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### Abstract

This essay explores the ubiquity of dogs in cinema as means of eliciting fear, love and excitement. Although dogs have acquired several universally recognized traits in society, their depictions on screen vary wildly and do not cohere to form a singular meaning. Dogs appear in many roles: as “good boys” in domestic comedies, as the hero in a coming home flick, and as the muscle to a villain; they have been commercialized, anthropomorphized, weaponized, and racialized. This essay looks at the various ways in which dogs are depicted and what their varying symbolism represents.

# Good Boy

## *Canine Representation in Cinema*

Caleb Chodosh, University of Pennsylvania

### *Abstract*

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<sup>1</sup> *Jaws*, directed by Steven Spielberg (1975; Hollywood: Universal Pictures).

<sup>2</sup> Katarina Gregersdotter, *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7.

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE DOG DIFFERENCE

MOST ANIMALS ELICIT A CERTAIN RESPONSE AS SOON AS THEY APPEAR ON screen. Before a single shark appears on screen in *Jaws*,<sup>1</sup> tension is built solely on the idea of the existence of this borderline mythological creature. By the time the shark finally appears, the audience is terrified; their worst fears surrounding the shark have been confirmed. In the cinema that followed Spielberg's master-class in horror, few films (re: *Finding Nemo*) attempted to subvert or disrupt the shark's image as a beacon of terror. Films such as *Deep Blue Sea* and the more recent *The Shallows* have capitalized on this image with little variation; yet, these films still succeed because of the implicit cultural understanding of the shark. Viewer's reactions can influence their attitudes toward animals. "This fact has often been emphasized in the critical literature about Spielberg's *Jaws*, which is said to have had a considerable impact on attitudes towards the acutely endangered Great White Shark."<sup>2</sup>

In a similar vein, the appearance of a deer on screen often carries a single connotation. Whether in childhood fare like *Bambi*, or contemporary thrillers like *Get Out*, the appearance (and oftentimes killing) of a deer without fail symbolizes some form of innocence. The deer, like the shark, has a singular cultural image and meaning. This attribute would make financing a film about evil deer or law-abiding sharks inherently difficult, unless perhaps you are Pixar.

The dog is an animal with a far more prolific and complex cultural legacy. Although dogs have also acquired several universally recognized traits, the depictions of dogs on screen do not cohere to form a singular cultural meaning. Depictions of dogs vary wildly in pop culture. Dogs appear in many roles: as "good boys" in domestic comedies, as the hero in a coming home flick, and even as the muscle to a villain. Any appearance could incite "awwww" or "ahhhh!" from the audience. This scale of adorability to ferocity is distinctive in the animal kingdom.

A couple of surface level observations can explain some of this diversity. For one, the dog is represented differently on screen compared to other animals because it is different. Dogs are more ingrained in human society than arguably any other animal, given that dogs were domesticated over 15,000 years ago. Plainly, humans have had more time to both cultivate relationships with and establish mythology surrounding the dog. Dogs seem more connected to humans than any other animal, something that is undoubtedly reflected in culture.

This paper will wade through the noise to glean several key insights about the dog's representation on screen. First, we must question the ubiquity of the dog movie itself. How and why are dogs more frequently featured on film than other animals? Then this paper will focus on certain threads traced through time period and genre in which dogs have a significant narrative role. These threads are just a few of the fascinatingly complex ways in which dogs appear on screen. Because of the dog's proximity to humanity, attempting to trace all of these themes would be akin to tracing all themes in cinema featuring humans, and is far beyond the scope of this project. In this light, this analysis will focus on three particularly compelling threads. The emergence of the "Coming Home" narrative post World-War II, and the utilization of the dog as a symbol illustrate the breadth and essentiality of the dog in popular culture. The full scope of canine cinema is remarkably multifaceted, and goes far beyond the cute childhood films that first come to mind. Dogs have been commercialized,

anthropomorphized, weaponized, and racialized. Dogs on film have transcended genre to serve as a proxy for what we fear and value about humanity itself. While other animals are pigeonholed into creating a singular emotional response; dogs can be equally compelling as heroes, villains, or romantic leads. The choices made in depicting these creatures on film are both driven by culture and impact culture in a circular feedback loop.

## II. RIN TIN TIN & CANINE COMMERCIALIZATION

WHY ARE DOG MOVIES SO PREVALENT? IT SEEMS ANYTIME ONE GOES TO THE Cineplex or browses films on a cross-country flight, there is at least one movie featuring a cheekily anthropomorphic dog front and center on the poster. This is no new trend; in fact, from the outset of Hollywood dogs have been stars of the screen.

The dog actually owes much of its stardom to the acting failures of its genetic ancestor, the wolf. The famous German shepherd Rin Tin Tin “unsuccessfully made the rounds of Hollywood studios until, one day in 1922... a wolf refuse[d] repeatedly to perform its scene on the set of a Warner Bros. movie, *The Man From Hell’s River*.”<sup>3</sup> His owner, a man named Duncan, convinced the director that Rinty could do the scene in a single take. After that Rin Tin Tin was a full-blown star, and made twenty-six films for Warner Brothers. Film historians often *solely* credit Rin Tin Tin with saving Warner Brothers and turning them into a relevant studio.<sup>4</sup>

The implications of Rinty’s success are evidence of Hollywood’s susceptibility to trends and fads. Films starring dogs became hugely popular, and at the height of this craze there were an estimated eighty German shepherd actors alone.<sup>5</sup> Although the Great Depression put an end to this wave, the reverberations had a profound impact on the popularity of the breed not just on screen but in the home. According to Derr, the German Shephard accounted for 36 percent of all dogs registered by the American Kennel Club.<sup>6</sup>

A 2014 study by Ghirlanda et al supplements this anecdote. In the study the authors found that “data suggest[s] that viewing a movie may cause a long-lasting preference for a breed that can be expressed years later... when the time comes to buy a dog.”<sup>7</sup> Logically, when a breed of dog becomes popular on screen, they become more popular at home.

However, this study also found that the sheer amount of films featuring dogs has increased at a rate higher than the growth of Hollywood’s output. Dog movies were released at a rate of less than one per year until 1940, a rate that grew to more than seven per year by 2005.<sup>8</sup> In a sense, the rise of dog movies has mirrored the rise of the dog itself. As more dogs made their way on screen more dogs were purchased, and vice versa.

Interestingly, Ghirlanda et al also points to the power of cinema itself as a highly accessible and influential art form. While the authors found a strong correlation between breed population and cultural representations, they also found breeds that win the Westminster Club Dog Show do not become more popular as a result. This suggests “reaching a small specialized audience may not be as effective as reaching the general public.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Mark Derr, *A Dog’s History of America* (New York City, NY: North Point Press, 2004), 272.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Orlean, “The Dog Star: Rin Tin Tin and the Making of Warner Bros,” *The New Yorker*, August 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Hanks, “Fall of the Wild,” British Film Institute, Aug. 11, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Derr, 273.

<sup>7</sup> Stefano Ghirlanda and Alberto Acerbi and Harold Herzog, “Dog Movie Stars and Dog Breed Popularity,” Public Library of Science (2014).

<sup>8</sup> Ghirlanda et al.

<sup>9</sup> Ghirlanda et al

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), Prologue.

<sup>11</sup> Derr, 272.

<sup>12</sup> Hilary Busis, "Coco Review," *Vanity Fair*, Nov. 21, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Hawkes, "Remembering The Artist's Uggie: One of Cinema's Top Dogs," *The Telegraph* (London, UK), Dec. 25, 2016.

Filmmakers have also theorized that dog movies are also prudent investments. When asked why he was putting a dog in a show, an early producer responded, "A dog is worth two points in prime time. One point is about 850,000 sets. You do the math."<sup>10</sup>

It seems the "cult of the dog hero" established by Rin Tin Tin became both culturally significant and profitable for filmmakers.<sup>11</sup> In addition to being easier to work with than other animals, dogs have a seemingly universal quality that transcends the boundaries of human culture. While everyone may not understand what is depicted on screen, we can all relate to the dog. Websites like *doesthedogdie.com* view cinema itself through the lens of the dog's experience. Indeed, this shows that the communities established in neighborhood dog parks extend into the digital and cultural realms.

It is telling that many of the reviews of *Coco*, film critics tend to hone in on Dante the dog as an important symbol and selling point. Although the themes specific to Latino culture may not resonate with all moviegoers, the film bets that the mere promise of a cute pooch (featured heavily in promotional materials) will provide common ground and raise ticket sales. *Vanity Fair's* headline promises "Wit, Style, and a Very Good Dog."<sup>12</sup> This reflects a more calculated interpretation of the dog: as a bridge of sorts for viewers to cross into other cultures and walks of life. Importantly, Dante's breed is never specified. He is a mutt, a blank canvas for viewers to identify with.

*The Artist* featured a dog in a similar functional role. As a French drama produced in the style of a 1920s era silent film, *The Artist* would have no pitch for the everyman without its scene-stealing pup. Many reviews and marketing materials prominently featured the pooch, and the dog was often used as entry point for cinephiles to convince their blockbuster conditioned friends to give the silent film a chance. When Uggie (the dog who played Jack) died of prostate cancer, several publications eulogized the pup's performance as one of the all time-greats. The Guardian's Rebecca Hawkes even goes so far as to suggest Uggie should have won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor.<sup>13</sup>

In this manner, movies not explicitly about dogs can profit from the inclusion of a dog. Critics and moviegoers alike often pitch these movies based on the appearance of a cute dog. Fundamentally flawed movies like *Max*, escape critical panning based on the presence of a "good boy."

However, the ubiquity of the dog is not explained solely by the universal appeal of the dog in connection to the home. For one, dogs are easier to work with than other animals, and because of advanced anthropomorphism, more easily can convey character traits. Additionally, cinema is somewhat grounded in real-world trends. Given this, it makes sense that the rise of canine cinema paralleled the rise of the canine itself. That is, as dog populations in America rose, more dog films were produced. While these patterns don't entirely explain the success of these films, they illuminate the sheer number and cultural power of these images.

### III. COMING HOME

ONE TROPE IN DOG-CENTRIC FILMS HAS BEEN EXPLORED TO THE POINT OF exhaustion. There is a dog. The dog is adorable, yet mischievous and free-spirited. Its place is in the home where a hetero-normative family loves (but never coddles) it.

Something goes wrong, and the dog is tragically separated from the family. The rest of the film focuses on a singular narrative: getting home.

The emergence of this “coming home” narrative has deep historical antecedents. Depictions of animals were influenced by the social era itself. Stone asserts, “dogs emerged as companions” in the years following World War II.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly, the post-war period could be defined by a move back to the home. After the war-centric 1940s, Americans were ready to enter the cult of domesticity. This shift is most clear in the advertising of the time. Cigarette advertisements sold smokes alongside images of relaxation, leisure, and family. Advertisements for home improvement products attempted to reestablish the sanctity of the American home, while reinforcing gender roles that may have been subverted in wartime.

While America was experiencing its own coming home story, that same narrative was repeatedly played out on screen. *Lassie Comes Home* was arguably the most influential in this movement.<sup>15</sup> Released in 1943 in full Technicolor, this film documented the bond between a boy named Joe and his dog Lassie.

The plot focuses on Lassie’s journey “home,” after she is sold to another family and is set on returning to her young master. Importantly, the film was a huge box office hit, making about nine times its budget. This success shows the thematic elements, specifically coming home, resonated with viewers enough to spark six sequels.

Here, Lassie’s plight mirrors the American desire to return home from the warfront. Essential to the impact of this film was Lassie’s acting itself. In a famous scene where Lassie climbs out of a river instead of naturally shaking off the water, Lassie “staggers around bedraggled and exhausted.”<sup>16</sup> According to Burt, this is what makes Lassie a great actor, “behaving more like a human than a dog.”<sup>17</sup> The complications of this performance position it as “more than a human projection.”<sup>18</sup> This anthropomorphism serves a specific function: to get humans to identify with Lassie in the wartime context.

After *Lassie Come Home*, this trope only grew in ubiquity. 1963 film *The Incredible Journey*<sup>19</sup> covers similar thematic ground albeit in a different context. This Disney picture sets up a clear binary between nature and the home, presenting the wilderness itself as the main antagonist. The original trailer pits the animals (two dogs and one cat) against a “menacing and hostile wilderness” as they fight their way home. The purpose of this is two-fold. One, to assert that dogs belong in the home. And two, to more holistically posit that what belongs in the home should stay in the home. As it relates to Post-War America, this narrative of domestic animals making it home directly mirrors the anxieties of heading off to war. At the film’s close, the animals are indeed greeted like returning veterans.

This trope reflects the deep-rooted fear of losing control of the domestic realm. Thematically, these films send the message that the structure of the home is sacred and natural, and that this structure will always return to its equilibrium. Plenty of dogs get lost in less serendipitous ways, such as running away. However, these scenarios are rarely represented on screen. Rather, filmmakers present scenarios where the dog innately, instinctively knows both where home is and who their rightful owner is. These scenarios validate the connection owners feel with their dogs, while also subversively conjuring utopic images of the traditional American home.

This trope also confirms the image of the “loyal” dog. In this narrative, dogs are so

<sup>14</sup> Sherril Stone, “The Psychology of Using Animals in Advertising,” (Hawaii University International Conferences: Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences, 2014), 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Lassie Comes Home*, directed by F. Wilcox (1943; Los Angeles, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer).

<sup>16</sup> Burt, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Burt, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Courtney White, “Tony the Wonder Horse: A Star Study,” in *Historical Animal*, edited by Susan Nance, 293. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> *The Incredible Journey*, directed by F. Markle (1963; Los Angeles, CA: Walt Disney Production).

20 *Fruitvale Station*, directed by Ryan Coogler (2013; Los Angeles, CA: Significant Productions).

21 Mike Ryan, "Ryan Coogler, *Fruitvale Station* Director, Defends His Controversial Scene," Huffington Post, Jul. 12, 2013.

22 Yasmin Nair, "Racism and the American Pit Bull," *Current Affairs*, Sep. 19, 2016.

remarkably loyal that all they care about is getting home to their rightful owners. Survival becomes secondary; in a sense, the trope suggests that a dog without an owner is no dog at all. By building the mythology of coming home, filmmakers position the marriage between owner and dog as a sacred institution. Reunions replete with tears, embraces, and swelling music; the climaxes of these narratives more closely resemble a dramatic romance than a light-hearted pup-driven caper.

#### IV. SYMBOLIC DOGS

NOT ALL SIGNIFICANT WORKS FEATURE DOGS IN PRIMARY ROLES. OFTEN, filmmakers use dogs as symbols in film's that have little to do with dogs themselves. These symbolizations often play off the cultural stereotypes associated with certain breeds or styles of dog. This symbolism is used to great effect in the 2013 biographical drama *Fruitvale Station*, directed by Ryan Coogler.<sup>20</sup> The film is based on the events leading up to the shooting of unarmed black man Oscar Grant on the BART public transportation system in 2009. Upon release, on scene in particular attracted a lot of attention.

In the scene, Oscar Grant pulls up to a gas station. A car runs over a dog in the adjacent street. Oscar Grant runs to investigate, and comforts the dog in his arms as it dies. Not by coincidence, the dog happens to be a pit bull.

This scene stands out for a couple reasons. All of the scenes in the film are based on accurately reconstructing Oscar Grant's last day in the Bay Area. However, director Ryan Coogler found a gap in which Grant's movements and actions were not accounted for. Coogler decided to fill this gap in time with the pit bull scene. Therefore, this scene appears incongruent with the rest of the film.

The scene garnered a lot of criticism upon release for being emotionally manipulative and not relevant to the subject matter. To counter, Coogler explained his intentions in an interview in the Huffington Post. In it, Coogler draws a parallel between the experience of the pit bull and the experience of the black man in America.

He states, "You never hear about a pit bull doing anything good in the media. And they have a stigma to them...and, in many ways, pit bulls are like young African-American males. Whenever you see us in the news it's for getting shot and killed or shooting and killing somebody—for being a stereotype."<sup>21</sup>

Here is an explicit example of a filmmaker using a dog's image to draw a symbolic parallel with a character. Coogler capitalizes on a collective cultural understanding of the pit bull, strong animals often associated with violence, to create a powerful image of a misunderstood creature. Additionally, pit bulls are often linked to African-American culture.

Few breeds are as demonized as the pit bull, a demonization process that mirrors the dehumanization of African-Americans in American society. Indeed, one can see similarities in the media vilification of pit bulls and the presentation of "urban" stories in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Based on cultural conditioning, many Americans exhibit more fearful responses when confronted with a pit bull, as compared to their less threatening compatriots such as the fluffy labradoodle. Coogler compares this experience with the experience of the black man; feared, misunderstood, and ultimately shoved aside



in moments of need.

That the sequence foreshadows the loss of innocence (in the form of Grant's death) at the end of the movie makes it heartbreaking to watch. Whether emotionally manipulative, or emotionally resonant, Coogler undoubtedly draws a compelling comparison between the pit bull and the plight of Oscar Grant. He uses collective understanding of the pit bull as a breed to subversively illustrate the oppression of African-Americans.

The Hungarian 2014 drama *White God* also uses dogs as an entry point to discuss race.<sup>23</sup> The film follows a mixed breed dog named Hagen who is cast aside due to his status as a "mongrel." "White God" criticizes the arrogance of humanity for carrying themselves "as if they have unquestioned dominion over all nature, especially animals."<sup>24</sup> The movie follows the rise of these street dogs as a sort of slave revolt against the humans who cast them aside. The filmmakers often employ shots at ground level to ask the audience to empathize with their plight, and by the end of the film, actively desire revenge on some of the less savory humans.

With regard to race, the film uses Hagen's status as a "mongrel" to lampoon how humanity values arbitrary things like the purity of bloodlines. The father's proposal, to buy a pure breed dog for his daughter Lilly if she agrees to get rid of Hagen, is depicted as both cruel and illogical. While the desire for pure breed dogs can be justified in many tangible ways, it becomes perverse when presented on this societal scale. Lines like, "Mutts have to be reported," evoke imagery of segregation and dehumanization. Interestingly, the film is structured as a distorted coming home tale, as Hagen and his pack slaughter multiple humans before finally submitting to Lilly. This suggests that even in the most allegorical of films, dogs still desire a home.

A film similar in both title and theme is the 1982 American drama, *White Dog*.<sup>25</sup> *White Dog* follows a dog trainer (who is black) as he attempts to rehabilitate a stray dog that has been conditioned to attack people of color. The dog is used as a proxy for racism, which is presented as an ambiguously curable mental illness.<sup>26</sup> The trainer's obsession with curing the dog stems from his belief that there may be an antidote to racism.

The director exposes the perversion of weaponizing an ideology using a dog by playing with audience expectations of what a dog can and can't be. A dog cannot intrinsically be racist, but it can be conditioned to be. The decision to use a dog to look at systemic racism lacks nuance in an inspired way. In depicting racist humans, filmmakers often fall into the trap of justifying the person's behaviors with nuanced backstories or sympathetic performances. However, the corruption of this dog is evil in a beautifully unambiguous way. By using such an innocent and recognizable image, the clean domestic dog, and corrupting it to the point of no return; the filmmakers manage to construct a film whose "anti-racist message is about as ambiguous as a slap in the face."<sup>27</sup> In their mind, there is nothing worse than training a good dog to do bad things.

This establishes the duality of the dog: a symbol of both domestic loyalty and truly disgusting evil. Indeed, what animal has played more roles on both sides of the spectrum, both heroic and villainous? However, more often than not, these films refuse to condemn the dogs themselves instead using the malleability of canine

<sup>23</sup> *White God*, directed by Kornél Mundruczó (2014; Hungary: The Chimney Pot).

<sup>24</sup> Matt Zoller Seitz, "White God Review," RogerEbert.com. Mar. 27, 2015. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/white-god-2015>.

<sup>25</sup> *White Dog*, directed by Sam Fuller (1982; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures).

<sup>26</sup> Dave Kehr, "Fuller's Fable," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 29, 1991.

<sup>27</sup> Kehr, "Fuller's Fable."

<sup>28</sup> *Game of Thrones*. Created by David Benioff & D.B. Weiss. HBO, 2011-2017.

29 *Up*, directed by Pete Docter (2009; Hollywood: Pixar).

behavior to put more blame on the humans in charge.

*Game of Thrones*<sup>28</sup> impeccably explores this duality through the canine companions of the Starks and the Boltons. While both the Stark's direwolves and the Bolton's hounds are vicious killers, they are portrayed in wildly different ways.

At face value, the direwolves should be more dangerous. Mythical creatures of the far north, they are supposed to inspire fear everywhere they go. Despite multiple instances of savagery (murder, biting off digits, etc.) they are depicted as docile and loyal domesticated pets. In contrast, Ramsay Bolton's hounds (a kind of modified Rottweiler) are portrayed as bloodthirsty and savage beasts. They are never seen in any kind of anthropomorphic or sentimental light; so much so that at the moment they brutally kill their own master, it elicits glee rather than surprise.

Although these animals both commit objectively heinous acts, one appears unmistakably good and the other as uninhibited evil. Here, the only difference is in the audience's perception of their owners. When the direwolves follow orders it is confirmation of their loyalty. Their bloodthirstiness only extends as far as protecting their kin. When Ramsay's hounds follow an order, it is an act of evil aggression. These notions are not dependent on the actions of the animals themselves; rather, a reflection of their owner. The direwolves enhance the humanity of the Stark family through violence while the hounds detract from Ramsay's. In one case, loyalty is earned; in the other, it is coerced.

In short, the behavior of a dog on screen is an indictment on the owner and not the dog itself. The image of the villainous dog does not posit that dogs are evil; rather, that the corruption of a dog is evil. On screen, behind vicious dogs, there is a human who made them that way. In this way, culture proposes that dogs are inherently *good* and only through careful and committed human intervention can this nature be changed.

## V. THREADS AND CONCLUSIONS

The standard depiction of the dog is aptly summed up by Dug, the dog from the 2009 animated film *Up*.<sup>29</sup> In possession of a miraculous device that turns his puppy thoughts into human speech, Dug is anthropomorphically adorable, all ears and eyes. His owner, the curmudgeon Carl, has successfully launched his house into the sky with the power of helium balloons. Dug was supposed to stay behind, on the ground. When Carl finds Dug on the porch; Dug justifies his deception simply. "I was hiding under your porch because I love you. Can I stay?" he says.

This exemplifies the universality of the domestic dog. When a dog enters the frame in this context, we as an audience assume several things about it that are usually verified. For one, they are loyal. A true dog has a strong sense of home and its rightful owner. These dogs are also good at heart. If they have any flaws, it only reflects poorly on their potentially villainous owners.

There is an unusual interplay between this universality and the sheer number of examples that explore the complexity of the dog. This dichotomy is a central point of tension that helps dogs become such poignant symbols and impactful characters. While audiences retain a set image of what a dog should be, this image can be twisted,

subverted, and explored in fascinating ways. This complexity and range enables dogs to play equally compelling villains, friends, and everything in-between.

While this analysis picked up several threads regarding canines and cinema, it is worth mentioning a few bonus compelling patterns and trends. For one, dogs are portrayed captivatingly in animation. Animation as a medium offers filmmakers a chance to use dogs in ways that are not possible with physical actors. Not having to control an animal's performance, or worry about proper treatment are both pluses. Because of this, dogs are a common foil for filmmakers in all types of animation.

Being able to fully control the dog's body makes for easier visual subversion or confirmation of certain tropes. Take two examples from popular network television shows. In *Family Guy*, creator Seth McFarlane brilliantly subverts the stereotype of the domestic suburban dog by portraying Brian, the Griffin's dog, as a cultured and alcoholic Labrador. Brian is anthropomorphized in several ways. He walks on two legs, talks, drives, and even loves jazz. These traits appear in the context of Brian's life as a miserable failed-writer turned misogynist and recovering drug addict. In anthropomorphizing Brian to this extreme, the creators suggest that it does not make sense for a dog that is simply "loyal" to be deemed anthropomorphic. Instead, a fully anthropomorphized dog should embody the full spectrum of human qualities, warts and all.

As a counterpoint, TV series *Futurama* uses the form to confirm our hopes about dogs. In an Emmy-award nominated episode titled "Jurassic Bark," a convoluted time travel plot reveals a heart-wrenching story.<sup>30</sup> The protagonist Fry gives a command to his dog Seymour, telling him to wait outside of a pizza shop until he gets back. Fry then gets cryogenically frozen, but finds a fossilized Seymour years later in a museum. After recovering the remains he discovers Seymour lived until the ripe age of fifteen, twelve years after he left him on the stoop of the pizzeria. In what remains one of the saddest ever endings to a cartoon show, a montage set to "I Will Wait for You" sung by Connie Francis plays out. It reveals a devastating truth: Seymour never stopped waiting for his master. The final shot, a gaunt Seymour finally closing his eyes after twelve years on the sidewalk, is emotionally haunting and confirms the ideal of a dog's unconditional love. This narrative closely mirrors the 1987 Japanese film, *Hachiko Monogatari*, in which a dog walks to his owner's train stop every day despite the owner's death.

Another rich theme not explored above is the connection between dogs and the apocalypse. A lone hero and his or her hound pops up time and again, most popularly in Will Smith vehicle *I Am Legend*.<sup>31</sup> The loss of his pet dog Sam, the last thing tethering him to domestic life and memories of his family, drives him into a suicidal rage. It is not coincidental that many depictions of apocalypse, or even realistic poverty, often focus on shots of stray and wild dogs. Seeing dogs outside of the context of the home signals to the audience that something has gone horribly wrong. The natural order has been disrupted.

There are so many more films worth discussing. From the sociopathic pooch in "Baxter" to the buddy-cop dynamic of *Turner & Hooch*, there are canine-centric films in every genre and style. All of the favored tropes, such as the dog knowing whom the bad guy is or where the danger is before humans, could fill an encyclopedia.

In summation, portrayals of dogs undoubtedly cover more complex territory than any

<sup>30</sup> *Futurama*, "Jurassic Bark," Season 4 Episode 7, directed by Swinton O. Scott III, written by Eric Kaplan, Fox, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> *I Am Legend*, directed by Francis Lawrence (2007; Hollywood: Warner Brothers).

32 *My Dog Skip*, directed by Jay Russell  
(2000; Hollywood: Warner Brothers).

other domestic or wild animal. The dog has deep historical roots in the development of modern society, and truly in the birth of Hollywood as well. Early canine stars such as Rin Tin Tin and Lassie exposed the profitability of that feeling of familiarity when a dog appears on screen, a resource producers have mined throughout film history. Dog movies are equally reflexive with regard to historical and cultural context, as shown by the emergence of the “coming home” narrative in post-war America. Furthermore, the complexity of the dog enables more nuanced symbolizations on screen.

Without a doubt, these representations matter. An influential film featuring a dog can affect treatment and purchase patterns of a particular breed in actuality. More importantly, these images peel back and expose the human condition. In this sense, dogs are an excellent proxy to explore human society itself. Dogs condition humans with idealized versions of loyalty and the sanctity of the home. Dogs are an excellent lens to look at complex issues of race, poverty, and violence within humankind. More often than not, these tales serve as parables that warn against certain societal ills.

Dogs, usefully, are the easiest ways to define their owners. There is no such thing as a bad dog; only a bad owner or a bad government. Dogs in film are often villainous but never faulted, often loud but never grating, and often get lost but always come back. Whenever a suburban dog crazily barks out the window at nothing, in the world of film, it signals intelligence and insight. Dogs can also transcend human limitations: a golden retriever in *Air Bud* does not miss a shot all movie, something LeBron James and Michael Jordan have never done. 2000 film *My Dog Skip* perfectly captures this sentiment when the narrator states, “Like all dogs, Skip was colorblind. He made friends easily with people of all races and origins. The town was segregated back then, but as we know, dogs are a whole lot smarter than people.”<sup>32</sup> Dogs represent our best selves; likewise, the corruption of a dog denotes our worst selves. The duality of dogs on screen mirrors the duality of humans. This push and pull between universality and complexity makes canines as fascinating on screen as they are in life.