

The non-human animal body as an audiovisual metaphor of cultural conflicts and identities

El cuerpo de los animales no-humanos como metáfora audiovisual de los conflictos culturales e identidades

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Abstract

In audiovisual arts, the inclusion of non-human animal (NHAs) bodies, is not rare, and it often helps to make a point about humanity and human nature. In such works, NHAs and their corporeality embody not just themselves, but rather act as human symbols, projections, stereotypes, allegories, taboos, myths, and superstitions. A close reading of Wes Anderson's feature film *Isle of Dogs* (2018) provides an analysis of how the representation of dogs constitutes allegories of discrimination and bias against the Other. Among other parameters, physiology and aesthetic appearance are the most prominent ones when it comes to basis of discrimination and its representation. The associated features of shape, senses, and channels inform about human view towards the natural world and the tendency to put everything to certain use. Finally, the level of hybridization from the filmmaking perspective, helps to illustrate the irrationality of such discrimination.

Keywords: Non-human animals, body, audiovisuality, *Isle of Dogs*, allegory.

Resumen

En las artes audiovisuales, la presencia de cuerpos de animales no humanos (ANH) es frecuente, ya que ayuda a resaltar la humanidad y la naturaleza humana. Las ANH y su corporeidad se manifiestan en el arte audiovisual no tanto como ellos mismos, sino más bien como símbolos humanos, proyecciones, estereotipos, alegorías, tabúes, mitos y supersticiones. Después de discutir tales representaciones e ideas en general, proporcionando algunas ideas teóricas, el artículo analiza el largometraje de Wes Anderson *Isle of Dogs* (2018). La representación de los perros en la película ofrece alegorías de discriminación y prejuicio contra el "otro", destacando aspectos fisiológicos a este respecto. Las características asociadas a la forma, los sentidos y canales de comunicación dan cuenta de la visión humana acerca del mundo natural y la tendencia de instrumentalizarlo todo. Por último, el nivel de hibridación desde la perspectiva del rodaje ayuda a ilustrar la irracionalidad de esta discriminación.

Palabras clave: animales no-humanos, cuerpo, audiovisualidad, *Isla de los perros*, alegoría.

1. Introduction

The relationship between non-human animals (NHAs, from now on) and human art/fiction has always been an intense one. Depending on the contexts —and by “context”, we mean pretty much every single cultural, historical, social, and geographical contingency—, NHAs have been depicted as preys and predators, antagonists and protagonists, donors and helpers, friends and enemies. Their appearance and modalities of representation have crossed all kinds of genres and have been employed for all kinds of themes. Regarding the specific field of audiovisual arts, NHAs were not only included from the very beginning¹ but they ended up epitomising the arts themselves in several respects.

When Eadweard Muybridge invented the first prototype of a movie projector in 1878, he chose a galloping horse as the quintessential example of cinematic movement. A few years later, as the Lumière Brothers produced their first film, *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895), amongst the dozens of workers filmed while leaving the factory, one could not miss that in fact the most entertaining (“cinematic”, one could say) character was a big dog popping up in more than one occasion (a horse pulling a cart also appeared).

As time went by, the audience saw NHAs in all genres, employed in several audiovisual and narrative solutions that is arguably superior to that of human beings themselves: their physical and plastic flexibility seem nearly endless due to the diversity of species and species-specific behavioural patterns available. Plus, when needed, it is possible to make them speak, and let them say just whatever one likes, with whatever accent, tone, or timbre. And, finally, audience did not just see NHAs acting in audiovisual texts, but also announcing them: a rooster for Pathé movies, a lion for MGM, a parrot for Metro... even fantastic NHAs, such as the Tristar's pegasus or even representations of both friendly and unfriendly interactions with them, like the boy fishing while sitting on the moon announcing Dreamworks productions: as evocative and inspiring such image may be, it still depicts an instance of animal killing)².

It may appear a bit surprising that this massive presence —and often centrality— of NHAs in audiovisual productions does not aim to say something

about the represented NHAs as such (that is, as species or as specimens). On the contrary, most of the time NHAs are there to make a point about humanity and human nature. Whether openly fictional or somehow realistic, NHAs tend to populate audio-visuality not so much as themselves, but rather as human symbols, projections, stereotypes, allegories, taboos, myths, and superstitions.

Therefore, it is perhaps more accurate to say that what is represented is not really a living being as a physical entity, but rather a “relationship”, factual or virtual, between the living being/s and the human species (again, as a whole humankind or as individuals). We call this relationship anthrozoosemiotic (Martinelli, 2010), distinguishing between a “communicational” one, when it is interactive, reciprocal and —when verifiable— intentional; and a “representational” one, when it is one-sided (from the human side, evidently) and the NHA is employed as a mere source of meaning —an object, rather than a subject, of semiosis.

2. The Human Gaze

Most audiovisual texts engage into the representational category, even when they stage a reciprocity of some sort. In other words, there is what we may call a human gaze (meant in the same sense as male gaze —after Mulvey (1975)— in gender representations) which prevents a transparent depiction of the anthrozoosemiotic relationship, instead affected by a significant, and usually intentional, human bias. That is certainly the case of fiction, but quite often it is also found in documentaries, news shows, and in similar non-fiction productions: for instance, the formula “innocent/cute prey alone in a field, close up on the predator's alert face, predating sequence in slow-motion” appears far too often in wildlife documentaries to suggest anything else than a standard montage mannerism aimed at that cinematic spectacularization that (human) audience is used to, thanks to Westerns and thrillers. Not to mention that in most of the cases, the three segments are shot in different moments, and may also not portray the same subjects.

The different articulations of human gaze points to an important axiom: the deployment of NHAs as a conceptual tool to define human identity negatively;

that is, by emphasising what NHAs are not, do not, can not, and so forth; but also what they are/do/can/ almost, or less, or worse, or any other comparison establishing an anthrozoosemiotic gap, ultimately hinting the human ontological status as something alien to animality. The cognitive and moral of humanity lies precisely in how they are able to realise that gap. For instance: a reduced gap is a threat and is morally deplorable (e.g., a “bestialized” person who becomes a dangerous monster in horror movies), while an increased gap is morally commendable and tends to solve problems (e.g., the adoption of a humanly intelligent solution to defeat that monster).

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to think that this configuration carries the sole purpose to reassert the prevalent assumption of the “human superiority”; more specifically, the assumption that “what makes us human”, in a positive sense, is first and foremost the consequence of human emancipation from the primitive membership in the animal kingdom into an evolutionary condition of our own. In fact, and particularly in the last few decades, what also stems from these representations is an attempt to use NHA characters as a metaphor of “discriminated” people, rather than “inferior”, “threatening”, or else. In other words, NHA characters tend to embody not so much the Other to outperform, but rather the outsider society rejects and the one we should sympathize with.

Roughly since the late 1960s, audiovisuality, as well as the whole society, has experienced a slow but inexorable change in the understanding diversity, discrimination, and intolerance and the nuanced ways of representing them. More importantly, such changes have addressed both the human and the non-human spheres. Indeed, on the one hand, the boost in acknowledging rights thanks to social and grassroots movements such as civil rights, feminism, LGBT+, immigrants, and refugees ones, plus the momentum gained by the political correctness rhetoric (we use here “rhetoric” in a neutral, not negative, connotation), have brought to attention that numerous audiovisual depictions of diversity had been culpably affected by discriminatory stereotypes, and by a suspicious tendency to assign negative and/or subordinate roles to the various cultural or anthropological outgroups. On the other hand, the development and sophistication of ethical standards and scientific knowledge about NHAs (ethological studies, animal rights movements, animal libera-

tion philosophy, for instance), along —but only partially, this time³— with political correctness itself, have contributed to more sympathetic and occasionally scientifically-accurate depictions of numerous species, often contributing to improve their reputation, wherever that reputation was negative. See, for instance, the transformation of the Orcinus Orca species from the revengeful assassin of Michael Anderson’s Orca, the Killer Whale⁴ into the intelligent and child-friendly sweetheart of the Free Willy saga in the 1990s.

In particular, since the beginning of the 21st century, these two phenomena of social and cultural emancipation (of human and non-human animals) have been increasingly brought together into a single audiovisual strategy: including the NHA in the role of the quintessential Other, as an opportunity to create a compassionate metaphor of individual and/or collective clash/incommunicability. The operative word here is “compassionate”, because the idea of such a metaphor is altogether very old, except that its moral purpose was the opposite. Rejecting the Other was usually conveyed as a virtue, or at least a necessary evil, in a sort of a Romantic ideal of defending both the identity and the safety of a peaceful ingroup from the aggression of any foreign entity. Depending on the cultural and historical context, the Others could be other humans (Germans and Russians being typical Hollywood choices), aliens or, indeed, NHAs.

The example of Cooper and Schoedsack’s King Kong (1933) is paradigmatic of this traditional approach. While the primary and most evident goal was to create a spectacular and scary cinematic variant of the beauty and the beast myth⁵, it became soon evident that the film was carrying an elaborated racist subtext: the black man-ape comparison; the idea of Kong forcibly taken from the jungle and brought in chains to the United States; his escape and Kong kidnapping the white blonde woman, by whom he is savagely attracted, and so forth (Rosen, 1975). Racist metaphors were quite common in the Hollywood scene back in those days. It was not until the 1960s that civil rights would have any significant impact on the filmic representation of African Americans. Until then, African American characters would often be mere variations on the depictions already introduced by minstrelsy⁶, through the “negro” prototypes⁷ of Jim Crow, Mammy, Buck, and other stereotyped characters.

Visually and behaviorally, King Kong responded to the “Buck black” stereotype. In minstrel shows, Buck was the character who psychoanalytically represented the sexual threat (or, stereotypically, the fear/envy of the white man towards the supposedly better equipped black masculinity): Buck was big, stout, rude, proud, aggressive, and constantly interested in white, often blonde, women. Unsurprisingly, the two “masks” (Kong and Buck) were physiognomically similar: same gaze; pronounced mouth, lips, and jaw; eyes wide open; dumb/aroused grin, and the likes.

To film critic Bryan McKay (2005), the racist metaphor was even “understated”, because it was far too obvious to the spectators of those days that a huge gorilla would be nothing else than a “negro” in disguise, a symbolic choice implying the alleged inferiority of African Americans. It is also worth noting that the closer Kong gets to white civilisation, the bigger he becomes, ending up almost three times bigger when he climbs the skyscraper.

3. Modes and Typologies of Representation

Currently, there is also an opposite moral direction in the human gaze: the threatening Other has not disappeared (far from it), but depictions of the discriminated Other are increasing in number and seem to better reflect the spirit of a society struggling harder than ever to be more inclusive, more culturally tolerant, and interspecifically conscious too. NHAs and aliens, or hybrids between the two, are more and more often the metaphor of choice for filmmakers to employ in animated and live-action movies to make a statement about both the failures and the achievements of multicultural societies. James Cameron’s *Avatar*, Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9*, Howard, Moore, and Bush’s *Zootopia*, among many others, all share the common denominator of being stories of cultural conflict and the lack of communication in which a given “dominant community” exercises discrimination and destruction, in the name of power, greed, or an ancestral hostility towards diversity as such. Some movies bear a direct reference to historical events (e.g., *District 9* and the South-African apartheid), some others do not (e.g., *Zootopia* uses the predator-

prey conflict to convey a universal message of tolerance), some others stand in between (e.g., *Avatar* is readable both as a general environmentalist plea and as a retelling of the Native Americans’ genocide).

The spectrum covered by these representations goes from the more general/universal to the more specific/individual, with all the nuances in between, which indeed often concern the various processes of interaction (or lack thereof) among cultures. In this respect, it may be useful to remark that the present article targets diverse forms of cultural mis/communication. There is a tendency to employ prefixes like “cross”, “inter”, “multi”, and others, in a rather interchangeable way⁸. Our analysis targets processes of cultural coexistence (“multi-” cultural processes), exchange (“inter-”), comparison (“cross-”), and merging (“trans-”). We explore all these forms of representation, which are evidently different but often complementary – and included in a variety of audiovisual pieces here analysed⁹.

The other important focus of this article is the non-human corporeality. What we shall discuss here is how the discussed metaphors and allegories are specifically conveyed through the depictions of the NHA’s body, a semantic field that includes a wide range of parameters that work as semiotic agents¹⁰. We shall mention at least a few of the most recurrent ones, providing slightly longer descriptions in those cases that present a higher degree of problematicity:

1. **Aesthetic appearance.** It indicates any feature referring to a cultural standard of beauty, ugliness, expressivity (or lack thereof), and mostly linked to the idea of relatability —the key element triggering the Aristotelian pity, necessary for developing sympathy towards a given character. In most cases, the more NHAs are presented with anthropomorphic features, the more relatable they are. While a character like *Bambi* was, at the time of the original film’s release, criticised for being too realistic and deprived of the “Disney magic”¹¹, some of the main features, like the big lively eyes, the facial expressions, and the head’s shape, remained heavily anthropomorphic, contributing to an overall “adorable cuteness”, traditionally associated with the young fawn.

2. **Size.** Big, small, tall, short, fat, thin, bigger/smaller than the human counterparts, bigger/smaller than the real-life NHA represented, increasing or reducing in size, etc.
3. **Shape.** Straight, curvy, narrow, large, regular, irregular, etc. (again, most of these parameters make sense in comparison to how we expect NHA to be in real life, or also how we expect certain moral/behavioural qualities to be assigned —e.g., big and round = good-natured vs. big and sharp/irregular = threatening).
4. **Consistence.** Soft, hard, fluffy, spiky, hairy, smooth, rough, etc. (see above: expectations and real-life parameters are important terms of comparison).
5. **Physiology.** Any bodily function that is assigned to the given NHA and that plays a relevant role in their representation. E.g., quite often, villain monster-NHAs in horrors and sci-fi's have a sinister tendency to reproduce according to the so-called "r-strategy" (high growth rate but low survivability) that is typical of insects, fish and amphibians, as opposed to the "K-strategy" (low growth rate but high survivability), that characterise mammals, birds, and reptiles. A scary "must" in many movies of these genres is the moment when the human protagonists discover the secret hideout where the monster has laid thousands of eggs. The reason for this preference is probably twofold: on the one hand, a thousand eggs are definitely spookier than one or very few (once again, the above-mentioned xenophobic politicians are familiar with the idea); on the other hand, this representation creates a greater cognitive distance between these monsters and human beings, reducing the risk of any possible empathy with the villain. Should Godzilla deliver a single hatchling, instead of laying endless eggs underground (as for instance he¹² does in the 1998 version of the franchise), there is a high chance that we would find that baby lizard cute enough to cheer for his/her survival.
6. **Movement.** Fast, slow, light, heavy, noisy, silent, regular/predictable, irregular/unpredictable, etc. (once more, see above for expectations and comparisons with reality).
7. **Senses and channels.** Any characteristic assigned to any of the five senses common to human beings, plus others that humans have not developed (e.g., magnetic perception, echolocation, electric channel...). The degree of power and effectiveness of these characteristics contribute to the representation in either a positive or negative moral way (e.g., a particularly powerful sense as a source of danger).
8. **Forms and degrees of hybridization.** Arguably, there is no such thing as a pure NHA in audiovisual production. The impact of the human gaze is such that even the most realistic representations contain elements of psychological or ethological manipulation that deviate from the real-life corresponding specimen/s. In that sense, every NHA displays a form of hybridization with other real or imaginary life forms. When it comes specifically to the body, there are often chances of witnessing some of the previously listed parameters in a rather faithful, true-to-life, way. Nevertheless, there will be one or more details usually revealing the human gaze. An example would be the expression of emotions, which is often depicted in ways that are more understandable to humans and that may have no scientific accuracy towards the way the given NHA experiences the given emotion. It is the case of the cliché of the extreme close-up on the NHA's eye, occurring during some emotional peak of the story, and that usually activates the spectator's pity. Or, one may mention the paradoxical depiction of a dog's joy, especially in comedies and family movies. While it is very well known that the most evident display of joy for a dog is the wagging of their tail, there are more chances that an audiovisual text will expose the feeling by offering another close up —this time, on the full face— during which the dog will either bark or incline the head to a 45-degree angle, or both. The former is effective in its resemblance to a linguistic sign (a "human" thing by definition —or so we maintain), the latter works because it reminds of a common human display of cuteness and tenderness. Obviously, despite universal knowledge, the tail is less effective in its basic morphological condition —that is: it is something that humans do not have.

4. On the Impossibility of a True-to-life Representation

Indeed, the audiovisual representation of NHAs are in principle imaginary: not necessarily in a Pegasus or unicorn kind of sense, but also, more simply, including features from aliens to their actual constitution and/or ethogram¹³. Moreover, even when the creatures are totally imaginary, their shaping and characterisation is based on existing models: Falkor, from *Neverending Story*, is clearly a non-existing animal (called “luckdragon” in the story), yet it is not difficult to identify in dogs and reptiles the points of departure for its physical appearance.

Four main types of imaginary animals can be identified:

1. Those that are taxonomically real, yet fictional in some or many characteristics/actions. This is usually the case in animated movies: The *Madagascar* saga, for instance, includes recognisable species (penguins, lions, giraffes). Nevertheless, they speak human language, have anthropomorphic physical features, and do fairly uncharacteristic things for their species, such as piloting an airplane.
2. Those that are taxonomically fictional, but verisimilar. For instance, *Scrat*, from the *Ice Age* saga, belongs to a fictional species, obtained by combining two existing ones (squirrels and rats) in an identifiable way. Besides all the comic and unrealistic situations he faces, he displays characteristics that are recognisable within our empirical experience of squirrels and rats: size, fur, tail, quick movements, and so on. There is no risk of mistaking him for, say, a snail or a rhino.
3. Those that are taxonomically fictional and unlikely, but display empirically recognisable characteristics. Often, particularly in *Sci-Fi*'s, we see unrealistic species who nevertheless bear features that we can easily associate to a species from the real world. Many imaginary animals serve a recognisable function of “dogs” (i.e., faithful, brave and smart pets) or “horses” (means of transportation);
4. Those that are fictional at all levels. In this case, the final result of the various combinations is

something different from the sum of the parts. While seeing the aliens of *District 9* we certainly recognise elements from human beings, insects, birds, reptiles, and even fish (and perhaps other taxonomic groups as well), but the result is not a tangible combination of all these features, but rather a new species.

A recurrent pattern across these groups is their confrontation/opposition with the human characters, either fully or simply more human than their counterparts (e.g., *Grandma Duck* is a duck who owns a farm with chickens, cows, and pigs, yet she is the “human” of the situation, and the others remain unmistakably “animals”). Particularly when cast in an antagonist/villain position, the imaginary animal is depicted in terms of basic “opposition” or “great difference” to humanity as such. The confrontation establishes boundaries between, e.g., instinct and rationality, outgroup and ingroup, cruelty and compassion. Even the introduction of supernatural features in the imaginary animal can be an excuse to highlight this opposition. When we see the “beast” moving too fast, reappearing out of nowhere, getting bigger or changing in a different way, we are re-evoking humanity’s ancestral struggle with nature, when the intelligent but physically limited *Homo sapiens* species had to deal with animals that were always bigger, faster, and stronger. This confrontation is brought to a deeper and existential level when humanity and animality co-exist in a single character. Or, to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari (2007) — there is a process of “becoming-animal”. Following Martinelli (2014), these cases are called “anthro-zoomorphic hybrids”: transitional characters, partly human, partly not, or first human and then not (or vice versa), which represent an important form of audiovisual characterisation of human identity (or its loss/achievement). Most of these hybrids appear in animated movies, and they are “anthropomorphic NHAs”. Others are more properly “zoomorphic human beings” and are more often visible in dramatic or scary movies.

Importantly, also the above-mentioned alien-NHAs hybrids are in fact anthrozoomorphic creatures in disguise. Not having had, at least officially (some believe that the staff at Area 51 is not telling us the full story), any empirical encounter with inhabitants of any other planet except ours, writers and artists have been fantasising about their appearance and their mental abilities in various ways.

Nonetheless, nearly all such representations were either anthropomorphic or zoomorphic, or anthro-zoomorphic, indeed.

Back to the main point, an anthrozoomorphic hybrid can be a special instance of all the four forms of imaginary animals we have mentioned above. A recurrent condition in the hybrid is the transition/transformation from non-human to human, or vice versa. The character is not always stable: in most cases, some kind of phenomenon occurs and triggers the hybridization. The transition can be “zoomorphic” (from human being to non-human, or quasi-non-human) or “anthropomorphic” (the opposite way). As a process, the transformation can occur in at least ethological, anatomical, physiological, or psychological ways, all bearing important consequences in the visual representation of the body (with the occasional exception of the “psychological” option).

Also, hybridization can be communicated through temporal coordinates and be (1) permanent, when it exists in the same condition throughout the whole story (as in most characters); (2) dynamic, when it displays forms/shapes that can be switched by conscious decision (as in many superheroes) or when particular circumstances occur (as in werewolves during a full moon); and (3) progressive, when it occurs in steps or by degrees, transforming the character from a state A to a state B in a way that is usually final (as in David Cronenberg’s *The Fly*).

Finally, the transition/transformation of the hybrid can be “diegetic” or “non-diegetic”, meaning that it may or may not be inherent to the story. The character interpreted by Michael J. Fox in *Teen Wolf* is an apparently normal boy who discovers that he is a werewolf: in this case the hybridization is diegetic. On the other hand, a cartoon character like Daisy Duck is the way she is non-diegetically, as in her stories there is no address to her peculiar condition of a duck that speaks human language and wears human clothes.

5. Analysis: *Isle of Dogs*

Isle of Dogs tells the story of an outbreak of dog flu and snout fever that cause the dogs from the city of Megasaki in Japan to be exiled to the fictitious Trash Island. Once a boy shows up in search of his dog, a variety of adventures ensue. The film has been cho-

sen here for its themes and representations as well as for its stop-motion animation, a not-secondary detail which suggests that each frame was carefully planned and thought out, with less meaning created accidentally. Additionally, the models photographed frame by frame are malleable, can be positioned any way and allow the creators to be as specific as they need. As an afterthought, to be perhaps elaborated on another occasion, it is also possible to think about the stop-motion models as still existing off-screen representations of NHA bodies, since the models were physically made and still remain in some places, contrary to the live action films that record only the activities within a certain time, or computer generated (2D or 3D) animation that does not exist physically.

To begin with, the film’s premise, and plot as a whole, speak about a discriminated other – a NHA that has to be separated from humans for its physiological features. While the dogs and their disease are perceived as a threat, the dogs are represented in a positive light, which likely hints to the ways certain groups can be marginalised based on prejudice. Brody (2018) in his *New Yorker* review of the film states that the latter reflects not Japan or its events (or rather its relationship with dogs or pet culture in general), “but, rather, the xenophobic, racist, and demagogic strains of contemporary American politics”, and looks at “deportation, internment in a prison camp, and the threat of extermination —all from the perspective of the victims” (Brody, 2018). While the film, in its capacity as morality tale, in the end proves why such biases and discrimination are wrong, the NHA and its opposition to humans becomes a plot device. Noteworthy is Trash Island itself, as a place signifying both the treatment the “other” receives (as something to be thrown away), and humans as consumers.

Taking a closer look, the imaginary NHAs in the film can be ascribed to the first type in our above-discussed model: Taxonomically real (dogs), yet fictional in some or many characteristics/actions (talking human language and engaging in other human activities). Additionally, when it comes to their opposition to humans, the dogs are more “human” than other NHAs in the film. Cats (who are represented as non-speaking creatures) can be seen as a direct opposition to dogs, favoured by Mayor Kobayashi (the villain), and being immune to the diseases that dogs carry. Rats and owls, too, can be seen in Trash

Island but they remain within their natural abilities of communication and other activities, thereby qualifying more as background characters. The idea of dogs being more “human” in this story can also be understood from the sushi making sequence, where a fish and a crab are killed and cooked for food, or when one of the dogs mentions rib-eye as his favourite food. On how “human” the dogs are, we shall elaborate in the part concerning the level of hybridization.

Moving forward with a more extensive analysis of the parameters that help convey certain messages within the film, and going through them one by one, it is possible to emphasise a number of ideas and specific uses of the NHA body for meaning construction:

Aesthetic appearance. All of the dog characters in the movie possess some anthropomorphic features. Visually, they have dog-like appearance (“dog-like” because of course they are still models, not live action dogs), but their facial expressions are enhanced to better communicate their feelings and emotions or, sometimes for humorous purpose, to show their mental activities (quick thinking, confusion). Such features make the dogs more relatable, especially when front view close-ups are used, and they appear to be looking straight into the camera, though the fourth wall is not broken.

Within the story, the aesthetics of the characters is compromised when it comes to the dog flu or snout fever. The dogs that are very ill are shown with some disfigurements, thinner fur, or generally less cute and friendly, making them less appealing to humans, and thereby discriminated.

The appearance is also vital for one of the characters —Chief, who is the single stray dog in the whole island. He is shown to have black fur (along with other connotatively “less friendly” features), until he gets a bath by Atari, the boy looking for his lost dog. Once Chief is washed, he is revealed to be of white fur with a few black spots, looking exactly like the lost dog Spots, who, as later it is revealed, is his brother. The bathing also points to a character arc, where Chief, from being a stray, angry, and violent dog, turns into a friendly, caring, and loveable pet — and that is represented visually.

It may be added that an important contribution to the vaguely-unsettling and not-too-healthy looks of

the dogs is given by the aesthetics of the animation itself, fairly distant from the Disney-esque standards of “cuteness” and anthropomorphism, and by the stop-motion technique, with its intrinsic slight irregularity and lack of fluidity in the movements.

Size. Size is not a highly important feature in the representation of NHAs in this film. Although the dogs are smaller than humans, which makes them easier to transport to an island, or the boy who eventually saves them is more like their size, it is not the main quality that helps to imagine them in one way or the other. It is important to note, however, that the team who comes from Megasaki searching for the boy, brings robot dogs with them. Robot dogs turn bigger in their attack mode, and transform themselves into smaller, less dangerous entities when not attacking. Also, while the obvious fact that the boy is naturally smaller than the adults and thus naturally of a similar size than dogs, we could also argue that their similarity serves as a metaphor of their emotional closeness.

Shape. The canids have no proper food and very little clean water in Trash Island. They are thin, they look tired, ill, and are ready to fight over every bite. In those terms, their shape, in comparison to what they could possibly be in better conditions, represent how they are treated by humans. Or in more general terms, that any worse treatment than they (or any neglected group) deserve have terrible consequences. From a strictly visual point of view, this is arguably what makes Brady’s parallel with “concentration camps” more evident. Significantly, a typical side-character appearing in animations, the “fat” one (who, usually, receives a benevolent or a sarcastic treatment, depending upon the level of political correctness of the film), is totally missing in Anderson’s movie — not even a short appearance for comic relief.

Consistence. Related to both shape and aesthetic appearance, the fur of the dogs is a significant point of representation. Their exile and bad treatment results in dirty and unhealthy fur, even to the point that seeing a dog with clean and soft fur is surprising to the other dogs on the island. The way the diseases affect the fur also make the pets less attractive and, in a sense, easier to neglect, which again, speaks about a discrimination based on appearance. The consistence recalls those stray dogs in precarious hygienic conditions, exposed to mud, dust and other agent, and exhibiting a greasy and stringy fur.

Physiology. Physiology might be one of the most important features of NHA representation in *Isle of Dogs*, since the main reason for the exile to Trash Island are diseases that only dogs are susceptible to, thus their physiology becomes an excuse for discrimination. While the illnesses (dog flu and snout fever) are portrayed as extremely repulsive, they evoke a level of empathy as well, since it is evident the creatures are suffering: “Weight-loss, dizziness, narcolepsy, insomnia, and extreme/aggressive behaviour. Three-quarters display signs of early-onset snout fever: high-temperature, low blood-pressure, acute moodiness and spasmodic nasal expiration. The exiled dog-population grows weaker, sadder, angrier. Desperate.” —can be heard off-screen, as images of dogs in different situations, and in difficult conditions, are shown. Physiology becomes a point of comparison —dogs vs. everyone else, or rather everyone else vs. dogs. The discrimination aspect becomes even more important after we find out that the diseases were artificially created and targeted specifically at dogs.

Movement. The moving abilities of the characters, on one level, appear to be influenced by the stop-motion quality of the film. The movements are quick, yet the changing frames can be slightly visible. However, the viewing experience is not negatively affected by this aspect, as it goes well with the whole aesthetic of the feature, camera movements and angles, colour palettes, and fast pace —all recognised as qualities typical of Wes Anderson’s filmmaking. Yet, as we mentioned above, the “unnatural” quality of the movements, as resulting from the stop-motion technique, may have something to do with the overall “unhealthy” appearance of the dogs.

When it comes to the movement of NHAs *per se*, they remain rather natural, among the more controlled movements (like walking somewhere with a mission), scratching, growling, or fighting with other dogs as “dog-like” characteristics are displayed from time to time. That said, these representations seem more descriptive and helpful of image making as a whole, rather than anything else.

Senses and channels. Similar to movement, senses are not displayed as particularly significant within the representation of the NHA-human relationship (or what it can stand for) in this film. Yet, a connection can be made with physiology, as dogs are vulnerable to snout fever, which highlights their sensitivi-

ty to smell. Additionally, their robotic counterparts seem to be created with such qualities in mind too —a sequence can be seen, where a boy’s DNA is submitted to a dog-robot and according to that, a group of robots go out to search for the boy. This reminds us of the tendency for humans to find ways to use and synthesise the qualities they find useful in others and ignore everything else (dogs as themselves are removed from the city, and robot dogs are created to replace them).

Forms and degrees of hybridization. Finally, a degree of hybridization is one of the most informative qualities throughout the film. The dogs speak English (“all barks have been rendered into English” is announced in the opening credits), while humans speak Japanese (and in some cases English, too) that is translated for the audiences only when some form of translation is present within the story. The different languages and the need for translation tells us about the incommunicability of the two species, and possibly metaphorically our inability, as well as the need, to understand the other. Communication wise, it can also be noted that the dogs speak calmly, have beautiful rich voices (courtesy of a number of well-known actors, including Bryan Cranston, Edward Norton, Bill Murray, Jeff Goldblum, Scarlett Johansson, Frances McDormand, Yoko Ono and Harvey Keitel), and like to gossip.

An interesting point of comparison is the mental abilities that help to represent both NHAs and humans. The dogs in the film appear to be significantly smarter than humans. Their critical thinking, ability to deal with stressful situations, and general composure is remarkable and is specifically positioned as a contrast with the chaos among humans in *Megasaki*. While in one scene, humans are shown to be arguing with each other, protesting, fighting, in another scene, a group of dogs is shown to make decisions on the principles of democracy and voting for many of the arising questions. Such representation is also indicative of Wes Anderson as auteur. Children are portrayed as smarter than grown-ups in his *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), foxes and other NHAs are shown to have more reason than people in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), and in the same film, the pups of the foxes are more reasonable than their parents.

Furthermore, the notions of human gaze can be felt as well. The characters are shown either from above, profile, or front, but close-ups from the front are

the most informative, as human-like emotions can be seen attributed to dogs (thoughtful eyes, crying).

As a last note on this aspect, it is possible to briefly discuss the hybridization as a contrast to reality. While the models of dogs could not be mistaken for real dogs (as the models of humans could not be mistaken for real humans), no specific deviation can be seen from the way real dogs look; the medium is believable, and the viewers can see it as a story of human-NHA relationship.

With these points covered, it is possible to go back and make a few conclusions on the processes that the aforementioned examples address: coexistence at first seems impossible because of a specific physiology of the NHA, yet as the story unfolds, the solutions can be found. Comparison is evident in both the communicative aspect of the film, as well as (drawing from coexistence) the idea that NHAs in this case are treated as lesser individuals, deserving of exile and a worse treatment in general. Exchange and merging are useful when it comes to the representation of NHAs, as some of the qualities of the characters can be seen merging and exchanging between species.

6. Conclusions

Isle of Dogs shows that the representation of NHAs, dogs in this case, and their relationship with humans (as bodies of different groups) can have broader meaning and say more about humans than about themselves. It can be an allegorical representation of the events at the time, as well as draw attention to our relationship with the natural world. One example for all: the existence itself of a place like Trash Island is reminiscent of both past ghosts (e.g., the Nazi delirious “Madagascar Plan” to relocate the Jewish community) and future ones (e.g., the equally delirious suggestions to dispose of nuclear waste in the outer space). At the same time, specific meanings can be assigned to some parts of the portrayal of NHAs and how they are expected to appear, behave, and communicate, and some parameters can be more important than others. Physiology and the level of hybridization becomes the most prominent aspects when it comes to the representation of NHAs in *Isle of Dogs*. Coherently with the view

expressed in other instances of his filmography, the creatures expected to possess a lower intelligence (dogs, in this case, as compared to human beings) are in fact smarter, more reasonable, and civilised. The main point of the movie remains otherness and our consequent inclination to discriminate it —where “us” is in practice any social ingroup embodying any supposed idea of “normality” and “dominance”. Due to their illness, dogs are stigmatised as “repulsive” by the human community, and also “policed” through dog-robots (an allegory to past and present forms of apartheid —the movie possibly making reference to Trump’s administration).

The predominantly happy ending of the movie, with the dogs reintegrated into society and cured of their illness, and only few perishing (none of whom being among the protagonists) suggests a message of hope for social justice, understanding and integration.

Notes

1. As they were included in all other sorts of artistic expressions, from Paleolithic cave art onwards.
2. For a more extensive discussion on the centrality of NHAs in the film industry, see also Burt (2002).
3. While it is true that political correctness has also affected the perception and the representation of NHAs, in a more compassionate and true-to-science direction, it is also true that some of the important cultural innovations introduced in human-related discourses do not yet have equivalents in non-human ones. E.g., the care we justly devote in addressing gender in language (the “he/she” or “they” formula, the abolition of “Mrs.” and “Miss”, etc.) is not paralleled by a similar attention in addressing NHAs (the use of the pronoun “it”, expressions such as “humans and animals” as opposed to the scientifically correct “humans and other animals”, etc.).
4. A 1977 release of the *ecokill* genre, a sub-genre of thrillers and horrors where non-human animals are a threat for human beings, such as *Jaws*, *Godzilla*, and the likes.
5. We must not forget that, despite its archetypal Gothic literature profile, King Kong was a character specifically designed for cinema.
6. Minstrel show, also called minstrelsy, was an American theatrical form, popular from the early 19th to the early 20th century, that was founded on the comic enactment of racial stereotypes.
7. By “prototypes” we mean that these characters were conceptually equivalent to “maschere” in *Commedia dell’Arte*: the same characters with the same cha-

- racteristics reiterated in different stories. Therefore, the prototype of “Buck” was the loud, constantly-aroused male “negro” (a sort of racist version of the Eddie Murphy type); “Mammy” was the motherly, and often sassy, big lady (a character famously portrayed by Hattie MacDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*), etc.
8. See the interchangeable way to deal with terms like “interdisciplinarity”, “multidisciplinarity”, and trans-disciplinarity.
 9. This issue was extensively discussed and problematized during the 13th IASS-AIS World Congress of Semiotics at Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania, in 2017. Its title was “Cross-Inter-Multi-Trans”.
 10. And often, as a Peircean representamina.
 11. Compared to Mickey Mouse or Dumbo, for instance.
 12. The eternal debate on Godzilla’s gender is not meant to be solved here. But in the 1998 version, which we use in our example, the monster is referred to as a male, reproducing through parthenogenesis.
 13. From the ethology, it is a catalogue or inventory of behaviours exhibited by an animal.

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