21. UNKNOWABLE DOGS

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> Man: Hello my boy. What is your dog's name?
> Boy: I don't know, but we call him Rover.[1]

In her soundtrack/film/experimental rockumentary *Heart of a Dog* (USA, 2015), Laurie Anderson claims to have loved her dog, but not her mother. To not love one's mother belongs to a special category of actions or states of mind which, if universal, would have serious consequences for our species' self-identity. If the love between offspring and mothers were to disappear, if none of us loved our mothers, would we still be recognizable as human? If the answer to that question is no, is Laurie Anderson, who has acknowledged not loving her mother, human? Or human, but with an asterisk? It has been a consistent and fundamental feature of the defining of the human that the difference between human and animal be carefully articulated. Crocodiles seem not to love their mothers, and for that reason, and others, we don't feel much kinship with them. But what about elephants and dogs? There is strong evidence that an adult dog, even after a long separation, can still recognize its mother by smell, although whether or not that constitutes love in any way recognizable to us is anybody's guess. We aren't very good at recognizing the subtle emotional states of animals – unless they are directed at us. We believe we know when dogs love us, and Laurie Anderson is as certain that her dog loves her as she is that she loves her dog. When people say that their dog is "almost human" or that they "think that they're people," they are referring, it

21.1 Laurie Anderson's *Heart of a Dog* (2015).

seems, to that obscure understanding through which they can love us, and can be loved by us in turn. What makes them people-like, then, is not of course language – the other great measuring device for separating the human from the non-human – but love. Dogs have love but no language, while humans have both. We're able to say with words that we love, or don't love, our mothers, but animals aren't.

Anderson's love for her dog Lolabelle is unconditional. She declares as much in her dream of having had the dog sewn into her stomach, so that she could experience being her biological birth mother. On giving birth to her dog, she consents to a virtual experience of the non-human, while proclaiming what human mothers characteristically do on giving birth: "I'll love you forever." And in this non-human state, she will succeed where her own birth mother is thought to have failed.

All this seems an affront to humanism, which has long proclaimed the self-aware, self-fabricating, features of being human, and has shown an oversized confidence in the process and products of human agency. There is of course a robust tradition of articulating humanism by separating the human from the animal – and then patching it back up by acknowledging our "animal nature." Blessed with reason and language (both of which are "unnatural"), humans are, in a defining sense, not-animal. But our evolutionary heritage and our biological infrastructure, being hard to ignore, are inevitably reintroduced, reluctantly by some, as an obligatory supplement, and we become the human-animal, or the rational, thinking-animal.

Here, the self-awareness so valued by humanism becomes trapped in its

anthropocentric assumptions, and becomes the object of critique from multiple perspectives. The more we learn about animals and fail to articulate what constitutes an essential humanity, and the more we reflect on a developing "human condition," the more the heartfelt traditions and self-regard of humanism just seem to fade away. Much of the current, and vibrant, anti- or post-humanist critique is aimed at the compulsion to impose our self-image on our world wherever possible, through anthropomorphized projections. This is particularly observable with dogs, and it's important to see just how extraordinary Anderson's birth fantasy is in this regard. The most neutral way to see the human-animal interface is abstractly relational, that is, without any preconception of the relative status of the related parts. But we know that this is always an asymmetrical relation; humans are always on top. (Observations that dogs are like people come effortlessly, but can we say as easily that people are like dogs?) Even among those who might proclaim "equal status" among humans and animals, it's inevitably an anthropocentric equality, ordained on humanity's terms.

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Anderson's dog-birth fantasy expunges the traditionally asymmetrical quality of the dog-human relation, leaving open the question of what kind of relation it is. The shock effect of hearing her story at the beginning of the film permeates the film's subsequent segments. In the seventh segment of the rockumentary, "How to Feel Sad Without Being Sad" – a phrase learned from her meditation teacher – Lolabelle, we are told, acquires the skill of empathy. Did Lola learn this skill from humans? Or did it naturally surface from an inherited canine moral infrastructure? Anderson suspends the context for posing this question, for this is not, as she says, about "being." At roughly the halfway point through this "song," a string accompaniment slowly emerges which sounds, according to the emotional tags we habitually attach to non-lyrical music, *sad*.

Considering Anderson's custom of using highly stylized irony in her musical and performance works, it is notable that *Heart of a Dog* is largely without noticeably incongruous music. For a sad theme, use congruously sad-sounding music. But the viewer experiencing this segment is not expected to either become sad or feel sad, but instead is invited to ponder the distinction between being and feeling. Even when emotionally invested while listening to a musical work, it is not the case that one feels one's self as intrinsically identical with that emotion. The events that give rise to the emotions experienced when listening to music, reading novels or watching films are not directly our events; we come as outsiders to the emotions that we experience in such works. Perhaps the distinction between feeling and being has an analogue with the distinction between emotions and moods. Moods, unlike emotions, are diffuse and don't have specific intentional objects, persons, or events, and so, unlike

emotions, don't motivate focused actions as responses. Similarly, empathy, being a second-order, vicarious experience, is not a claim about possessing the experience, but mirroring or mentalizing it. Empathy occurs when one experiences another person's feelings, while also imagining the context and frame of reference which gave shape to those feelings. Strictly speaking, cross-species empathy shouldn't be possible. Sympathy yes, but can humans and dogs really imagine the frames of reference and contexts of the other? It is, as Anderson says, "really hard to do."

This question of whether to *feel* or *to be*, appropriate as it is to ask of the subject, can also be asked of the object. Does the musical accompaniment itself embody "sadness"? Does it import the concept of sadness from Anderson's voice/text as a kind of provisional quality? There is sadness, but where is it located? Whether or not artworks possess the qualities often attributed to them is a point of disagreement between aesthetic realists and anti-realists. The realist will claim that the artwork's qualities inhere in the artwork, while the anti-realist will say that it is an attribution. It seems a lesser commitment for a person to feel sad than to be sad, as if being sad is somehow part of the self's infrastructure while feeling sad is (only) ephemeral. But the reverse seems true of the art object. It may be just a habit of speech, but to say that a musical piece *is* sad sounds uncontroversial and would receive the approval of the aesthetic realist. Or it may be "a function of the auratic, artistic, or commodity residue still clinging to them, a function, in other words of human sensibility, imagination, pragmatic need, greed, etc." (Bennett 2015, 95). Saying that an object, art or not, can *feel* sad, on the other hand, is "a way to think about vitality that is not dependent upon a dichotomy between organic and inorganic matter." This is what Jane Bennett calls "animacy," or "registers of liveliness." (Bennett 2015, 98).

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Heart of a Dog is an indifferent exercise in non-identity filmmaking – indifferent as it doesn't so much actively critique identity thinking as simply ignore it. This merges effectively with the various post- and anti-humanisms, as it seems now certain that any hope of articulating an essential identity of the human – at least insofar as it has been identified by the various strands of humanism – is over. The human desire to master its animal nature through reason and knowledge has turned out about as well as one would expect when one is left in charge of one's own narrative. Humans can pretty much make up anything (. . . who's watching?) provided that it is appropriately sensitive to the requirements of human self-aspiring. It's all, as we say, a construction. "Homo sapiens, then, is neither a clearly defined species, nor a substance; it is rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human" says Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 2004, 26) Agamben identifies an "anthropo-

21.2 Laurie Anderson's *Heart of a Dog* (2015).

logical machine" as the agency which polices the border between animal and human, ensuring that our self-image remains sacred to ourselves. He suggests that we make the anthropological machine "inoperative," that we suspend its operations, through profanity and play. And accordingly, Anderson doesn't so much critique the anthropological machine, as simply carry on as if it doesn't exist. In *Heart of a Dog*, the anthropological machine is switched off, and what at first seem like familiar doggie anthropomorphizations (Lola can paint! Lola can make music!) turns out to be something else entirely. The more Lola is seen as becoming-human, the more the human of the anthropological machine recedes from view.

Anderson remembers being in a hospital as child, recovering from a broken back, where a doctor informed her that she would never walk again. Anderson comments: "And I remember thinking: This guy is crazy. I mean, is he even a doctor? Who knows?" In this expanded world of the inoperative, there are no real doctors, just as there are no real artists and no real humans, no real dogs. Similarly, Anderson relates a memory of Moses, a man who every day, regardless of the weather, could be seen at the top of telephone poles, doing repair work, opening boxes, hammering things. He was thanked warmly by passers-by for his services. Moses, however, did not work for the phone company: ". . . he just lived in another world." This may be the first step in letting go of the illusions of selfhood and identity; perhaps this is the only experience of pure existence that we can grasp. There is the real, of course, readily available to experience, but no concepts that we engineer to understand and represent the real can be themselves real. You can't have both. The more we insist that our

concepts of the real are themselves real, the more the *real* real recedes from view. So perhaps that was indeed a doctor, but not a real one. Just as Lola and Laurie Anderson are indeed artists and musicians, but not real ones.

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If, beyond the operations of the anthropological machine, humans experience a divided relationship with themselves as species-specific, their relationship with animals, dogs included, is of course no less divided. Even the most earnest dog lovers are not particularly good at seeing dogs as ends-in-themselves. They are viewed primarily as ends-for-us – a core of instrumentality wrapped in affection. This is not surprising, as the respective phenomenal worlds of dogs and human are largely unintelligible, one having a nose close to the ground dominated by the sense of smell, the other having risen on hind legs dominated by the sense of sight. Humans, after all, struggle just to comprehend the experience of having a body of their own. As Anderson helps us understand, the *umwelt* of the dog is far too strange for us to understand – and it's likely as close as one gets to the animal as other. Humanity has a very, shall we say, mixed record in grasping otherness, which no doubt explains why Humanism works so hard to domesticate strangeness. It recognizes the importance of managing the mysteries of being a human animal, and to channel those alienating energies into a satisfyingly human telos whose reality may not otherwise survive scrutiny.

If, contrary to the basic tenets of Humanism, there is no Humanity, only individual humans, then the human telos is (if we think that, being human, we still must embody a telos) death. And that is indeed what happens to Lola, Anderson's mother, the sculptor Gordon Matta-Clark, many of the children in the Anderson's wing of the hospital, her husband Lou Reed, and the victims of 9/11. Almost all criss-crossing mini-narratives in the film end up there, including, as we may well surmise, that concerning the massive and life-denying state surveillance in the USA somewhat paratactically described in the rockumentary. I recently crossed the border into Tibet, where a Chinese security agent confiscated my copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and tossed it into the bin of book-death. That is the text, originally called *Bardo Thödol*, which Anderson uses to guide Lola after her death. It is not clear how often *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is used to assist in the after-death experience of an animal, as it was initially designed to help the recently deceased from being reborn as one. With the help of this text, all Tibetans are regularly reminded of death's inevitability.[2] Anderson helps Lola through the bewildering and frightening transformation from death to rebirth, for *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* provides an essential concept of death absent all the qualities of the living that prevent us from seeing what death is.

When entering the *bardo*, or the time/place of the experience that separates

death and rebirth, the recently deceased, who may not yet fully grasp the fact that they are dead, are advised not to be attached to the life that was once theirs, and that the sometimes violent and disturbing visions that they may soon encounter are not real. What is now gone is the body, although not yet consciousness. Bodily dissimilarity is removed from the list of human-animal differences, leaving only consciousness and its human or animal experience of death, and whatever differences between the two may subsist there.

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When we make the anthropological machine inoperative, Agamben says, we release the animal-human relation into the "zone of non-knowledge." "To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean to seek new – more effective or more authentic – articulations, but rather to no longer show the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness . . ." (Agamben 2004, 92). The most compelling gesture of inoperativity in *Heart of a Dog* occurs when Anderson guides Lola through the *bardo*. ". . . the purpose of death is the release of love," Anderson says; love replaces the the anthropological machine; love complements the experience of non-knowledge, giving it shape, enabling the move beyond the aporetic condition of human-animal inertia. This approach can be translated into artistic method. In a study of the poems of Wallace Stevens, Simon Critchley sketches two distinct approaches undertaken by poets: "On the one hand, literature is an act of idealization governed by the desire to assimilate all reality to the ego and to view the former as the latter's projection . . . On the other hand, the second slope of literature does not aim to reduce reality to the imagination, but rather to let things be in their separateness from us"[3] (Critchley 2005, 86). Anderson makes no effort to assimilate the world that she encounters. Instead her heterotopic film/album asks the viewer to risk themselves in the emptiness.

Not all major material elements of *Heart of a Dog* – language, music, image, and voice – contribute to this inoperative emptiness, for Anderson plays both sides of the divide articulated by Critchley. Despite being spoken in the first person, *Heart of a Dog* is both a "language-based" and a "subject-based" work. The difference from a more consistently language-based artist like Gertrude Stein or Samuel Beckett is that she gets there having started initially from a subjectivist place, with the seemingly authoritative "I" of first-person discourse. *Heart of a Dog* starts and ends with Anderson's voice, which pulls image, music, and language into its orbit. But here the voice is a divisible thing, with two capacities. The first is that of a pure sonic instance, emanating from the body and from Anderson's distinctness, which, before it says anything at all, says no more than "I am a person; I have language; I can speak" – pure voice innocent of actual words. And secondly there are the words. The words

say and mean things, but with Anderson's fragmented form, strange hesitations and characteristically odd elocutions. Anderson's speech, full of caesuras or pauses, has something of the enjambment of poetry – when a sentence or phrase in a poem carries over the end of a line. If the pauses with which she irregularly fragments the lines of her text were seen in written form, it might look like this:

> And it's almost
> A perfect moment
> Except
> That the joy is mixed with
> Quite a lot of
> Guilt

or

> To feel sad, without
> Being sad[4]

But it is not the quasi-poetic tendencies in Anderson's reading or text that make her voice – singing or non-singing – the central organizing principle in *Heart of a Dog*. She has what Roland Barthes would call the "grain of the voice" (Barthes 1977). Empty and powerful at the same time, hers is also the paradox of the Voice – it exceeds the person whose voice it is. The voice may remain immanent in the world it encounters, and it may speak directly of and to that world – of the recognizable vagaries of memory and loss, for example – but unlike many works which are based in critique or negation, signification in *Heart of a Dog* is placed in parentheses – human, animal, painting, hawks, the State, and so on. Even seemingly fundamental philosophical-aesthetic principles like "we structure the world by representing it" seem unreliable. Like Moses operating "in a different world," the imperatives of communication as such precede what is communicated. Take away everything that is said and there is still Anderson's voice; her voice is, in a sense, the Image of the spoken text. This is not the "escape from the tyranny of meaning" (Barthes 1977, 185) that Barthes valorizes in his grain of the voice, but the momentary and necessary break that the artwork makes with the world it so much wants to know and describe. The process of putting into parentheses the things said is not negation, but an immersion of the artwork in the sensations of presence and thought that the artist may not be able to advance herself. The artwork can do things and be things that people can't, and is frequently called to tasks difficult or unachievable by the artist or viewer.

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Often the simultaneity of image and voice shows a strong referential link (we hear of hawks, and see hawks), sometimes weak or absent ones (we hear of a dying mother, and see snow landing on a windshield). Some of the images accompanying anecdotes are drawn from family super-8 films, and so might claim a kind of authenticity. Others are re-enacted. There is footage of Gordon Matta-Clarke, and there is also footage of an actor playing Gordon Matta-Clarke; the attentive viewer not already familiar with the real Gordon Matta-Clarke won't know which is which. The majority of images are "processed," that is, significantly modified in post-production. This diversity of form reminds us, as so much visual art does, that images are not concepts, and should not be counted on to do the work of concepts. Somewhat in the spirit of paradox found in René Magritte's *La Trahison des images* (1929), James Elkin writes "Pictures . . . have no words, and therefore do not 'say' anything" (Elkins 1994, 255).[5] In *Heart of a Dog* we are presented primarily with the image as an image, and secondarily with the image as a stand-in for something not present. *Heart of a Dog* – odd for a work familiarly categorized as a "documentary," a "rockumentary," or even an "experimental rockumentary" – uses the image as an "artificial presence," but with the emphasis heavily weighted towards the artificiality rather than the presence.

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What is powerful about *Heart of a Dog* is its essential strangeness. The voice, the image, the music, are simultaneously very artificial and surprisingly intimate, two seeming opposites orbiting each other – yet in it all one can easily recognize a shared world. The representation offered up by image and language seems indifferent to what is thought to be a key responsibility – providing some much-needed clarity about the world while enlightening us about ourselves. But that is the paradox of the artwork; it wishes to speak of the world but it can only do so through misrepresentation.

Maybe then it's the Image and not the Voice which holds *Heart of a Dog* together. It is a somewhat familiar idea, sometimes true, that the artist replaces a concept with an image. The concept is "non-identical" with the thing it conceptualizes; it's never enough, it will always misrepresent or mask what is "really" there. At the same time that they make things intelligible, concepts also estrange us from what they conceptualize. Images are not conceptual; what advantage does that provide?

People, things, events have a plural existence, they both are, and they want to be perceived, experienced. With this dual ontology they become a cloud of virtual self-images, a haze of potentialities which detach themselves from the originary person, thing, or event. The world becomes strange, and artificial, and it is that world which the artist seizes on and wishes to explore. Maurice Blanchot articulates the most extreme version of this approach. When we stare

at something, he says, it has already "sunk into its image . . . and once it has become an image it instantly becomes ungraspable . . ." (Blanchot 1981, 80).[6] The image, then, is not something that "comes after," it is not subordinate to the thing represented, or dependent on that thing for its existence. The image attains independence by virtue of difference, and makes its own distinctive contribution to perception and understanding. "Certainly," continues Blanchot, "we can always recapture the image and make it serve the truth of the world; but then we would be reversing the relationship that characterizes it: in this case, the image becomes the follower of the object . . ." (Blanchot 1981, 80).[7] The task of these sometimes referential, highly processed images is not to become believable, but to make believability inoperative.

Jean-Luc Nancy sees the relation between the image and text (language) concerning neither one nor the other as such, but as manifested in an "oscillation" between the two. They are "heterogenous, yet stuck to one another . . . strangers to each other and because, at the same time, each discerns itself in the other: each one distinguishes a tinge, a vague outline of itself in the ground of the other, deep in its eye or throat" (Nancy 2004, 64). What image and text do not do is respectively illustrate or explain or illuminate one another. Oscillation is firstly a formal procedure, which attempts to describe a process whereby the image provisionally imbibes some of the characteristics of language, while language takes on some of the characteristics of the image, but without essentializing them. The borrowed characteristics, however, are conditional; they don't stick, and we remain uncertain what they achieve. But the primary effect is not expressed in what image and text do to each other, but what their interaction creates. The oscillation is a third thing, neither image nor language, but a relation which takes on a virtual existence.

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There are no translations or paraphrases to be had between language and music, as both originate in incommensurate systems. As Elkins might say, music has no words and therefore doesn't say anything. All forms of commentary or analysis on musical works must resort to formal description or, no doubt more sympathetically for most, metaphorical language. Like the incommensurate systems of language and image, the incommensurate systems of language and music have the potential to oscillate. Unless of course there are lyrics. In that case we might ask if the music and language come as a package deal, jointly inscribed. If so – and continuing to use a metaphor of distance suggested by oscillation – if music and lyrics are bumped up against each other, each mirroring and fortifying the other, perhaps there is no room for oscillation, so tightly are word and music inscribed in each other. With the exception of a few passages in *Heart of a Dog* there are no lyrics, strictly speaking; the text is spoken rather than sung. Anderson does not modify her tone or cadence

to accommodate the music track, creating space between voice and music, and affording each a high degree of autonomy.

The strategies devised to confront the incommensurability of juxtaposed representational systems or divergent meaning systems are boundless, but might be generalized in three ways. One approach is to be absolutist about the difference. One thinks of Rosalind Krauss, who speaks of the silence of the viewer when confronting abstract painting, or Michael Fried, who sees scandal when language penetrates the visual realm, or Stan Brakhage, who would protect the image from the corrupting influence of language. This approach has perhaps been most visible when the specificity of the medium was a dominant critical and artistic concern. Or – the most common approach – one can overcome incommensurability, and cultivate potential linkages, as when literature is designed specifically to stimulate mental imagery, or when the image is "read" as a "text," or when any non-linguistic material is thought to be "discursive" – the "linguistic desire of the image" (Groys 2011, 98). Or, one can work with the stringent challenges offered up by incommensurability, and carry on. Collage, particularly more radical collage, embraces incommensurability as a calculated opportunity. One might think of works by Leslie Thornton, where the voice/sound tracks from films are heard – Kung Fu films and sequences from Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* – while accompanied by silent images of ducks bobbing around in a pond, or water rushing backwards and forwards. The spirit of incommensurability can also be seen, for example, in Stravinsky, who wrote works for violin and piano, while judging the sound of the two instruments to be incompatible.

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Much of the material in *Heart of a Dog* – personal stories about family and friends and a dog – feels disarmingly familiar, conventional even, and is significant enough in its effects to have the film identified and circulated as a documentary and rockumentary. But while the various incommensurabilities of image, language and music in *Heart of a Dog* are not statistically dominant, they are strategically essential, and are significant enough to compel a puzzled programmer to ask one of the editors "what the film was actually about."[7] It's a revealing question, for which there is no real answer. Dogs, mothers, love, death, our selves – in contradistinction to a culture forcefully committed to knowledge, and far too accepting of State surveillance, *Heart of a Dog* suggests that maybe we really don't know too much about these things, and maybe it's best to start a re-examination by not-knowing, or, as Agamben says, going "beyond both knowing and not knowing" (Agamben 2004, 91). This isn't about ignorance, or some kind of misplaced epistemological humility; it's concerned with recognizing that to really confront some of these questions is to confront an abyss. Incommensurabilities, non-knowledge, and strategies of

non-identity are engaged in an effort to find a truly "open" artwork, one that opens onto its own world as well as the world it inhabits.

Notes

1. O'Hare, p. 122.
2. The fear of death is evidently much higher among Tibetan monks than among Hindu or Christian clerics. The reason being, as philosopher Shaun Nichols guesses, that Tibetan monks, due to cultural and religious circumstances, are given to think about death far more than their Christian or Hindu colleagues. "Shaun Nichols on Death and the Self," podcast, *Philosophy Bites*, April 14, 2015.
3. Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are* (86).
4. While introducing virtual enjambments into the text through reading, Anderson reverses what frequently occurs when poets read their work. For example, a poem published in a recent edition of the *New Yorker* (August 5 & 12, 2019), "Almost Human" by Ocean Vuong, is also accompanied by an audio file so that the reader can hear the voice of the author reading the poem. The visual enjambments of the textual version are elided in the reading; that is, there are almost no pauses in the reading to indicate the enjambed line breaks in the poem's printed version.
5. Elkins adds "... it helps to remember that some pictures – like fallen leaves – are irrefutably, permanently, and wholly meaningless" (257).
6. Blanchot continues: "Not only is the image of an object not the meaning of that object, and of no help in comprehending it, but it tends to withdraw it from its meaning by maintaining it in the immobility of a resemblance that has nothing to resemble" (85).
7. Related to the author in a conversation.

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