

REPRESENTING DOGS: ANIMALS, HUMANS, CULTURE AND FILM

INSTRUCTOR: Isaac Rooks

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In his essay “Why Look at Animals,” John Berger argues that, throughout much of history, living and interacting with non-human animals helped people make sense of the world. Berger mourns how, in the modern world, “animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them.” Berger’s assertion seems odd. For instance, in many parts of the world, dogs have never been more ubiquitous – in the home, the public sphere, and visual culture. However, to some critics, neither pets nor mediated animals count as *real* animals. How does one reconcile and understand the modern relationship between animals, people, and the media? We will explore that question by looking at diverse representations of one of cinema’s best friends: the dog.

Throughout this class, we will analyze how dogs are represented across a wide array of films, and the way these varied presentations seek to capture and create an understanding of this important companion species. In order to aid our study, these various examples are all drawn from U.S. cinema, providing some degree of cultural unity between texts. Students will critically engage theoretical and critical writings on animal studies and the place of animals in visual culture and film. In their final research projects, students will apply these readings and concepts to their own investigations of how a different animal species is variously presented in cinema. This will provide a richer sense of how writings about animals hold certain common truths, but must also be adapted to account for the unique qualities of different species.

COURSE OBJECTIVES & LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Analyze the representations of animals in a wide variety of films, and the relationship between *visual representations* of animals and *actual* animals.
- Consider how unique concerns about a particular animal species or an individual animal relate to generalized concerns about “animals.”
- Investigate how animals are used to create meaning and help humans understand the world and themselves, and how animals might resist or subvert that meaning-making process.
- Explore how concepts from animal studies and a concern for / an eye towards the treatment of animals in film changes our understanding of the humanistic study of film and media.
- Adapt and apply concepts and theories gathered from readings, screenings, and discussions to the development, construction, and presentation of an original research project.

READINGS

- Baker, Steve. *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation*.
- Burt, Jonathan. *Animals in Film*.
- Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet*.
- Malamud, Randy. *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture*.
- McHugh, Susan. *Dog*.
- Wolfe, Cary. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Participation: 15%

The success of this discussion-based class depends upon your active and informed participation. It is vital that you come to class ready to discuss readings and screenings, and to offer mature and thoughtful insights that forward the group's understanding of these texts and the subject.

Reading Response Journals: 30%

Weekly reading responses are to be submitted regularly throughout the semester. In order to prepare for your final paper, concentrate on takeaways from assigned readings that can apply to your own investigation. For each reading, provide: (1) a one-sentence distillation of the argument; (2) a paragraph summarizing the article; (3) three to five key quotes. There will also be periodic questions asking you to analyze specific elements of a reading's argument or to put it in conversation with other readings or screenings.

Independent Research Project: 55% Total (*see breakdown below*)**One-page Proposal: 5%**

At the semester's midpoint, you must submit a document outlining your final project. This should identify the species you will focus on and the films you will analyze. Explain the rationale for your selection: why is this species worth investigating and why are the texts you have selected useful examples? Put forth a hypothesis of how your project will nuance the understanding of animal studies we have developed based on our work on dogs.

Final Presentation: 15%

This presentation should adapt your research project into an accessible and engaging 10-minute presentation. Like the paper, your presentation should have a clear thesis statement and explain the relevance of your work to our understanding of your unique animal and animals in film. Your presentation must use visual aids, including clips. The length of your clips should not exceed five minutes and will not count towards your 10 minutes.

Final Written Assignment: 35%

Students will analyze a set of key films featuring differing treatments of a single animal species. You can draw upon analytical methods and readings from outside the course, but you must engage class readings and concepts. Papers must include a clear thesis statement and an in-depth analysis of the objects of study. Analysis should be supported by specific examples from the films. Papers should be 10-12 pages; 1-inch margins, 12-pt Times New Roman font. Page length does not include a properly formatted Works Cited page.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introduction to Course & Animal Studies**Week 2: Introduction to Animals in Visual Culture**

Screening: *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961)

Week 3: Animals & Production - Dog Celebrities & Dogs on Sets

Screening: *Lassie Come Home* (Wilcox, 1943)

Week 4: What Makes an Animal?

Screening: *Alpha* (Hughes, 2018)

Week 5: Animals & (the Limits of) Anthropomorphism

Screening: *Best in Show* (Guest, 2000)

Week 6: Animals, Affect, and Death

Screening: *Old Yeller* (Stevenson, 1957)

Week 7: Animals & Horror – Fantastic & Grounded

Screening: *Cujo* (Teague, 1983)

Week 8: Animals & Documentaries – Advocacy Films, Nature Films, & Essay Films

Screening: *Heart of a Dog* (Anderson, 2015)

Week 9: Animals & Animation – Disney & Beyond

Screening: *My Dog Tulip* (Fierlinger & Fierlinger, 2009)

Week 10: Animals & Ideology – Dogs, the Nation, and Families

Screening: *Megan Leavey* (Cowperthwaite, 2017)

Week 11: Animals & Human Otherness

Screening: *White Dog* (Fuller, 1982)

Week 12: Animals & Meaning – Dogs as Metaphors, Dogs as Dogs

Screening: *Isle of Dogs* (Anderson, 2018)

Week 13: Student Presentations