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ANTHROPOMORPHISM UNVEILED: A CASE ANALYSIS OF ISLE OF DOGS AND ITS ROLE IN MEDIATING MULTISPECIES NARRATIVES

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This essay explores Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* through the lens of anthropomorphism and multispecies theory, examining how the film captures the complexities of human-animal relationships and the interconnectedness of all beings. Anderson's distinctive filmmaking style, characterized by vibrant visuals and intricate narratives, serves as a backdrop for the exploration of themes such as empathy, collaboration, and the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human worlds. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's ideas in *When Species Meet* and academic film reviews, the essay analyzes key scenes and characters to uncover the profound insights offered by *Isle of Dogs* regarding the nature of interspecies communication and the transformative power of companionship. Ultimately, the film challenges viewers to rethink their perspectives on the world around them and embrace a more inclusive understanding of multispecies interactions.

Wes Anderson is a renowned filmmaker recognized for his distinctive style—featuring vibrant colors, notable soundtracks, intricate costume designs, and consistent font usage—and narrative techniques that offer valuable artistic insights into humanity and the world around us. His films, which often focus on themes such as love, capitalism, and over-consumerism utilize postmodern styles to evoke feelings of nostalgia and hope within their viewers (Szemetová 5–6).

Among Anderson's repertoire is his 2018 stop-motion animated film *Isle of Dogs*. The film transports viewers to the realm of Trash Island, where the canine inhabitants' journeys mirror human challenges of forging connections, navigating loyalty, and confronting environmental decay. This practice of attributing human or personal characteristics to non-humans, called anthropomorphism, plays a pivotal role in storytelling. It acts as a bridge between the familiar and the bizarre, allowing viewers to suspend their disbelief to a degree that allows them to confront difficult dynamics within the human narrative more empathetically. In *Isle of Dogs*, the canine characters are given human-like qualities, transforming them into relatable figures and allowing audiences to emotionally invest in their struggles and triumphs. They each have names, distinct accessories that match their individual personalities, dynamic relationships, and the ability to communicate with one another—and with the audience, which is important for later discussions. These attributes help the audience make inferences about what the characters are going through, which should, in turn, allow viewers to empathize with the characters by relating the experience to emotions they have felt in similar situations (Harrison and Hall 34). Anderson's use of dogs was an especially strategic decision for the anthropomorphizing of this narrative because studies show humans are already confident in their ability to communicate and understand feelings among dogs, compared to a list of other animals (Harrison and Hall 37–40). Despite the benefits of using anthropomorphism in regard to the narrative, there are limits to the strategy, relating to its morality and effectiveness in media. While it undoubtedly serves as a valuable narrative tool, at what point does the use of anthropomorphism hinder our ability to connect

with the animals and cultures represented in the media outside of the context of the film?

In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway delves into the complex relationships between humans and animals, challenging traditional notions of species boundaries and emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings. Haraway's ideas resonate deeply with the anthropomorphic portrayal of canine characters in Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs*. Haraway's emphasis on interspecies communication and collaboration underscores the importance of understanding and respecting the perspectives of non-human entities—a theme echoed in *Isle of Dogs* as the characters work together to navigate their shared challenges. By drawing upon Haraway's ideas and various academic film reviews, this analysis aims to explore how the anthropomorphism in *Isle of Dogs* serves not only as a narrative device but also as a reflection of broader inquiries into the nature of interspecies relationships and the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human worlds. To review, *Isle of Dogs* is set in a dystopian near-future Japan where dogs have been quarantined on Trash Island due to an outbreak of a canine flu called Snout Fever. When a young boy named Atari Kobayashi, or the little pilot, crashes on the island to find his lost dog Spots, a group of five alpha dogs—named Chief, Boss, Duke, King, and Rex—aid him on his quest. The story revolves around their journey, and the narrative is driven by their interactions with each other, the island, and the human characters. The first interaction we see among the characters of the film is a political gathering, or “a special midnight session at the Municipal Dome,” where Kenji (Mayor) Kobayashi addresses the canine flu to a large crowd of Japanese citizens (*Isle of Dogs* 00:03:45). The first observation a viewer can make is that the humans in the film are speaking Japanese, yet there are no subtitles provided. Rather, viewers rely on interpreter characters and machines to explain and emphasize important information in English. For instance, after Mayor Kobayashi calls for a hasty and crowd-pleasing quarantine, an electronic display board translates what appears to be Mayor Kobayashi's exact words: “Our legal-system provides for: dissenting opinion.” This is where the minority opposition, scientists exploring a

cure for Snout Fever, has a chance to advocate for the dogs. The scientists seem confident they will be able to find a cure, so they are pleading with the crowd to be patient and ask themselves, “What ever happened to man’s best friend?” This line is intended to evoke feelings of nostalgia, which, as previously mentioned, Anderson commonly focuses on in his films. Still, the crowd responds by cheering with displeasure and throwing things at the scientists on stage. The interpreter contextualizes this visual response by announcing, “The crowd is calling for the immediate ratification and approval of the mayor’s proposal.” This implementation of limited English and communication from the human characters is intended to decenter the humans from this narrative. The audience is meant to focus on the ways in which the dogs are shaped by the world around them. Thus, the only information we need to know about the humans is that this crowd supported their exile, but there are still a few humans who trust in the bonds of their human-animal relationships.

Aside from this observation about Anderson’s use of language in the film, this scene also lays the foundation for all future interactions between the characters, as well as their interactions with the surrounding environment. Mayor Kobayashi’s anger and the crowd’s overwhelming support of his decree show viewers the crowd’s general disdain for the dogs. On the contrary, the scientists, as well as their supporters [1], showcase the side of this community that still cares for these animals. This shows viewers that the beliefs that lead to the dogs’ excommunication are not unanimous among humans, and there will likely be advocates appearing later in the film.

While most of the animals in *Isle of Dogs* exhibit a degree of human traits, it is important to note that the deepest emotions associated with human beings are projected onto our five leading canines and the companions they connect with on their journey. After the first dog is transported to the island, the film cuts to six months later, after all of the inhabitants have arrived and grown accustomed to their new home. After a bag of garbage is dropped on the island, a pack of five nearly identical dogs show up to investigate (*Isle of Dogs* 00:09:35–00:13:30). They gather close to-

gether behind the bag before looking up at the main pack, and the camera cuts to a long symmetrical shot of five dogs standing a few paces from one another. Our leads Rex, Duke, King, Boss, and Chief are introduced using single medium shots of each member in that order. This is how they are established as a pack yet noted to be individual beings with alpha-like personalities. In the single shots, viewers see the dogs' names on their collars—aside from Chief, who doesn't wear a collar. After the packs are introduced and the exigency, the trash, is presented, the packs move toward the trash slowly yet ferociously. Once they meet face to face directly in front of the trash, Rex interrupts the face-off to present the option of opening the bag first to see if it is worth fighting for. They all agree, open the bag, and are met with rotting fruit and meatless bones. While it looks like an unsavory meal, the animals quickly decide it is worth it and jump into a chaotic ramble that ends with Chief biting the ear off of the rival pack's leader Igor. His yelp concludes the fight, leaving Rex, Duke, King, Boss, and Chief with their prize.

In this short interaction, the rivaling packs, the trash, and even the humans “become with” (Haraway 4) each other in tight-knit packs in order to survive, which is an unfortunate contradiction to their need to fight other packs in order to do so. Additionally, they once “became with” human beings, but that connection is not entirely severed here on the island, as the dogs' dependence on human-generated waste reflects the ways in which human activities shape the ecology of the island and influence the behaviors of its inhabitants. These aspects of the film resonate with Haraway's exploration of the entanglements between humans, animals, and their shared environments, emphasizing the ways “in which diverse bodies and meanings co-shape one another” (Haraway 4).

After the alpha pack's chaotic scramble with Igor's pack of pedigree dogs, Rex interrupts their relaxing mealtime to say, “I don't think I can stomach any more of this garbage,” initiating a discussion about their old lives. This dialogue scene serves as a crucial moment of reflection and introspection for the pack. Rex, once accustomed to the warmth and comfort of indoor living, is now on the cold and desolate Trash Island, longing for

the security and care provided by his human owners. King, once the star in dog food commercials, bears the disheveled appearance of neglect, a stark contrast to his former glamorous life. Boss, formerly a spirited mascot for a baseball team, now lacks his former spirit, crushed by the harsh realities of life on the island. Duke, desiring nothing more than basic care and attention, grieves the absence of the comforts and routines he once took for granted. As the conversation progresses, Rex admits fearfully, “I want my master” (00:12:30). This underscores a deep emotional bond between humans and their canine companions. However, Chief, who embodies resilience and survival instincts, intervenes to scold his companions for their lack of resilience as alphas, urging them to persevere. At the end of his speech, Chief insults the pack by referring to them as “pets.” Rex begins to retort with the clear intention of calling him a harsher term, and Chief finishes his sentence, confidently claiming his identity as “a stray.”

This scene provides a rich exploration of multispecies encounters as well. Through their reminiscence of past lives as pets and their current struggles on Trash Island, the dogs embody the complexities of human-animal relationships and the intertwined histories that shape them. Haraway’s premise that touch shapes accountability is evident in the dogs’ interactions with each other and their environment, reflecting their shared experiences and responsibilities. Rex, King, Boss, and Duke were each touched by their masters with various expressions of love and care, which shaped who they are today on the island. Conversely, it is later revealed that Chief has not experienced this kind of love from humans, so he finds a deeper connection with the island, where he can express his resilience. These histories drive their journey and the narrative throughout the film. Additionally, the use of anthropomorphism serves to enhance these and future messages about multispecies encounters. By portraying the dogs with human-like emotions about their past lives, viewers are invited to consider the complex bonds that exist between humans and animals from an empathetic perspective. While in real life, dogs do not have the cognitive abilities required to reflect upon change and relationships, those relationships still exist. The film just paints it in a way that human viewers can personal-

ly connect with.

Atari Kobayashi arrives on the island at 00:14:41 after the animals discuss their situation and witness his plane crash in the distance. They watch from a distance as he gets out of the plane and collapses on the ground, taking a vote on whether they should eat him or rescue him. Deciding to help, they embark on a journey with the little pilot to find his lost dog Spots. In the midst of this, viewers are shown a scene from three years prior, when the little pilot and Spots are first introduced. After his parents were in a fatal train accident and his uncle adopted him as a ward of the mayoral household, Atari is gifted with Spots as a highly trained guard dog. They are told that Spots is not a pet and should not be treated as one, but their connection as companions is clear from the beginning. They each receive a communication apparatus that is attached to their ears, and as Atari mumbles into the device, Spots begins to tear up repeatedly saying, "I can hear you." Throughout the film, as they search for Spots, Atari's presence builds on what we know of each dog's relationship with humans. This flashback to Atari's past emphasizes the deep emotional connections that can exist between humans and animals. Despite the instruction that Spots is not a pet, their relationship is characterized by companionship, communication, and mutual understanding. Haraway discusses the ways in which an encounter among species changes once they gain the ability to communicate, as they move from being an object to being a subject (25). Their ability to communicate opens the door for Spots and Atari to have a meaningful and impactful relationship that drives the film. Once again, the anthropomorphism in this scene helps the audience engage with the characters on a more emotional level. The little pilot is a vital character in the film, being the only human to show up looking for his lost dog. He represents the perseverance of deeply woven relationships between species, and his relationships with each dog, mainly Spots thus far, highlight those aspects of multispecies theory.

Upon the little pilot's arrival, we see a stark contrast between human and animal perspectives on survival and morality. While Chief, representing the more feral instincts of the canine pack, initially leans toward

viewing Atari as a potential food source, Rex advocates for compassion and assistance, reflecting a tension between primal instincts and empathy within multispecies interactions. Atari's presence on the island highlights the interdependence and mutual reliance between humans and animals in extreme circumstances. Despite their initial differences, they recognize a shared bond and understand the importance of collaboration for not only survival, but also the preservation of love and friendship. This underscores the notion that multispecies encounters often require cooperation and mutual aid, transcending traditional boundaries between humans and animals. Atari's relationships with the dogs, especially with Chief, embody this film's lessons about multispecies interaction. An important aspect of that is Chief's backstory, which is revealed at 00:40:23 after he, Rex, Boss, Duke, King, and Atari have been traveling for some time. In a close-up shot, he tells the pack that he grew up on the streets, running from dog catchers. After being caught three times and escaping the first two, he was adopted by a large family that had two dogs already. The youngest child woke him up one morning and tried to pet him. Scared, Chief bit the child and was locked in the family's shed. Once again, he escaped, returning to his life as a street dog. In this monologue, Chief explains that he knows the child was only being nice, so he doesn't know why he bit him.

As the audience, we can understand why, connecting his story to multispecies theory. Chief was not raised with humans, yet his species is one that relies on them entirely. Among the basic necessities, Boss relies on them for cheer, Rex relies on them for comfort and safety, King relies on them for his ego, and Duke relies on them for structure, but Chief has only ever relied on them for garbage. The only connection he had to humans before this was being captured by them unwillingly, and that is who the little boy was reaching out to when he was bit. These knots that tie him to humans are rotten, and new knots that consider his different past need to be tied with this human Atari to make the new pack work (Haraway 18). I say, "new pack," because this scene also emphasizes Atari's growing role as a member of their pack. Recall the earlier scene where we first met Chief, Rex, Boss, Duke, and King in an extreme long shot. In this scene,

when Chief is talking about his past, we cut to a much closer but similar shot of Boss, Atari, Rex, King, and Duke. This visually establishes that the lines between dogs and humans here are blurring, new knots between humans and animals are being tied, and Atari is becoming a member of our alpha pack. Additionally, he is paying attention to Chief and learning about who he is, reflecting Haraway's assertion that companion species need to learn to pay attention (19).

Atari's connection with Chief is solidified later in the film after the pack is separated and they continue the journey as a pair (00:55:04). After convincing Chief to fetch a stick, Atari calls him a "good boy" and hugs him. From this point forward in the film, their relationship is changed. In the next scene, Atari bathes and grooms Chief, revealing the true color and pattern of his coat. Throughout the film it was black, but the bath revealed it is white with black spots, just like Atari's lost dog Spots. Observing their similar appearance, Chief reflects on his history. He has brothers, but their breed isn't a rare one. Chief becomes unsettled by his confusion, so Atari offers him half of the dog biscuit he brought to the island. Declaring it as his "new favorite food" (00:57:39), Chief thanks Atari before the camera cuts to a close-up shot of the two moving forward on their journey, this time as true companions.

These pivotal interactions between Chief and Atari represent the new knots being tied in their multispecies relationship, which showcases the positive aspects of their new relationship. They also actively oppose the preconceived notions Chief has about humans, untying the old rotten knots that connect him to the people who believe he is a bad dog. Once the barrier that Chief has between him and Atari falls, Atari is able to help Chief step out of survival mode and reflect on his past. This kind of understanding of Chief's complex being is a key aspect of forming strong companion relationships (Haraway). Once this bond is formed, Chief and Atari's relationship drives the point of the narrative. The pack reunites and successfully completes their journey to find Spots, who has been living on the other end of the island with a pack of aboriginal dogs. Upon their arrival, it is confirmed that Chief and Spots are in fact brothers, and Spots reveals

he has a mate and will soon be a father. Unable to neglect his newfound responsibilities, he asks that his brother Chief replace him as Atari's body-guard dog. They both accept in a discussion that mirrors traditional wedding vows, once again highlighting the depth of the connection between companion species (01:16:57).

In the final parts of the movie, it is revealed that the cure to Snout Fever has been proven effective and that Mayor Kobayashi hid the serum to push his personal agenda forward. After the scientists' supporters—a group of local young journalists—and Atari reveal this to the citizens at the megadome, he gives a touching speech that resonates deeply with the multispecies theory present in Haraway's work. Here is the relevant excerpt:

I have spent much of my time in recent weeks traveling in the company of the very kind of animals our mayor refers to as bad dogs. They are the finest living beings I have ever come to know in all my dozen years on this earth. To your readers, the good people of Megasaki, I say, 'The cycle of life always hangs in a delicate balance: who are we and who do we want to be? (In English) Who are we?' . . . I dedicate this poem to my distant uncle Mayor Kobayashi, who took me in when I myself was a stray dog with nowhere else to turn. (01:24:34)

Here, Atari actively decenters his humanity in this narrative by referring to himself as "a stray dog." The speech awakens something in Mayor Kobayashi, forcing him to reflect on the deeply rooted bonds between humans and their companion species. After a few moments, Kobayashi announces, "Not fair to the boy, not fair to the dog," officially unstamping the Trash Island Decree.

Multispecies theory invites us to connect with the world around us without using our individual experiences as humans as the lens through which we see the species we are connecting with. By anthropomorphizing the canine characters, Anderson enables viewers to empathize with their struggles and triumphs, fostering a deeper understanding of the shared experiences between humans and animals. This narrative strategy not only serves as a powerful storytelling device but also prompts reflection on the

nature of interspecies relationships and the blurred lines between human and non-human worlds. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's ideas and academic film reviews, we can see how *Isle of Dogs* delves into the complexities of human-animal interactions, emphasizing the importance of communication, collaboration, and mutual aid in navigating shared challenges. Through characters such as Atari Kobayashi and Chief, the film portrays the transformative power of companionship and the capacity for empathy across species boundaries. At its core, *Isle of Dogs* invites us to reconsider our relationships with the world around us, urging us to connect with other species without imposing our human-centric perspectives. As Atari's poignant speech at the film's conclusion suggests, embracing multispecies theory allows us to recognize the inherent value of all living beings and strive for a more harmonious coexistence on this delicate balance of life.

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[1] At 00:05:51, the audience is shown a small section of the crowd that is in support of the scientist, sporting "pro dog" clothing accessories and raising their fists in solidarity. (*Isle of Dogs* 2018)