Entangled Lives: Uncanny Animals in Cosmopolitical Documentary

> All the universe is full of the life of perfect creatures.
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> —Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky, pioneer of Russian rocket science (cited in Turkina, *Soviet Space Dogs*: 19).

> Am I the first human in space, or the last dog?
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> —Attributed to Yuri Gagarin (cited in Turkina, *Soviet Space Dogs*: 31).

1. Perfect Creatures

Before Laika, there were Dezik and Tsygan (Gypsy); Chizhik and Mishka (Little Bear); Albina (Whitey) and Kozyavka; Knopka (Button) and Malyshka (Little One). After her, there were Belka (Squirrel) and Strelka (Arrow); Otvazhnaya (Brave One) and Snezhinka (Snowflake), and the rabbit Marfusa; Zvedochka (Little Star); Ugolyok (Coal) and Veterok (Breeze). Some died; many survived and were sent back; some ran away. As Olesya Turkina recounts in her wonderful book *Soviet Space Dogs*,

> [i]t is estimated that between July 1951 and November 1960 over thirty suborbital flights were launched … In all, of the dogs who participated in those flights, at least fifteen died. The canine crews consisted of two dogs. This was a precaution in case one of the dogs displayed a non-typical, unusual reaction. Some of these dogs made multiple flights on geophysical rockets (Turkina 2013: 68).

Those that survived became stars, celebrated in children's stories, pop songs, and animated cartoons. "One day these unknown strays were living on the street, the next they were shown on television, and their portraits published in newspapers" (Turkina 2013: 13).

But it was Laika (, "barker," from the Russian verb *laiat*, to bark) who captured the hearts of the world, as the first living creature to orbit the planet aboard Sputnik 2, before perishing about five hours into the mission due to inadequate thermal insulation in her capsule. After its orbit decayed several months later, the capsule was incinerated on re-entry into Earth atmosphere (Turkina 2013: 110). Memorials were erected in Paris and Tokyo; as Turkina puts it, "the dog's valiant little face with its pointy ears appeared on the front page of every newspaper around the world. Her poignant image came to symbolise both heroism and the human capacity for compassion" (*Soviet Space Dogs*: 81-82).

After Laika, according to the Museum of Jurassic Technology, "10 more dogs in 6 separate missions followed Laika's courageous example culminating in the flight of Zvedochka (daughter of the stars)." The Museum's memorial tribute to the Soviet space dogs, "The Lives of Perfect Creatures", includes oil paintings, notecards, a locket set, and a View-Master reel. Sacrificed to the geopolitical rivalry of the Cold War, memorialized across half a century of postage stamps, postcards, matchbooks, cigarette brands, oil paintings, and the names of indie bands, these animals continue to haunt us. ## 2. Strays

Like the other space dogs, Laika was a stray, "picked up in a Moscow *dvor* (courtyard)" (Turkina) a mongrel, contemptuously nicknamed "Muttnik" in the U.S. in a variation on the name of the Sputnik satellite (*sputnik* means companion or fellow traveller in Russian). According to Turkina, dogs were caught in Moscow's alleyways, and had to be no heavier than six kilos and no taller than thirty-five centimeters to fit in the rocket's nose-cone. "Strays were not chosen for ideological reasons of class, but because, having to fend for themselves, it was assumed that they were naturally hardier than purebred dogs" (*Soviet Space Dogs*: 64-5). For orbital flights, only female dogs were selected: since there was no room in the cabin to cock their legs, they were better suited to space (Turkina 2013: 107).

What is a "stray" exactly? Straying implies the idea of a digression or diversion, of straying *away* from a designated or usual path. The Portuguese term, *errantes,* makes explicit the term's connection to *wandering*, following a circuitous path randomly

and without destination: wandering *around*. An analogy immediately suggests itself to the condition of large populations of human animals in 21C globality, the millions of refugees, asylum seekers, or other outcasts of global capitalism displaced and forced to stray far from their home territory, compelled to seeks shelter and survival in foreign, often hostile environments.
3. Citizens

The history of the Soviet space dogs make a compelling case for the urgent need for what the Brazilian philosopher Juliana Fausto calls a cosmopolitics of animals. Historically, Fausto explains, the denial of rights to animals originates in Aristotle's celebrated declaration that "man is by nature a political animal". If *only* humans are political animals, however, then non-human ones are excluded from political existence and the rights associated with it, and can be treated merely as tools for human purposes: food, transport, clothing, or the advancement of science. Fausto's book sets out to dismantle this anthropocentric framework, proposing in its place a cosmopolitical one that frames the rights of non-human animals as a new form of cultural citizenship. From where Fausto is standing, the citizenship of non-human animals has the same legitimacy as that of oppressed human minorities, political refugees, or asylum seekers.

In the Ph. D. thesis that is the basis for her book, Fausto defines four different types of animal that correspond to areas in which such a politics might be elaborated: *errantes* (strays), *confinados* (confined in zoos, circuses, or factory farms); *experimentais* (science or the cosmetics industry), and *desaparcidos* (the resonant term "disappeared" positing an analogy with the "disappearance" of human citizens under repressive political regimes in Fausto's own continent).

Laika checks not just one but all of these boxes: *errante*; *confinada*, *experimental*, and *desaparecida*. Indeed, the Soviet space dog program in its entirety, not to mention the US's preference for sending primates into space, is a historical case study in animal cosmopolitics. Even at the time, it was seen in such terms, at least outside the Soviet Union itself: as Turkina reports, even in its time it triggered an international debate over the inhumane treatment of animals, with Laika as its cultural icon,

a martyr to the Cold War space race. While the protests were to no avail, they can be seen as precursors of the cosmopolitical consciousness that Fausto is advocating. ## 4. Outcasts

In film, Laika was recently the subject of the Austrian documentary *Space Dogs* (2019) by Elsa Kremser and Levin Peter. (CLIP) The film follows two ghostly reincarnations of Laika, as they haunt the eerie liminal zones of Moscow by night, snarling at rivals and occasionally each another, in the perpetual quest for food or, if they get lucky, a cat. These street sequences are intercut with archival clips of the Soviet space dogs being handled by scientists in white lab coats, strapped into centrifuges, undergoing surgical procedures, confined in capsules so small that they are unable to turn around, or obliterated in launchpad explosions.

The past decade has seen a surprising surge in documentary films that focus on the condition of stray animals, and frequently dogs, in cities around the globe. Examples include *Los Reyes*, a Chilean documentary about two dogs that inhabit a skatepark in Santiago; *Stray* depicts the entanglement (*emaranhamento*) of feral dogs in Istanbul with the lives of migrant Syrian teenagers displaced by the turmoil in their home country; *Clebs* [a French slang word for a dog], Halima Ouardiri's short film about a canine refugee camp in Morocco; *Fog Dog*, a short set in Dhaka, Bangladesh by the Catalan artist Daniel Steegmann Mangané; *The Stray Story: A Dogumentary* (2021) by Christina Georgiou; and Fausto's own co-produced experimental documentary *A Cosmopolitica dos Animais* (2021). Let us also not forget Tsai Ming-Liang's *Stray Dogs* (2013) (even though its Chinese title, *Jiaoyou*, means "Excursion") which equates the experience of an unhomed family in Taipei with the stray dogs in the liminal spaces both inhabit.

How are we to account for this surge in documentary films about stray animals, which is of course not just limited to dogs (*Kedi* and *Crazy Cat Lady* are about the exploding feral cat populations of Istanbul and Los Angeles respectively; Theo Anthony's *Rat Film* is about Baltimore)?

But the stray dogs in the documentaries I have mentioned are not merely metaphors for human outcasts: on the contrary, it

is the non-human animals' experience of exclusion and alienation that is their primary focus, rather than merely peripheral to human experience. Human and non-human animals co-exist on the same plane. In Moscow, Istanbul, Santiago, or any other 21C global city, the street is the contact zone where human and non-human animals encounter one another and their lives become intertwined or entangled (*emaranhadas* as Fausto would put it).

The documentaries I have mentioned show the interdependency that develops between stray dogs and the human street dwellers whom they live among: in Santiago (*Los Reyes*), the teenagers who hang out at the skatepark, whose conversations are only overheard in footage that shows only the dogs; in Istanbul, the undocumented refugees of the Syrian war. Halima Ouardiri's *Clebs* shifts the perspective even further: the Moroccan rescue center that houses 750 abandoned dogs has much in common with a human refugee camp, its population trapped and focused only on eating and sleeping. Under these harsh conditions, new relations of reciprocity, of symbiosis develop: humans or non-human become mutual support animals for one other. All of the films are in different ways about *companionship*, the forging of interspecies bonds in the absence of traditional forms of community. ## 5. Phantoms

Both *Space Dogs* and Fausto's writing on animals are (ironically) haunted by the Freudian specter of the *uncanny*: stray animals are figured as phantoms haunting the peripheral vision of the city, manifestations of its repressed histories, the unconscious of global capitalism. No wonder that the dreams of sleeping animals are such resonant motifs in films such as *Los Reyes* or *Space Dogs*. In its German sense of the *un-homely* (*unheimlich*), the uncanny provides another way of understanding the experience of being without home in the socio-political sense, whether human or non-human.

Fausto draws on the concept of hauntology introduced by Jacques Derrida in his book *Specters of Marx* and later elaborated by the British cultural critic Mark Fisher. The animals in the films that she discusses are spectral presences, apparitions of traumatic colonial histories. The specter of

Laika invoked in *Space Dogs* exemplifies this hauntological dimension of recent animal documentaries.

In an essay on Daniel Steegmann Mangrané's *Fog Dog*, Fausto references the ghosts of dogs abandoned after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 and the Fukushima disaster in 2011:

> One of the most frightening stories … was about a dog in chains that was abandoned by his owner. He was surrounded by an entire pack of other dogs in the afterlife, barking spectrally as he tried to enter the body of a medium: "There are dogs all around me—it's loud! They are barking so loudly I can't bear it. No! I don't want it. I don't want to be a dog," she screamed. ("And Specters Have A Lot To Say").

Haunted by ghost dogs, sacrificed not to space travel but the nuclear priesthood, our contemporary world remains "populated by angry, melancholic and expectant specters," which remind us of our continuing disregard for the animal species who share our planetary home.

Several of the documentaries I have been discussing include sequences of dogs howling, whether in response to police sirens or (in Dhaka and Istanbul) the Muslim call to prayer. The animals in these films literally cry out to us, their anguish a kind of protest against a human-dominated world in which their existence remains peripheral. The current generation of animal documentaries I have been discussing suggests that at least some human animals are finally starting to listen. (CLIP) #### 6. Revenants

> What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is no longer or not yet.
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> —Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*: 82 (cited in Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*).

Whether literally or metaphorically, the *revenant* is one who comes back, from the world of the dead, back to haunt us. The film *The Revenant* (2015) is, of course, about a human rather than a non-human *revenant*: the bear that digitally mauls Leonardo Di Caprio ultimately meets the same fate as so many millions of other non-human animals on the American frontier, dispatched by a rifle shot. Laika and her compatriot cosmonauts, however, represent a new breed of *revenant*, the ghost of an animal who reminds us how global present occupies a liminal zone between the *no longer* and the *not yet*. On the one hand, we no longer live in an era in which sending animals into space was considered a legitimate form of scientific research, because they were, in the end, merely animals. Yet in our own time animals are genetically engineered for human consumption, their waste products are devastating natural ecosystems, while unimaginable numbers continue to be "sacrificed" for scientific research and the beauty industry. Nevertheless, the spectral presence of Laika that haunts our 21C present, and the interspecies documentaries that I have been discussing, suggest that some kind of shift has been taking place. As these documentaries show, when it comes to non-human animals we remain suspended between what Martin Hägglund calls the NO LONGER and the NOT YET, between sending dogs into orbit and the interspecies future to which Fausto is pointing. How long will it be before we are able to give up the ghosts of our anthropocentric past? Laika and her fellow cosmonauts would surely be glad to see us try.