

Elizabeth Young

Canine Uncanny Zone

Adrienne L. McLean, editor, *Cinematic Canines: Dogs and Their Work in the Fiction Film*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014. 272 pp. \$90.00 hc; \$27.95 pd; \$27.95 e-book.

Ann-Janine Morey, *Picturing Dogs, Seeing Ourselves: Vintage American Photographs*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. 228 pp. \$34.95 hc.

Philip Howell, *At Home and Astray: The Domestic Dog in Victorian Britain*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2015. 252 pp. \$39.50 hc; \$39.50 e-book.

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The dog grows ever more domesticated, albeit in different ways — from the affective enshrinement of dogs as family members in the home to the incorporation of the military dog as “Citizen Canine” ([Grimm](#)). This domestication creates variously gendered roles, from feminized lady’s lapdog and child-surrogate to masculinized K-9 police dog and canine veteran. In its gender affiliations and in other ways, the dog has never occupied a singular or stable domestic space. Dogs in the United States, for example, have been inseparable from the maintenance of white supremacy, from the hounds used to track escaped slaves to the German Shepherds unleashed by police against Civil Rights protestors. Across and within breeds, dogs oscillate between emblems of domestic order and perceived threats to it — an oscillation also embodied within the individual animal. For in the specter of the friendly pet who becomes Cujo is the possibility that the dog may expose the permeable boundaries of domestication, turning from faithful to violent and reverting from cute to wild.

Following Freud, we might think of this ambiguously domesticated dog zone between familiarity and estrangement as that of the canine uncanny. (I adapt this phrase from the title of Murray Pomerance’s essay, “Hitchcock’s Canine Uncanny,” in *Cinematic Canines*.) In this zone, domesticated spaces are made strange, doubles proliferate, the line between animate and inanimate blurs, and the repressed of violence — both canine and human — may return at any point. Three recent books explore the many dimensions, literal and symbolic, of a canine uncanny zone. *Cinematic Canines* is an anthology of critical essays on dogs in film; *Picturing Dogs* analyzes a collection of U.S. photographs of dogs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; and *At Home and Astray* explores debates over the domesticated dog in the cultural geography of Victorian Britain. All three books suggest the gendered dimensions of the domesticated dog in American, British, and other cultural histories; all embed that history, albeit unevenly, in other axes of power, including race, class, and nation. Together, they suggest the need to continue to think about the aesthetics as well as politics of dog representation, particularly the ostensible fidelity — visual and behavioral — of the photographic image of the dog. Collectively, these books show that the canine uncanny comes most fully into view through undomesticated interdisciplinary, intersectional, and transmedia cultural lenses.

Cinematic Canines: Dogs and Their Work in the Fiction Film is a lively collection of ten essays on “dogs in live-action narrative films” (15), divided into three sections. The first focuses on dog “stars” in silent and classic Hollywood cinema: Fatty Arbuckle’s pit bull co-star, Luke; the German Shepherds Strongheart and Rin Tin Tin; Asta, the wire-haired fox terrier of the Thin Man films; and Lassie, the collie star of film and television. The second section addresses dogs as “character and supporting actors,” extending beyond Hollywood and up to the present. Essays here treat dogs in American and Japanese WWII films; dogs in Australian film across several decades; dogs in post-apartheid South African cinema; and dogs in films from different national cinemas set in the Antarctic. The third section, “Stocks, Bits, and Extras,” comprises one essay on dogs in Hitchcock films and another on dog behavior in cinema. An Afterword by McLean

expands the category of live action cinema, exploring the representation of dogs in live action films that also include animatronics and CGI.

The essays in the first section show both the singular success of dogs in the first half-century of cinema and the continuities between dog and human actors. The discourse of the star — enshrined in close-up within the diegesis of narrative film, celebrated in elaborately manufactured fan culture without — applied as much to dog stars as to human ones; the language of genre was shaped by canine players, as in the case of Asta and the screwball comedy; and the Hollywood goal of promoting American nationalism impelled Lassie as much as John Wayne. In a Hollywood studio system, the dog was an exaggerated version of the actor under contract, commodified and controlled by others. Hitchcock's probably apocryphal quip that "actors are like cattle" seems inaccurate when it comes to the singular dog star; actors here seem like dogs, and vice versa. This similitude is particularly strong in the case of early cinema, with its absence of human speech. Joanna Rapf notes in her essay on Luke that the silent film was "where [the dog's] bodily language could be the equal of the people with whom he shared the screen" (51).

Cinematically, the dog-star was a quintessential strong silent type, an icon of rugged, albeit desexualized, masculinity. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley and Jeremy Groskopf position Strongheart and Rin Tin Tin as "analogous to ... the decade's leading male Hollywood stars, especially the strong, athletic, loner heroes of action films, such as swashbuckler Douglas Fairbanks" (65). This masculinity could, semi-facetiously, come under dispute. Kelly Wolf notes that for *Son of Lassie* (1944), publicity materials asserted the "masculinity" of the actual dog playing the female character: "'Lassie Resumes 'Her' Rightful Sex. 'She' is Actually a Male Collie'" (116). Elsewhere the dog star seems more akin to the female movie star. As Sarah Ross and James Castonguay note in their essay on Asta, the career of the cinematic dog was "roughly the same length as the average career of a romantic leading lady during the studio era" (90).

Dog-stars, male and female, were individuals domesticated within the stabilizing plots and happy endings of Hollywood studio films. The essays in the second section explore more uncontrolled plots with dogs in individual and group form. Thus dogs in Australian film are "teetering on the boundary between civilization and wilderness" (145) and dogs in films about the Antarctic "circulate around the culture/nature, civilized/wild binaries, expressing anxieties about the fragility of these binaries in one of earth's wildest environments" (192). These binaries may be organized around the purebred/mutt distinction, but also along intra-purebred lines and in mutable ways. While the German Shepherds Strongheart and Rin Tin Tin became lovable celebrities, as Aaron Skabelund notes, in Hollywood WWII films the breed became associated with Nazis, while in Chinese films, German Shepherds came to embody Japanese military aggression (137-38). A standout here is Giuliana Lund's essay on dogs in South African film, analyzing how films in the apartheid era offer a split between idealized purebred "bully" dogs and scorned mixed-breed curs: "The good 'white man's dog,' like the good African, is a highly trained, domesticated servant doing the bidding of his master. In contrast, the kaffir dog, like the unruly and uncooperative African, must be beaten into shape or eliminated" (164). Post-apartheid films have inverted these connections, valorizing the "kaffir" and "cur," but not eliminating the allegorical mode; ironically, Lund suggests, "current incarnations of canines have less agency, personality, and individuality ... Recent films also make less of an attempt to engage a canine point of view" (178-79).

The final two essays in the volume take the cinematic canine both further into and outside of the language of Film Studies. Murray Pomerance, a prolific film scholar, explores the wonderful topic of dogs in films by Alfred Hitchcock, who includes canines in so many of his films — Pomerance discusses *Rebecca*, *Foreign Correspondent*, *Suspicion*, *Saboteur*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Rear Window*, *The Birds*, *Marnie* and others — that they seem essential to his auteurist signature. Pomerance argues that dogs in Hitchcock have a stabilizing function: "[A]ll dogs are guide dogs for the somewhat 'blinded' viewer; the dog establishes the terms of our involvement and thus ultimately works as ballast for the narrative" (212). Alexandra Horowitz, a cognitive scientist whose *Inside of a Dog* has been a best-seller, undoes this "ballast" from the perspective of canine ethology. Comparing dogs in film to actual canine behavior, Horowitz argues for "the ways in which humans misread the dog" (219); specifically, she shows how cinematic canines often vocalize in ways that do not mean what they seem to imply, pay attention within the frame in unlikely ways, or fail to act as might be anticipated (223). Horowitz characterizes this as "a dog's actions, viewed ethologically, jarring with the intended meaning of the dog actor's actions" (223), although this formulation raises the question of what the "intended meaning" of a dog actor might be. Here the discourse of the dog and human in film decisively diverge, the dog not having the same relation to intention or performance as the human actor (although the dog does sometimes resemble, as McLean notes, the child actor [9]). The cinematic dog is ultimately a figure of radical animal otherness rather than an analogue of human celebrity.

In different ways, the essays by Pomerance, Horowitz, and McLean suggest the uncanny dimensions of the cinematic dog. Pomerance uses this concept in a general way: dogs offered Hitchcock "strategic dramaturgical possibilities for establishing action and relationships that could not be shown otherwise — hence the invocation of the uncanny in my essay's title" (201). The dog also seems uncanny in more specifically psychoanalytic senses in Hitchcock films, unnervingly occupying liminal spaces between life and death (*Rear Window*) or between the familiarly domesticated pet and the unfamiliar attacker (*The Birds*). McLean discusses the well-known "uncanny valley" that animators try to avoid. Although "[d]igitized dogs in live-action films ... seem to leap safely across the uncanny valley" (240), she suggests that in a more general sense, dogs "already look like caricatures or stuffed toys ... [W]e always already understand dogs as both exaggerated and real" (240). The stuffed toy is a mark of the uncanny, lodged between inanimate and animate. In his taxonomy of uncanny forms, Freud also favors the automaton and the double, figures who have cinematic canine analogues as well — for example, in the case of the multiple dog bodies who played Lassie and Asta over time, or who play a single dog in the same film.

The uncanny would seem to organize canine cinema in another sense: in the disjuncture between the dog on screen and the experience of the actual dog or dogs on set. Both the familiarity of the dog as a domestic animal and the apparent indexical fidelity of the moving image to its referent make cinematic dogs seem knowable, but this fidelity is constructed and misleading. Horowitz analyzes this falseness as an ethological error, but it also adds an emblematically uncanny twinning of the familiar with the unfamiliar. This is, of course, an ethical issue as well about the possible mistreatment of dogs in the making of the film. As McLean puts it in her Introduction, "I worry about film dogs ... [Are] sick, dying, destroyed or destroying dogs in films ... 'really' suffering or not?" (18-19). The quotation

marks around “really” express the fear that the unhappy dog on film — or, perhaps even more, the seemingly happy one — uncannily embodies a real dog who is really unhappy. If death constitutionally organizes photographically based images — in the Sontag sense that “All photographs are memento mori” — this seems particularly so in the case of canine representation. The dogs here might be dead not only from the inevitable passage of time, but also from the violence inflicted on them outside the frame.

Given the gigantic number of dogs in film, the anthology’s focus on fiction live-action film and mainstream cinemas makes sense, though it inevitably excludes discussions of animation, documentary, and experimental film, which would provide different perspectives. A sequel volume on independent film might open up more varied depictions of dogs, toward more radical formal or political ends. Everyone will have their own list, but three recent examples that come to mind are Kelly Reichardt’s *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), a fiction film that reworks both female and canine subjectivity; Laurie Anderson’s *Heart of a Dog* (2015), an experimental documentary on grief, death, politics, and dogs; and *White God* (2014), Kornél Mundruczó’s allegorized drama of dog oppression and resistance in Hungary. Within the scope that *Cinematic Canines* sets for itself, there might be more essays focusing on race and ethnicity; for example, Lund notes in passing Sam Fuller’s *White Dog* (1982), an understudied Hollywood film about racism (and ambiguous antecedent for Mundruczó’s film). A sequel volume might also delve into more textured close readings of individual films or into further questions of film form. What happens to the vocabulary of continuity editing, like the shot-reverse shot or eyeline match, when the suturing of shots involves the gaze of an animal? How does cinematic sound operate in the case of dogs?

Different versions of uncanny domestication haunt the remarkable photographs of Ann-Janine Morey’s *Picturing Dogs, Seeing Ourselves*, which analyzes some three hundred photographs of dogs and humans from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including tintypes, cabinet cards, cartes-de-visites, photographic postcards, and later snapshots. (The volume reproduces more than a hundred photographs.) These represent the personal collection of Morey, a scholar of literature and religion, who places them in the contexts of Animal Studies and visual and literary history. The photographers are not known, and Morey organizes the book into chapters with such thematic groupings as “the visual rhetoric of everyday people,” “family portraits,” “hunting pictures and dog stories,” and “women cross the line.” She juxtaposes discussions of photographs with interpretations of dogs in such novels as *The Great Gatsby*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The overarching claim is that the domesticated dog is a political animal: “the dog becomes part of the patriotic iconography embracing all the meanings of home — family, fidelity, comfort, protection, nurturance, and love — as well as symbolizing some of the less palatable meanings of home and family — domination, subservience, and violence” (25). Morey’s focus within chapters is on dogs as compositional elements illuminating human and human-animal relationships, sometimes by indirection or displacement. For example, she suggests that the extreme stiffness of facial expression in many of the photographs (a stiffness in excess of the demands of photographic portraiture at this time), should be seen in relation to the more playful depiction of dogs in these image; in these images, with very stiff-looking people, the dog is the “missing smile” (25).

As with the cinematic canine, the focus on dogs as emblems of home brings gender into view: the book includes, for example, discussion of how hunting photographs align dogs with white masculinity, and, conversely, analysis of photographs that cross gender boundaries, such as a group depicting white women hunters with guns and hounds. That Morey specifies these human figures as white is consistent with the most exciting feature of her analysis in *Picturing Dogs, Seeing Ourselves*: her attention to race, and especially to the representation, through absence as well as presence, of African-Americans. Race is the topic of the third chapter, entitled “The Gaze Outside the Frame,” which focuses on groups of photographs in which “the African American subject is reduced to petlike status” (78), including photographs of black employees with the dog of the white “master” and of black women caretakers with white children. She cautions against reading photographs of African Americans with dogs as exemplifying the same kind of familial iconography as white families. In some cases, “Even when no white person is visible, the racist gaze that is the product of white people’s bigotry still commands the image” (101). Morey also attends to racial difference throughout the book, analyzing, for example, an image of an African American boy with dog in a Fauntleroy suit (75) and an African-American boy with bicycle and dog (“Cecil and Fido” [111]). She speculates on the thematic connections between hunting photographs of white men, dogs, and captured nonhuman prey and contemporary lynching photographs of white men, dogs, and lynched African-Americans: in the latter, dogs are “terrorist instruments,” and “the edible bodies of animals have become the sexualized bodies of black men, who in turn are killed twice, thanks to shooting the death on film” (158). Morey draws on scholarship from historians of photography who study race (including Laura Wexler and Shawn Michelle Smith). The book’s focus on dogs and race also puts it in dialogue with recent work in American Studies focused on non-photographic nineteenth-century racializations of animals ([Boggs](#), [Lundblad](#), [Freccero and Kim](#)).

The racial ambiguities of these photographs suggest another feature of the canine uncanny: as with the analysis of post-apartheid films in *Cinematic Canines*, these photographs everywhere register the repressed, or barely repressed, legacy of slavery and racial violence. The uncanny converges with the gothic in these photographs, sometimes quite specifically, as in a haunting image of an African-American girl holding a small dog, directly facing the camera, liminally positioned in front of a very dark doorway — “either a sanctuary for her or a place of imprisonment” (119). Another photo is a group portrait of five white adults, one man on the floor affectionately holding a large dog, with the woman’s face at the center scratched out (137). This defacement, in the most literal sense, suggests some act of violence, perhaps on the part of one of the photograph’s other subjects — “the hidden private world has erupted into the public face of the photograph” (138). Other uncanny modes erupt in a photograph of a hunting dog taxidermied with taxidermied kill in his mouth (199). Here, as in the hunting photographs, the emphasis is on the dog as agent of violence, against humans and animals; as Morey notes, the dog as a target of animal cruelty is not documented. Like the violence against dehumanized black bodies that lies outside the frame, dog suffering and death remain uncanny presences.

As a study of photography, the project is an eclectic one, based as it is a personal collection of images, with an author who controls the acquisition, categorization, juxtaposition, and other taxonomic logics of the volume. Morey’s use of literary sources is interesting, though another scholar might more directly compare these photographs with paintings, silent films (the later photographs are contemporary with the early Hollywood history in *Cinematic Canines*), or other visual representations of dogs. Morey puts this issue in passive voice — “Through the juxtaposition of similar images, questions and insights begins to emerge, as the photographs speak to us of their context”

(48) — but she is making the photographs speak in particular ways. Nonetheless, the photographs themselves remain remarkably evocative.

Philip Howell's *At Home and Astray* focuses on the uncanny ambiguities of the dog in Victorian Britain. He argues that this period is marked by fierce debates over the domestication of dogs, which was "partial, incomplete, and provisional" (3). Though Howell's discipline is cultural geography, with its focus on space and place, the first two chapters are anchored by literary figures: the first chapter, on dogs in the work of Charles Dickens, explores competing images in his oeuvre of dogs as emblems of bourgeois domestication and, conversely, as "disruptive agents of contingency and undisciplined desire" (49). The second chapter explores the practice of dog stealing, famously dramatized in Virginia Woolf's much later *Flush* (1933), her mock-biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog. Subsequent chapters address the founding of the Battersea Dogs' Home; cultural debates over Darwinism as it intersected with debates over dog vivisection; the founding of the Hyde Park pet cemetery; and new regulations about public dog-walking, including muzzling laws. The study draws from but also contests a Foucauldian framework of domestication as a disciplinary policing of norms. Howell's emphasis is sometimes on ideological containment of dogs and humans; thus Battersea involved "policing, incarceration, and execution" (100) of masterless dogs, and "technologies like the muzzle, the collar, the lead and the license [function] alike as attempts, not to discipline animals directly, but rather to represent and regulate the conduct of their human companions" (170). Elsewhere, he emphasizes more liberatory strands of debates over dog domestication, arguing that dog cemeteries were "not, or not merely, a confirmation of human privilege, [but] also a challenge to the established boundaries of the anthropocentric orthodoxy," with "genuine potential for resistance" (148). His conclusion emphasizes the emancipatory elements of domestication, arguing that in the Victorian period, for all its anthropocentric anxieties, dogs also became "political actors" (179).

The study as a whole deconstructs the binary of "at home" and "astray," with both modes organizing each other. The most effective chapters are the later ones, on dog cemeteries and dog walking, which give a vivid sense of geography. The impression here is of dogs, alive and dead, occupying public space, particularly in London, in new ways and to uneven effect. Pulled into the home, dogs were also pushed into the public; as Howell shows, the push-pull is not that of domestication versus its opposite, but of competing impulses within domestication. Dogs could stray, like women — and indeed, gender is a key element in debates over the "dog question" (3), his term for the period, deliberately echoing that of the "woman question." Class is an organizing frame; anyone masterless — human dog thieves as well as stray dogs — threatened social order. The content of "astray" could be expanded further. Although Howell's definition of "domestication" includes "the dog's all-too-conditional citizenship in the 'homeland' of Britain and 'Britishness'" (3), there is little discussion of empire or of otherness in racial or ethnic terms. The illustrations here, including nineteenth-century political cartoons, are rich and would merit their own analysis as visual sources.

Within the materials that Howell explores, the tension between home and not-home suggests, once again, a geographical version of the uncanny. Howell names this subject explicitly in his discussion of Darwinism: critics of vivisection capitalized on the strangeness of scientific experiment on animals as "alienating and distinctly *unheimlich* ... to the Victorian public" (103), and "just too *unheimlich* to be easily domesticated" (119). But the more general impression of dogs moving between homed and unhomed selves — and outside the home, in walks and cemetery plots — suggests a version of uncanny oscillation between home and not-home spaces. It is interesting to imagine the model expanded to other forms of a materialized uncanny, like the increase of taxidermy that often brought mounted dead animals, including some pets, into live Victorian parlour spaces. The dead dog — executed at Battersea, buried in Hyde Park — would seem to shape the domestication process of the live one as much as of the "stray" humans who were also being brought under social control. The unfinished and contested nature of these domestication processes is vividly on display in these exciting books, which show dogs as at once visibly familiar and unfamiliarly uncanny.

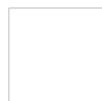
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