The Dog at the Side of the Shot

Incongruous Dog (Canis familiaris) Behavior in Film

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Familiarity is both a boon and a bane to the domestic dog, Canis familiaris. On the one hand, it has allowed dogs to occupy our homes and enjoy a share of the resources, both nutritive and protective, that their humans have secured for themselves. On the other hand, the familiarity afforded by this ubiquity prevents us from seeing dogs for who they are. Generally, humans anthropomorphize: we attribute human characteristics to animals without sound evidence for the existence of those characteristics. In particular, our assessment of the meaning of the dog’s behavior, and our extrapolation from that behavior to claims about an individual’s or the species’ knowledge, cognitive capacity, or emotional experience, is often flawed. That great observer of the natural world, Charles Darwin, was an avowed anthropomorphizer, attributing magnanimity, shame, pride, and a sense of humor to dogs (Darwin 1871/2004). The dog’s success at integrating him- or herself into human homes may make it difficult for us to see their true natures: having a shared ancestry with Canis lupus tens of millions of years more recent than that with Homo sapiens. In this essay I use the science of ethology to explore dogs’ roles in films as exemplifying the ways that humans misread the dog. Movies using dogs represent various manifestations of...
the use of dogs as props, as veritable family members, or even as nonindividuals, instead of as animals.

**Bringing Ethology to the Movies**

Those people who study animal behavior in natural settings practice *ethology*, the science of animal observation. Ethologists research the biological basis of behavior through field experimentation or through long-term observations of their subjects. These observations can reveal the intricacies of behaviors previously unseen or underappreciated. Behavior that might have seemed unitary is revealed to have many integral component parts. For instance, what may look like simply “play” between two dogs, an enjoyable if uncomplicated engagement, is revealed through frame-by-frame review of video recordings to involve highly coordinated behaviors (Horowitz 2009b). In particular, dyadic rough-and-tumble play includes instances of turn-taking, self-handicapping, role reversal, and metacommunicative play signals sent by the participants (Bekoff 1972; Bekoff and Allen 1998). These behaviors are not just components of play; they are constitutive of it. Long-term observations of dyadic play have revealed that when a stronger dog fails to self-handicap—modifying his actions so as to reduce their severity—with a weaker partner, or when the turn-taking grows asymmetrical, play breaks down. Similarly, observations reveal that if play is attempted prior to sending a “play signal,” it is usually unsuccessful. As play bouts involve behaviors used functionally in other contexts, such as reproduction, hunting, and defense, specific signals must be wielded to “frame” the bout; essentially, they indicate “everything that will happen now is untrue” (Bateson 1972). Without a play signal, a bite on another dog’s rump is just a bite, worthy of a response of umbrage; preceded by a signal, a subsequent bite is seen as “pretend.” This bite can then safely lead to any number of similarly tuned behaviors.

Play serves as an example of a general animal behavior phenomenon: behavior, considered as a category, can be deconstructed, is describable, has relevance, and is context sensitive. While it may appear to a lay observer viewing a moment in an animal’s life that the animal is “not doing anything,” an animal’s behavior is comprehensible if one appreciates the context in which it emerges. That context includes information about the local situation in which the animal finds itself, the animal’s age and developmental history, and the perceptual and cognitive abilities of the species.

Standard protocol in animal behavior studies is to compile and use an “ethogram” of behaviors. This ethogram lists the numerable, describable behavioral acts the animal may do. After much research, an ever-expanding catalogue of species-typical behaviors is formed. This catalogue is a perpetually in-progress encyclopedia of behaviors. Characteristic behaviors, poses, expressions, vocalizations, and so on can be named and their contexts described. Ordinarily, this
catalogue, and its “entries” would be used to help further delineate a species’ behavioral repertoire or to understand a category of behavior previously unexplored. The end state in ethology is never a declaration of a complete understanding of an animal; the desideratum is to view sufficient numbers of behavioral acts in context to allow the observer to reliably describe a species’ behavior patterns or to predict an animal’s response to various stimuli.

Here I bring this catalogue, and an ethological lens, to assessing dog behavior in an unusual context: in film. With this lens the typicality, realism, and appropriateness of dog behavior in movies can be analyzed.

The Dog in the Lens

Much dog “acting” in movies is a result of explicit training. These days, the training is usually reward-based and derived from a kind of associative learning called operant conditioning, first identified and described by the early twentieth-century experimental psychologist Burrhus Frederic Skinner (for more on the history of methods used for training movie dogs see the introduction). This training involves pairing a desired act—sitting, barking, coming on command—with a reward, such as a food treat, verbal praise, or the opportunity to play with a favorite toy. The act does not develop ab initio: it is usually “shaped,” in the language of operant conditioning, from a simple act into one unusual for the repertoire of the species. For instance, dogs have been trained, through simple associative learning, to water ski. To so train, one does not wait until the dog spontaneously mounts a ski in the water; instead, one begins by giving the dog an opportunity to, for instance, encounter a ski on dry land. If he steps on it, he is rewarded. Should he then happen to mount the ski and continue to stand on it, he gets rewarded for that. Stay on the ski as it is pulled forward, and the dog gets further rewarded. Through small steps, the dog who came across a ski on land may come to be a skier on water.

The kind of dog acting resulting from operant conditioning is easily recognizable in film. Not only are many of the behaviors atypical of the species; there is also a stable of preferred trained acts that reappear like canid leitmotifs in films: begging on hind legs, “playing dead,” and so forth. Most of these behaviors are used for their predesignation as having a fixed meaning and audience effect. For instance, a begging pose is read as an indication of subservience or adorableness. Similarly, a dog covering its eyes with its paws—a behavioral act seeming to convey intention that does not appear to be performed intentionally by dogs without training—is read as a show of modesty or fear. Some acts may be used to represent the sameness of the dog and human experience, such as dancing or vocalizing in a humanlike way. These behaviors are largely conspicuous. In some films the location of the offscreen trainer on set can be deduced from the inclination and attention of the dog. Cueing the animals in real time, the trainer’s presence is implied.
I am not concerned in this essay with the transparency of trained dogs “acting” performances or with that particular (mis)representation of natural dog behavior. Though a listing of so-called dog movies—from Beethoven (1992) to the live-action version of 101 Dalmatians (1996), or the star vehicles of Rin Tin Tin, Lassie, et al.—seems to create a discrete category of films featuring dogs trained to so act, the domestic dog has another, less discussed role in contemporary narrative film. In many films dogs appear at the side of the shot, wandering through a scene. They are used for their simple presence, or they are used as plot devices. These dogs, while they may be trained, are asked to, with their presence, signal an emotion or mood; to, with an action, provide meaning to a scene; to, with their company, reflect something about ourselves. In many cases these dogs are cast as “extras”; in all cases their behavior is not glossed with human voicing but is expected to serve as self-evidently meaningful. In other cases they are mere props instead of individuals. To look at the behavior of these dogs in films is to bring ethology to the movies. The result is the discovery that dogs’ cinematic behavior is often jarringly at odds with the meaning that is attributed to it.

We can begin at the beginning of movies, which coincides with the beginning of dogs in movies. With the advent of the new medium of film at the turn of the twentieth century, dogs were immediately implicated. In the various versions of the famous 1895 Lumière actuality Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory, dogs move among the factory workers—watching, waiting, running alongside a bicyclist. In Rescued by Rover (1905) the collie playing the character Rover rescues an infant stolen by a beggar woman from the child’s distracted nanny. The dog appears in the second action scene, staring placidly away from the nanny as she informs her employer of the loss of her child. At a cue from stage left, Rover suddenly exits, and with a jaunty lop in his step runs down the street, allegedly in the direction of the poorer section of town to which the thief has repaired.

Rover not only succeeds in finding the baby; the “everydog” Rover has succeeded in finding his place in film. It was not long after the success of Rescued by Rover that scores of films featured animal actors, and many of these films—especially those that, like Rescued by Rover, starred dogs—were so popular that the film stock was destroyed from frequent playing. Although only one of Strongheart’s films has survived, The Return of Boston Blackie (1927), in which he also plays a “character” named Strongheart (see Fuller-Seeley and Groskopf in this volume), it stands as an early example of the kind of behavioral mismatching seen in later films. The story turns on Strongheart’s apparent attack on the film’s designated villainous character. Said villain reacts as though attacked; Strongheart’s master in the film, Boston Blackie (Bob Custer), reacts as though the dog had attacked. What Strongheart the dog actor is doing, though, is ludicrous: he is playing. He jumps onto the man but does not follow through with this “attack” when the man drops to the ground. Instead, the dog pauses—waits for a response—just as dogs do in play, awaiting their play partner’s move. When the man finally rises, the “attack” continues with Strongheart pulling the man
by his arm. Viewed without presumption of intent, though, the dog’s behavior is an apparent engagement in a game of tug-of-war. Strongheart wags his tail loosely, a characteristic sign of play. More evidential is what happens when the villain fails to mind the rules of this “game”: when he strikes the dog, the dog does not respond defensively or aggressively. Instead, the dog drops his ears in surprised reply. Of course he does: the dog’s expectation has been violated. The man has not play-signaled his benign intent before striking, as one must do in a play session.

Examples of this kind of behavioral dissonance—a dog’s actions, viewed ethologically, jarring with the intended meaning of the dog actor’s actions—are strewn through the catalogue of films that followed those of Rover and Strongheart. They are especially rife when a dog is not featured in a film but is only a side player. Having a dog in a scene, whether in the background or as part of a family, makes the scene read true, and makes the family seem more familiar. What we will find, though, is that the details of the dog’s behavior are often overlooked. Rover, the everydog, stands in for the reality of an actual dog: Rover’s appearance and behavior are what the filmmaker imagines, and the audience asserts, that “every” dog looks or acts like. These incidental dogs behave incongruously with their context or assigned roles in discernible ways.

**Dissonant Dogness**

A sampling of classic and familiar films with dogs appearing in them was chosen for review and analysis. Films featuring dogs both with named roles and with lesser roles were selected. Some films include widely recognized dog roles—*The Thin Man* (1934), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Annie* (1982). In other movies discussed here—*Mary Poppins* (1964), *Oliver!* (1968), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001)—the dog is all but uncredited. In these cases dogs seem to have been used to embellish a scene (see also Pomerance in this volume); the presence of a dog in a scene may not even be noted by the audience. Each film-dog’s behavior in every scene in which he or she appeared was coded and described in ethological language. Not every film had an example of dissonant dog behavior; of those that did, the ways that the dogs’ behaviors rang false fall into three distinct categories.

The first category of incongruity relates to communication: a dog vocalizes, and a specific *meaning* of the vocalization is assumed by the human actors. That meaning often diverges from the actual meaning of the vocalization. The second category concerns the dog’s attention in a scene. In particular, dog actors are ostensibly involved in a scene, but their attention, in the form of their gaze, posture, or vector of movement, may indicate otherwise. The final category of incongruous behavior relates to the dog’s *non*behavior. In situations that call for a response, or in which a reaction is expected, the attendant dogs fail to acknowledge the exigency. Each of these categories will be discussed in turn.
Incongruous Communication

Dogs, like most social mammals, use numerous methods to communicate to conspecifics. Unlike the social human, much less canid information seems to be vested in vocalizations, and much more is conveyed with other means. The olfactory acuity of dogs, for instance, allows for communication via odor. Odorant messages are worn on one’s body or emitted and left for later investigation by another dog. Body language makes use of the position and height of an animal’s head, ears, tail, and gaze direction. And, too, dogs vocalize. They bark, of course, but they also growl, yelp, whimper, howl, and snuffle in apparent interspecific and intraspecific communication.

For researchers the informative content of these communications is determined by their context. The precise meaning of different kinds of barked vocalizations is still elusive. Indeed, for a long time there was a question whether there is meaning in barks. Simply because an animal emits a sound, it does not follow of necessity that the sound is either intended as communicative or even serves as communication to conspecifics at all (Shettleworth 1998). Though Darwin (1871/2004) claimed that dogs make distinguishable barks, expressing eagerness, anger, joy, or demand, the actual sound spectra of barks were not extensively studied until recently. The bark is a classically “noisy” sound with a fluctuating structure and no single identifiable fundamental frequency, the single pitch that defines a heard sound. Currently, most canid researchers agree that there is information in the barks, although some demur that barks are simply attention-getters, the equivalent of a voiced but unmeaningful shout. Research comparing the spectrographs of different barks found some barks to be distinctive (Yin and McCowan 2004) and has identified the different contexts in which distinguishable barks are emitted, such as being left alone (“isolation” bark), asking to go on a walk (“request” bark), at the approach of an unknown person (“stranger” bark), or in play with other dogs or humans (“play” bark). Even naive, non-dog-owning listeners can discriminate and sometimes correctly characterize the context of these barks on the basis of their sound alone (Pongrácz et al. 2005).

In films using dogs, barks are often used to carry meaning: as informative to humans. Indeed, the course of a person’s behavior may be changed as a result of the ostensive “information” contained in that bark. Two films demonstrate this well: Mary Poppins and Oliver! In each a barking dog serves as messenger; in each the bark does not jibe with the message given.

In Mary Poppins one scene finds the title character (Julie Andrews) out doing errands with her charges, young Jane (Karen Dotrice) and Michael (Matthew Garber), when they encounter a dog named Andrew (uncredited) on the street. It is a dog known to nanny Poppins, and, consistent with her magical way with the world, she is able to communicate with the dog and understand what he is saying. The notion that there is intelligible, sentence-like language in the
dog’s barks is not at issue; it is a conceit. But there is also, the script claims, emotional content in the bark: the dog is alerting Poppins to an emergency involving Uncle Albert (Ed Wynn). Uncle Albert has apparently begun laughing so uncontrollably that he is lifted into the air, unable to return to the ground. Poppins responds with alacrity, diverting their outing to go attend to Uncle Albert at once.

Viewed ethologically, however, the dog’s behavior is not consistent with an emergency bark. His tail wags loosely and low: a generally relaxed, if uncertain, display. He approaches with an unhurried, jaunty gait, symptomatic of a calm animal. The bark itself, moreover, is more representative of a food request bark. This would be consistent with the role of a dog trained to “speak” on command, with an expected reward of food.

In Oliver!, a surly character known as Bill Sikes (Oliver Reed) is regularly accompanied by his (uncredited) dog, a bull terrier he calls “Bull’s-eye.” In a scene near the movie’s climax Bull’s-eye’s vocalizations play a critical role. At a local pub Sikes is conferring with Fagin (Ron Moody) about the fate of Oliver (Mark Lester), whom they have stolen from his new family. Sikes has set the dog to “guard” Oliver by sitting beside him. The benevolent character Nancy (Shani Wallis) has concocted a rousing version of a song and dance, “Oom-pah-pah,” as a distraction. Nancy’s ploy successfully distracts the men, and as she dances by them, she grabs Oliver. But as she spirits Oliver away, the dog barks. Though the dog remains sitting, and the cacophony in the pub remains, the barking calls Sikes’s attention to Oliver’s absence.

Bull’s-eye’s bark is taken as meaningful: it conveys that Oliver has escaped. Unfortunately, if one listens to Bull’s-eye’s bark, the report he has issued to Sikes is not about the boy’s absence. Like Andrew’s bark, Bull’s-eye’s most resembles the cadence and pitch of a “request” bark, used to solicit food or a toy. Bull’s-eye may be asking Sikes to interact with him, or for the meal he surely has not yet been given.

In both Mary Poppins and Oliver!, a dog is called into action to change the course of a scene: to bring attention to a character’s actions; to alert a character about an urgent situation. The most generous characterization of the directors’ use of these dogs’ vocalizations is that they are consistent with a theory that barking is predominantly a noise-making activity. Insofar as noisiness will attract attention, these barks serve to do so. But barks have been more carefully studied and characterized than that theory suggests. The kinds of barks these filmic dogs emit do not synch with the meanings they are intended to hold. Furthermore, barks are situated within a greater context: the other behaviors of the Barker. In Mary Poppins and, to a lesser extent, Oliver!, the dog’s posture and bearing is not consistent with an urgent message. Especially in nonverbal animals, a communication in one modality may be moderated by behavior in other modalities. For instance, a dog’s growl with hackles up and tail stiff and erect has a different meaning than a growl emitted from a supine position with tail
wagging. These dogs’ vocalizations, intended to be the bearer of urgent information, are accompanied by postures that belie that intention.

Incongruous Attention
The second category of filmic dog behaviors involves the attention of these incidental dogs. Attention, as represented visually in direction of gaze and bodily stance, and olfactorily in source and length of investigative sniffing, is indicative of the perception, understanding, and interest an animal has in its environment. The domestic dog’s use of the attention of others is thought to be a large component of his success at integrating into human society and families. Dogs attend to us: they look at people, especially familiar people, in the eyes, a behavior not typical of any other nonhuman animal. In most species eye contact is used as a threat; prolonged eye contact is not part of expressing familiarity or intimacy, as it is among humans. Dogs do not only hold our gaze; they follow it, as young children learn to do, extending the direction of the eyes to the object or objects that have caught their interest. Young children also learn gaze alteration, in which they look at an object of interest, to the face of an adult, and back again to the object. This kind of gaze pattern serves as a communication: either showing the adult the object, or requesting the object from the adult. Dogs, too, show gaze alteration (Horowitz 2009a).

Thus, one can look at the attention of dogs in films. On this topic two films serve as exemplars of incongruous attention by dogs: The Wizard of Oz and The Royal Tenenbaums. Many films, including these, also have examples of a specific kind of incongruous attention: a posture that indicates that a dog is not mind- ing others’ attention.

The Wizard of Oz represents an unusual case study for dog behavior. The movie itself, and the “little dog, too,” are highly familiar in contemporary society. Repeated viewings of the film, far from revealing more details, may serve to solidify initial impressions and actually prevent viewers from seeing precisely what is happening. One of the most quoted lines from the film begins a scene that involves a dog. In this scene the heroine, Dorothy (Judy Garland), finds herself in a strange new, colorful world. “I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore,” she declares to her dog, Toto (played by a Cairn terrier named Terry), whom she clutches in her arms. Looking around with fascination, Dorothy sets Toto down. He initially seems to follow her interest. Dorothy’s attention, and the audience’s attention, is suddenly captured by an approaching radiant bubble, quickly growing larger and accompanied by anticipatory music. Out of the bubble Glinda the Good Witch (Billie Burke) will appear. Dorothy is captivated. Just before the bubble reaches the pair, Dorothy’s posture is highly anticipatory. Though her back is to the audience, a gawk is implied. At her feet, Toto does a full-body shake, turns in another direction, and casually trots off stage right.

Viewed ethologically, shaking behavior may be used functionally, to remove dirt, dust, or discomfort; it may also be employed when—or to facilitate—changing
A bored or oblivious Toto (Terry) departs while his mistress Dorothy (Judy Garland) is transfixed by the arrival of Glinda, the Good Witch, in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, MGM, 1939). Digital frame enlargement.

activities. In this case Toto shakes before leaving the scene; it appears to be an activity-changing shake. Although the arrival of Glinda in a floating bubble is imminent, with his behavior Toto is expressing his inattention to and lack of awareness of the focal point of the human’s attention. On the one hand, Toto is cast in the film as Dorothy’s constant companion, who will stay with her through her adventure in Oz. On the other hand, by his behavior Toto reveals himself to be a companion in spirit only; he does not see nor show concern with the object of Dorothy’s perception and interest. Indeed, his lack of attention serves as an implicit signal of the fact that Glinda and her floating bubble, a special effect produced by process work after the scene was shot, were not actually present on the set and would have been invisible to Toto/Terry and Dorothy/Garland alike. Garland could pretend to see the bubble; Terry could, or did, not.

*The Royal Tenenbaums*, in contrast to *The Wizard of Oz*, was produced at a time when much research into dog social cognition had been published and was being publicized. Although dogs are not featured prominently in the movie, they enter periodically as props. In one long sequence a family dog is crushed as a result of reckless driving by one character; moments later, the patriarch of the family, Royal (Gene Hackman), acquires another dog from the firefighters who have responded to the car crash and spontaneously christens the dog “Sparkplug.” Royal intends this gift to be a salve to his son and grandchildren,
whose dog it was that was killed. Sparkplug, a Dalmatian, reappears in another scene near the movie’s end, at Royal’s funeral. Royal’s family and closest associates are gathered in a cemetery, all attendant to the space in the earth into which he has been placed—all, that is, but the dog, who is staring fixedly in the opposite direction. While the dog is ostensibly with the family, observing the occasion with them, his attention is elsewhere; he is there figuratively only, doing the film’s bidding by his presence alone.

Sparkplug calls to mind an unnamed dog in Gustave Courbet’s *A Burial at Ornans*, painted in 1850 (Laqueur 2010). In it, an open grave is encircled by mourners and attendants. The frame is, indeed, filled with people reacting to and attending to the ceremony and each other—but for the dog in the lower right-hand side of the image. The dog is looking—even sniffing, it appears—in another direction entirely. He alone is directed at some other concern. As with Sparkplug, the gravity of death does not move him, nor is he a participant in the...
ceremony. His inclusion can perhaps only be explained as a bit of scenery, not unlike the mesas in the background: they identify a location in space; the presence of the dog identifies a customary habit, dog-keeping, of that time.

In *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Royal Tenenbaums* dogs are inserted for the sake of companionship and as representatives of a family unit. Though a companion would ordinarily be held to certain standards of behavior, as would a family member, in these cases the dog’s presence alone is sufficient for membership: neither dog participates in the action of the actor(s) in the scene. Indeed, their bearing, gaze, and it can be assumed, attention are elsewhere.

Even more common an incongruity is a cinematic dog’s lack of eye contact, gaze holding, or facial bearing consistent with listening to someone speaking to it. Examples of this are rife in films. Small dogs are especially well represented here: portable, “toy” dogs can be picked up and placed so as to face a person, allowing the person to apparently communicate—have a dialogue—with the dog. Were another human to behave as dogs in this situation regularly do, failing to fixate on the face of the speaker at all, any pretense of shared understanding would be obliterated.

**Incongruous Response**

The master deducter Sherlock Holmes, as imagined by Arthur Conan Doyle, is able to draw improbable inferences from the slightest bit of evidence. He is equally skilled at discovering salient information from an absence of evidence. In “Silver Blaze” (Doyle 1892/2002), in response to a detective’s question about the scene of a crime—“Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”—Holmes replies:

“To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

“The dog did nothing in the night-time.”

“That was the curious incident.” (272)

The final category of incongruity involves an absence of response where, verily, one is due. While ethological and biological knowledge of dogs has not made their behavior entirely predictable, there are certain responses that can be anticipated. For instance, many dogs’ interest or lack of interest in moving objects—from a thrown tennis ball to a fleeing squirrel—can in part be traced to the configuration of photoreceptor cells in the dogs’ retinas. Longer-nosed dogs, like Labrador retrievers, tend to have what is called a “visual streak” in their retina: they have a higher density of cells across a horizontal band running the length of the eye. These dogs can see, and thus often respond with enthusiasm to, objects moving on the horizon. By contrast, smaller-nosed dogs, like pugs, tend to have a density of cells at the center of their eyes, called an “area centralis,” resembling the fovea in human eyes that allows us to focus well on objects right in front of us. These dogs are less likely to respond to a tossed ball; instead, they are more
likely to sit in an owner’s lap and gaze into his face (McGreevy, Grassi, and Harman 2004).

Should a retriever not show any reaction to a moving ball, one would think it unusual. Sparkplug, the Dalmatian from The Royal Tenenbaums, barely flinches when two rifles are shot at the funeral a mere foot or two from his head. Given dogs’ auditory acuity—their hearing is as good as human hearing, and in addition they hear more high-frequency sounds—it defies belief that a dog would not register a response.

In The Thin Man (1934) the wire fox terrier Asta regularly accompanies Nick and Nora (William Powell and Myrna Loy) on their adventures and, indeed, occasionally helps extract them from some misadventures (see Ross and Castonguay in this volume). But his actions are often out of keeping with the spirit of a scene. For instance, in one scene Nick and Nora have retired to their beds, when Nora inadvertently lets a stranger into their house, who follows her into the bedroom. Asta is lying on Nora’s bed. The stranger produces a gun and threatens them, raising his voice. While the human actors react to the presence of a threatening stranger in the room, Asta, who is facing the door, lies still on the bed and does not react in any way.

This is curious behavior. Dogs not only react strongly to loud noises; they notice changes or novel elements in a known environment, and they are very attentive to new people. One common behavioral complaint owners have about their dogs is that the dogs are said to have an undesired and negative reaction to a category of people: men; people of a different race; people wearing hats. Indeed, the dog’s skill at discriminating known people from unknown is sufficiently acute that dogs have for millennia been used as “guards,” protecting a domicile by identifying those who do not belong there and deterring or attacking the intruders. While the fox terrier is not a breed trained as a guard, the breed is known to be reactive. The American Kennel Club (AKC) breed standard describes wire fox terriers as “on the tip-toe of expectation at the slightest provocation” (akc.org/breeds/wire_fox_terrier/). In this scene Asta not only does not act like a veritable member of his breed; he is not behaving as any dog would.

Furry Authenticity

In these three categories of dog’s filmic behavior, dogs are behaving incongruously with their intended role in the scene in which they appear. The dogs serve as plot devices as much as they do as dogs. Given the use of these dogs, one is left with the impression that they are included to lend an air of authenticity to the scene. Authenticity may be lent by association or by mere presence. In stories revolving around families, a dog may serve as a touchstone, assuming that the family portrayed on film resembles the kind of families that constitute the audience. According to the Humane Society, as of this writing two in five American
households include a dog ("U.S. Pet Ownership Statistics," 2012, humansociety.org); so, too, therefore, might the film family. Relatedly, the domestic dog is considered a kind of interlocutor: a companion not just physically but emotionally. People regularly talk to their dogs and may confidently gloss the dog’s seeming response using language. So, too, in film dogs communicate information to humans and sit agreeably listening when the humans want to communicate with them. In the 1982 film musical Annie, the long-suffering dog, Sandy, taken in by the lead character endures frequent episodes of the heroine, Annie (Aileen Quinn), singing directly into his face. Sandy’s role is not to behave as a dog would and repair to a less noisy environment; it is to apparently listen to Annie as would a comrade or confidant.

In other cases the dog lends an air of authenticity to the background. These dogs may not be involved in the action of a scene at all, or they might appear, as in Mary Poppins, for a single purpose and then depart. In the 1987 Witches of Eastwick, for instance, dogs are scattered through the movie as typical dogs one might see in a typical town. But ethnological examination shows the behavior and appearance of the dogs to be abnormal. Dogs appear in two scenes wandering across streets of the town, unleashed and unaccompanied—and yet clearly cared-for. Their behavior and bearing is quite unlike that of village strays, nor is it typical of owned dogs. Similarly, in the 2010 Leap Year a single dog makes a single, odd appearance. A sheepdog, he pops up aside the protagonist waiting at a train station, with no sheep in sight. His vocalizations and behaviors are contextually bizarre: he whines and seems to solicit attention from the girl, then growls and snaps at her unprovoked. As she runs off, he is suddenly quiet. However, the dog makes locational “sense”: he is a sheepdog in Ireland, a place of many sheep. Eastwick, a staid town in New England, might, one expects, be home to many well-groomed and nonstray dogs. Both films use dogs as part of the scenery; their behavior and appearance are overlooked.

These uses of dogs— as associates or as merely present— attempt to increase the sense of reality of the scenes in which they appear. However, ethnological scrutiny of many dogs’ behavior gives the lie to their inclusion. Rather than increasing the realness of the scene, they serve to undercut it.

**Guilty Looks**

The use of dog characters in the films explored herein is representative of the way that humans misrepresent the dog. Dogs are used for their generic roles— as props, as part of the scenery, as part of the family—but are not considered as dogs, as individual animals. Using an ethnological approach to consider these filmic dogs’ behavior, it is apparent that dogs are regularly acting in ways at odds with their film roles. The examined films, despite their longevity and, in some cases, the acclaim bestowed upon them, have examples of radically incongruent dog vocalizations, attention, and responses (or lack of response).
It appears that the filmmakers are less concerned with the content of the dog—with the dog’s posture, with the meaning of a vocalization or gesture—than with introducing an intentionally vague notion that dogs are “about.” On the one hand, this is a kind of “reality effect,” as Roland Barthes (1986, 141–148) describes it. On the other hand, reality could not truly be the desideratum, nor is it the result. Information about the typical behavior, the sensory and cognitive capacities, and the expected appearance of dogs is widely available. What these dogs “at the side of the shot” demonstrate is the filmmakers’ lack of concern with the dog qua dog. The effect is “reality” with an absence of attention to the detail of the real. This use of dogs is a kind of “Rover verisimilitude,” the filmic version of “somewhere, a dog was barking” in literature: the dog sets the scene, but the fact of the dog is irrelevant.

There is precedent for this disregard of the behavior of dogs. Indeed, it is related to what the zoologist Heini Hediger (1981) called the “assimilation tendency”: that is, humans’ disposition to see other animate creatures as more or less like ourselves. Humans anthropomorphize; we assume that nonhuman animals have similar subjective experiences to our own. We fail to see the animal’s behavior on its own terms, because we have defined the terms: we assume they are humanlike in some way (usually a diminished way). Dogs are treated as furry humans, with simpler emotional and cognitive abilities but essentially the same desires, requirements, and capacity for subjective experience.

Anthropomorphizing of animals has long standing; even Paleolithic art included animals rendered with human features (Mithen 1996). It is not uncommon to hear attributions of jealousy, embarrassment, and shame made to domestic pets. The imagery of Aesop—the happy dog, the persistent tortoise, the industrious ant—persists even when scientific evidence questions these characterizations. But dogs may be the species most often subjected to anthropomorphisms, as they are typically the animals we see when we, with pen in hand, look down at our feet. To some extent we do not see the dog in front of us, because we are blinded by the things that it represents. Dogs serve as the model (human) partner: the ardent listener, the sympathizer, the faithful, and the loving. As such, dogs have long been featured in prose in this fabled form: as reflections of ourselves. Victorian autobiographies ostensibly written “by” the dog, reflecting on the trials and tribulations of their lives as a person would, represent the apex of this trend (Horowitz 2009a).

Anthropomorphisms endure for their utility: in an attempt to understand and manage our environment, we naturally project onto animals motivations and knowledge that may help us to predict other animals’ behavior (Horowitz and Bekoff 2007). A contemporary ethological approach makes the veracity of anthropomorphisms an empirical claim. Does a dog’s “guilty look” represent its experience of guilt? Is “jealous” behavior when an owner directs her or his attention to another dog an emotional experience or a practical one: go where the attention is being provided? While research suggests that there
are better explanations for the “guilty look” than the experience of guilt, and that the personal interest of a desired object or attention is more salient than whether another dog is unfairly receiving it, anthropomorphic language makes up much lay description of animals (Horowitz 2000c; Horowitz 2012). In cognitive ethology the anthropomorphisms made of dogs and other animals have begun to be unpacked. An understanding of dogs born of a sense of familiarity is being replaced by an understanding borne of empirical investigation and scientific confirmation. Replaced, not displaced—sometimes the anthropomorphism is well-founded. It is an empirical question, however, in most cases still to be answered.

In films the use of dogs as prop, rather than as dog, continues apace. As punctuation to a scene, to move the plot forward, to set a character's or environment's tone, dogs are used as symbols. But they are animate symbols, and animate symbols that are, training aside, behaving on their own terms. The cinematic disregard for dogs is puzzling, as they are expressive creatures in their own right, perfectly able to convey emotion, transmit information, or show affection. As Susan Orlean (2011) and others have observed, dogs' heyday in films may have been the silent era: as no one could speak, dogs and humans were on more equal footing. “In fact,” Orlean suggests, “people look diminished when in silent films”; by contrast, “the purity of a dog's focus was the heroic quality that they brought” to a film (interview with Susan Orlean at the Free Library of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 5, 2011). When talkies began, dogs were diminished, and we stopped looking at them and began imagining them, even when they played “heroes,” as silly humans. The result is that, often, the behavior of the dog at the side of the shot reveals how distant dogs, and our view of them, have become.

Notes

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1. Prop also implies and evokes property, another inescapable feature of pets in contemporary culture: their status as equivalent to one's personal effects.
2. Although there was no indication that this was the case with Sparkplug, many Dalmatians are congenitally deaf, so this example may be more complicated.

Chronological Filmography

*Rescued by Rover* (Lewin Fitzhamon and Cecil M. Hepworth, August 1905), Blair [dog], May Clark, Barbara Hepworth.

*The Return of Boston Blackie* (Harry O. Hoyt, August 1927), Strongheart the Dog, Bob Custer, Corlis Palmer.

*The Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1934), William Powell, Myrna Loy, Maureen O'Sullivan, Skippy/Astra [uncredited].
The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939), Judy Garland, Frank Morgan, Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr, Jack Haley, Billie Burke, Margaret Hamilton, Terry [dog].
Mary Poppins (Robert Stevenson, 1964), Julie Andrews, Dick Van Dyke, David Tomlinson, Glynis Johns, Karen Dotrice, Matthew Garber, Andrew [dog, uncredited].
Oliver! (Carol Reed, 1968), Mark Lester, Ron Moody, Shani Wallis, Oliver Reed.
Annie (John Huston, 1982), Aileen Quinn, Albert Finney, Carol Burnett, Ann Reinking, Tim Curry, Bernadette Peters.
The Witches of Eastwick (George Miller, 1987), Jack Nicholson, Cher, Susan Sarandon, Michelle Pfeiffer.
Leap Year (Anand Tucker, 2010), Amy Adams, Matthew Goode, Adam Scott, John Lithgow.