

Cynematographic Doubling:

*Dogs' Phenomenal Presence
in Hollywood Feature Films*

Borbála László

Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies
University of Debrecen, Hungary

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Abstract: The present article contends that cinematic canines do not rupture representation even when they seem to slip out of character; rather, they reveal an immanent phenomenological dimension of fiction films. The main premise is that even such a crystallized representational form as classical narrative cinema, which treats the domestic dog as a sentimental icon, offers at least three layers to account for: 1) a visual layer that constructs the dog as a cute image; 2) an epistemological layer that carries the meanings we attach to it; and 3) a phenomenological, or “creaturely” layer that the cinematic medium will never be able to represent but will continue to present as long as it employs real-life dogs. Dogs thus create moments of what I call “cynematographic doubling”, when their phenomenal presence completes the diegesis with a documentary dimension, and moves the audience to emotions which are difficult to define. While focusing on the first two layers alone would reinforce an anthropocentric approach, according to which dogs in the fiction film project human notions, sentiments and intentions, the phenomenological, or “creaturely” layer calls for a relational approach according to which the cinematic portrayal of dogs is co-created by flesh-and-blood canines. Through an interpretations of selected Hollywood films, the article highlights moments that reveal the extent to which the film is indebted to the star dogs’ creaturely agency and affect.

Keywords: *dog representations, cinema, cuteness, creatureliness, creaturely affect, phenomenology, relationality*

Bio: Borbála László is a PhD candidate at the University of Debrecen, Hungary, engaged in reading cinematic texts from a more-than-human perspective. She is particularly interested in filmic representations of dogs as well as their phenomenological, biopolitical, and bioethical implications. In her research she attempts to map the cinematic traces and transformations of human–canine relationships in documentary and fiction films.

Email: brbala.laszlo@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-7718-6419

“As much as you think that you’re a master of your pet, it’s usually the other way around.”

—Ericson Core, director of *Togo*, 2019

“Hello, dad,” say the eyes of Strongheart to Boston Blackie, a jewel thief who has just been released from prison. “Hello, old boy,” the man would reply, if *The Return of Boston Blackie* (1927) were not a silent film, but one shall want for nothing: the intertitle helps viewers read the opening sequence as an emotional reunion of man and his beloved companion, the “pal who had never failed him.”¹ This scene, a dog running towards his master after a long absence, jumping into his arms, and covering him with slobbering kisses and adoring glances (Fig. 1), has been replayed countless times in subsequent Hollywood films. Although affective experiences like this do not easily lend themselves to analysis, the simplest way to make sense of them would be to say that the spectator is expected to be moved by the reunion of master and pet, the dog’s enduring love and such concomitant gestures as the “puppy eyes” look—an evolved feature of domestic canines to emotionally manipulate humans, which Hollywood has been using for its own purposes of prompting an emotional response in the audience. But is this all that is happening? Put differently, the initial question of this article is “What do we feel as spectators when we see a cute-looking dog character in a Hollywood feature film?” Yet to make sense of the affective force of the cinematic canine, one first needs to see clearly the creature that affects the viewer. The introductory question thus gives way to the main set of queries underlying this paper, namely, “What evokes the almost inexplicable, poignant emotion that many of us experience when encountering—through the screen—the adorable glances of a dog?”, “What is this creature?”, and ultimately, “What do we see

1 *The Return of Boston Blackie* is a valuable source for studying dog representations because it is the only one of the Strongheart films that has survived to be restored for viewing today. As Alexandra Horowitz explains, this has to do with the fact that films featuring animal actors, especially those that starred dogs “were so popular that the film stock was destroyed from frequent playing”. Horowitz, “Dog at the Side”, 222.

when we are watching a dog in a Hollywood movie?” In an attempt to understand its strong emotional effect better, the present article thus examines the nature and visual manifestation of the being that constitutes the cinematic canine in Hollywood feature films. It adopts a non-anthropocentric, relational approach that entertains the idea of the (f)actual dog playing a part in creating his or her own representation. In other words, the paper builds on the premise that the quality of the canine character of moving viewers to emotions is as complex as the individual who evokes it and that this character is not just a product of cinematic technologies.

Three-Fold Four-Legged Furry Friends

As the opening sequence of *The Return of Boston Blackie* illustrates, the fictional canine comprises at least three layers, as it were, three dogs with three different names. First, hugging his master like a child clinging to their parent, there is Strongheart, the cute-looking, quasi-human character. Then there is Strong Heart, the allegory of loyalty and love. And finally, hiding in plain sight, there is Strongheart, the real-life dog whose not-fully-convincing performance as a dog of the same name makes it relatively easy to notice his presence. It is odd, for instance, that he seems to be looking and barking in the wrong direction (Fig. 2), most probably at his handler off-screen, thus revealing his non-fictional “Being-There”, to borrow the term Heidegger reserved for human beings to describe, in this case, a non-human animal. Yet this is not to say that the real-life dimension of Strongheart will disappear once he is looking “the right way” and resumes his position in the diegesis. As Adrienne McLean argues, dogs, like all animals, provoke a “crisis of representation” in commercial cinema because their depiction can never be considered as proper representation.² That is, a fiction film featuring a dog is always, to a certain extent, documentary, not in the generic sense of providing a factual report on a particular subject, but in the most literal sense of documenting reality, although, as I will argue, this documentary referentiality does not transcend the fiction but rather doubles it, becoming part of the diegesis.

2 McLean, “Introduction”, 20.

Jonathan Burt asserts that “the line between the fictitious and the real animal is most difficult to draw”, but it becomes noticeable especially in the case of slippages, such as when Strongheart looks at his handler off-screen. At such moments, Burt argues, the on-screen animal precipitates an ostensible “rupture in the field of representation”.³ In *The Return of Boston Blackie*, such a rupture appears to occur when, while Blackie and Strongheart are out walking, a cat leaps into the frame and, catching sight of the dog, arches its back with its fur standing on end, seeming to double its size in a second. Triggered by this excitement, Strongheart duly slips into dog-mode: his eyes are fixated on the cat, his ears prick forward, his tongue is thrust out and withdrawn repeatedly; his whole being is strung with attention and curiosity. The film stylistically accentuates this focused state with a close-up. Then, as the cat decides to flee, canine prey drive cuts in and Strongheart moves to begin the pursuit only to be held back by Blackie (Bob Custer). What makes this sequence interesting is that seeing the dog actor momentarily distracted by the cat reveals an immanent documentary or phenomenological dimension within the fiction, which we do not usually pay attention to. Consequently, this scene has the potential to change our perception of feature films as being pure fiction, with characters who are separate from who they are in “the real world”, to a kind of impure or hybrid fiction which, evoking the main points of Bazinian realism, always already contains reality and where acting means not “simply the simulations of feelings and identities” but the “presentation of states of being”.⁴

Since it is the dog acting on his instincts that, in the highlighted scene, causes the realization about fiction’s impurity or hybridity, one could assume that the present view on cinematic canines relies on an implicitly Cartesian distinction between humans, who are capable of acting by tapping into their inner selves, and animals, who are incapable of acting as humans do because they lack psychological depth and only behave according to their instincts. However, by blurring the line between representation and reality as well as

3 Burt, *Animals in Film*, 11–12.

4 Kouvaros, “Realism and Cinema”, 385.



Figure 1 (left):

Strongheart, the cute-looking character and Strong Heart, the allegory of loyalty and love.

Still from O. Hoyt, *The Return of Boston Blackie* [01:57]

Figure 2 (right):

Strongheart, the real-life dog barking at his handler off-screen.

Still from O. Hoyt, *The Return of Boston Blackie* [02:08]



Figure 3:

Strongheart helping us glimpse the film's phenomenological dimension.

Stills from O. Hoyt, *The Return of Boston Blackie* [11:12–12:15]

acting and non-acting, this view in fact reminds us that all characters, whether they are human or nonhuman (in the present scene human, canine or feline, to be precise) inevitably present their real or phenomenal “states of being”. Strongheart’s fictional status as an anthropomorphized character is reinstated when Blackie says, “Listen, old boy, I said a quiet and peaceful evening. Remember?” to which the dog responds with an affirmative bark. But this intertitle can also be read metafictionally, as if the human actor were reminding the dog to play his role. Which he does, though not entirely: the attempt to restore representation as we have previously known it cannot be fully successful because we have glimpsed the irreducible phenomenological dimension of Strongheart, with his susceptibility to chase a cat or look at his trainer at any moment, of Blackie, since the actor, Bob Custer can be also distracted by, for instance, some strong smell, and of the cat, who is also simultaneously playing part in the fiction and is being him or herself. Thus, even though master and pet continue their walk, implying that the “proper” — pure — fiction has resumed its course, the flickering eyes of the cat, now sitting safely in the nook of a tree, remind us that fiction films always involve and are affected by the real-life animal, whose continuous presence greatly contributes to evoking a poignant feeling in the viewer (Fig. 3).

All animals, human and nonhuman, can reveal their own as well as the other characters’ phenomenological state. However, since dogs are considered to be one of the most trainable species, possessing the intelligence, the emotional depth, and the agility to play a character in a manner similar to humans, while at the same time, as non-human animals, being denied the status and significance of a character in their own right, when they apparently rupture the fabric of the diegesis, they break the illusion of pure fiction more effectively than another, less trainable animal, such as a cat — who is assumed to be always present simply as herself — would, or, conversely, than a human being, who is assumed to be acting even when she is being herself. Therefore, I will address the effects particularly dogs have on our perception of fiction, by focusing on similarly representative scenes from a number of Hollywood films. To stress my point, the present paper partly breaks with McLean’s and Burt’s arguments

and contends that cinematic canines in fact cannot rupture representation. Even when they seem to do so, the dogs reveal only their phenomenological dimension, the (f)actual dog who is also present while convincingly playing his or her part; it is, in fact, the same creature who plays the character. While this is true for all movies in which dogs appear, I am here concerned with Hollywood productions because I wish to make the point that even such a crystallized or polished representational form as the one perpetuated by classical Hollywood cinema, with its seemingly one-dimensional canine images, offers at least three layers, namely: 1) a visual layer that constructs the dog as a cute image; 2) an epistemological layer that carries the meanings we attach to it; and 3) a creaturely/phenomenological layer that the feature film absorbs and presents in the manner of a documentary as long as it employs real-life dogs.

Classical Hollywood cinema tends to construct the dog as an image of cuteness,⁵ drawing heavily on the animal's mimetic-neotenic morphology, the evolved feature of the puppy eyes which makes the canine gaze resemble that of human babies, hence potentially activating a sense of protectiveness in the viewer.⁶ Even in the silent film

- 5 One must add that, although dog representations in Hollywood films are mostly based on the aesthetics of cuteness, we also often encounter dogs foaming at the mouth, bloodhounds chasing escaped criminals and other monstrous canine characters, which rather recall the aesthetics as well as the meaning- and affect-making mechanisms of horror. As Katarina Gregersdotter et al. argue, the animal in animal horror cinema is often represented as a monstrous, ferocious, evil Other, who embodies our fears and confirms our sense of normality, civility and moral superiority ("Introduction", 5–14). Of course, individual dog figures are much more complex than the simple binary of cute or terrifying allows, as I argue throughout this article.
- 6 According to a 2019 ethological study, there is a pair of muscles, levator anguliculi medialis (LAOM), and retractor anguli oculi lateralis (RAOL) present in dogs but not in wolves, their closest genetic ancestors, which proved to be responsible for the special affective communication with humans (see Kaminski et al., "Evolution", 14678). When these muscles raise the eyebrows, making the dog's eyes look bigger and objectively cuter, humans respond with a jolt of oxytocin in their blood, the same hormone that activates our nurturing instincts when we see human babies. The findings of this study thus show that domestic dogs have developed these muscles during their coevolution with us, that is, they have voluntarily mimicked our young offspring in order to appear cute and stimulate in us an urge to care for them. The perception of cuteness is, of course, highly subjective, but, as the quoted study shows, it has a well-grounded biological underpinning first introduced in the 1940s by ethologist Konrad Lorenz. His theory of baby schema (*Kinder-schema*) suggests that creatures with juvenile aesthetic features – large eyes, bulging

era, filmmakers realized that a flash of puppy eyes can trigger (parental) feelings in the audience, especially given that with no dialogue, the pantomimic gestures of the actors gained a huge narrative significance and similar importance was imputed to the facial expressions, most importantly the eyes, of dog heroes.⁷ For instance, *The Chicago Tribune's* review of Strongheart in *The Silent Call* (1922) remarked that the dog was “an extraordinarily intelligent creature with a pair of eyes that go to your heart.”⁸ Owing to its ability to cause such an overwhelming experience, filmmakers have never ceased to capitalize on the “puppy eyes” look, instructing the dog actor to turn towards the human actor or the camera with pleading eyes, usually emphasizing the animal’s expressions with a close-up.

According to Burt, it is the animal’s affective impact upon the human observer that constitutes its agency, but it is questionable to what extent the affective response is evoked by the real-life dog or by the strategies of representing dogs in feature films. Acknowledging the ambiguity of such and similar affective forces, Burt writes:

On the one hand, it can be argued that an emotional response to animals is an empathetic and hence a straightforward natural expression of sentiment toward fellow creatures. On the other hand, it can as easily be said that it is film itself that, since its arrival in the mid-1890s, has increasingly influenced the constructions of the animal in the public domain and that the force of the viewer’s response to the animal is imbued with the techniques by which film provokes feelings in its audience.⁹

From an anthropocentric perspective, and knowing that they are trained and instructed to “act” in feature films, it can be stated that dogs serve to trigger our emotions and are thus deprived of their

craniums, retreating chins— are likely to trigger our nurturing instincts. In this sense, dogs have not only learnt to mimic the expression of human babies, but in order to do so have retained their juvenile facial features into adulthood, hence their mimetic-neotenic morphology, more precisely, their puppy eyes.

7 See Fuller-Seeley and Groskopf, “The Dogs”, 65.

8 “Introducing a Canine Hero Who Can Act”, *Chicago Tribune*, 12 April (1922), 24; quoted in Fuller-Seeley and Groskopf, 59.

9 Burt, *Animals in Film*, 30–31, 10.

agency. Their filmic representation is under human control. Nevertheless, one should not forget that films draw on a trait that domestic dogs have developed in order to generate in humans the impulse to care for them,¹⁰ even if this quality is manipulated by the film industry and its practices of aestheticizing cuteness.¹¹ Furthermore, the individual dog actor also needs to establish an emotional bond with the human co-star in order to move the viewer with its glances through the camera. These details suggest, then, that it is not only the representational strategies that make dogs appear cute on the screen: it is also their own ability which they decide to use when bonding with humans. Taking into account the possibility of the dog actor him- or herself looking wilfully adorable already challenges the notion that the cute dog character is a mere visual construct completely controlled by cinematic technologies.

In terms of projected meaning, the dog often appears as a “threshold creature” in the sense that it moves with ease between the realms of tameness and wildness, nature and culture.¹² And, I would add, childhood and adulthood, since in the narratives of Hollywood films, there is a recurring pattern of a dog befriending a child, in most cases a boy. As I will show in the analyses that follow, the dog’s role in this type of narrative is not so much to teach the child discipline

10 According to Joshua Paul Dale, the dog’s cute appearance suggests the possibility of self-domestication which might have taken place in concert with human selection. He argues that the domestication of dogs from wolves might have had two stages: that of self-domestication, during which a few less fearful or aggressive wolves began to draw closer to human settlements, behaving in an increasingly prosocial way as humans got used to their presence; and that of a subsequent selection process when humans started breeding dogs intentionally, based on traits that proved to be useful in human activities such as hunting. These assumptions allow one to speculate that it was the dog’s intrinsic appeal for sociality that brought canines and humans together in the first place. See Dale, “Appeal of the Cute Object”, 48.

11 In this regard, cinema follows the principles and mechanisms of consumer culture, which, as Daniel Harris, Lori Merish, and Sianne Ngai have articulated, aestheticizes and commodifies weakness to trigger a maternal response in the consumer, thereby increasing the appealing value and profitability of cute objects. See Harris, *Cute*, 4; Merish, “Cuteness”, 186; and Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 1. Yet, as Ngai points out, consumer culture also capitalizes on the cute entity’s *own* inclination to manipulate the perceiver, which betrays the etymology of the English word “cute”, a shortened form of “acute”, as in “clever”, “sharp witted”, or “cunning”.

12 See McHugh, *Dog*, 42.

and catalyse his maturation into a responsible adult as it is to retain or reintroduce into the adult world some of the wildness, emotional freedom, and social flexibility that—according to the adult perception—characterizes childhood. Therefore, interestingly, while dogs’ evolved neotenic appearance (potentially) evokes our nurturing instincts, their behaviour encourages us to identify with dogs’ constructed childishness. Canine figures, moreover, are often associated with the tropes of love and loyalty. Although it should be noted that such allegorical constructions find support in real-life dogs’ proclivity for interspecies engagement, they are nevertheless constructions, abstract meanings that we attach to the creature. Focusing only on the visual and the epistemological layer of cinematic canines would thus repeat the reductive, dominantly anthropocentric interpretation according to which animals in fiction are mere constructs (symbols, metaphors, allegories, and the like) created to project ideas about ourselves—a reading strategy that prevailed both in literary and film criticism before the animal turn, but was recently challenged by animal studies scholars such as McLean and Burt.¹³

Cinematic canines are much more than a cute image and an intricate allegory of love, loyalty, and emotional freedom. Yet, while Burt and McLean account for the actual creature as an entity who resists and ruptures representation, this paper, taking Strongheart’s example as a springboard, proposes that the real-life dog in fact completes representation with its own phenomenological reality. As Derrida once said, “in its closure, representation continues”, absorbing the real.¹⁴ Although one usually only glimpses the creaturely layer when the fictitious skin peels back, revealing some sensuous (olfactory or tactile) canine experience, that is, when the lifeworld of the flesh-and-blood dog most conspicuously protrudes from the film’s surface, it is never separated from the fictional world. This means that

13 While my approach aims to highlight that the third, creaturely layer of cinematic canines has the potential to resist the control of cinematic technologies, I also realize that the animals’ creaturely beings are recruited by Hollywood’s storytelling apparatus. This also implies that Hollywood functions as a cultural institution of the most powerful settler-colonial, capitalist country in the world, and reflects the ethical, political, and ideological implications for the way animals relate to and are treated by the State.

14 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 316.

the dog's movements, gestures, and actions are simultaneously part of the narrative and of the world of sensory impulses, the here-and-now, the place and moment of shooting with the cameras, the handler, other human and nonhuman animals on set, the whole filmic apparatus: in short, reality. I thus argue that dogs occupy a threshold position in Hollywood feature films, and, by being simultaneously in and out of fiction, they help us glimpse the hybridity of the representational universe as it inherently contains a phenomenological dimension: an aspect which most of the time we do not notice but which nevertheless affects the perception of the film and the emotional states it creates in the audience. While my argument resonates with that of Burt, he approaches the question of filmic animals from the opposite direction, stating that creatures in fiction can always be seen as real, nonfictional, and factual. I claim that even when they appear as themselves, animals in cinema are also always fictional and constructed. Or, to put it slightly differently, as opposed to Burt and McLean who suggest that the actual, real animals are, in a sense, unrepresentable, I perceive them as completing, and hence actively contributing to the creation of their own representation.

As suggested earlier, all animals — human and nonhuman — are capable of doubling representation with their phenomenal presence. Yet due to their perceived trainability, intelligence, psychological depth and agility, which makes them similar to human actors, while at the same time remaining essentially canine, different and nonhuman, dogs are more prone to call our attention to the diegetic world containing a documentary dimension than a less trainable animal, such as a cat, or, conversely, a highly trainable and trained animal, such as a human. A cat is assumed to be always present simply as herself, treated as a prop by both filmmakers and viewers, while a human is believed to be simulating feelings and identities even in moments when she is simply being herself. Thus, although bringing their phenomenal realities into the fiction, these two species are less likely to reveal the immanent impurity or hybridity of feature films than cinematic canines. When a dog's phenomenal presence or "state of being" is presented, he or she effectively breaks the spell of pure fiction and confronts us with the immanent impurity

or doubling of fiction with reality. I propose that one could describe such moments as “cynematographic doubling”, a term that combines the etymologically similar roots of dogs (the Greek κύων [*kuōn*], dog, and κυνικός [*kunikos*], doglike, canine, Cynic) and cinema (from κίνημα [*kinēma*], meaning movement, hence the phrase moving image, which is simultaneously construed here as an emotionally moving medium). The notion of cynematographic doubling thus brings together, or rather reflects, the connection between dogs, cinema, and that emotionally moving quality when the former two are joined together. More precisely, cynematographic doubling refers to moments when a dog’s phenomenal presence doubles the diegesis with a real or documentary dimension, which is always there but we usually do not see it, and, as a consequence, also complicates the affective spectatorial experience. The films selected for analysis will thus be read as works of cynematography in which the phenomenological or creaturely double of the canine character actively contributes to completing the fiction with his or her phenomenal reality and, consequently, to creating a moving image not only in terms of the medium’s dependence on movement, but also in the sense of being emotionally moving for the viewer.

The Creaturely Double of the Canine Character

This paper furthermore proposes that the aforementioned doubling can be construed in terms of the Derridean logic of spectrality insofar as it “exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, sensible and insensible.”¹⁵ Derrida’s spectre, however, “is visible only insofar as it is not visible in flesh and blood.”¹⁶ Since the dog character’s sensory lifeworld is present in and through the canine actor’s body, and therefore intrinsically linked to carnality, it should be termed a creaturely/phenomenological rather than a spectral or ghostly doubling of the fictional dog. Relying on Derrida’s notion of the spectre, yet grounded in the animal actor’s corporeality, the present article refuses to treat the filmic dog representation as a mere construct, and, joining other animal studies scholars’

15 Derrida and Stiegler, “Spectrographies”, 39.

16 Derrida and Stiegler, 38.

work, aims to call attention to the real creature beyond the image and the projected meanings. As Pao-Chen Tang insightfully argues in his essay “Of Dogs and Hot Dogs: Distractions on Early Cinema”, “[u]ndoubtedly cinema signifies, but the dogs’ agency complicates [the] claim that animals are naturally turned into languages or signs when they become filmic element.”¹⁷

As part of the argument that the (f)actual dog actively completes its own representation, it is important to note that the creaturely double of the canine character is not conceived here as a Cartesian beast-machine that takes over the “well-behaved” dog actor when a reactive mechanism is triggered by a disruptive element such as a cat or an offscreen handler. Although it becomes visible in such impulsive instances, the creaturely double, as I implied above, denotes the real-life animal that is always present alongside—in fact is inseparable from—the character even when it remains invisible; it is the same creature that convincingly plays its role. In other words, although the selected scenes may give the impression that the third layer of the cinematic canine emerges as an instinctual being that cannot think, pretend, or transcend itself—which would reinforce the old anthropocentric notion of animals that Derrida deconstructs in his essay “And Say the Animal Responded?”¹⁸—the segments in fact refer to the dog actor who can be indeed distracted (just as human actors), but who also convincingly pretends to be a character for a large part of the narrative.

Perceiving the third layer of the cinematic canine as a real-life creature that can act both convincingly and unconvincingly also makes the question of whether the dog actor can “pretend to pretend”, as human actors supposedly can, or merely pretend, as in following commands, irrelevant. Regarding this matter, Derrida admits that “it is indeed difficult, even impossible, to discern between pretense

17 Tang, “Of Dogs and Hot Dogs,” 50.

18 The essay is a critique of Lacan’s argument that the animal is incapable of “pretense in the second degree”, whereas the “subject of the signifier” belonging to the human order possesses such a power and, as such, can “emerge as subject, instituting itself and coming to itself as subject by virtue of this power, a second-degree reflexive power, a power that is conscious of being able to deceive by pretending to pretend.” Derrida, “And Say”, 130.

and a pretense of pretense, between an aptitude for pretense and an aptitude for the pretense of pretense.”¹⁹ He concludes that “every pretense of pretense remains a simple pretense (animal or imaginary, in Lacan’s terms), or else, on the contrary, and just as likely, that every pretense, however simple it may be, gets repeated and repositioned undecidably, in its possibility, as pretense of pretense (human or symbolic in Lacan’s terms).”²⁰ Informed by Derrida’s conclusion, this article takes the dog’s ability to act for granted, making no difference between “simple pretense” and “pretense of pretense”, and instead differentiates between moments when the dog actor acts convincingly, and thus absorbs the viewer into the fiction, and moments when, because it is itself distracted, distracts the spectator. The consequence of such instances, as Tang brilliantly argues, is that the onscreen animals can act as distractions, inviting us to see them “as real dogs—*dogs as such*—in relation to cinematic mediation.”²¹ Drawing on Tang’s argument, this paper adds that in Hollywood, the dog that acts and the dog that distracts, thus the character and its creaturely double, are one and the same, which refutes rather than reinforces the Cartesian notion of the animal as beast-machine.

A Relational Perspective on Dog Representations in Hollywood

Taking the above into consideration, while the first two layers of the cinematic canine reinforce an anthropocentric approach according to which dogs in the fiction film always “signify as ‘projections’ and ‘realizations of an intention’ — of trainers, writers, directors, and studios, as well as of audiences and critics,”²² the creaturely/phenomenological layer, most salient when the dog seemingly acts “out of character”, calls for a relational approach that acknowledges the extent to which the film and the feelings it evokes are indebted to the canine subject. This approach does not imply an expansion of human subjectivity and agency to the nonhuman, but rather what Anat

19 Derrida, “And Say”, 135.

20 Derrida, 134–36.

21 Tang, “Of Dogs and Hot Dogs”, 55.

22 McLean, “Introduction”, 13.

Pick calls a “gesture [...] of *contraction*”, in the sense that it seeks to make our cultural representations including cinema and our modes of inquiry, such as film criticism, “less human” while “seeking to grant animals a share in our world of subjectivity”.²³ The relational interpretations of the selected Hollywood films that follow aim to account for the presence and the affective power of the dog figures’ creaturely dimension. Although the three layers overlap, I shall focus on moments that, in the words of Roman Bartosch, “take effect as a transgressive rupture of stable, dichotomous taxonomies for the sake of a sustained sense of relationality.”²⁴

Before moving on to the analysis let me stress that the animals in the selected scenes do not rupture the fiction, but rather reveal their immanent phenomenological dimension, that is, the dog actor playing the character — an aspect which would remain unnoticed were it not for a momentary distraction. What the scenes under consideration do rupture is therefore the long-taken-for-granted link between representation and human agency, which they replace with a relational notion that even Hollywood films are co-created by the nonhuman creatures’ actions. This approach heavily draws on Tang’s “cinema of distractions” which “concerns an alternative mode of viewing that invites the viewer to spend more time looking at and thinking about cinematic animals.”²⁵ Partly breaking with Burt’s and McLean’s, and rather siding with Pick’s, Bartosch’s and Tang’s positions, I argue that even Hollywood movies that use the dog as a sentimental icon — a cute image, an allegory of love and loyalty — contain the phenomenological layer and thus move the spectator with the affective power of the creaturely, and that recognizing this can result in an ethical viewing practice.

Uncovering the Creaturely in Three “Classic” Hollywood Hounds

In the following analyses, I will first demonstrate the traditional, anthropocentric reading of cinematic canines, which construe them

²³ Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, 6.

²⁴ Bartosch, “Reading Seeing”, 226.

²⁵ Tang, “Of Dogs and Hot Dogs”, 55.

as cute images and sentimental allegories, and then offer a reinterpretation of the films and the selected scenes, with the third, phenomenological or “creaturely” layer in mind. Continuing the legacy of such legendary dog actors as Strongheart and Rin Tin Tin, who could allegedly pull the heartstrings of the audience with a simple raising of their brow, *Lassie Come Home* (1943) consistently applies the technique of the “puppy eyes” look. On the visual level, the dog thus appears as an image of cuteness, the moving effect of which is emphasized through close-ups of the dog actor Pal’s face. For instance, in a scene where Lassie is taken back to the Duke’s (Nigel Bruce) kennels after running away for a third time, she looks at Joe (Roddy McDowall) with pleading eyes, begging him not to leave her there again (Fig. 4). The canine character is infantilized, appearing as a little child, and as such, serves as an example of how Hollywood exploits the dog actor’s evolved skills for emotional manipulation through the aestheticization of weakness.

The film, furthermore, also seeks to move the audience on the level of the narrative where the dog is given a twofold allegorical role. On the one hand, Lassie serves as a “threshold creature” in McHugh’s terms and is supposed to lead both human character and viewer alike back into a blissful, albeit imaginary, state of childhood. In order to fulfil this function, she is endowed with more empathy than most human characters and is able to transform them into compassionate beings. This is particularly true for Joe’s parents and the Duke of Rudling, who abandon their intention to sell and buy Lassie, respectively, after witnessing the dog’s loyalty to her young master. Evoking nostalgic sentiments for childhood, imagined as a time when one was allowed to give in to one’s emotions, Lassie serves as an allegory of childhood and loving with unreserved devotion.²⁶

²⁶As Henry Jenkins points out, the “linkage of those two sentimental icons—the boy and the dog—was no accident”, since a newly-found emotional value was ascribed to both children and dogs between 1870 and 1930. Jenkins, “Her Suffering Aristocratic Majesty”, 222. The perception of childhood was gradually changing, rendering children emblematic of a lost idyll in literature sometimes to the point of sacralization, while dogs were coincidentally revaluated as companions, becoming the means through which the rising middle-class communicated ideas about themselves in popular media or in children’s literature like Erik Knight’s novel on which the film *Lassie* was based. See Wolf, “Promoting Lassie”, 107.

On the other hand, the adults make an ethical decision not to stand in the way of the dog's love and loyalty, which is a sign of maturity rather than pre-social emotional freedom and unruliness. The film, nevertheless, allegorizes canine love for a purpose that is similar to its reasons for aestheticizing canine appearance: to manipulate the audience emotionally by projecting human notions and sentiments through the dog.

The 1957 Disney film *Old Yeller*, set in rural post-Civil War Texas, continues the narrative tradition of following a dog-boy friendship where the eponymous dog has a single allegorical role: to reintroduce the wildness, emotional freedom, and social flexibility that—in the adult imagination—characterizes childhood. Left in charge of his little brother, his mother, and the farm in their father's absence, the teenage Travis (Tommy Kirk) longs to cross into manhood, but his self-enforced maturation process is offset by the dog's neotenic behaviour. Although Yeller (Spike), a stray appearing one day on the family's farm, is initially claimed by the younger son Arliss (Kevin Corcoran), he eventually establishes a bond with Travis, who, from a would-be man, becomes a boy again thanks to his developing friendship with the maverick dog. Travis is easily distracted, for instance, when, enthralled by two squirrels playing chase, he almost misses the opportunity of shooting a deer, and his emotions increasingly prevail over his reason. This ultimately leads to him withholding the knowledge that Yeller is infected with rabies, keeping the dog alive until it is too late, as a consequence of which Travis has to shoot the dog himself. Soon after Yeller's death, Travis's father returns, and the boy refuses to accept the horse he had asked for as a present, the symbol of manhood in his eyes, because the memory of Yeller, and his childhood, is still very much alive in his heart. This film is therefore another example of the link between the sentimental icons of the boy and the dog, the latter represented as a guide who transports character and viewer alike back into a childlike state of emotional freedom. *Old Yeller* is also abundant in close-ups of the dog's puppy eyes—mostly appearing in scenes when Yeller needs shelter, care, protection or food—thereby constructing the dog as a cute image which is intended to evoke the viewers' nurturing instincts (Fig. 5).



Figure 4:

Lassie as an image of cuteness with her “puppy eyes” directed at Joe and the audience.

Still from Wilcox, *Lassie Come Home* [27:12]

Figure 5:

Yeller shown in a vulnerable state to evoke the viewers’ parental feelings.

Still from Stevenson, *Old Yeller* [52:40]



Figure 6:

The image of the cute-looking Benji (top) juxtaposed with that of the child characters in danger (bottom).

Stills from *Camp, Benji* [50:42; 50:46]

More often, however, we are invited to go down the rabbit hole of childhood, for instance, when the titular character is catching fish in the river, and stir the water of our repressed emotions. The film's canine character thus primarily functions as an allegorical "threshold creature" who is able to take us back to our childhood with his unbounded emotions. Hence the film ultimately projects human notions and sentiments onto the dog, just as in *Lassie*.

In the 1974 family film *Benji*, the frequent use of close-ups of the eponymous dog's affectionate glances renders the dog a cute image with the intention of evoking parental feelings in the viewers. Alternating the "puppy eyes" look with images of the child characters in danger further serves to enhance this effect (Fig. 6). On the narrative level, however, Benji (Higgins) yet again functions as an allegory of childishness and pre-social emotional freedom, destined to transport the audience back into an imaginary childlike state. In contrast to this, adulthood is represented by the respectable Dr Chapman (Peter Breck), who, despite his children's fondness for Benji, forbids them to keep him as a pet, arguing that, as a stray, he is likely to carry diseases. Whereas the father's intersubjective relationships are characterized by domination and separation — his insistence on the dog's distance, for instance, focalizes the lack of an intimate relationship with his kids — Benji's repeated visits to the Chapman house, despite the risk of being harmed, stress the importance of contact and connection, which children are known to place above caution. The film's narrative thus associates its canine protagonist not only with childlike naïveté, urging viewers to imitate such behaviour, but also with the tropes of love and loyalty, which are values and skills one acquires through socialization. Considering the film's visual and narrative layers, *Benji* is therefore similar to *Lassie* and *Old Yeller* in treating the canine character as a sentimental icon — a heart-warming image and a carrier of projected human meanings — and thus ostensibly offers an anthropocentric reading.

Yet all the three canine characters discussed so far hide another layer in plain sight: their experiential, phenomenological, creaturely side which doubles the fiction, challenges the one-sided, anthropocentric

interpretation, and complicates the affective spectatorial experience of the viewer. A significant moment, when Lassie's creaturely layer becomes discernible, is when she and Toots, the canine companion of Rowlie (Edmund Gwenn), the itinerant tinsmith, whom Lassie joins on her way home, are engaged in a tug of war. "You've been good dogs. Go and play. You did a good show today," says Rowlie to the dogs after one of his end-of-sale performances in which both Toots and Lassie participate. Rowlie's command is ambiguously metafictional, similar to when Blackie reminds Strongheart to behave in *The Return of Boston Blackie*: Rowlie seems to be speaking both as a character and as a real-life dog trainer, the "show" referring to the diegetic act performed by the fictional dogs as well as to the canine actors' performance in the film itself. And the dogs do indeed go and play, not only as characters but also as real dogs enjoying an actual game of tug of war (Fig. 7). Rowlie's command thus introduces a scene into *Lassie* where fiction and documentary markedly overlap but which reminds the viewer that the real-life dog is ever-present, constantly completing representation. In this light, even though one catches a glimpse of the (f)actual dog when Lassie runs out of the frame with the rag in her mouth, she is always in the process of quitting fiction, at the threshold between representation and reality. Considering Lassie's character only from a visual and an epistemological perspective would fail to account for the role played by the dog's creaturely presence in interweaving the fabric of the film and evoking a subtle, but all the more profound and partly ineffable feeling in the spectator.

Although *Old Yeller* strongly projects the allegory of childhood, the viewer does not have to wait for long to catch a glimpse of the dog actor's phenomenological/creaturely layer as the film effectively begins with Yeller racing through the family's cornfield in pursuit of a hare (Fig. 8). Since the sequence is part of the narrative but can also be seen through an ethological lens, the fictional dog yet again appears as a threshold creature, not only as an allegory, running between worlds and thereby connecting wilderness to civilization and childhood to adulthood, but also in terms of the division between representation and reality which Yeller's double status effectively





Figure 7:

Lassie and Toots simultaneously playing as characters and real-life dogs.

Still from Wilcox, *Lassie Come Home*
[1:09:00–1:09:13]



Figure 8:

Yeller's phenomenal presence
revealed as he is chasing a hare.

Still from Stevenson, *Old Yeller*
[07:04]





Figure 9:

Benji doubling the fiction with reality as he is chasing a cat.

Stills from *Camp, Benji* [08:46–09:00]

undermines. It seems that fiction and fact most saliently converge in chasing and playing sequences, which most emphatically present the dog as a dog. One must mention that these scenes are also selected and edited, carefully eliding moments that might disturb the human audience (for instance, dogs fighting, killing other animals, or coupling), which shows how representation absorbs and at the same time censors reality. Yet integrating such sequences as that of Yeller chasing a hare still signal that the filmic text opens up to (at least some aspects of) creatureliness and in so doing doubles itself with a phenomenological dimension.

Just like Lassie and Yeller, Benji is more than just a sentimental icon conveying human notions and triggering well-calculated sentiments in the audience; this cinematic canine also contains a layer of the creatural and thus moves the viewer with his specific, largely inexplicable affective power. As with the previous films, the presence of the (f)actual dog becomes most salient when Benji's behaviour coincides with that of the canine actor. This occurs, for instance, when we see, first from an external, then from a subjective point of view, him chasing a cat up a tree as part of his morning routine (Fig. 9). Just like Blackie's disciplining remark to Strongheart or Rowlie's prompting Lassie to play, the cat's owner's outburst of "You primitive, uncultured cur" comes across as ambiguously metafictional, causing uncertainty as to whether she is reprimanding Benji the character or Higgins the dog actor. The woman's words yet again underpin the fictional dog's perpetual threshold position, his being constantly in and out of character, and with this comes the ability to double the fictional universe with a phenomenological dimension that contributes to forming the audience's affective reactions.

Emotionally Moved by Two Less "Traditional" and More Creaturely Cinematic Canines

In the final two analyses, I will focus on two less "traditional" Hollywood hounds that do not fit into the category of overly cutesified canine images, therefore they resist an anthropocentric reading, while their capacity to evoke the creaturely affect is the most powerful, and thus they best demonstrate the significance of a relational reading.

Among the fictional dogs in Hollywood movies, Hooch (Beasley), the eponymous dog in the buddy cop comedy *Turner & Hooch* (1989), is most liable to reveal the character's creaturely/phenomenological dimension. This is partly because as an unruly, stocky, and powerfully built French Mastiff, with a drooling muzzle and a jaw powerful enough to tear one's throat out, he most emphatically occupies the position of the threshold creature who easily slips out of the "cute doggy" image into the realm of the wild, or the unfamiliar and the uncanny within and, more importantly, across the diegetic world. As Elizabeth Young argues,

[a]cross and within breeds, dogs oscillate between emblems of domestic order and perceived threats to it—an oscillation also embodied within the individual animal. For in the specter of the friendly pet [...] is the possibility that the dog may expose the permeable boundaries of domestication, turning from faithful to violent and reverting from cute to wild.²⁷

The character of Hooch epitomizes dogs that wildly oscillate between the domestic or civilized sphere. For instance, in the scene where the titular characters are first seen together, it is difficult to discern whether Hooch is rushing towards Turner (Tom Hanks) to greet a friend or to attack a trespasser and whether, after their collision, he is licking the policeman's face out of love or if he is getting ready to bite it off (Fig. 10). More importantly, one might be concerned about Tom Hanks, since the clash of the human and the canine body, preceded by a slow-motion shot of this massive dog running towards the camera, creates an overwhelmingly haptic experience and requires viewers to see the dog as a dog. Casting such a fierce-looking breed thus not only ascribes the role of a threshold creature to the dog within the narrative but also in relation to the ostensible fiction/reality divide, which Hooch/Beasley is ready to tear down at any moment, constantly doubling fiction and causing a slightly unnerving feeling in the spectator.

27 Young, "Canine Uncanny Zone", 132.



Figure 10:

Hooch tearing down the divide
between fiction and reality.

Stills from Spottiswoode, *Turner &
Hooch* [08:50; 09:23]



Figure 11:

Shots of Hooch's puppy eyes look used for emotional manipulation (upper images), and images causing uncertainty about the dog's thoughts and emotions (lower images).

Stills from Spottiswoode, *Turner & Hooch* [42:56; 44:32; 1:02:13; 1:02:45].



Figure 12:

Hooch's gaze reflecting his inner depth. Still from Spottiswoode, Turner & Hooch (32:37)

Still from Spottiswoode, *Turner & Hooch* [32:37].

Interestingly, due to the dog's "perceived threats" to rip up the fabric of representation, the allegory of friendship and love presented by *Turner & Hooch* is all the more powerful. The narrative follows the formation of an unlikely bond between the canine and the human character, the latter being characterized as organized, disciplined, and clean to the point of obsessiveness. Parallel to the taming and grooming of Hooch into a domestic pooch, Turner is transformed into a much more flexible person who is open to abandoning his former ways to learn from, and love, others: after all, it is thanks to Hooch that Turner accepts the romantic overtures of the veterinarian Emily. One could even argue that dog and human go through a mutual assimilation as a result of which Hooch becomes a police dog identifying and tracking criminals while Turner transforms into a zoomorphic creature who enjoys nibbling dog biscuits. Similar to the transformation of Joe's parents, the Duke of Rudling, Travis, and Dr Chapman, Turner is thus turned into a compassionate being due to his growing friendship with the dog. On an epistemological level, then, this film is not exempt from attaching a heart-warming allegorical meaning to the canine character. Yet the affective power of the portrayed interspecies friendship largely depends on the actual dog's similarity to wild animals, and his unfamiliarity and ontological distance from human beings, which makes Hooch's crossing over even more moving. It seems that the greater the distance between human and canine, the more powerful the force is that unites them, something that goes for both the characters as well as the fictional dog and the viewer. The creaturely presence of the canine figure permeates the epistemological layer and evokes an inexplicable emotion in the audience, similar to what one feels when encountering a wild animal.

The constructed image of Hooch as a cute-looking pet, furthermore, is occasionally saturated by a creaturely tint since some of the close-ups of Hooch's "puppy eyes" highlight the character's subjective experiences and thus remind viewers of the presence of the (f)actual dog. Although the film is full of close-ups where the power of the dog's puppy eyes is used for manipulation, like the infamous "I didn't do anything" or "Please let me in" look (Fig. 11, upper images), the

film also contains images of the dog's apparently genuine, non-mimetic vulnerability, for example when Hooch seems to be thinking of his former owner (Fig. 11, lower images). But apart from this emotional assumption, which one obtains through Turner's perspective, the viewer is left uncertain about the dog character's, let alone dog actor's, emotions and thoughts. Another close-up shows Hooch from the side in semi-darkness, slightly lit from above so that the rims of his eyes and his iris have a golden glow (Fig. 12). This aesthetic presentation highlights the affective connotations of Hooch's gaze toward Turner, who is finally ready to cooperate with the creature he initially finds repulsive. Considering that Hooch had been fond of Turner already before his former owner was murdered and the policeman took him in, this shot indicates that the bonding between the human and the dog is initiated by the latter, thereby highlighting canine agency. The dog character's motivations for befriending a "neat freak" policeman, however, remain elusive. Neither can we be sure that Beasley's apparently affectionate glances are indeed addressed to the human actor playing Turner or to his handler off-screen, or whether they are maybe a reaction elicited by a piece of ham dangling above his nose. Although the shot focalizes the dog's puppy eyes look, its affective power derives as much from the constructed image as from the pupil's bottomless blackness against the iris's golden glow. In *Turner and Hooch*, unfathomable creaturely subjectivity thus cuts through both the visual and the epistemological layer.

All the cinematic canines analysed above have been read as three-fold entities wherein the creaturely/phenomenological dimension completes the perception of the dog as a cute image and as an allegory of childhood, love and loyalty, thereby challenging the usual anthropocentric readings of the films they are featured in. In the closing analysis, I continue to pursue a relational approach by showing that even if either the aesthetically or epistemologically constructed layer is missing, commercial cinema can effectively move the audience as long as it employs real-life dogs that bring their own, inscrutable lifeworld into the fictional universe. For instance, given the Siberian

husky's lack of neotenus morphology,²⁸ that is, the breed's genetic inability to use the power of the puppy eyes for emotional manipulation, the 2019 Disney film *Togo* can only rely on allegorizing canine love and on the affective impact of the dog actors.²⁹ It is, nevertheless, one of the most touching representations of the human-canine bond among the movies discussed here because the creaturely presence of the real-life dogs interpenetrates the whole fabric of the film as well as the allegory of love that we attach to it.

Much of *Togo's* emotional quality derives from the narrative which recounts the initially tentative, yet increasingly intimate relationship between Leonhard Seppala (Willem Defoe) and his sled dog. When Togo is still a pup, Seppala wants to get rid of him because he looks weak and is unmanageable, but the musher eventually yields to the dog's insistence to become part of his sledging dog pack. During the training process, the underdog proves to be an energetic, resilient, and natural leader, and his outstanding qualities are relied upon even in Togo's old age when Seppala and his pack complete the legendary 1925 serum run to Nome, Alaska, across 1,085 km in severe weather conditions to collect a vaccine during a diphtheria outbreak. Despite his principle of keeping an emotional distance from his dogs, Seppala's shell of solid stoicism eventually cracks as he becomes intimately attached to Togo: moved by his vulnerability due to the dog's old age and injuries, he takes him into his house, nurses him by the fireplace, and lets him lie in his bed. Even more moving than these gestures is the episode in which, refusing to stay housebound, Togo runs after Seppala, who welcomes him with open arms (Fig. 13). This is not the cliché reunion of master and pet first used and perpetuated by silent films, since an integral part of that overused image, the 'puppy eyes', is missing. But it is not only allegorical either, or at least not exclusively. Although at this point in the

28 The authors of the study on the evolution of facial muscle anatomy in dogs tell us that RAOL, the muscle responsible for pulling the lateral corner of the eyelids towards the ears, is not present in the Siberian husky, which is "more closely related to wolves than many other breed" (Kaminski et al., "Evolution", 14678).

29 Although it was one dog named Diesel, a direct descendant of the real-life Togo, going back fourteen generations, who played the adult Togo throughout the film, the filmmakers used several huskies as stunt doubles. See Core, "Crafting a Tearjerker".

film one might attach the abstract meanings of loyalty and love to Togo, the allegory is based on the portrayed dog's subjectivity. Since the unknowability of the fictional Togo, furthermore, reflects the inscrutable motivations of the dog actor, the creaturely layer permeates the epistemological layer, thereby evoking an inexplicable, almost visceral experience in the audience.

The fact that the filmmakers chose to employ real-life huskies in spite of the difficulties of working with them largely contributes to the particularly strong creaturely affect, the almost musky aroma, seeping from this film. As Michael Lawrence points out, the increasingly popular practice of supplementing real dogs with digital animation and visual effects has many advantages: for instance, the digitally enhanced dogs are more cost-effective, as “they are less time-consuming and therefore less expensive because no longer determined by the unpredictable or intractable volition of real animals, however ‘well-trained.’”³⁰ This aspect, however, already implies that digital enhancement deprives canine characters of their creaturely dimension which is responsible for evoking the aesthetic experience of unpredictability. The latter is a crucial aspect in my reading as it allows the real dog to counterbalance the control of the human filmic apparatus that produces images, signs and symbolical constructions out of the (f)actual animals. Furthermore, while Lawrence suggests that digital enhancement is also “effective dramatically” as it can make dog characters “more anthropomorphically expressive”,³¹ it also cuts back on the dogs' agency in this respect. For instance, the digital manipulation of the dogs' faces makes them more suitable to express and evoke human emotions, while manipulating their movements so that they can present stunts that real dogs would be unable to do (such as head-spins and somersaults) entails moulding the canine body for dramatic purposes. As Lawrence admits, both of these enhancement methods evoke the ethically and politically questionable practices of breeding that have treated the body of domestic canines as malleable material to produce more and more “perfect”

30 Lawrence, “Practically Infinite”, 116.

31 Lawrence, 116.



Figure 13:

The dog actor playing Togo completing the fiction and the affective spectatorial experience.

Still from Core, *Togo* [1:40:17].

Figure 14:

The real husky puppy contributing to creating his own representation.

Still from Core, *Togo* [1:40:06].

dogs for various purposes.³² Just as the canine body is “plastic in the hands of the breeder”,³³ so too is the dog character in the hands of visual effects personnel. Consequently, while Lawrence argues that digitally enhanced dog characters can “reveal for us the repressed histories of such subjection”,³⁴ I would add that they also reinforce the representational regimes that transform dogs into anthropomorphic spectacles and signs. In other words, while digital manipulation makes dog characters more effective economically and dramatically, this also means that they eliminate the characters’ creaturely dimension, the layer which, as I have argued throughout this paper, contributes to evoking a profound emotional experience in the viewer. *Togo* is an effective film exactly because Ericson Core, the director, realized that involving real dogs instead of using CGI technologies is key to providing an authentic affective experience for the audience.

As Core put it in an interview, “[t]hey’re not always looking at you, they’re not always in exactly the right place, but their heart is there.”³⁵ To another magazine, Core remarked that during shooting, the animals “teach you more than you probably teach them” and so “as much as you think that you’re a master of your pet, it’s usually the other way around.”³⁶ Such a directorial attitude entails letting the dogs be themselves in front of the camera, recording uninstructed movements and gestures, and finally editing and incorporating these takes into the final product. This explains why, for example, when a young Togo escapes from the kennel and disrupts Seppala’s training routine within the diegesis, Togo’s behaviour also seemingly disrupts the fiction. The little husky’s genuine gestures of impatience, his autonomous desire to break free from wherever he is locked up, and his ebullient movements once finally loose (Fig. 14), force us to see the *dog as a dog* and therefore touch us with the affective force of the creaturely. Despite the absence of the puppy eyes feature, this film can thus move the viewer because, ultimately, it adapts to and incorporates the real animals’ actions.

32 Lawrence, “Practically Infinite”, 118–120.

33 Watson, “Toy Dogs”, 878; quoted in Lawrence, 119.

34 Lawrence, 120.

35 Core, “True Story of ‘Togo’”.

36 Core, “Crafting a Tearjerker”.

Conclusion

While *Togo* explicitly supports the assumption that cinematic dog representations are co-constituted by flesh and blood canines — as much responsible for emotionally engaging the audience as the film-makers' strategies — all the films analysed in this article absorb and are, in turn, affected by canine agency. In other words, all of the enlisted illustrations can be construed as “cynematographic” films, because besides the filmic techniques, namely the aesthetic cutesification and narrative sentimentalisation of the canine characters, the real-life dogs also play a crucial part in emotionally moving the viewers, and thus also in shaping the representation of their species. To demonstrate this argument, I focused on moments of cinematographic doubling, namely scenes and sequences in which the dog's phenomenal presence is at once revealed and helps reveals the immanent doubling or hybridity of the feature film itself that, in the Bazinian sense, always absorbs reality. Furthermore, while calling our attention to the impurity of fiction, the dog's phenomenal presence also causes an almost inexplicable, poignant emotion in the audience, which mostly derives from having just glimpsed the (f)actual animal on the screen. This means that it is not only the cinematic apparatus that renders the canine character emotionally moving, but also the dog actor him or herself. In moments of cinematographic doubling, we thus see how much cinema is indebted to the dogs' participation in creating their own representation as well as in generating an emotional response from the viewers. In short, the analysed scenes help us perceive films featuring dogs as cinematographic images with an emotionally moving quality largely dependent on the dog character revealing his or her phenomenal “states of being”.

Taking account of the creature not as an entity who ruptures but who completes the character can help us better understand what we feel when we are watching a cute-looking dog on the screen. It, furthermore, also sheds new light on the nature of cinematic canine representations in Hollywood, which seem to be as much indebted to the agency of the dog actor as they are controlled by the

human filmic apparatus. This is not to deny the power relations unevenly distributed along species lines within the film industry, or, at the other extreme, to say that dog actors themselves write, direct, or shoot films. It is to illuminate that without their presence, the Hollywood movie could not evoke such overwhelming emotions in the audience, that is, it would not work as an affective cultural representation. To conclude, viewing Hollywood productions featuring dogs from the relational perspective proposed by this paper can help us realize that the films are not only the products of human, but also of nonhuman agency. In so doing, it might also open up viewers to a more relational perspective through which they could see how much of “our” representations, “our” cultures and “our” worlds are co-created by nonhuman animals. To quote Tang’s idea, which resonates with this research in many respects, such an alternative mode of reading films can serve as a basis for an ethical viewing that “changes not only how we relate to cinema but also how we relate to animals”³⁷ and the world(s) that we together inhabit.

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³⁷ Tang, “Of Dogs and Hot Dogs”, 55.

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