"That dog is real": queer identities in the new Wes Anderson film *Isle of Dogs*

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ABSTRACT: The representation of animals in movies deals with an unavoidable premise which has pragmatic consequences: movies are made by humans, for humans. Therefore, since humans usually define their identity in opposition to animals, representing them as individuals implies a problematic application of human categories to animal characters' performance. Trying to combine queer theories with Animal Studies, I propose an analysis of Wes Anderson's latest movie, *Isle of Dogs*, and in particular a reflection on the relationship between animals and machines. This article first focuses on the stop-motion technique which has been used to create speaking animal characters. Then, it explores how the machines are used by humans with animals in the movie and what ambiguities can emerge. Finally, it closes with a reflection on how the dogs relate to an identity constructed and ascribed to them by human society.

KEYWORDS: Isle of Dogs, Animal Studies, Queer Studies, Film Studies

> *To all the animals for whom I have cared*
> *To all the animals who have cared for me*

> Gregor was shocked when he heard his own voice answering, it could hardly be recognised as the voice he had had before. As if from deep inside him, there was a painful and uncontrollable squeaking mixed in with it, the words could be made out at first but then there was a sort of echo which made them unclear, leaving the hearer unsure whether he had heard properly or not. [...] "That was the voice of an animal", said the chief clerk, with a calmness that was in contrast with his mother's screams. [...] Gregor, in contrast, had become much calmer. So they couldn't understand his words any more, although they seemed clear enough to him, clearer than before – perhaps his ears had become used to the sound.
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> (KAFKA 1915; Eng. Tr. 2012)

1. INTRODUCTION

Queer is often used as a synonym for LGBTI, but the object of analysis of *queer* is more abstract and general, which is what makes it such a productive hermeneutical category. *Queer* deals with denaturalisation of

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categories and their performances, especially when defining social identities, and it questions all kinds of identities, their representations and what is considered normal or natural in a given society.[1] Since this denaturalisation unveils the mechanisms of legitimation and inclusion/exclusion operated by systems of power that are otherwise invisible to the subjects produced – in a Foucauldian perspective – by the systems themselves,[2] the subversive potential of *queer* is to question and dismantle the potentially violent construction of identity categories. This hermeneutical category is particularly suitable for an analysis of human-animal relationships[3] and the queer purpose of deconstructing what is socially construed as "normal" in this binary opposition – which has such deep connections with the construction of both human and animal identities – reflects the object of the new interdisciplinary fields of Human-Animal Studies and Critical Animal Studies, as spelled out in Margo DeMello's introduction:

> We try to make visible what was once invisible or what is so taken for granted that we never even consider it (DeMello 2012: pos. 631).

In this article I will focus on American filmmaker Wes Anderson's most recent movie, *Isle of Dogs* (2018), whose story questions the animal-machine relationship. In a dystopian future, in the Japanese city of Megasaki, a plague of dog-flu and similar diseases becomes widespread among the dog population of the city. Consequently, the political leader of the city, Mayor Kobayashi, decides to confine all dogs from the city deporting

[1]   This definition of queer is articulated in considerable depth by Dell'Aversano: "According to this vision, the most basic, and at the same the most abstract, idea in queer studies is the deontologization of categories, first of all of the categories towards which a given culture makes it compulsory to position oneself, those which define social identity. Performativity, which is arguably the most widely applied concept in queer theory, is, from the logical viewpoint, nothing but a consequence of this questioning and deconstruction of categories: unless social categories are deontologized, they cannot be revealed as nothing more than the outcome of the iteration of performances" (2018: 38).

[2]   In Dell'Aversano (2010: 89), the author refers to Foucault M., 1975, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la prison*, Gallimard, Paris: "As Foucault points out (Foucault 1975), systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent. This process of production is in no way neutral: it has legitimating and exclusionary aims, but most of all its end is to make these aims impossible to acknowledge by anyone residing and thinking within the system. In order to be unfailingly effective, both legitimation and exclusion have to be naturalized and to become inaccessible not so much to criticism as to simple recognition".

[3]   For a systematic analysis of the "natural" divide between humans and animals see Dell'Aversano (2010).

them to an abandoned island, the so-called Trash Island. After a few months, however, Kobayashi's young nephew Atari sets off with a small plane and lands on Trash Island to find his dog Spots, the first dog ever to be deported. There, Atari will be helped by a group of dogs, while scientists in the city try to find a cure and dog robots are created in order to replace the absent, sick dogs.

Questioning the animal-machine relationship means to focus on two categories through which, *via* a binary opposition, humankind has defined its identity. Interestingly, during his studies in what later became known as Conversation Analysis,[4] Harvey Sacks first introduced several concepts of a new methodology, later known as Membership Categorization Analysis, very close to queer studies from the '90 such as Butler and Sedgwick.[5] Some of his unpublished research is now available thanks to Gail Jefferson's editorial work, in the two-volume work *Lectures on Conversation*.[6]

From these two volumes we learn that societies use categories to classify individuals and to endow them with identities. In the *Lectures* Sacks explains "how categories are used not only to classify members of a society but also – indeed, chiefly – to order and generate information about them"

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[4]   Conversation Analysis is a subfield of sociology, which was developed by Harvey Sacks during his collaboration with Harold Garfinkel. As we read in Dell'Aversano (2018: 37): "Harvey Sacks (1935-1975) is remembered as the founder of conversation analysis; however, his most important published work, *Lectures on Conversation* (the transcription of all his surviving lectures, spanning the years from 1964 to 1972), contains a wealth of insights which transcend the disciplinary boundaries of linguistics, no matter how applied, and find their meaning in an attempt to rebuild, on a rigorously empiric foundation, Sacks's home field of sociology".

[5]   Sacks does start from the same basic assumption of queer theory (that identity categories are socially constructed, and that therefore they–and the very process of their construction–can, and should, be deconstructed), but he develops this assumption into a systematic methodology; this has no parallel in queer theory; as a consequence, Sacks's work is not merely parallel to queer theory, it can actually endow queer theory with tools and concepts which it lacks at present, and which could prove extremely useful. As we read in Dell'Aversano (2018: 45): "If we are willing to put this idea to the test, we cannot help noticing that the birth of queer theory, in this most abstract, but for this very reason most productive sense, predates by far both Butler and Kosofsky Sedgwick's synchronous work and De Lauretis's fortunate terminological creativity, but must instead be located in the years between 1964 and 1972, when Harvey Sacks, as he was establishing conversation analysis, devoted a big part of his analytical acumen and theoretical brilliance to the study of the social use of linguistic categorizations, and to analyzing ordinariness not as a trait but as an activity, as the result of 'work'".

[6]   The *Lectures* only collect a small amount of Sacks's unpublished research and many documents have not yet been edited. As underlined in Dell'Aversano (2018: 48): "In the Department of Special Collections of the UCLA library there are 144 boxes of 'notes, drafts, diaries, unpublished lectures, tapes, lectures, and miscellaneous materials related to the life and work of Harvey Sacks'".

(Dell'Aversano 2018: 52):

> It seems that there is a class of category sets. By 'category sets' I mean just that: A set which is made up of a group of categories. There are more than one set, each of which can be named, and they have common properties. And that is what I mean by referring to them as a 'class'.
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> A first thing we can say about this class of category sets is that its sets are 'which'-type sets. By that I mean that whatever number of categories a set contains, and without regard to the addition or subtraction of categories for that set, each set's categories classify a population. Now, I haven't made up these categories, they're Members' categories. The names of the sets would be things like sex, age, race, religion, perhaps occupation. And in each set are categories which can classify any member of the population. [...]
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> A second thing we can say about this class of category sets is that its categories are what we can call 'inference rich'. By that I mean, a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored in terms of these categories. And by 'stored in terms of' I mean that much knowledge has some category term from this class as its subject. [...]
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> A third feature is that any member of any category is presumptively a representative of that category for the purpose of use of whatever knowledge is stored by reference to that category (Sacks 1992: I, 40-41)

This use of social categories has a tremendous cognitive impact on individuals: people are forced to perform a range of socially understandable actions. If they follow such rule, everything that they do will be socially understandable and, therefore, socially real. A fundamental point Sacks makes is that there are activities assigned to every category which are "bound" to the category itself and which must be performed by the individuals in order to belong to that category. These 'category-bound activities' (CBA) are an important connection between Sack's theory and the queer concept of performance (used both by Butler and Sedgwick[7]).

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[7]   Butler (1990) starts from, among the others, a crucial question: "Does being female constitute a "natural fact" or a cultural performance, or is "naturalness" constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?" (1990; 2006: xxxi). And the aim of her work is to give a revolutionary answer to it: "The notion of a 'project', however, suggests the originating force of a radical will, and because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term *strategy* better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. [...]In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated.* This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a

> Let's introduce a term, which I'm going to call 'category-bound activities'. What I mean by that is, there are a great many activities which Members take it are done by some particular category of persons, or several categories of persons [...] (Sacks 1992: I, 241)

Individuals who do not perform the activities which are "bound" to their categories are classified as non-members of those categories and marginalised into 'boundary categories'.[8] But another development of Sack's concept of category-bound activities appears to have a massive relevance:

> [T]he term 'baby', it's part of a set of what I'll call 'positioned categories': 'baby' ... 'adolescent' ... 'adult'. The dots mean that there are other categories in there, in various places. By 'positioned' I mean such a matter as, that 'B' could be said to be higher than 'A', and if 'B' is lower than 'C' then 'A' is lower than 'C', etc. [...].If there is an activity 'bound' to some category of the positioned collection, then one thing that we may find about it is that if a person is a member of another such category and does that action which is bound to this category, then he can

set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. [...] There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame—an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject" (2006: 190-191).

Sedgwick (1990: 3) also refers to the notion of performance: "An assumption underlying the book is that the relations of the closet – the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition – have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally. It has felt throughout this work as though the density of their social meaning lends any speech act concerning these issues – and the outlines of that 'concern', it turns out, are broad indeed – the exaggerated propulsiveness of wearing flippers in a swimming pool: the force of various rhetorical effects has seemed uniquely difficult to calibrate. But the vicinity of the closet, even what *counts* as a speech act is problematised on a perfectly routine basis. As Foucault says: 'there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determinate the different ways of not saying such things... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses'. 'Closetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularly by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it".

[8] The importance of boundary categories in defining a "member" is underlined by Dell'Aversano (2018: 62-63): "Sacks's analysis focuses on the categories which are used to classify those which the technical vocabulary of conversation analysis today still defines (using a term derived from Garfinkel, and ultimately from Parsons) "members", that is, members of a society. Among these categories, the most important one is "member" itself, which designates full-fledged members of a social group one of the most important rules of its functioning, which can be inferred by linking various statements in the Lectures, is that the category "member" is defined by its opposition to a number of "boundary categories" (Sacks 1992: I, 71), whose function is to limit and question the right of some individuals or groups to be considered full members of society".

be said to be 'acting like an X', that X being whatever category the activity is bound to. And when "You're acting like an X" or things to that effect are said, that turns out to be one of two sorts of actions. If the activity is bound to a category lower than the one the person is in, then the statement is a 'degradation'. If the activity is bound to a higher category than he is in, then the statement is 'praise'. So that, say, in the case of an 'adolescent' found to be crying, they can be said to be 'acting like a baby' and that statement will be seen as a 'degrading' remark. (SACKS 1992: I, 586)

Sacks says that categories are 'positioned', organised into hierarchies: beside the fact that in order for "membership" to be meaningful and perceptible, there must be necessarily someone who is a non-member, there are members of certain categories 'who own reality' and who decide if and how someone is not a member and is therefore marginalised into a boundary category.

   Sacks's model shows how humankind has constructed its own identity over time, always assuming a privileged position in defining itself through a positioned relation to other categories, such as animals and machines among others (for instance humanity v divine, humanity v supernatural, humanity v monsters…), that could be considered non-human according to a non-performance of the CBAs which define humanity. As a pragmatic consequence, language reflects this privileged, exclusive status of categories "who own reality", especially in the relationship (of some sort of superiority) with animals. Since "animals are defined through human linguistic categories – pet, livestock, and working animal – and those categories themselves are related to how the animal is used by humans", language itself reveals the oppressive power of human categories: "the artificial boundary between 'us' and 'them' is certainly part of what allows humans to use other animals for human benefit" (DEMELLO 2012: pos. 606).

   From Aristotles onwards humans have constructed their identity in opposition to animals, since they were considered non-rational beings,[9] and

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[9]   We read in Aristotle's *Politics* (Eng. tr. 1944: Vol. 21: Pol. 7 1334b): "This therefore at all events is clear in the first place, in the case of men as of other creatures, that their engendering starts from a beginning, and that the end starts from a certain beginning that is another end, and that reason and intelligence are for us the end of our natural development, so that it is with a view to these ends that our engendering and the training of our habits must be regulated". And in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*: (ARISTOTLE Eng. tr. 1981: Vol. 20: *Eud. Eth.* 2 1224a): "Similarly also in the case of living things and of animals, we see many being acted on by force, and also acting under force when something moves them from outside, contrary to the impulse within the thing

in opposition to machines, because they were considered unable to feel emotions according to exactly the same cliché that science fiction literature and cinema has been challenging.[10] But how do animals and machines, that are consequently considered boundary categories, relate to each other? Are they really, always different and even opposite categories in relation to each other and to the category of 'humans'? These radical distinctions in *Isle of Dogs* become a relevant problem, thanks to interesting technical and narrative solutions proposed in the narrative: they can be considered queer solutions since they question identity boundaries and widen identity possibilities.

A queer analysis of *Isle of Dogs* can help us understand how important it is to denaturalise and deconstruct how humans, in order to define their identity, impose socially shared boundaries separating themselves from other categories and exacting a systematic performance of the CBA from the boundary categories. This is a presumption which can lead to dramatic consequences and behaviours, like the ones we see in the movie, and like the ones we can easily observe in our ordinary lives. Moreover, it helps us understand how the solutions proposed in the movie can become destabilising for potentially violent binary systems of categorisation and of thought, similar to those represented in the film.

This paper starts with a reflection on the stop-motion technique and on the ways in which it has been used in *Isle of Dogs* to create speaking animal characters with the use of puppets, machines and digital effects. It examines how machines in the movie can be used to save the dogs' lives and how they can become a real threat to the dogs and the ambiguous presence of animal-machine hybrids. The paper closes with a discussion on how the dogs relate to an identity constructed and ascribed to them by human society.

itself. In inanimate things the moving principle is simple, but in living things it is multiple, for appetition and rational principle are not always in harmony. Hence whereas in the case of the other animals the factor of force is simple, as it is in the case of inanimate objects, for animals do not possess rational principle and appetition in opposition to it, but live by their appetition, in man both forms of force are present - that is, at a certain age, the age to which we attribute action in the proper sense; for we do not speak of a child as acting, any more than a wild animal, but only a person who has attained to acting by rational calculation".

[10]   In the contemporary golden age of technology and innovation, major public worries regard the dangers of artificial intelligence and artificial consciousness. From *2001: A Space Odissey* to more recent examples like *Ex Machina*, the question of the development of consciousness has been explored in great depth in cinema.

2. The queer stop-motion animation in *Isle of Dogs*

Even if it sounds quite obvious, we necessarily have to remember that movies are made by humans, and that this implies that the human system of logic, emotions and values are used to tell stories, even or, better, especially when the protagonists are boundary categories. In particular, the stop-motion technique can be considered a practical way to create a link, a connection with the boundary category of animals, an operation that troubles the radical human-animal-machine distinction.

Stop-motion is a technique which traditionally involves the use of puppets, and which is now augmented by the use of digital effects to better model the characters in the movies.

> Stop-motion animation 'is in the hands of the people'.[11] I say this as a pun. As a craft, the act of animating in stop-motion requires a person to literally place a puppet in their hands and bring it to life, frame by frame. The other meaning is that in the past few years, the art of stop-motion has experienced a renaissance that has not only brought it more prominently into the big film studios, but also brought it into the hands of regular people worldwide (Priebe 2011: xvii).

It is a technique which has been used since the beginning of the XX century. Among the first experimental animation shorts that were made in front of the camera, worthy of mention are *The Automatic Moving Company* (1912) directed by Romeo Bosetti and *Bewitched Matches* (1913) directed by Émile Cohl.[12] The first feature-length film was shot by the Russian filmmaker Ladislas Starewitch between 1929 and 1930, *Le roman du renard*, a French version of the XI century tales of Reynard the Fox, an anthropomorphic fox famous for its cruel trickery.

It is interesting to notice how in its history stop-motion animation has often been used to represent animals, monsters (as in *King Kong*, 1933 and *Mad Monster Party*, 1967), imaginary worlds (as in *Alice in Wonderland* 1949, *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm* 1963), all topics and characters which are normally not – to continue with the pun – in the hands of the people. Unfortunately, stop-motion up until the '90s did not reach great commercial results and this was the reason why many artists often abandoned their projects. However, a change came with the success

[11] The emphasis is mine.
[12] This was actually filmed as a stop-motion sequence for a live-action short.

of *Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993):

> This was the first time a stop-motion feature was produced with a high-level budget and a wide range of experienced talent in the medium. Disney was back on top, animation was cool again, and stop-motion had been riding the wave of its first major golden age in all of its facets: clay, puppets, and creature effects. *Nightmare* combined nearly every puppet and filmmaking technique that had ever been used for stop-motion, including front/rear projection, double exposure effects, casting in foam latex, ball-and-socket armatures, replacement animation, and strong character performance. The production design was incredibly strong, and another unique feature was the extensive use of modern motion control to make the camera a moving part of the story (Priebe 2011: xvii).

What is really "in the hands of the people"? Since we have been taught to accept opposite categories like humans-animals, they have become objects of our perception. Although biologically speaking between humans and animals there is not any substantial distinction, we have been taught to *see* them as two different categories. Therefore, if a range of CBAs (in the most general sense) is considered to be "naturally" constitutive of a given category, in the context of film production it is possible to take a subject of a category and endow it with CBAs from another category. This procedure appears to be a fundamental feature of stop-motion (and CGI as well): it is intrinsically queer since, thanks to the use of machines and sophisticated technologies (motion capture and performance capture), it can endow non-human subjects with human CBAs.

The point is that it can do so in the most perceptually realistic way, which leads viewers to 'perceive' the subversion of the categories which shape their own perception of reality 'as unquestionably real'. The realistic creation of animal characters performing human-like CBAs, far from being just an aesthetic choice, entails to question the "natural" distinction of the two categories and has ontological implications. The more realistic the visual[13] representation is, the more the object of our perception is considered as being real, according to the principle that "what makes the power of figuration 'magic' are its ontological effects, its ability to *make*

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[13]   I willingly consider only the visual representation, though I am aware that in movies sounds are also involved. The creation of sounds in movies is a complex process that often involves mixing an unbelievable range of different sounds. For instance, to create the sound of the stormtroopers' spaceships in *Star Wars*, a considerable variety of sounds was combined, from an elephant's trumpeting to the sound of tyres on tarmac.

something real" (Dell'Aversano 2008: 339).

The totalitarian hegemony of mimetic realism over the artistic traditions of our culture has been so lasting and so powerful that its representational conventions have come to permeate our very sense of reality: *ontologically*, mimetic realism tells us that whatever exists is constrained by a set of absolute laws; but *representationally*, it tells us that whatever is represented according to its rules and canons (whose purpose is to allow for the visual portrayal of the action of those laws) really exists. In mimetic realism, lifelikeness is not simply an aesthetic ideal but becomes the ultimate ontological criterion: whatever is represented according to the conventions of mimetic realism is real. Seeing is believing. (Dell'Aversano 2008: 332)

Thus, machines become a useful tool to re-create different characters with specific personalities, individual ways of moving, expressing themselves, thinking and feeling emotions, in other words, a tool to shape new identities. Let us read some behind-the-scenes comments, from which the semantic fields of "creation" and "performance" emerge (I have put all the relevant words in italics):

> "When you're working with puppets like these dogs, it takes a lot of experience to know how to *bring a face to life*" (Wes Anderson, Director)

> "We try to get *performances* out of lots of metal, rubber and silicon. *They are inanimate objects but we have to bring life to them* [...] We got an amazing cast on this production. The animation comes out of that, *you get their personality coming out*, the style of the dog. [...]We basically had a database of dog actions, so the animator could have *something to base their animation on*. [...] He [Wes Aderson] would suggest ideas for *movements, or gestures or an emotional state that the characters would need to be doing within their performance*, and that's where the animatic and the life all come together like a little map for where the animator need to go" (Mark Waring, Animation Director)

> "I'm like I'm *sculpting the perfomance*. It's what kids do when they're playing. " (Jason Stalman, Lead Animator)[14]

Isle of Dogs is not Wes Anderson's first work to use stop-motion technique: he used it in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), adapted from Roal Dahl's book for children, to create a world of animals with different personalities, different

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[14]   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELKPnT_UJuU

ways of thinking and behaving. However, the aesthetic result of the previous movie is perfected in *Isle of Dogs*. From the crew's statements, and from behind-the-scenes footage, we learn that, in order to create human and animal characters, they used video recordings which suggested movements and facial expressions, a number of puppets of different sizes which were moved to perform specific actions, emotions and, last but not least, computer graphic to combine all these elements together. But what model was used for shaping animal expressions? It is easy to verify that the final result comes from a human perspective, from human performances, from human interpretations of feelings which are literally projected onto the animal characters, that therefore behave as real-life dogs but perform human CBAs. The end result is an animal character with its own CBAs which performs a human-like set of CBAs.

Therefore, not only is the performance of animal characters created by human animators (since, as spelled out at the outset of the paragraph, movies are made by humans) but its model and starting point are human expressions and CBAs. Nevertheless, in the process of creation of these animal characters, an interesting choice is made in *Isle of Dogs* and it deals with a CBA that is considered to distinguish, from Aristotle's *Politics* onwards, humankind from animals: the use of language.

> For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state (Aristotle; Eng. tr. 1944: Vol 21: *Pol.* 1.1253a).

There are countless examples of animation films (from Disney to Dreamworks, to Pixar productions, just to mention the major production companies) where animal characters speak our language and where they are perfectly understandable by human characters in the movie or, at least, by the public. But what happens in *Isle of Dogs* is that only the dogs speak English, while the majority of human characters speak only Japanese.

Therefore its spectators – except for Japanese ones[15] – are literally forced to assume the dogs' perspective as well as to accept the existence of an animal sensibility and rationality and to sympathise with their inevitable difficulty to communicate with humans. What happens is that the identities of those misunderstood animal individuals who normally are not even considered as subjects of a culture, become perceptible and intelligible. The "natural" cognitive perspective we usually assume is turned upside-down and we are forced to empathise with the animal characters and their struggle in communicating with humans. This is why we can understand Duke's (one of the dogs) perplexity in front of Atari's speech ("I wish somebody spoke his language!", 28:46) and King's (another dog) comment a few seconds later "Well, I understood that, sit down!"

Therefore, even if humans are the actual creators of stop-motion animal characters and their expressions and CBAs are the starting point of the creative process, the creation of animal characters, whose personalities become intelligible to us thanks to the use of machines and digital technologies, allows the spectators to perceive the dogs' performances as Members. Thanks to its formal and technical features, the art of stop-motion (and CGI as well) generates a radical and subversive cognitive effect: a realistic

[15]   Unfortunately, I have not found any Wes Anderson's comment about the movie being shown in Japan yet, but some Japanese viewers were a little upset about the different use of English and Japanese. In an article published by Nippon.com we read: "There has been criticism that the simple words of Japanese characters compared with the complex English conversation of the dogs leads to stereotyping". An interesting comparison between three viewers' receptions has been proposed by Emily Yoshida in her article published by Vulture "What It's Like to Watch Isle of Dogs As a Japanese Speaker".

representation of CBAs of a certain category performed by another category allows us to experience as full members individuals who are normally members of boundary categories.

This experience of the 'other-ness', of members of boundary categories as full members has great political and gnoseological relevance. Since, as happens during the act of watching movies, we are pushed, with or without our intention, to sympathise with the protagonists, who in this case are animals. We are forced to hear their voice and to feel the same sense of frustration and sadness in front of events in which the dogs are victims, a sensation that is far from what we normally experience. From what we have learned in our social life, if we see a large group of individuals speaking, feeling emotions, elaborating complex thoughts, relating to each other, sharing common values and ethics and getting organised as a community, we are led to believe that we are effectively in front of a society. What stop-motion allows is the possibility of hearing the voice of one of the quintessential others: the voice of animals. Bronisław Malinowski in his research on the populations of the Trobriand Islands, that he studied during the '20s, refers to the concept of "phatic community" to describe the use of language which aims to create a union between individuals. His reflection, of course, comes from the direct observation[16] of human primitive cultures, but it can in some way be applied to the opposition between humans and animals, because it deals with the issue of language. As also Joseph Marie de Gérando (1800: 13) pointed out before Malinowski:

> The first way to get to know the Savages is to become like one of them; and it is by learning their language that we will become their fellow citizens.[17]

Language has a major role in creating a contact between two different social realities, between two different categories. Communication means first of all contact, communion and possible mutual understanding. *Isle of Dogs* tries to move forward the distinction of these categories by filling the silence that separates them.

[…] speech is the intimate correlate of this tendency [being together in a social

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[16]   He precisely uses the term of "participant observation", a method that he popularised globally and that radically changed the history of anthropology.
[17]   The English translation is mine.

group, *n.d.A.*], for, to a natural man, another man's [or animal, *n.d.A*] silence is not a reassuring factor […]. The breaking of silence, the communion of words is the first act to establish links of fellowship […] (Malinowski 1923: 314).

Since "Speech is the necessary means of communion; it is the one indispensable instrument for creating the ties of the moment without which unified social action is impossible" (Malinowski 1923: 310), machines and technology used in stop-motion can be used to create the common field of understanding between human spectators and animal characters which would be probably too hard to achieve outside fictional reality. Far from being just a cathartic moment, the audience is led to start thinking that, even if with great differences, animals are people who live in societies and that they are easily misunderstood by human societies and individuals.

Of course, it should not be strictly necessary to resort to stop-motion or CGI to understand that, but usually people do not even consider the fact that animals are proper individuals with a personal construction of reality. It just does not fit with the general human construction of reality if the supposed superiority of humans is taken for granted by those – as it happened to be – 'who own reality'. As we have said above, the stop-motion allows to experience as full members individuals who are normally members of boundary categories: at least, stop-motion allows this message to be seen, spread globally and hopefully understood once for all.

However, what differs from Malinowski's speakers is that in a movie spectators cannot have a conversation with the characters and therefore they are perfectly able to accept the existence of other non-human individuals outside fiction or to relegate it to the fictional dimension. As always, the ontological and cognitive shift is in the hands of the (human) people. This is what has led Frans De Waal to ask himself and his readers "are we smart enough to know how smart animals are?", which leads to another complementary question: are we ready to accept different intelligences?

> Every species deals flexibly with the environment and develops solutions to the problems it poses. Each one does it differently. We had better use the plural to refer to their capacities, therefore, and speak of intelligenc*es* and cognition*s* (De Waal 2016: 12).

Nevertheless, the acceptance of other intelligences, other identities, other individuals deals with an important issue that we will discuss below: how

do we accept those identities? How can we behave in non fictional realities, where stop-motion or CGI are absent? How do we relate with them? How many times do we find ourselves speaking to our animals, waiting for some sort of feedback which we interpret as an answer? Even if our attempts fail, I believe that moving beyond speciesism and thinking that animals have their own way to relate to and to construe their subjective world as individuals are already a "giant leap for mankind".[18]

3. Do machines protect or harm animals?

We have seen that from a technical point of view, stop-motion can be seen as a way to transcend identity borders and the distinction between two categories, since the two *boundary categories* from which humans define their identity are put in a strict relationship together: machines become a necessary tool for human animators to create animal characters, in order to let something unreal become real (namely dogs speaking fluently our language), to let subjects of another category become full members. In simple words, human artists use machines to mould animal characters and it is a practice, as we have already seen above, that preserves the status of humans as members of a positioned category: human animators create their animal characters and human CBAs (in the most general sense) are the starting point. However, this operation has the effect of making the existence of a variety of animal identities and personalities perceivable. In giving (albeit fictional) room to animal subjects for being real, a connection between the two categories – humans and animals – is created thanks to the great potential of technologies and modern machines used in film productions.

After these reflections about the queer implications of the use of stop-motion in creating animal characters, I would like to move to a reflection on some narrative contents of *Isle of Dogs* which questions not only the relationship between the humans-animals categories but also between

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[18]   I have chosen to quote the famous words that Neil Armstrong ("This is a small step for a man, but a giant leap for mankind") pronounced during his landing on the moon because I believe that it might be a powerful and metaphoric image for the topic I am trying to analyse. Moving across boundaries of speciesism and considering animals as people just like we are – an operation made easier by techniques like stop-motion and CGI – should not be a great effort, like a small step, since there are no biological differences between us and them; but socially speaking, these ontological afterthoughts about our and their identities can be seen as the first steps on a new, far away planet (the planet of the boundary category of animals). Walking on another category-planet represents gnoseonogically a great success that might lead to the consideration of the possible existence of other similar planets, similarly accessible and partially understandable.
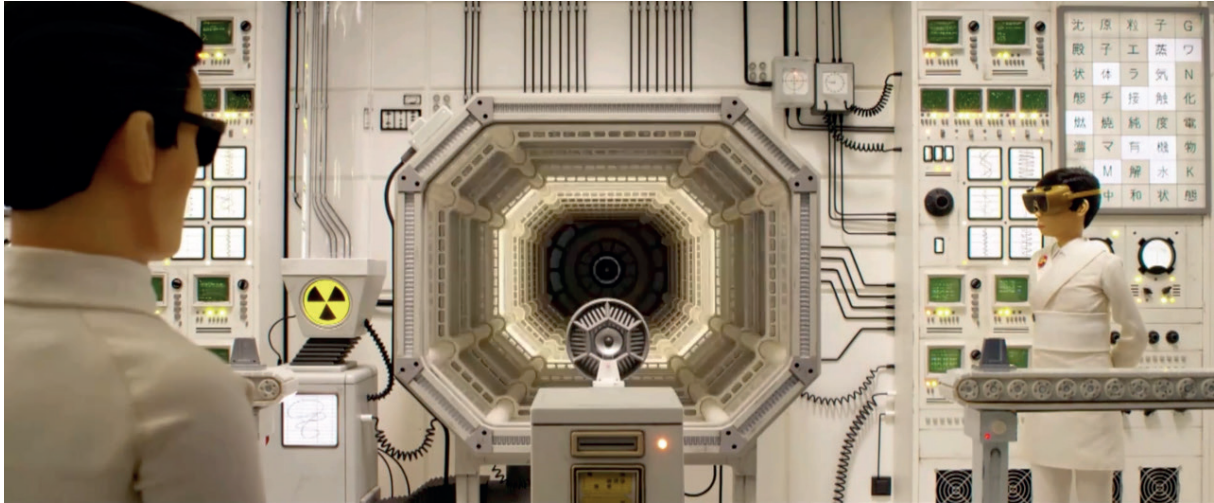
the boundary categories animals-machines. The movie seems to reflect not only on the problematic use of machines towards animals, but also on the ontological and political implications of the uncertain placement of category boundaries.

Isle of Dogs, by proposing in its story different situations in which machines can be exploited as harmful tools against animal characters or as helpful objects to assist animal characters, suggests a reflection on how the humans we see in the movie can use machines and technology in their relationship with animals. Not only two opposite human approaches – using machines against or for the good of animals –, which will be spelled out in detail below, but also ambiguous, queer cases of identitarian possibilities are offered, as we will see later on, to the extent that the question "do machines protect or harm animals?" becomes not so easy to answer.[19]

In the film there are scientists who use machines and technology to find a cure for the canine diseases and this is particularly striking when they test the healing solution (20:29-21:28): a beautiful and innovative range of high-tech machinery is used in order to save the dogs from the exile and confinement to which they are condemned. At the end of the movie

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[19]   This question is also similar to the one that stays behind sci-fi literature and cinema: are machines dangerous for humankind? Are machines good or evil? Do machines have their own identity? Many books and movies question these topics more and more, especially in the context of a global development in the field of robotics and artificial intelligence and we have learned that the answer might not always be that simple. In *Isle of Dogs* the same issue is discussed to some extent, but taking into consideration the relationship between machines and animals. The sci-fi pattern of the dystopian future where robots are built by an evil government, which can use them as dangerous weapons, is here adapted to a different range of characters, namely not human but animal.
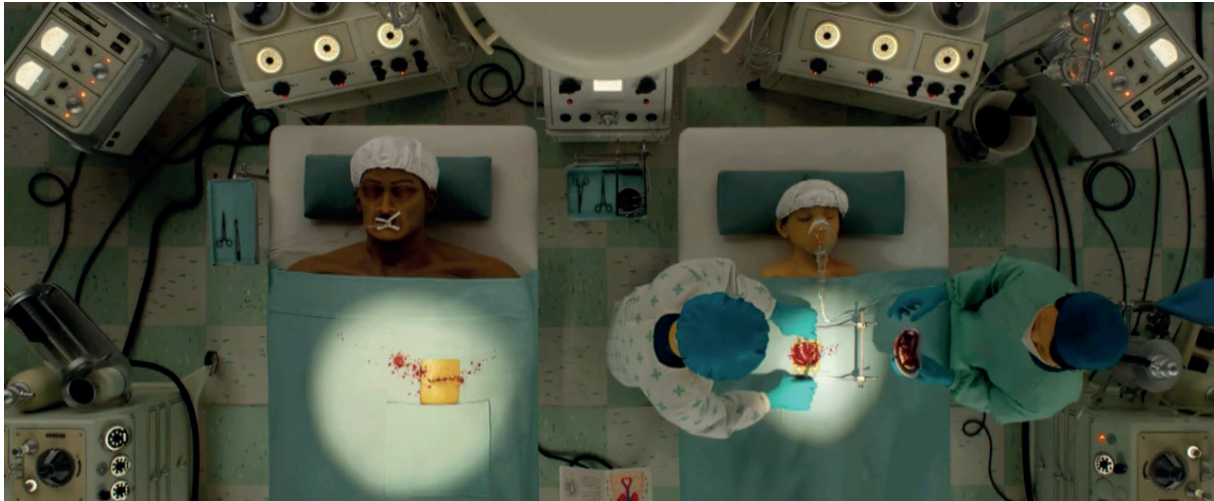
(01:26:42) we also see that surgery machines are used to perform surgery on both Mayor Kobayashi and Atari and on Spots and that the operations save the protagonists' lives. In addition, even if he remains a silent character, there is also the figure of the hacker student who manages to get into the military task force and who uses his knowledge in computer science to sabotage the massive elimination of dog prisoners (01:25:69). In this case technological knowledge is used for a good purpose, to save the animals even if it seems too late. However, the movie also shows how these technologies were actually used to create the same canine diseases (01:10:25) and the evil sides of scientific research are shown: experimentation on animals and a harmful and repressive use of machines against them.

The film shows how true it is that the relationship between humans and animals

> is a relationship of unconditional domain: it is not a relationship, albeit asymmetrical and unbalanced, of power between two subjects but a relationship between a class of subjects and one of objects (Dell'Aversano 2015: 177-178).[20]

The conviction of some sort of human superiority over all of creation, according to the ancient concept of "scala naturae",[21] legitimates men to 'use' animals for purposes that can even damage the inferior boundary category.[22]

[20] The translation from the Italian text is mine.
[21] "The medieval notion of the great chain of being [...] borrowed from Aristotle, in which God created all of life according to a hierarchy of higher and lower beings – with man just beneath God, and animals below humanity" (DeMello 2012.: pos. 1061).
[22] "St. Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth-century theologian who maintained that world is divided into persons who have reason and thus immortal souls, and nonpersons that are essentially things

> Biological differences are not – are never – the point: the point are the discursive and institutional conditions under which some biological differences become social and political differences which are used to establish boundaries, to exclude, to oppress, to maim, torture and murder (Dell'Aversano 2010: 88).

This socially, politically and institutionally constructed superiority of humans justifies brutal scientific experimentation, like the one practiced in the movie on a group of local dogs (44:49, 01:09:50) whose bodies still show the signs of all the sufferings, and the use of machines to attack and harm the dogs who are wrongly considered dangerous. We first see this violent behaviour when the robotic dog (the "military attack pet", 24:51) attacks the group of dogs and Atari and when it fights with Chief (25:15); then the same robots in a larger group are used to attack the same group (59:42); in the end they are set to be used as weapons to destroy all the segregated dogs of the Trash Island (01:19:53).


The point of these two opposites approaches is that the good or harmful use of machines is determined by humans. Their changing attitude reflects the presumption of the positioned category of humans of considering itself able to decide what is good or not, and consequently which animals are good (in the film, cats) or not (dogs), and if dogs must be eliminated or not. By proposing these opposite human behaviours, *Isle of Dogs* describes precisely what happens in non-fiction realities: it reveals how a member can

that can be used in any way to serve the interests of people. Persons are persons because they are rational, and thus have intrinsic value and ought to be respected; animals, being irrational, have only instrumental value and can be used in any way humans see fit" (DeMello 2012.: pos. 1075.

be potentially dangerous to a non-member, how humans usually justify their evil actions towards non-members with a supposed and constructed superiority and can become harmful to those boundary categories who do not perform correctly their identity, according to a member's opinion.[23]

Moreover, the debate suggested around the question "do machines protect or harm animals?" is made more complex by the presence of intermediate beings: animal-machine hybrids. There are animal characters whose body is partly composed of mechanical parts or even animals that use mechanical items in useful ways.
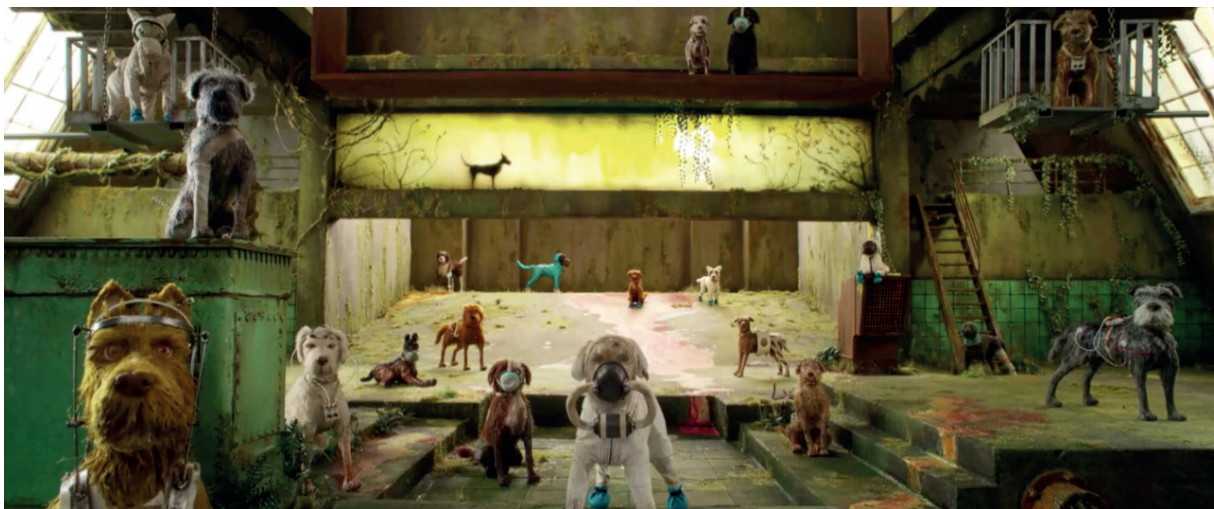
We have already mentioned the case of the canine survivors from scientific experimentations, which still present on their skin the scars of all their sufferings or which still have machinery as functional parts of their body. In addition, there is the character of Spots, Atari's previous pet, who has mechanical teeth that he uses as explosives in case of danger (01:03:51; 01:07:12) – the same item that will be set into Chief's mouth when he becomes Atari's new dog (01:29:35) –, a head-phone to communicate with his young owner (19:42) and at the end an artificial eye (01:31:18). This massive presence of mechanical elements in some of the dogs' anatomies and the use of mechanical items by other dogs lead us to two considerations: when machines become part of animal bodies it becomes more problematic to distinguish both where the animal or the machine ends and what

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[23]   See SACKS 1992: I, 586 quoted above. I would also like to thank Carmen Dell'Aversano for her precious observations about this issue.

exactly, in some cases, the living being that we see is (an animal, a machine or an animal-machine?); the fact that animals can actually use machines for their own purposes endows them with the exclusively human CBA of using machines for something. This is particularly uncanny for humans who consider dogs non-rational beings, since the dogs in the movie demonstrate not only to be perfectly rational beings, but also living beings with a strong will, a great sense of organisation, a sense of justice and deep sensibility. A moving example is the scene in which Spots becomes Atari's protector and pet. He explains in detail what his professional duties are, he starts to use the head-phone to communicate with Atari and he starts to cry when he hears the kind voice of his new young owner ("I can hear

you", 19:54). These specific and particular cases lead us to the question we asked at the outset: where and how do we place the boundary between animals and machines and between the *boundary categories* and humans?

4. Looking for the best performance

The word that we generally use in defining dogs (and other types of animals) shows the human dominant power behind an apparently neutral relationship with these living beings: *pet*, namely an animal that has been domesticated (by humans) and kept (by humans) for (human) pleasure. What should a pet be like? What are its CBAs? The film shows three important qualities that a pet should have among others, according to the superior category of humans: it should be friendly, obedient and healthy. The point is that in *Isle of Dogs* the third CBA appears to be lacking and

this is enough not to consider the dogs as pets anymore.[24] Since they are not performing the CBA of the socially accepted pet to perfection, they are no longer considered as part of human society but are demoted to rubbish, defective objects to be replaced. This is why almost all the citizens refuse to keep their formerly beloved pets when the government asks them to send them to Trash Island. Even if it sounds quite disturbing and deeply upsetting, an episode similar to the one narrated in the movie can be found in our recent history. It is worth mentioning what happened in London, at the beginning of II World War. The British government ordered to Londoners to have all pets euthanised, because they would not be admitted to shelters during bomb attacks. The sad fact that nearly all loving owners complied is proof of how humans can be selfish and hypocrite, not only in fictional representations.[25]

I would like to mention an important notion from Erving Goffman's work *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1990) that might fit with our reflection on queer identities, in which he points out how a stigma can have strong influence on individuals' lives and on their relationship with society. He says that the stigma comes out from a discrepancy between the "virtual social identity", the one we assign to a person from what we know, and the "actual social identity", the one verified in practice:

> This discrepancy, when known about or apparent, spoils his social identity; it has the effect of cutting him [an individual] off from society and from himself so that he stands a discredited person facing an unaccepting world (GOFFMAN 1990: 31).

If we assume that the virtual social identity corresponds to the correct performance of the CBAs which are supposed to be performed by the boundary category of pets, the fact that the social identity given by the actual performance of the CBAs does not correspond to the ideal one has pragmatic effects. The theoretical and ideological distance from what is accepted by human society is translated into a physical distance ("he stands a discredited person facing an unaccepting world"). And this is precisely what happens to the sick dogs, since they are literally deported

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[24]   Mayor Kobayashi, during one of his speeches, underlines with a false version of facts how the dogs are not performing the expected CBAs and how they represent a threat for humans: "My ward Atari has been kidnapped against his will by a pack of disobedient, contagious, infected animals" (21:50).

[25]   This sad historical page is told in a scene from *Glorious 39* by Stephen Poliakoff (2009).

away from the city of Megasaki, to a dump island. Judith Butler, quoting Douglas, observes that "all social systems are vulnerable at their margins and all margins are accordingly considered dangerous" (BUTLER 1990: 180); in *Isle of Dogs* the dogs on Trash Island come to represent a coincidence between spatial and identitarian marginality: the boundary category of dogs, which stays at the margins of full membership, embodied by humans, is relegated to a cultural and social margin, to rubbish, positioned as leftovers thrown 'away', excluded from culture. But it is from this dangerous margin that identity borders are troubled, as we see in the development of the story.

The point is that "Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories" (GOFFMAN 1990: 11). There is a substantial and politically oppressive bad faith behind the (so easily) changing human attitude which deals with the expectations generated by the CBAs of boundary categories. For instance, animals are considered non-rational beings in comparison to humans; also children are considered non-rational in comparison to adults, but generally when a pet does something irrational that disappoints the owner, compared to children, it is likely to be punished with harder measures. There is a radical and deep difference between the behaviours that humans assume towards human categories and the ones they assume towards animal categories: a child can be educated, a sick human can be helped and healed, while it is easier to abandon or to put down a disobedient and/or sick animal. Of course, it is unacceptable (at least, legally) to choose the same extreme solutions with other humans: you cannot abandon a child in the middle of the road just because he/she makes too much noise at night.[26] While humans treat other humans who do not perform the ordinary CBAs (in the most general sense) perfectly as subjects worth to be helped, they treat animals just like objects cool to possess, but that can be thrown away at any moment if owners

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[26]   Someone might rightly argue that humans have actually developed socially accepted solutions to deal with human boundary categories that do not perform correctly their CBAs. I believe that many controversial examples in history of humanity (taken from history of religions, migrations, sexuality, mental illnesses and so on) should be studied with this queer approach to unveil political dangerous aspects and aftermaths. Among the countless similar social situations, let us just think, for instance, about all those old and maybe sick men and women who are relegated in nursing homes and literally forgotten by their families. Are not these places a slightly different example of Trash Islands, where social leftovers are dropped off?

are disappointed in their expectations on them. This implies that the performance expected from animals in general, and from pets in particular, tends to resemble the one expected from machines, because it is conceived just like a mechanical functioning: all the parts should work perfectly. An animal that suffers from a disease that cannot be cured becomes more like an object, a machine that cannot be fixed and should be thrown away or even eliminated.[27] This conviction is particularly evident in *Isle of Dogs* if we consider, for instance, the mascot-role of some of the dogs explained by the dogs themselves (11:27)

> King: I starred in 22 consecutive Doggy-Chop commercials.
> Boss: I was the lead mascot for an undefeated high-school baseball team

and the comparison of the places were they are mascots, where their presence is missing (28:01; 43:31; 01:22:20) and where they return in the end (01:28:02). In these cases, animals are a substantial part of their owners' social identity since they contribute to their owners' commercial image, but, just like the other citizens, they comply with the government's orders without hesitation, since they are not considered to be necessary anymore.

Therefore, the abnormal performance of pets becomes more like an abnormal functioning of a machine which should be replaced with a brand new one that works without problems. What can replace a sick dog? A dog that is healthy enough or, hopefully, healthy forever, namely a robotic

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[27] Mayor Kobayashi speaks clearly about the final solution when he says: "The time has come to put the violent, intimidating, unsanitary bad-dogs of Trash Island humanely to sleep. For their own good; and also ours" (01:18:03).

dog able to perform perfectly all the pet CBAs. And in fact robotic dogs are friendly because they can do tricks (as we see when the robotic dog stops fighting with Chief to perform tricks, when Atari pushes the button of the remote control 27:22), obedient because, since machines normally do exactly what they are supposed to do, they do exactly what humans order them to, and healthy because no disease can ever weaken them.

Since we are following the story from the point of view of the dogs, we have to underline an important ontological consequence of the categorisation. Since, as we saw at the beginning, society uses processes of categorisation to establish what is intelligible and, therefore, real, and since we are following the story from the alternative society of animal individuals, the dogs themselves can decide what is real or not, especially in their relationship with machine dogs. When Chief says "I can't smell him" (23:56, 59:38) referring to the robotic dog he sees in the distance he is implying that that dog does not possess a distinctive feature (CBA) of dogs, the smell, while, when he sees Spots approaching, even though he does not perfectly see him he can smell the air and affirm "That dog is real" (01:00:44). It is extremely interesting how the movie focuses on certain features through which dogs are likely to construe their own vision of animal society. Although a film remains a human cultural product – with the technical, cognitive and ontological implication we have discussed in par. 1 –, *Isle of Dogs* shows that dogs themselves actually have and share a system of socially construed categories to organise identities and visions of the world. It is not so impossible to imagine, especially if we consider, for instance, how easily a dog recognises its master's voice and face. The dialogue between Chief and Rex about the opposition between two categories 'pet' and 'stray' (12:50), that seem to be meaningful even for the dogs, is quite eloquent in this sense:

> CHIEF: You're talking like a bunch of house-broken…pets!
> REX: You don't understand. Uh, how could you? You're a…
> CHIEF: Go ahead, say it. I'm a stray, yeah.

as well as Chief's answer to Nutmeg's question:

> NUTMEG: You're a stray, aren't you?
> CHIEF: Yes, I'm a stray. But aren't we all? In the last analysis, I mean?

Another relevant example, even if apparently secondary, is the discussion about food that the group of dogs starts while walking in their quest for Spot with Atari. An apparently neutral question "What's your favourite food?" (37:57) allows indirectly the dogs to mention both the habits and the social status of their masters. When it is Chief's turn, he just mentions garbage and leftovers, which is plausible for the others that do not reply with enthusiasm. But when Chief says "Of course, I wasn't always a stray", he catches the other dogs' attention. Chief's virtual social identity is not confirmed as it used to be and this makes the other dogs curious about what he 'really' is. It becomes a pattern of the character during the movie, since Chief eventually discovers who he 'really' is.

Another possible opposition of categories seems to be relevant in shaping dogs' identities in the dog-society of the movie*:* 'dogs who bite' and 'dogs who don't'. During the same scene we have just mentioned, Chief, in telling his story and his experience as a pet, remembers when the little boy of the family approached him and that, even if he knew that the boy just wanted to pet him, he bit him badly (40:10):

> CHIEF: What happened? Why did I do that? To this day, I have no idea, I guess he scared me. I bite.

It is the same pattern he repeats other times in the movie (17:16; 51:08) and that appears to be an important CBA in defining his own identity, which he actually questions in the end (01:30:31):

> CHIEF: My friends think that I like to fight but it is just not true. Sometimes I lose my temper and blow off a little steam but I never enjoyed it. I'm not a violent dog. I don't know why I bite.

Chief seems to struggle with the discrepancy between the virtual social identity assigned to him by the other dogs and the actual social identity.

Another example worth mentioning but which is not analysed in detail in the movie is the linguistic ability to recognise an individual's provenience by the accent (01:08:25):

> SPOTS: You're from central Megasaki, I can tell it by the accent.

This is a feature we would more easily associate to humans, but why should dogs not be able to do so as well? It is only an experimental hypothesis, but it is taken into consideration.

Of course, these examples in the movie are just attempts to underline the fact that animals actually have their own construction of reality. The first scholar ever to have thought about this issue was Jakob von Uexküll, a German biologist who

> drew attention to the animal point of view, calling it its *Umwelt*. To illustrate this new concept (German for the "surrounding world"), Uexküll took us on a stroll through various worlds. Each organism senses the environment in its own way, he said. The eyeless tick climbs onto a grass stem to await the smell of butyric acid emanating from mammalian skin. […] Can we understand the tick's *Umwelt*? It seems incredibly impoverished compared to ours, but Uexküll saw its simplicity as a strength: her goal is well defined, and she encounters few distractions. Uexküll reviewed other examples, showing that a single environment offers hundreds of realities peculiar to each species. *Umwelt* is quite different from the notion of ecological niche, which concerns the habitat that an organism needs for survival. Instead, Umwelt stresses an organism's self centered, subjective world, which represents only a small tranche of all available worlds. According to Uexküll, the various tranches are "not comprehended and never discernible" to all the species that construct them. […]
> Humans can try to imagine the Umwelt of the other species. (De Waal 2016: 7-8).

Although it is a concept that has a huge relevance in the development of Ethology and Animal Studies in general, von Uexküll work presents great discrepancies.[28] First, in his attempt to describe the tick's "Umwelt", he does not consider that it is not accessible and not understandable to him if not from the perspective of a human being. In other words, since he is not a tick he cannot be able to fully understand the tick's "Umwelt", and this is particularly evident in De Waal's comment "Humans can try to imagine the Umwelt of the other species". In addition, von Uexküll seems to distinguish humans' "Umwelt" from animals', when actually inside every specific species, each social group of animals of a given spieces is likely to have a specific "Umwelt", different from other social groups of the same species but, for instance, living in a different environment. This clarification is particularly

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[28]   I would like to thank Carmen Dell'Aversano and our independent Queer Seminar for the discussion we had around this specific topic.

evident in *Isle of Dogs*: all the dogs in the movie do not share a common "Umwelt", since there are pets, strays and dogs that were used for scientific experiments; moreover, among domestic dogs, the social environment from which they come from is described and spelled out, and it has – just like in human societies – a huge influence over individuals' construction of reality. We have seen it from the discussion on food: each dog, from his own experience, has learned what is good to eat and what his favourite food is.

These are the reasons why I have spoken about "attempts": in creating animal characters, since filmmakers and animators, as humans, can only try to imagine how their animal characters see the world both as a different species and as individuals, what we see even in an accurate and sympathetic movie like *Isle of Dogs* are just attempts to shape animals' construction of reality. But at least, as humans, it is worth trying to give voice to boundary categories who are so often not even considered subjects and it is worth saying, to mention Chief's comment about helping Atari in his journey, "We won't find the dog, but we will die trying" (34:25).

To move back to the case of hybrids, not only does it disturb the border between what can be considered a machine or a dog, but it also brings forward another final and curious solution: the actual possibility for the robots to fall sick (01:28:36). The fact that in the end there are still robotic dogs which are wandering on Trash Island and present the same symptoms as a sick dog (we see the robotic dog sneezing on a hill, just like a dog we see at the beginning of the film, when the voice over explains the range of symptoms of the sick dogs, 09:10) remains a rumor, but it is a solution which can be disturbing enough for the boundary between living beings

and machines. If a machine performs the dogs' CBA so perfectly that it can even fall sick, who is performing correctly the pet CBA now?

Again, human bad faith has a major responsibility in this situation. It is up to the positioned category of humans to judge if the boundary categories are performing correctly their CBAs and, unfortunately, to decide to have their pets replaced with a new one, a mechanical one (01:18:08), which is likely to be controlled easier and better. It is up to humans since they "own the rules of the game" and because they are convinced to have some sort of superiority that allows them to create a mere relationship of power over their pets. Therefore, according to humans it is perfectly acceptable to possess mechanic animals (namely, an artificial pet able to perform correctly according to the virtual social identity assigned by humans and so fully healthy), but not animal machines (namely, an artificial pet that, in performing so correctly the "being animal", does not respect the same virtual social identity). It does not matter what the pet looks like, but it has to perform correctly 'just' the CBAs that humans 'want' to see performed.

5. Conclusions

What we have discussed so far leads us to consider the fact that the binary distinction, enforced by humans, as "natural" Members, between Members and "boundary categories" reveals not only its weaknesses but also pragmatic violent consequences. Even if we are dealing with a movie and thus with a fictional representation of reality, if we consider the robotic dogs in *Isle of Dogs* a representation of the perfect performance that humans expect from their pets, when one CBA is lacking, like health, that pet is not even considered an animal anymore but just a disposable item, likely

to be replaced with another one. The human habit to compare the actual performance with the ideal one is also verified in the film by their fickle behaviour of re-accepting their pets once they are healthy again. To some extent this ambiguity of behaviours is proposed in the title itself: among all the ways to express the concept of an island populated by dogs, the pronunciation of *Isle of Dogs* suggests both the place where they are cruelly relegated by their owners, and the phrase "I love dogs", which might have been pronounced by the same owners.[29] However, a similar unacceptable way of thinking is much more widespread in the non-fictional world: how many pets are abandoned (and eventually replaced with new ones) or put down by their owners simply because they are sick, old, ugly, in other words, because they do not respect and perform all their CBAs?

Chief's comment "That dog is real" tries to teach us about the animals' capacity to have their own conceptions and constructions of reality and of identity, which humans usually do not even take into account. What usually happens – the crowd of citizens, including the pet's (ex-)owners, that does not hesitate to send the dogs to the Trash Island compared to the small group of 'pro-dogs' rebels is an eloquent example – is that most humans prefer not to take into account that animals are people too, that is, that they each have their own constructions of events just like humans. The point of this selfish choice is that this would necessarily entail acknowledging at least the right of animals to life and freedom, which would end human exploitation of them. Who would ever like to give up the comfort-zone of superiority and exploitation of boundary categories?

However, even the minority of people who really care about animals and consider them as individuals that should always be respected as such has major difficulties in approaching and fully understanding animals' needs. It is very difficult, in fact, for humans to access animal constructions of events, because humans and animals do not share a common language and because the sensory and cognitive abilities of each animal species are a world apart (as we have seen above in the example of the smell, which is vital in animals). Consequently, even when humans honestly try to act in an animal's best interest (such as when loving caregivers of a terminally ill pet consider euthanasia) the animal can never be consulted. Still, I believe

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[29]   I like to think that the title itself contains also a not-so-hidden declaration of love for dogs by the movie crew, but this is just a personal suggestion.

that it is always worth trying and making efforts to sensitise people about this issue and I think academic research in any field (from humanities to scientific studies) has a great responsibility and should never give up.

The inability of the dogs to oppose the identity which has been stuck on them by humans emerges also from Nutmeg's comment about her previous life as a show-dog (30:52-31:04):
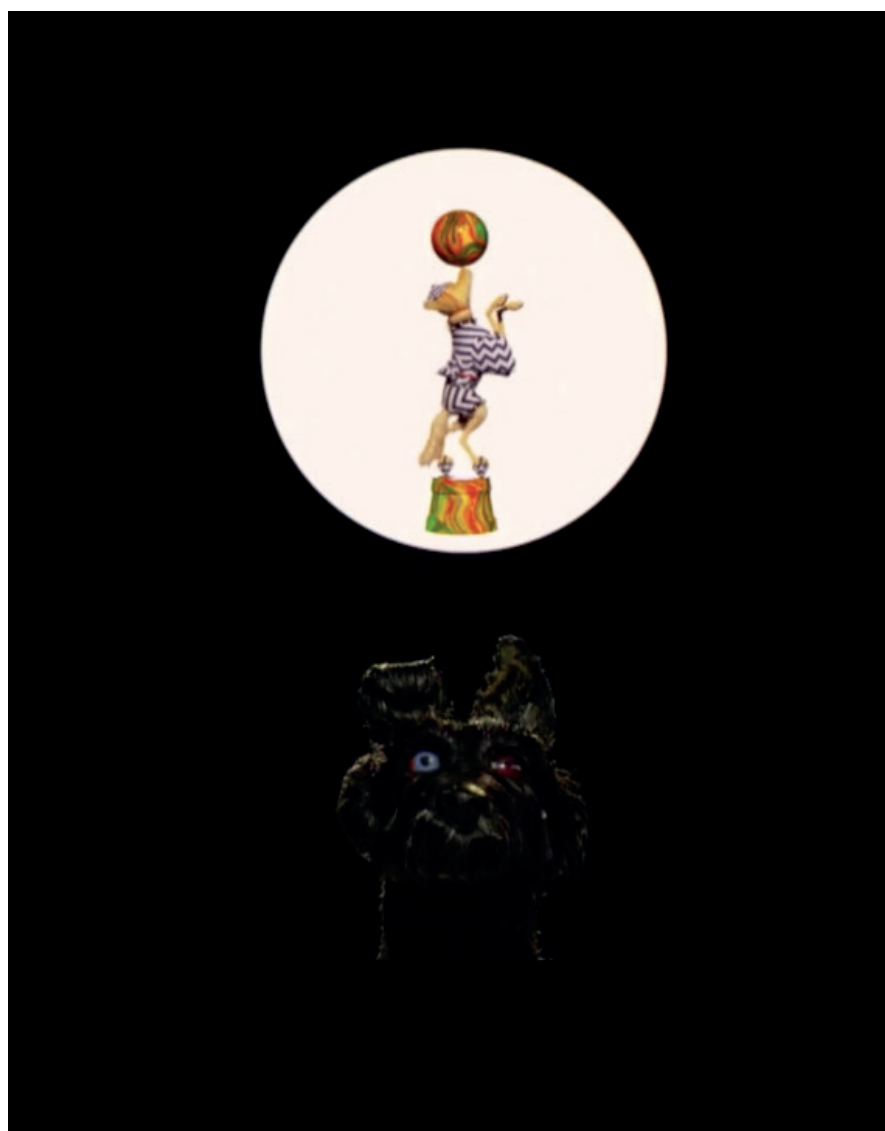
CHIEF: You were a show-dog?
NUTMEG: I was bred as a show-dog, I was groomed for that purpose. It wasn't my choice and I don't consider that my identity. Anyway, look around: what difference does it make now?

It is perfectly consistent that the only characters in the movie who can empathise with the *boundary category* of dogs are the members of another

boundary category, children: Atari and Tracy, the American exange student. Tracy and Atari are the only ones who struggle to do something for their dogs: Atari sets off with the plane and physically wants to change the situation by looking for his Spots, while Tracy, who had her dog (Nutmeg) deported to Trash Island too, investigates passionately about the "conspiracy theory" and guides a pro-dogs protest from the beginning of the movie. It is interesting that there is a substantial difference between the two young protagonists: we can understand Tracy because she is American and mainly speaks English, but we do not understand the Japanese young boy Atari. This is understandable in the fact that he is actually an outsider, the only one to have ever dared to move to the Trash Island and do something, like Rex points out when he says:

> REX: That boy flew here all alone and crash-landed onto this island for one reason, one reason only: to find his dog. To the best of my knowledge, no other master, not one single human master has ever made any effort to do that. They've forgotten all about us.

He is deprived of human language (the one we can understand, at least) just like animals who do not have the possibility of speaking a human/understandable language. I think that he can be seen both as an animalised character[30] and as a symbol of those caregivers who struggle silently (not by speaking and shouting like Tracy, but by acting directly) for animal rights and still remain misunderstood or even not understood at all. At the end of his official speech to the city of Megasaki in which he tries to defend the dogs – which is by the way translated in English by Tracy and not by the official translator that we hear in the rest of the movie –, Atari refers to the delicate question of identity, summing up all the reflections proposed in the film: "To the readers, all 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?" (01:21:55).

In conclusion, *Isle of Dogs* not only proposes technical and narrative

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[30]   It is interesting to see how in the last scenes the animalisation of Atari becomes a relevant topic. In front of all the citizens of Megasaki he says (01:23:12): "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". The process of Atari's sympathy for the dogs comes to a conclusion with a complete identification, which is confirmed even by Mayor Kobayashi (01:23:50): "Not-fair-to-the-boy, not-fair-to-the-dog". In addition, a visual comparison between Atari and the dogs is also made and underlines the corporal dimension: we see an anatomical image of both Chief's inner body, when they officially taste the syrum in front of the crowd (01:20:51), and of Atari's, when he gets vaccinated after the operations.

queer solutions in order to denaturalise the institution of borders between animals, machines, and also humans, but it also invites us to think about the oppressive nature of imposing identity borders and about the violent, harmful consequences of using binary oppositions, of imposing categorisation and of expecting specific performances from living beings each of whom have their own identity and their own ways to see the world.

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