
Space Dogs

A haunted story of cruelty and compassion

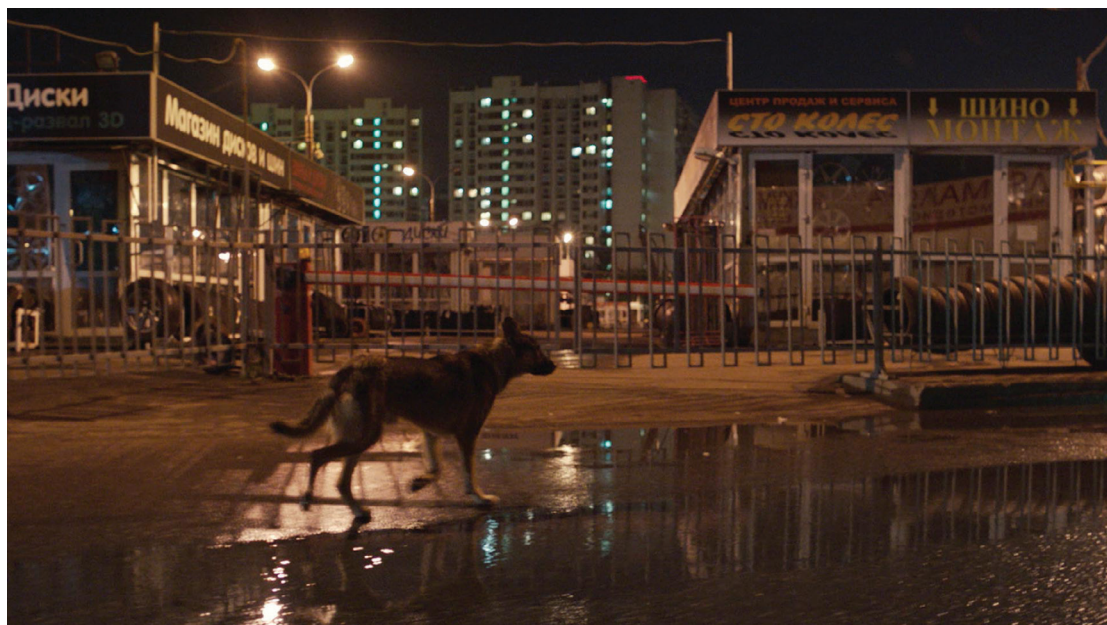
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Consuming pain

'One simple test of the claim that the pleasure in the world outweighs the pain', observes the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, 'is to compare the feelings of an animal that is devouring another with those of the animal being devoured' (2000: 292). It is this statement that comes to mind about 25 minutes into Elsa Kremser and Levin Peter's 2019 documentary *Space Dogs*. We have then been following several stray dogs as they roam the streets of Moscow, during the day and at night. The camera – the cinematography is by Yunus Roy Imer – hovers at their eye level, making us feel like we are exploring these streets with the dogs, looking for food, inspecting trash cans, evading traffic and hoping that a benevolent human will give them something to eat or just pet them. The more we follow the dogs, the more we empathize with them, feeling fear when they cross a busy street or when they encounter a human who might not have the best intentions.

This changes around the 25-minute mark, when we are confronted with the observation that we do not really understand the world that these animals live in. At this moment in the documentary, one of the dogs spots a housecat, who is unable to escape through its little port in a door. The dog catches its tail, but the feline manages to run away. However, the dog quickly grasps it again, takes it between its jaws and snaps its back. The scene is repulsive, but the camera does not give the spectator respite: for about five minutes, we have to watch how the dog,



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together with his companion, kills the cat. We hear its bones break, see its body being thrown on the grass and hope that it is dead so at least its suffering is over. When the camera lingers over the cat's body, however, we cannot help but notice that it is still moving, twitching in agonizing pain while the dog bites it again and again, seemingly not knowing what to do now that the cat is not running away anymore.

The scene triggers a feeling that is difficult to lose, lingering in one's body long after the documentary has ended. This is a feeling of dread, of being drawn into a zone of meaningless suffering, strongly emphasized by the documentary's often eerie soundtrack, composed by the music collective Paradox Paradise. The dogs are oblivious to this suffering, absentmindedly biting the cat, illustrating Schopenhauer's conclusion that the suffering in the world greatly outweighs the pleasure; a conclusion resulting in the German pessimist's claim that this is the 'worst of all possible worlds' (1969: 583).

But it is also a suffering that the two documentary-makers, apparently, were not able to or did not want to prevent. Why shoot this scene instead of rescuing the cat? Doesn't this make them similar to the dogs, unmoved by the creature's suffering, pointing their camera at a body that is overwhelmed by excruciating pain? Maybe it makes them even worse? Unlike the dogs, after all, they can reflect on the situation and make a moral decision. Aren't they exploiting the cat's pain to generate an effect in the spectator?

Asking this question, however, makes the feeling of dread that the scene causes expand like an oil slick at sea. What does it say about us as spectators, for example, that we are watching the cat's suffering? We are affected by it, sickened even. But, as Schopenhauer's statement implies, we are also still capable of distinguishing our feelings from those of the cat. Does watching this scene make us complicit to its suffering, consuming the documentary like the documentary-makers consume the scene of the cat being killed, and like the dogs eventually seem to want to consume the cat?

Space

A large part of *Space Dogs* consists of scenes during which we follow the dogs. Apart from the fatal encounter with the cat, however, we do not see them hurting any other animals. The documentary contains only a few pieces of narration, beautifully read by Russian actor Aleksey Serebryakov. This means that *Space Dogs* is not primarily concerned with explaining scenes or transmitting information: the documentary mainly shows, instead of telling or judging.

Indeed, one of the directors, Elsa Kremser, observed in an interview that in storytelling and nature documentaries 'they always put very clear roles on animals. Nature in these terms is always very far away or very humanized, and we wanted to [shine] a different light on this topic' (quoted in Wall 2020). In



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another interview, Kremser links this observation to the scene with the cat:

We had decided to follow the dogs without being judgmental, so we followed them in this case as well. Without any compromise. Whether something was spectacular or not wasn't a criterion for us. At that moment the dogs snatched control away from us, and we were just still functioning. It became apparent to us that they have their own world, which exists without human control.

(quoted in Schiefer 2009)

Levin Peter, the documentary's second director, adds: 'A frontier had been crossed. Those dogs didn't owe us anything: they didn't exist in order to satisfy our projections. They showed us that in drastic fashion' (quoted in Schiefer 2009).

This absence of an explicit judgement does not mean that *Space Dogs* does not make us think or that it is not critical. Indeed, I want to argue, the documentary triggers us into critical reflection in a specific and highly effective manner: by intercutting the above-described scenes with never-before seen archive footage of the dogs that were fired into space during the Soviet Space Programme of the 1950s and 1960s. The two documentary-makers managed to dig this footage up in the Institute of Biomedical Problems in Moscow and eventually to restore it for *Space Dogs* (see Wall 2020). The most famous of these dogs was Laika, the first living being to orbit the earth. These dogs, including Laika, were strays as well, picked up from the Moscow streets and subjected to horrible experiments to test whether they were able to survive – at least for some time – in a space capsule.

The grainy black and white archive footage included in the documentary shows some of these experiments. We see the dogs as they are put in a mill to test whether they can stand g-forces. We see how holes are pierced in the skin of their neck, how they are given a stoma, how they are connected to machines and are prepared for survival in small rockets, apparently all without any form of anaesthesia. Furthermore, the end of the documentary addresses the manner in which the dogs were made part of the Soviet propaganda machine, presented to

the public as heroes who were the first to explore the final frontier. Most noteworthy, two dogs who did return from space alive, Serebryakov's narrator tells us, were made part of a process that scientists called 'The Wedding'. They were locked in a cage until they had mated, and their 'cosmic children' were presented 'as trophies' to show that travel to space was not harmful.

Cruelty

In his review for *The Guardian*, Alex Mistlin criticizes *Space Dogs* and writes that it should have focused more on the Soviet Space Programme. He rejects 'the unremarkable footage' of the stray dogs for acting 'as a drag on the film's momentum' and argues that the documentary should have included more narration and information: 'we don't hear from the men responsible for this state-sponsored torture. A defence of their actions would have given this otherwise beautiful-looking film a third dimension it's lacking' (Mistlin 2020).

Mistlin's critique misses the point of the documentary, in my view. This documentary is not specifically *about* dogs like Laika, nor is it about the Soviet Space Programme per se. Had it been about this programme, then it would indeed have required an explanation of what we see, why this was done and how Moscow street dogs became victims of the twentieth-century Space Race. However, as the scene with the cat illustrates, this documentary is about different issues. In spite of its sometimes fairy-tale and dreamlike atmosphere, it is about cruelty. It is about the similarities and differences between human and non-human animals, such as the shared ability to inflict pain and suffering, or the way in which the former often exploit the latter, illustrated by the feelings of panic and the pain that Laika must have suffered when she was dying a horrible death of overheating in the Sputnik 2.

To arrive at this interpretation of the documentary, it is crucial to note that it is only *after* the scene with the cat, which is not mentioned by Mistlin, that we are shown the archive footage from the Space Programme. Since the documentary presents the footage in this order, it *does* something in a specific manner: the scene with the cat confronts the



spectator with acts of mindless and animalistic cruelty, permeating her with dread caused by the apparent ability of one creature to close itself off to the suffering of another, so powerfully emphasized by Schopenhauer. This feeling of dread, caused by the dog's cruelty, then bleeds into the archive footage, and turns into a critical reflection on the cruelty inflicted on street dogs by Soviet scientists.

Indeed, *Space Dogs* does not let these scientists explain their reasons. Nor does it describe how the totalitarian system of the USSR justified the suffering of these dogs (and of countless other living beings). Instead, the juxtaposition of the street dogs' cruelty and the sanitized nature of equally cruel scientific experiments performed by humans on animals turns the documentary into a critical reflection on human and animal cruelty that does not provide us with easy answers or explicit judgements.

In this way, *Space Dogs* pulls the spectator into that which Theodor W. Adorno, in a haunting passage in his lectures on metaphysics after Auschwitz, called the 'zone of the carcass and the knacker' (2000: 117;

see also Peters 2013). This is a disturbing and abject zone, the German philosopher observes, shaped by systematic and rationalized pain and torture, a zone that makes rational reflection almost powerless and reduces morality to a 'materialist stratum' in which only bodily pain and compassion with suffering might mean something. Adorno writes:

As a child, I believe, one still knows something about this stratum – with the dim knowledge people have of such things. [...] one had an inkling of it in subliminal experiences – as when the dog-catcher's van drove by, or suchlike things.

(2000: 117)

Rather than only concerning the Soviet Space Programme, it is this zone that *Space Dogs* explores, I believe. And what makes its approach so strong is precisely that it mainly shows this zone without judging it, shaping an ambivalent realm that touches and affects the spectator without giving her a way out.

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Haunting spectres

It is true that the title of the documentary gives the impression that the documentary is exclusively about the dogs fired into space. However, the narration that opens the documentary points at an alternative interpretation of the phrase 'space dogs'. While we see views of the earth from a spinning capsule in space, we hear Serebryakov tell us in Russian:

Once upon a time, far out in the Earth's orbit, a dead dog floated in a space capsule. The dog was called Laika, and she had once lived on the streets of Moscow. Laika had been the first creature to be fired into space. But soon she lay dead in the capsule. For months, the lifeless animal floated through the darkness like some cosmic flotsam. And yet it seemed Earth could not just surrender its dead dog to the infinite cosmos. With all her might, Earth drew her dog ever closer to herself. But as the capsule finally touched the atmosphere, the heat grew so enormous that Laika's body was burned up. At that very moment, what had been a Moscow street dog became a ghost.

We then see a yellow flame, representing burning fuselage in space. The flames change colour and eventually turn into a bright light: Laika's ghost. It is this ghost, I want to argue, that the notion of the 'space dog' refers to.

The ghost of Laika lingers over the film and keeps haunting the society it shows, confronting us with the cruelty of a programme, designed by humans, that aimed to reduce her to 'cosmic flotsam'. As the French philosopher Jacques Derrida famously noted about the figure of the spectre, referring to the role

that ghosts play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: a spectre may haunt us from the zone in-between life and death, confronting us with traumas from the past or suppressed memories that shape the subconscious of our societies (Derrida 1994). Indeed, the narrator goes on while we see a stray dog sleeping on a nightly Moscow street: 'According to a legend, Laika's ghost had fallen to Earth like a comet, and has roamed the streets of Moscow ever since'.

That Laika's ghost haunts the bonds – and tensions – not only between humans and dogs but also between human and non-human animals in general is emphasized in the documentary by the inclusion of other animals. *Space Dogs* ends, for example, with shots of turtles. Two of these animals, Serebryakov's narrator tells us, were shot into space as well and circled the moon before their capsule went off-track and disappeared into space.

Before we see the first footage of the Soviet Space Programme, furthermore, the documentary also includes scenes with a chimpanzee in modern-day Moscow: dressed as a human, forced to wear a little hat, he sits on a bus with a man who is taking him to a party to entertain children. While the man walks to the building in which the party is held, carrying the chimpanzee who has his arms wrapped around the man, Serebryakov tells us about an ape that was exploited in a different way by humans: the chimpanzee, named 'Number 65', who was part of the American Space Programme of the early 1960s. The narrator tells us that this ape 'had once lived in the tropical rainforest of Cameroon' fell into a trap and was then sold to the American Air Force. His first real flight in a space capsule brought Number 65 into a panic, however. He survived, but was so traumatized that he could never see a capsule again, and was transported to a zoo in Washington, DC. Having



become so used to humans, he stayed away from the other apes, dying 'lonely and overweight', the documentary tells us, from liver failure.

Red Peter

Watching a scene in which the Moscow chimpanzee is clothed by a man and a woman in a white business shirt, and hearing Serebryakov's narrator tell us about Number 65, it is impossible not to think of Red Peter, the talking ape of Franz Kafka's 1917 short story 'A Report to an Academy'. After he was caught in West Africa, Red Peter reports to a group of scientists in this story, he learned to imitate humans mainly as a way to escape from his life in a cage, adopting their behaviour, learning to speak and gradually becoming more and more human. His name refers to the red scar, caused by the bullet that was fired at him when he was captured. Exploring the zone in-between human and animal existence, as many of Kafka's stories do so powerfully, 'A Report to an Academy' confronts us with questions about humanity, animality and the idea that animalistic survival mechanisms were, paradoxically, what turned Red Peter into a human.

Red Peter is mentioned in J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, in which the South African author develops an anti-rationalistic animal ethics that is based on the idea that both humans and animals can feel pain, and that this observation should already be enough to not inflict pain on living creatures; an ethics that comes very close to Schopenhauer's moral philosophy of compassion. Coetzee lets the protagonist of the text, Elisabeth Costello summarize this standpoint as follows with reference to Red Peter: 'I am not a philosopher of mind but an

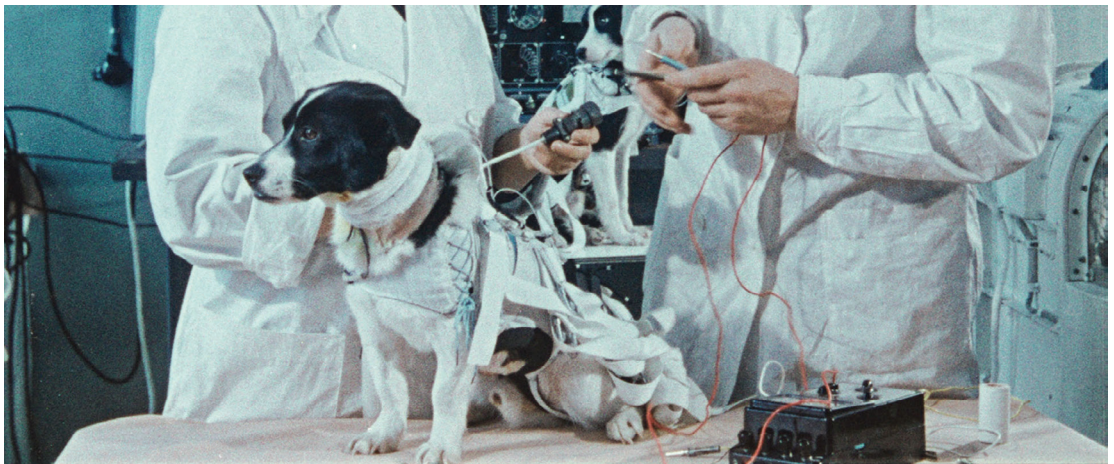
animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on every word I speak' (1999: 26; see also Peters 2014: 217–18). It is this, I believe, that the documentary does as well: it touches a wound, a wound that turned Red Peter into a human being, and that reminds him continuously of the suffering that other human beings inflicted upon him.

Compassion

Space Dogs ends with shots of a litter of stray puppies playing in an abandoned ruin. Before the credits roll, Serebryakov's narrator tells us that the puppies were killed with poisoned meat by a stranger, and the camera lingers over their bodies, covered with flies, just like it lingered earlier over the body of the cat.

Haunted by the ghost of Laika, this scene again confronts us with cruelty, with a senseless cruelty inflicted by a human being on harmless animals. Paradoxically, however, this cruelty and the ability to experience pain are also what unite human beings and animals, *Space Dogs* suggests. On the one hand, the documentary foregrounds the divide between human and animal existence, embodied by the schism between the life of dogs roaming Moscow streets and the life of humans aiming to explore space and using dogs to accomplish this. On the other hand, it foregrounds the idea that cruelty and suffering permeate both human and animal existence, making us more similar than we often tend to think.

And it is by emphasizing this similarity that *Space Dogs*, paradoxically, also presents the viewer with flashes of hope. We not only, the documentary suggests, share the ability to experience pain with



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non-human animals, but also the ability to alleviate each other’s suffering. This idea materializes briefly in several scenes in *Space Dogs*: we see a man bringing the stray dogs water when they are sleeping outside of a nightclub, another man giving them bones to chew on, and we notice the dogs in the archival footage licking each other’s fur and comforting each other in their state of panic. It is the urgency and importance of this dimension of our existence, I believe, that the ghost of Laika emphasizes as well, not only confronting us with the suffering that took place in the past, but also highlighting the compassion that could have prevented it.

Contributor’s details

Mathijs Peters lectures at the Philosophy Department at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. He has published on a wide variety of issues, including the critical dimensions of popular music, Schopenhauer and Adorno’s reflections on bodily suffering and Hartmut Rosa’s critical theory of modernity and acceleration.

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