

THE REPRESENTATION OF DOGS AS FAMILY IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY FILM

by

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ABSTRACT

The American family dog is a social construct that blurs the ontological boundaries of nature/culture dualism and which contemporary American documentary filmmakers represent by employing alternate tropes of ‘dog as human’ and ‘dog as animal.’ In filmic and practical use, these tropes are in flux and are confusing. The position of the dog as a paradox of nature and culture and member of the contemporary inter-species family makes the decision to euthanize it ethically challenging.

Non-fiction dog programming is more popular than ever and most shows employ the ‘dog as human’ trope. But few address at what point that trope breaks down and how to find the line between ‘dog as human’ and ‘dog as animal’ when making ethical decisions for dogs. I will prove this by describing movies like *Why We Love Cats and Dogs* (Ellen Goosenberg Kent 2009) that rely on removed experts to explain the how humans are similar to dogs and those like *Shelter Dogs* (Cynthia Wade 2003) that follow devastating moments of loss with cheery depictions of renewal. My thesis film *Soul Dog* instead dives into the deep emotional conflict that many of us face in a society where dogs have become surrogate for family. Using personal subjective storytelling techniques like that in *Sherman’s March* (McElwee 1986) and quirky vox pop interviews similar to those in *Gates of Heaven*, (Morris 1978) I focus on the personal stories and popular wisdom that influence our actions.

INTRODUCTION

The depiction of the American family dog in film reflects our often-conflicting biological, sociological and religious philosophies about what ontologically constitutes nature and how to relate to it ethically. Humans and human made things that represent *culture* are outside of nature and subject to a different code of ethics (Evernden 32-35). Domestic dogs are a product of both *nature* and *culture* and are therefore a paradox of the dualism or what Donna Haraway calls a “naturalcultural contact zone” (7). Americans increasingly treat dogs as equal family members (Serpell 123). But in terms of medical care and end of life decisions, this makes finding ‘the line’ between human and canine family member an ethical dilemma.

Following the nature/culture dualism, social and filmic depictions of the domestic dog can be broadly broken into two tropes of ‘dog as animal’ and ‘dog as human.’ These tropes are informed by the socio-political realm and are under pressure of constantly changing philosophies of biology, sociology and definition of family. In flux, they often leave people wondering how to acceptably treat their pet family members at the end of their lives.

Based on the sheer number of contemporary non-fiction programs about dogs, these shows seem to be more popular than ever. They employ one trope or the other to advance their story. I think that the ‘dog as human’ trope is the most widely used of the two. This reflects the increasing importance of dogs as family members to contemporary Americans. But representing the dog as a human does not accurately portray the real difficulty owners have finding ‘the line’ between human and dog when making the decision to euthanize their canine family members.

I believe that the most effective documentaries that deal with pet euthanasia give the audience the opportunity to *think* about the symbiotic interspecies relationship and the social influences on deciding to euthanize a pet family member; to *feel* the anxiety, confusion, and sadness of that decision and; to *realize* that we have no roadmap to follow because the norms and philosophies keep changing. Additionally, sharing stories can help

others to deal with a similar situation (Garton 8). Therefore, I believe the most effective documentaries about euthanasia are the ones that convey personal stories.

In support of my argument, first I will explain the history and rupture of the nature/culture dichotomy that informs the tropes of ‘dog as animal’ and ‘dog as human.’ Then I will analyze two contemporary documentaries that deal with dog euthanasia, *Why We Love Cats and Dogs* (Ellen Goosenberg Kent 2009) and *Shelter Dogs* (Cynthia Wade 2003). I will evaluate how each movie uses the opposing tropes and I will look at other stylistic attributes within these documentaries that affect the audience’s opportunity to *think, feel* and *realize*.

Next, I will compare those works with my thesis movie, *Soul Dog*. *Soul Dog* is a personal journey story about caring for and eventually euthanizing my soul dog, Juno. I also attempt to reveal interesting things about the culture and time in which I live. My goal is to provide an alternate way of representing pet euthanasia for people who have to make that decision too. I believe that the best way to allow an audience to *think, feel* and *realize* in a documentary about pet euthanasia is to focus narratives on popular wisdom and personal experiences. In my thesis work I intend to show how subscribing to one trope or another does not prepare us for the ethical dilemma of euthanizing our pets. Instead, I wish to explore between the tropes, find their intersection and where the ‘dog as human trope’ ends differently for different people.

THE NATURE AND CULTURE OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY DOG

Whom and what do we touch when we touch this dog?

Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (5)

The American family dog is a social construct that we know through a coming together of biological science, social interactions and media. Biological science has historically obtained knowledge about dogs, like other animals from an objective distance (Evernden 41). Most of us have a common knowledge of dogs instead through a close relationship in which we share out homes, communities, families and even diseases. These social intimacies give us an empathetic bend despite science's historical efforts to draw ontological distinctions between them and us.

Filmic depictions of the American family dog follow these two epistemological urges and I broadly define them as 'dog as animal' and 'dog as human' tropes. These opposing tropes are emblematic of the nature/culture dichotomy debate, which pertain to questions of what constitutes nature and how we should relate to it ethically. Filmmakers tend to employ one trope or another to advance their story while rarely examining their contradictions and the influence these tropes have on socio-political debate such as pet euthanasia. To explain the core of the problem, I will begin with a brief introduction of the nature/culture dichotomy and how it pertains to the American family dog.

Modernist humanism and posthumanism are founded on divisions of nonhuman and human or nature and culture. In Uncommon Ground, William Cronon writes, "One of the most important implications of that word [nature] is that the things it describes is *not* of our own making" (34). Implicit in this distinction is that humanity is superior to nature. This is nature/culture dualism. In The Social Creation of Nature, Neil Evernden explains that Humanist biologists see the world through an anthropocentric lens governed by human agency, superiority, consciousness and dominion. Depending on which side of the dichotomy something falls determines the code of ethics to which it is subjected (31-35). However, as Bruno Latour writes in We Have Never Been Modern, "all of culture and all of nature get churned up again every day" (2).

The American family dog is a complex construct of both cultural and natural elements. Donna Haraway in When Species Meet writes that dogs signify the infoldings of “the clean lines between traditional and modern, organic and technological, human and nonhuman” (8). Therefore, we face an ontological dilemma when we make medical, end of life and other ethical decisions in its regard. In the broadest sense, the dog is an animal that populates the human world by sharing our home, experiences, family, medicine and diseases. This relationship is not new but our understanding of the relationship is undergoing change from one of anthropocentric domestication to co-evolution. This new understanding is challenging the nature/culture dichotomy and how we view agency and consciousness within nature.

The historically dominant view of canine domestication is anthropocentric and denies the dog any agency. However, an alternate view to domestication proposes that dogs and humans have *co-evolved* for as long as 200,000 years. The academic controversy heated up in 1997 when RK Wayne published an article in *Science* that suggested the dog split from the wolf 135,000 years ago. It contradicted the prevalent theory that the split happened only fifteen thousand years prior and that early humans perpetuated it. Such an early date suggests co-evolution, which Mark Derr calls in Dog’s Best Friend, “an intriguing notion that, if true, should temper our anthropocentrism” (xiii).

In 2002 Michael Pollan popularized the theory of co-evolution of humans and domesticated species as an alternative to the hegemonic belief in anthropocentric domestication. In The Botany of Desire he explains that people have formed a reciprocal relationship with domestic plants. Domesticated plants have evolved to satisfy people and have simultaneously benefited themselves. Their nectar and fruit induce us to spread their genes, thereby getting to make genetic copies of themselves. From Pollan’s point of view, it is not one-way domestication. It is reciprocal. It is co-evolution. And it is a new way of seeing our place in the world. Pollan wonders, “What would happen if we looked at the world beyond the garden this way, regarded our place in nature from the same upside-down perspective” (xvi)?

In 2005 Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson looked beyond the garden to the human-animal partnerships. They popularized the theory of co-evolution between humans and dogs in *Animals in Translation*. Grandin's view of canine domestication involves more animal agency than evolutionary scientists normally give credit. In *Animals in Film*, Jonathan Burt says that when we think about animal agency, we consider the impact that animals have on humans rather than seeing them as passive partners. Grandin views the human/dog partnership as historically symbiotic. She believes that people wouldn't be who we are today without canids. "Humans co-evolved with wolves; we changed them and they changed us" (303).

Today, evolutionary biologists still debate the time of the split. In their 2003 paper, *Co-Evolution of Humans and Canids, An Alternative View of Dog Domestication: Homo Homini Lupus?*, Wolfgang M Schleidt and Michael D. Shalter explain that before humans met wolves, we were more socially like our nearest genetic relative, chimpanzees. In stark contrast to chimpanzees, wolves survive as a result of teamwork, cooperative hunting, and pup rearing. Schleidt and Shalter argue that wolves taught us the cooperative qualities that make us socially human and that have enabled us to exchange ideas. This "lupification" of human behavior (a term coined by W.M Schleidt in 1998) may in fact exceed the effect we had on forming the domestic dog. "Strangely, there are indications that such humaneness, which many admire and hold, at least in theory, to be the highest achievement of humanity, was invented millions of years ago by early canids" (60). If so, I conclude that to be human is to be in part *dog* or as Haraway writes, "The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters" (2).

Dogs and humans are constantly adapting to an ever-changing concept of family. Human families are changing in post-Industrial America as we become geographically separated from our relatives. Same-sex couples and childless couples also re-define the modern family. This has had a direct impact on our relationship with our pets. John Berger writes in *About Looking*, "Never have there been so many household pets as are to be found today in the cities of the richest countries...it is part of that universal but

personal withdrawal into the private small family unit which is a such a distinguishing feature of consumer societies (14).”

In *People in Disguise Anthropomorphism and the Human-Pet Relationship*, James Serpell admits that pet keeping does not mesh with beliefs about natural selection. He wonders if pets are just social parasites invoking our parental response or if they are counterfeit substitutes for relationships with people for those who are socially dysfunctional. Instead, he offers that because pets serve as a form of social support pet owners are in fact healthier, have less stress and lower blood pressure than non-pet owners. And that dogs out rank humans in meeting many relationship needs such as reliability, nurturance and companionship (124).

Ten thousand years ago dogs became our agricultural partners, helping us to herd, hunt and do physical labor. In post-industrial America, however, they are becoming more family member than useful tools. All over the world people live with dogs in their homes, celebrate their birthdays, give them human names, and mourn their deaths. In America they wear designer clothes, go to spas and get expensive medical care such as kidney transplants and 75% of pet owners say they consider them to be like their children (Serpell 123).

How we know and represent nature and domestic dogs is informed by the nature/culture dualism. However, this dualistic vision of the world has not always existed. In *The Social Creation of Nature*, Neil Everden explains that in the Renaissance, empirical scientists like Leonardo began to decipher the world through homogenizing scientific and mathematical laws. Nature was now predictable and lacked theological meaning. A strict division between culture and nature formed and nature could only be understood from an objective distance. Early Humanists established the nature/culture dualism to protect the elevated status and meaningfulness of humans. Humanists sought to remove of all empathy and fellowship to understand nature. Humans were now the sole proprietors of all subjectivity including thoughts, spirituality, agency and feelings and they considered natural objects like plants and animals to be just biological reacting matter. “[W]hen the path to knowledge became that of the stranger, the detached observer, there was not only the possibility but the requirement that nature be utterly

devoid of human qualities” (Evernden 89). Following this epistemological way of knowing animals as empirically ‘other’ and distinctly separate and inferior to humans, I derive the ‘dog as animal’ trope. This trope is in keeping with the evolutionary theory that I have discussed that supports a later date of wolf/ dog divergence and anthropocentric domestication.

Evernden further explains that before the Renaissance humans had a monistic world-view of which they were part. We understood our world empathetically because we saw ourselves in nature and vice versa. “Empathy implies an underlying similarity between the human and the natural world. For nature to be knowable through empathy, subject and object must be fundamentally akin” (41). Following this empathetic world-view, I derive the ‘dog as human’ trope. Using this trope implies the acceptance of a commonality between dogs and humans. I believe that the ‘dog as human’ trope is becoming more popular today in part because the theory of co-evolution and an early split from wolf lineage is growing in popularity. This shift has caused us to think of our relationship as cooperative rather than anthropocentric.

Because we have different ways of knowing dogs and because the nature/culture dichotomy is unreliable, people are faced with practical predicaments with how to treat their pet family members ethically. William Cronon writes, “How can we act in an uncertain world where our familiar compass bearings don’t work as well as we once thought they did, and how must we change the way we think in order to reorient ourselves and act responsibly” (28)? This predicament is poignant when we make end of life decisions for our pets. How do we find ‘the line’ between dogs and human family members? ‘Dogs as animals’ are subject to a death ethic in which euthanasia is a normal, humane option. ‘Dogs as humans’ get increasingly advanced health and hospice care. More and more often dog family members are treated and represented as humans but it is to a point. That point keeps shifting on a wide social scale and is the subject of my thesis movie, *Soul Dog*.

‘DOG AS ANIMAL’ AND ‘DOG AS HUMAN’ IN FILM

Our historically dualistic view of dogs is in flux because of changing scientific theories and social influences. More and more dogs are family and treated with the luxuries normally reserved for humans. ‘Dogs as humans’ go on vacation, to spas, and get advanced medical care. But at the point we decide to euthanize them, that trope breaks down and they are ‘dogs as animals’ and the dualism returns. That point is different for different people and finding it can pose an ethical challenge. How do we provide dignified ends of lives for the pets that have given us so much? Is euthanasia a humane option that we reserve for animals and not people or is it a convenient act of dominion? These questions and finding the point when the ‘dog as human’ trope breaks down are rarely addressed in film. Filmmakers employ alternate tropes of ‘dog as animal’ and ‘dog as human’ in both fiction and non-fiction films but rarely examine their contradictory relationship or their disintegration. But by examining the paradox, we could, as William Cronon writes, “...see the unexamined, sometimes contradictory, assumptions at the core of our own beliefs—assumptions that can distract and defeat us if we embrace or act on them unthinkingly” (26).

Fiction filmmakers tend to employ the ‘dog as human’ trope and anthropomorphism widely and sentimentally. Fictional movies such as *Ole Yeller* (Stevenson 1957), *Big Red* (Tokar 1962), *Lassie* (Granville 1954), *Air Bud* (Smith 1998) and *Beethoven* (Levant 1992), and more recently *Marley and Me* (Frankel 2008) establish the dog is a family member who can heal family ruptures between parents and children. “Humans never seem so indelibly human as in fiction that turns them into animals” (Daston and Mitman 1). For example, In the *Shaggy Dog* (Robbins, 2006) when a man turns into a dog he can finally understand and be loved by his family. In *I am Legend* (Lawrence 2007), a dog replaces the hero’s family when all humans turn animalistic and against him. But as Jonathan Burt says,

But the issue here is not really the mollifying of human consciences via sentimentalism. Rather it concerns whether or not animals films should entail or inspire a sense of the real animal uncluttered by the emotional and psychological links that allow for human-animal relations in the first place.

The visual animal is caught in an argument over whether the animal should be considered on its own terms or understood through a network of human-animal relations (188).

Non-fiction filmmakers exploit the ‘dog as human’ trope to advance their story but they too rarely address the line at which that trope breaks down socially, or ethical questions about euthanasia. The popular National Geographic television show, *DogTown* (Dennett 2008) follows dog rehabilitations at a rescue center of the same name and is “the last best hope for problem pooches.” (<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/series/dogtown#tab-Overview>) The caregivers in *DogTown* do extraordinary things to rehabilitate and understand the emotional life of homeless dogs. The show’s vets perform grueling eight-hour surgeries. Behavior specialists spend months socializing painfully shy dogs. And adoption coordinators find homes for special needs dogs. The dogs of *DogTown* are ‘dogs as humans’ and the stories about their medical and behavioral rehabilitation never question the trope, even if the rehabilitation efforts seem questionable.

The National Geographic television show, *Dog Whisperer* (Fincke 2004 - 2010), also does not deny otherness. However, it does something very interesting with the ‘dog as human’ trope by reversing it to ‘human as dog.’ The host of the show, Cesar Milan, teaches people to act like alpha dogs because in his opinion, we are behaviorally the same.

The HBO documentary, *I am an Animal* (Galkin 2007) features PETA’s cofounder Ingrid Newkirk. In the film she says that when she grew up, her dog was her sibling. She is famous for her animal rights protests in which she subjects herself to the similar torture and humiliation of abused animals. However, when one of her rescue dogs is found to be sick with heartworm, she hastily euthanizes it. As a result, the movie trope goes from ‘dog as human’ to ‘dog as animal’ without question. Ingrid also reveals that when she dies, she wishes for her own body to be eaten and her own skin to be fashioned into leather products. We return to ‘dog as human,’ trope or rather, ‘human as animal.’

Dogs and More Dogs (DMD) (Noel Buckner & Rob Whittlesey, 2004) does an excellent job of representing the current scientific debate over canine anthropocentric

domestication versus co-evolutionary adaptation (as discussed earlier). Standard talking head interviews with experts such as James Serpell and RK Wayne (both mentioned in this paper) are journalistically positioned to present the arguments over how ‘domestication’ happened. And John Lithgow entertainingly narrates. In an essay titled, *Do You Work for a Living* from Uncommon Ground Richard White questions “Are the cows and crops we breed, the fields we cultivate, the genes we splice natural or unnatural” (173)? A dog breeder in *DMD* unwittingly answers this question when she says of her very inbred Pomeranian, “I made her, this is my art.” This logical positioning of arguments and focus on the hereditary traits of bred dogs facilitates the ‘dog as animal’ trope. But *DMD*’s expository style appeals logically and not emotionally, therefore, *DMD* does not really address the ethical paradox of the contemporary American family dog. One exception is a short vox pop interview section where an old man memorably says that his beagle means more to him than his wife.

With the same talking head expert interviews, *DMD* explores parallels between dog and human lives and swings towards the ‘dog as human’ trope. One topic is the dog show in which dogs are judged solely on appearance. James Serpell makes the point that this echoes human racist, eugenicist rhetoric. We also learn that understanding dogs with genetic diseases such as narcolepsy helps us understand people with similar problems. The reason, I did not chose *DMD* for further analysis is because it does not addresses dog euthanasia nor how it challenges these parallels we draw.

Some contemporary documentaries about dogs mirror one hermeneutic cycle in evolutionary biology (that I mention earlier) to reinterpret ‘dogs as human.’ But is it just anthropomorphism? Anthropomorphism in non-fiction films has a sordid history of imposing patriarchal, capitalistic human moral values on animals such as in Disney’s True Life Adventure movies *Seal Island* and *Beaver Valley* (Mitman 110-111, Chris 28-41). But I agree with Everden who writes that it’s anthropocentric to think that animals do not have consciousness, intelligence and emotions similar to our own (93).

John Berger thinks maintaining the nature/culture dualism is critical for understanding animals, because rejecting it leads to total marginalization of animals. And when animals and people become synonymous, animals fade away. Cynthia Chris also

supports the dualism. In Watching Wildlife, she writes that the wildlife film genre shifted from animal as object of human action to anthropomorphic focus, in which human traits are mapped onto animal subjects, to a zoomorphic focus in which knowledge of the animal is used to explain the human. She worries about such cross-mapping of human and animal traits as a way to naturalize bad behavior and western patriarchal ideology. And that when we try to relate with animals, we just see our ideology reflected back at us. These are valid concerns, but in Animals in Film, Jonathan Burt writes, “identification between human and animal does not automatically imply anthropomorphism, or even the opposite, the bestialization of man” (69). As humans, animals and actors upon nature, I believe it is impossible for us to represent animals without some amount of empathetic understanding.

DOCUMENTARY STYLE AND DEPICTING EUTHANASIA

... the figure of the animal opens up the experience of humans to a richer life whilst at the same time making this experience dependent on some form of absence or loss

Jonathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (184)

Unlike human family members, there is no clear ethical standard by which to make end of life decisions for pet family members. This lack of clarity can be isolating for people who care for sick pets. People search for guidelines. How do you know when it is time? What is the dog's level of consciousness? We ask our vets, read blogs, and watch movies. Every piece of advice affects the caretaker and pet's experience. I have found evidence of this struggle in a plethora of artistic pet dedications from poems, diaries, home movies, and even newspaper ads in which people express their personal experiences. *Soul Dog* has its place in this collection of artifacts that represent individual people's struggle to make sense of the pet's value as family member.

Humans use animals to symbolize, dramatize, and illuminate aspects of humans' experience and fantasy. Importantly, dogs and humans share histories, social structures, diseases and medical care. Their life spans are a fraction of ours and we experience their life span in front of our eyes. This mutuality can help us contemplate our own deaths and dignity at the end of our own lives.

I believe that the most effective documentaries that deal with pet euthanasia give the audience the opportunity to *think* about the complexities of the symbiotic interspecies relationship and the social influences on the decision to euthanize a pet family member; *feel* the anxiety, confusion, and sadness of that dilemma and; *realize* that we have no roadmap to follow because the norms and philosophies keep changing. This process can also help us contemplate our own deaths and place in nature.

Next, I will analyze two documentaries that deal with dog euthanasia. I chose these films because they are non-fiction movies about dogs that have been produced in the last decade and in the United States. They must also address dog euthanasia. The two films I chose represent two very different stylistic approaches. *Shelter Dogs* (Cynthia

Wade 2003) is made up of observational footage in the lineage of Direct Cinema. *Why we Love Cats and Dogs* (Ellen Goosenberg Kent 2009) *WWLCD* is a standard documentary that consists mostly of interviews and b-roll. I will evaluate how each uses the tropes of 'dog as human' and 'dog as animal' and how well their use of tropes represents the paradoxical situation of the dog. I will also look at stylistic differences that affect their audience's opportunity to *think, feel* and make *realizations* about that paradoxical existence and the ethical dilemma of dog euthanasia. I will consider stylistic elements such as who are the characters? Are they academic experts or people on the street? Is the footage stylized? What is in frame? How much information is conveyed, with what authority and at what pace? Does the movie show and tell or just tell? Does the soundtrack support or detract from the emotional authenticity? By identifying how the use of tropes and style affect the engagement of the viewer in the question of the dualistic nature of dogs, I can make recommendations on how to represent the ethical dilemma of pet euthanasia filmically. Doing so can help us contemplate our own actions, deaths and place in nature.

WHY WE LOVE CATS AND DOGS (WWLCD)

James Serpell says that participating in non-human lives is an antidote to the existential loneliness of the human condition and anthropomorphism is an opportunity to bridge the conceptual gap between them and us (Serpell 132). *WWLCD* proposes to teach us about cats and dogs from the perspectives of evolutionary biologists, behavioral specialists and pet owners. Each is treated stylistically differently but iterate the ‘dog as human’ trope. Biologists tell us how we are physiologically similar and that the difference between species is only by degree. Pet owners tell heart-warming stories of redemption through a relationship with their pet, revealing them as muse, savior, soul mate, and other half. An ASPCA animal behaviorist discusses “canine-ality” (derived from personality). She categorizes dog personalities into types that she matches with people’s personalities to facilitate pet adoptions. But by focusing only on what makes us similar to cats and dogs, not different, *WWLCD* does not get to the heart of their paradoxical existence within the human world.

Jerry’s story is a segment within *WWLCD* and is a particularly interesting use of tropes. Jerry’s owners Rene and Jim were so attached to him that when he got cancer they dedicated the following two years to giving him the best quality of life possible. After Jerry had one front leg amputated, his “pawrents” sold everything to buy an RV and take Jerry hiking around the west until the end of his life. Receiving such special treatment, Jerry is like a human. But at one point his “mom” Rene insightfully asks, “How far do you go for a dog? He’s not a kid, not a person. But he means so much to us.”

Jerry’s owners wait for Jerry to let them know when he is ready to die. But they do not fight at all costs as one normally would for a human. They refuse repeat chemotherapy treatments and further operations in the interest of quality of life. One wonders how they will make such decisions for themselves at the end of their own lives.

Jerry’s story was so popular that viewers could follow it online after *WWLCD* aired. In Jerry’s blog (written from his point of view) we learn that even though his ‘pawrents’ wanted to see him grow old, their definition of dignity was for him to be able to potty on his own. After he lost that ability, his “pawrents” euthanized him. Although

they had said they would treat Jerry like a human and “never give up,” in the end he is subject to a different (possibly more humane) death ethic. The ‘dog as human’ dies as an animal.

Jerry’s story is told through sit-down interviews, archival footage, and observational footage. Archival footage and voice over concisely inform about strong bond and the medical information about Jerry’s cancer. Observational footage in a veterinarian’s office gives us access to deeply intimate moments and the opportunity to feel the pain of their loss. Although Jerry’s story is interesting, it is not a helpful example for people struggling to care for sick pets. Not many people would or could sell everything to go on the road with their handicapped dog. But many may try to incorporate him into their normal lives. Therefore, a story demonstrating realistic home care would be more relevant for most Americans.

Other segments in *WWLCD* are made up of a variety of stylistic techniques. They consist of studio interviews with pet owners, formal interviews with experts, and observational footage of people in their homes. In terms of giving the audience an opportunity to *think, feel* and *realize* these segments are generally unsuccessful. The studio interviews are lit like commercials with odd props self-consciously placed in a white background. That, and circus-like music undermine the sincerity of the pet owners who reveal their intimate feelings about their bonds with their animals. All of the experts’ interviews are cut into quick sound clips that allow the audience no time to think, feel or make their own conclusions. The positioning of so much information, instead tells the audience what to think.

Stylized footage also undermines the film’s sincerity and opportunity for the audience to think, feel, and make realizations about our relationship with pets. The personality assessments conducted by behavioral specialists at the ASPCA are portrayed in what looks like black and white surveillance footage while the person conducting the assessment seems to be unaware of the camera. What is so strange about this technique is that the cross species personality typing is supposed to make us feel more similar to the animal. But the stylistic treatment of such makes us feel more removed.

WWLCD employs the ‘dog as human’ trope while trying to argue human and pet similarities. For people trying to make a decision to euthanize their pet, this can be problematic because it does not help to find the ethical line between them and us. During Jerry’s story, the movie skims questions of humane end of life care in favor of a cute story. Jerry is treated as a human in a way that is unrealistic for most people. Consistently, the stylistic elements that Ellen Goosenberg Kent chooses is ineffective for allowing her audience to *think, feel* and make *realizations* about the paradoxical situation of pets and how that affects our decision towards euthanasia.

SHELTER DOGS (SHD)

In *The Death of an Animal* Akira Mizuta Lippit writes that different cultural views of animal death blur the boundaries between animal and humanity. He writes that in Western thought, animals cannot experience death because they have no knowledge of it. “The inability of animals to know death follows from the perceived absence of language among animals. Language brings consciousness and with it the consciousness of consciousness and its absence or death” (Lippit 11). However, as Lippit also mentions, animals *do* have language and therefore consciousness, the extent of which is a topic of fervent research and debate. I believe that understanding animal death can help us understand the animal for what it truly is and give us insight to our own existence.

Shelter Dogs eloquently uses alternating tropes of ‘dog as animal’ and ‘dog as human’ to represent the paradoxical existence of the dog and how that paradoxical existence complicates the euthanasia decision. *SHD* follows the employees of Rondout Valley animal shelter in New York over the course of two years as they make difficult choices as to which dogs to rehabilitate and which to euthanize. In early audio address, central character and Rondout Kennel founder Sue Sternberg says she has been devoted to dogs her whole life and that she is closer to them than humans. However, only some of Sue’s dogs are ‘humans.’ For Sue and her staff, euthanasia is clearly a better option for dogs than spending the rest of their lives going crazy in a no-kill shelter. So, if they judge a dog to be unadoptable (not compatible with humans), they do not attempt to rehabilitate it, they hastily euthanize it instead of kenneling it for the rest of its life. These dogs are animals. For humans, at no-kill shelters (and for the dogs of *DogTown*) we fight at all costs. But to the characters in *SHD*, euthanasia is not the enemy. Living in inhumane conditions is.

Wade acknowledges the dog as a social construct when she pays particular attention to the adoption rooms at Rondout that the staff furnishes with comfortable things like chairs, sofas and blankets. Sue explains that she tries to make each room like a human home because living in stark concrete kennels is unnatural and maddening for dogs. She seems to be saying that if the dog can’t live a human-like life (on a bed rather

than a kennel floor) they are better off dead. Through Wade's perceptive observational storytelling we see for ourselves that the dogs appreciate the comforts and that these 'dogs are human.'

Rondout employees debate the cost and worth of dogs' medical treatment. Their decisions are openly dictated by the quality of a dog's personality. Fred, the Doberman pincer with neurological dysfunction in his hind legs gets experimental spinal treatment because he has a sweet personality. A dog that bites a staff member or guards its food is deemed unsafe to adopt. In one case, Sue claims that a Springer spaniel named Beau exhibited "dominant aggressive" behavior towards her. When she conducts additional behavior testing, we begin to question her actions. In a separate location, Sue aggravates and videos Beau to prove that he is dangerous and must be euthanized. One wonders why there were no other people present at the 'testing' and what she has done to get that response. This sequence effectively represents the subjective ethics that 'dogs as animals' face.

However, Sue's euthanasias are not unceremonious. Sue says that when you can plan a dog's death you can "get into his mind" and give him a sacred pleasure before he goes. Just before Beau's death, she feeds him chicken McNuggets from McDonalds -- an arguably human sacred pleasure. (Interestingly, Beau non-aggressively eats them from her hand.) Sue admits that she does not know if her actions are moral and that she worries how she will be judged in purgatory. Insightfully, she contemplates the ethical dilemma, and the dog's consciousness. Thus the audience does too.

SHD uses effective stylistic elements to allow the audience to think, feel and realize. The steady, contemplative pacing of *SHD* gives the audience time to absorb the emotions and the information and make their own realizations. Director Cynthia Wade conveys Sue's personal information through archival footage, interviews and observational footage of Sue at work and at home. Contemplative pacing allows for the time and intimacy for the audience to contemplate the bond and its purpose. The movie's strongest asset is that in lieu of formal interviews, it consists mostly of observational footage that 'shows' while it 'tells.' This observational footage has the emotional authenticity that the formal interviews in *WWLCD* lacks. The 'telling' is done with

Rondout employees' audio addresses that reveal intimacies deftly recorded by Wade. When Sue talks about her bond with dogs, we see her quiet moments at home with all three on her lap. When she talks about the stress that dogs feel in kennels, we see them spinning, pacing and biting their cages. When the staff members talk about their frustrations trying to adopt out the older dog Agnes, we witness their disappointing phone calls and Agnes lying quietly under the desk.

Wade's treatment of Agnes's story allows one to draw parallels with the lives of elderly people. Agnes is an older dog that ends up at Rondout because her elderly owner has died. Rondout employees struggle to adopt her but they find that her advanced age is an obstacle to finding a home for her. The camera searches for mutual understanding in Agnes's gaze while the employees tell potential adopters that she still has life to live. They look disheartened by people's preference for puppies. Eventually, we learn that Agnes has heart failure and the staff decides to euthanize her before she suffers.

Because Cynthia Wade is a removed filmmaker and not a character in *SHD*, we accept when she films euthanasias and close-ups of recently euthanized dogs. Because she is firmly seated behind the fourth wall, one doesn't question her filming Agnes's heart-wrenching death. If she were a character participant, I believe the audience would mistrust her motivation for filming those intimate moments. Instead, it is a gift that she can share the experience with an audience who has possibly never seen euthanasia. In *Soul Dog*, my veterinarian Dr Kari Swenson says that most people will have to euthanize their dogs. Therefore, it is empowering for pet owners to see euthanasia in a movie like *Shelter Dogs* because it lessens their fear of the unknown.

As an undergraduate biology student, I took a class from controversial Dr Randy Thornhill. I'll never forget his idea of "misplaced parental affection," which is the notion that people who have pets instead of children are wasting their resources and ignoring their biological imperative. At the same time, my conservation biology professor Dr Howard Snell advocated a non-reproductive lifestyle as more environmentally sustainable. This philosophical debate within the same department has been one of the most impactful of my education.

SHD skillfully broaches this controversial notion of dogs as surrogate family when Sue says that her own dogs are her soul mates and without them, she would be married with children. Instead of positioning experts that talk about the role of dog as family, *SHD* more effectively articulates the heart of the debate through a character's feelings and personal experience.

SHD has some stylistic shortcomings that deny the audience the opportunity to fully experience the ethical dilemma of dog euthanasia. Wade structures her story around the seasons and uses the weather as a clichéd tone setter. These devices are so stereotypical and heavy-handed as to be distracting. In the sequence when a vet diagnoses Agnes with heart failure, Wade inserts rain and lightning to set a pathetically tone. It is peppered with unrelated interludes of “breathtaking footage of the Catskill Mountain region” (<http://www.shelterdogs.org/synopsis.htm>) that detract from the story rather than enhance it. Unlike the observational footage that makes up the rest of *SHD*, this footage is classically beautiful. Instead of supporting the story, it has a different objective (to be aesthetic) and awkwardly and self-consciously stands out.

Jonathan Burt writes that in family films in which animals are killed the death is commonly followed by the arrival of newborns, which overcomes the sense of trauma. (Burt 181) *SHD* is powerful in its bold representation of euthanasia but retracts at the precise moment it could really scrutinize the ethical paradox. Agnes's euthanasia is a powerfully crushing moment. But the audience is given very little time to *feel* the loss before it is bombarded with images of puppies and thoughts of renewal. *SHD* begins in the bleak winter and ends in the hopeful spring with an awkwardly upbeat montage of pets in silly costumes that is set to saccharine music. The implication is that the “troubling moral dilemmas” of Sue Sternberg's “world in which there are no simple solutions” (<http://www.shelterdogs.org/synopsis.htm>) are in fact resolved.

In conclusion, *SHD* uses the tropes of ‘dog as animal’ and ‘dog as human’ alternately and effectively in terms of addressing the paradoxical situation of the dog. It consciously walks the ontological line between the two tropes and begs the question of where the ethical line is between dogs and humans in terms of euthanasia. *SHD*'s observational storytelling is far more effective at giving its audience the opportunity to

think, feel, and make *realizations* about dog euthanasia than *WWLCD*'s traditional journalistic positioning of arguments. But the movie scuttles itself in its weak, cloying ending that cheerily depicts birth and renewal and devalues the emotional sacrifice of euthanizing a beloved animal.

SOUL DOG (SD)

My thesis movie, *Soul Dog* is a personal subjective story about caring for and eventually euthanizing my soul dog, Juno. I tell my story with audio address from my video diary and observational footage of Juno and I taken over the four years in which he went slowly paralyzed from Degenerative Myelopathy. I openly question Juno's role as my surrogate family and its impact on finding the ethical point at which to euthanize him. Part of my personal journey is engaging total strangers on camera to talk about their bonds with their dogs and their views on euthanasia. I try to position these vox pop interviews as a Greek chorus to my experience. My personal story points to the larger sociological issue and the larger issue, represented by the vox pop, points back to my personal experience. Together we seek and question the paradoxical situation of the American family dog. It is an important reflexive gesture that my voice is heard during these interviews. Talking with strangers was part of my personal journey therefore my character is present both in front of and behind the camera.

My intention is to examine the alternate tropes of 'dog as human' and 'dog as animal' rather than subscribe to one. Science can be used to support either trope and explain our relationship with dogs, but I am more interested in the social implications of that knowledge and how it affects peoples' experiences. I found that for many people, 'dogs are human' to a point. That point is in flux and is different for different people. My prevailing question when I made *SD* was "Where is the line for most people? Where is it for me?" Unlike *WWLCD*, I do not seek the advice of experts to pose a "classic debate structure typical of the journalistic approach to controversy" (Kennerson 25). Instead my vox pop interviews are similar to those interviews in Errol Morris's *Gates of Heaven* (1978) in that they reveal personal philosophies that are based on emotion and experience rather than on scientific facts. By focusing my narrative on personal stories and popular wisdom I believe that I allow my audience to *think, feel* and make *realizations* about pet euthanasia and the paradoxical situation of the dog.

Sharing stories can help others to deal with a similar situation (Garton 8). Unlike Jerry's story from *WWLCD* in which two dog owners give up their entire normal lives to

care for their sick dog, my story is a more realistic scenario for most people. Not many people can or would give up everything to care for a sick pet, but many would try to incorporate him into their normal lives, which is what I do in *SD*.

Video can translate a complex experience but still is only a small window. I struggled with conveying complex medical information, the day-to-day repetition of Juno's care, the subtle ups and downs that confused my judgment, and showing the difficult matter (like expressing Juno's bowels) without turning my audience away. Like *SHD*, I use archival footage to give context to my family history to emphasize and the strength of our bond. Like *SHD* I use observational footage and careful pacing to show and tell at the same time. But unlike *SHD*, I am a character participant with a presence both in front of and behind the camera. In this regard, *SD* is similar to Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March*. Like *SD*, McElwee's reflexive, personal journey is entwined with cultural reflections. McElwee's journey to find love and cope with his fears about nuclear proliferation is mixed with regional civil war history and its affect of Southern masculinity and femininity.

McElwee's self-representation takes three forms: his reflexive presence as a filmmaker that includes his voice from behind the camera, his audio address and his direct address. In *SD*, my representation takes three forms: my reflexive presence as a filmmaker, audio address and direct observation. However, one major disappointment I had while making *SD* was that for a lack of time, I did not get to incorporate my direct camera addresses which I feel would add emotional depth to the telling of the experience.

Another similarity with *Sherman's March* is that *SD*'s production value is not as important as the story. Some of McElwee's shots go in and out of focus or have the sound accidentally turned off. Instead of being detracting, this technique contributes to the emotional authenticity of the film. Unlike *WWLCD*'s studio interviews, I believe *SD*'s interviews feel authentic. It is obvious that they are not casted, scripted, or lit. And the audience can hear me interacting with the interviewees. I did these vox pop interviews with a small camera and as a one-person crew. This helped me capture authentic moments because my gear was not intimidating to people on the street nor was it

encumbering to me. Like *Sherman's March*, this resulted in some poor sound and out of focus shots but I feel that was a worthy sacrifice for spontaneity and authenticity.

In “Viewing What Comes Naturally: A Feminist Approach to Television Natural History,” Barbara Crowther says that most Natural History programming consists of masculine discourse. She says that a more feminine representation of the natural world may include suggestions rather than statements, and would not rest on the historically male scientific privilege. *SD* is feminine in its focus on social and personal wisdom rather than scientific knowledge and makes suggestions rather than statements about the paradoxical situation of the American family dog. I carefully position my audio address with observational footage and vox pop interviews to raise questions about ethical boundaries, animal consciousness, inter-species family, parallels with our own lives and the biological reproductive imperative. Then I give audience members the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and make their own conclusions.

I am not the first person to question why some couples have dogs instead of kids. But the question is subtly present throughout my film: during footage of my husband and I biking with Juno in a baby cart, spending a lot of money at the veterinarian's office, and tucking Juno's mostly paralyzed body gently into his bed. The vox pop is also carefully positioned to support the same question. For example, after I say in audio address, “the look in Juno's eyes means that he wants to go for a walk, only a mother would know,” there is a vox pop sequence of people talking about why their dogs are like children to them.

I attempt to draw parallels between dog and human end of life decisions by showing images of Juno's care that is similar to human care like washing him, taking him to the doctor, and pushing him in his wheelchair. When Juno's death becomes eminent, my audio address speaks of “an existential dilemma that we go through together” and questions, “How will we be at the end of our own lives?”

There is also an underling discomfort that some dogs get better treatment than some people. I spend hundreds of dollars a month on Juno's medical care. Candace makes the bold remark that euthanizing dogs at a shelter is like euthanizing kids at an

orphanage. Celia tells us that Stella gets new outfits every season. And Naomi lovingly pours bottled water for her bulldog.

In *SD*, I try to understand Juno empathetically ‘as a human.’ But as Jonathan Burt writes, “Film multiplies the different ways of seeing an animal. . . . looking into the eye of the animal we see both the reflection of ourselves and the irreconcilable otherness of an intelligence ordered around a world we can share in body but not in mind” (Burt 50-51). One shot in particular combines the multiple forms of seeing and the different gazes, which are the camera’s, the audience’s, Juno’s, and mine. I film Juno who looks at me from the other side of a glass door. My own reflection and that of the camera are superimposed on his image. I endeavor to understand him, but the result is a feeling of alienation and incomprehension.

Unlike *SHD*, *SD* rejects the notion that the arrival of newborns and other cheery depictions of renewal can overcome the trauma of animal loss. *SD*’s ending is thematically similar to that of *Ole Yeller*. “*Old Yeller* is different from many family films in which animals, if they die at all, are usually killed through accident, hunting or illness. Rarely does a child have to kill their own pet, whom they love more than anything. . . . the renewal consequent on animal death is not one that entails simple moving on. The sacrifice necessary for the rite of passage requires its scar” (Burt 181).

I contemplate Juno’s agency when I talk about “his will to live” and “the light in his eyes.” I want him to choose death for himself -- to be human. But because he is an animal, I had to choose for him compassionately. I found my line and it was his physical suffering. In the end I admit that I wanted Juno to make up for my losses. He came to represent everything ephemeral and important to me: my friends, my youth, and my family. I say, “Losing him was like losing everything I loved all at once. How can all of that be wrapped up in one being, one love? I don’t know.” To me this sums up the paradox of the contemporary American dog: It is an integrated member of the contemporary American family but we can’t possibly appreciate the animal for what it actually is.

In *Soul Dog* my personal subjective story is entwined with vox pop interviews that paint a larger cultural picture of the paradox of the American family dog. Together

we explore the role of our dogs as our surrogate family and where the ethical line lies when it comes time to euthanize them. I do not rely on conventional tropes of ‘dog as human’ and ‘dog as animal.’ Instead I try to find where the ‘dog as human’ trope breaks down for different people.

SD relies on personal and social wisdom rather than on empirical scientific knowledge. And it makes suggestions rather than statements, which allows its audience to come to his or her own conclusions. Carefully positioning my personal story and vox pop interviews, I ponder difficult topics. Why are dogs surrogate for family? Can dogs help us contemplate our own end of life? Why are some dogs treated better than some people? Can film help us bridge our irreconcilable otherness? How do we cope with the trauma of euthanizing our canine family members? Is the dog capable of understanding death? How ‘human’ are they?

In SD, I attempt to show why euthanizing my dog Juno was like losing everything I loved all at once. The contemporary American dog has come to mean so many different things to so many people that we can barely see the dog for what it is. They are our surrogate family. They make up for the loneliness of the human condition. And their life spans, a fraction of ours, represents particular times in our lives that may be hard to let go. However, we share so many things with dogs: our families, homes, diseases and 135,000 years of co-evolution that they deserve our empathetic understanding. And as we plan dignified deaths for our canine family members, we can take the opportunity to contemplate our own mortality and dignity at the end of our own lives.

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