

Going
Off Leash

GOING OFF LEASH Siavash Minoukadeh

Around two thirds of the way into Anne Haugsgjerd's *Good Girl... Sit Down!* (1991), a therapist's voice asks, 'What does freedom mean to you?' As we hear this, we watch two dogs mating. Do these dogs feel free? What do the dogs feel free from? Is the liberty we afford to animals to follow their sexual urges without judgement a liberty that we ourselves feel we lack?

Nobody asks the dogs what they think. They carry on mating, unaware that they are being filmed, and that this footage will appear in a short film that uses canine behaviour as a foil to the complexities, insecurities and neuroses of being human.

The dogs may not be aware of this, but the therapist's patient recognises that her perception of them reflects how heterosexual masculinity treats her. She speaks of purebreds and the shows in which these dogs compete (or in which they are made to compete), each creature fighting for attention and approval, judged against intricate and ultimately arbitrary standards of appearance and behaviour.

This woman can relate to these purebreds, whose every inch needs to be groomed immaculately, their every step rehearsed countless times in private. To even be eligible for these aesthetic and behavioural judgements, they must demonstrate the purity of their lineage – that they are not mixed with other, inferior stock. It is a canine matrix through which familiar human racist and classist attitudes become manifest. She seeks the seeming freedom of the mutt, of those who are ignorant of all this and allowed to desire and be desired freely.

It is 23 minutes past midnight on a January weeknight. As I sit at my desk, my dog is sleeping on her bed on the other side of the room, tucked under a blanket. I have just discarded the few hundred words that I had written for an earlier draft of this text. The draft had become filled with observations about my own dog which I had felt would be as charming for the reader as they were for me, ignoring the fact that for everyone else, my dog is more or less the same as any other. I felt that the text had become the canine equivalent of a child's drawing stuck to a fridge – cherished by the parent, but for a visitor no different or more valuable than any other drawing made by any other child.

My dog has just got up, turned around a few times and curled back up on her bed with a small grunt, fast asleep once again. She would be neither offended nor embarrassed to know that I am writing about her, or that I had discarded what I had written. This is not a reflection on her character. It is because she is a dog.

It is ironic that my efforts to articulate something about the canine condition have brought out distinctly un-canine feelings: self-doubt and concern regarding how we may be perceived. For both Haugsgjerd and myself, admiration for dogs' freedom from these debilitating sensations manifests itself in more of these same sensations. As much as the voice in *Good Girl... Sit Down!* wishes to be more dog-like and place desire over thought, she articulates this in the most

cerebral of therapy sessions. The film does more to attribute human thought to dogs than vice versa.

In my and Haugsgjerd's defence, we are hardly the first to do this. Humans' relationship with dogs has almost entirely been framed as an anthropomorphising one. We describe how we domesticated wolves, bringing their behaviour more in line with what humans could tolerate and benefit from. We say that dogs can understand us when they have learned that carrying out a certain action in response to a certain sound will result in a reward. My mother sent me a video that claimed to show the average IQ for a number of common breeds, as if a system that has been discredited for measuring human intelligence were still somehow applicable to dogs.

Taking stock of dogs in popular culture, I think of Aardman's newspaper-reading Gromit, Disney's spaghetti-twirling *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) and *Family Guy's* rationally-spoken Bryan. Off the top of my head, the first live-action dog that comes to mind is Messi from *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), who, much like my own dog, is named after a human celebrity. We have been domesticating dogs for millennia. In the century and a half or so that we have had the technology to create and present moving images, we have taken this yet further, articulating and popularising a vision of domesticated dogs that breeding and training have not yet managed to make material. The course of canine history, according to us, appears to be headed in a clear direction.

We rarely, if ever, consider if our own position has changed at all. I measure my own experience in decades rather than millennia and my relationship with my dog in years. Any change in myself over this scale is not going to be inscribed in the genome of our species, I am under no illusions about that. And yet I find myself more welcoming of mud around the place than I was before, more inclined to wake up early to satiate Tilda's urge for breakfast at dawn. Certainly, when I find myself hunched down, pulling a toy my dog wants to play with, the two of us growling at one another, I must reach the conclusion that my dog has trained me as much as I have trained her.

Yet while I philosophise about how dogs behave and Haugsgjerd dreams about behaving like a dog, in *Dog Lady* (2015), Laura Citarella and Verónica Llinás actually come to create a vision of what an anti-anthropomorphic dog-human relationship may look like. Here the dog does not behave like a lady, the lady behaves like a dog.

The film's pack of ten Argentinian mutts behave much as you would expect any dogs to behave if left to their own devices. They roam around looking for scraps, have momentary tussles and languidly fall asleep when they have nothing else they need to accomplish. Doing much the same is a woman played by Llinás herself. Carolee Schneeman said that she did not own her cats, affording them more agency in the human-animal relationship. A similar dynamic is at play here, with the dogs being cohabitants more than pets. The woman is just part of the pack, leaving the others when needed and falling back in later on. Communication is almost entirely non-verbal and instinctive.

The film doesn't push the boundaries of the believable in this regard. There is no Tarzan-like fantasy; this human remains a human though she is not limited by what this may mean for her. She wanders into buildings for medical appointments

and wanders out of them with the same ease. When the urge strikes her, she has sex and thinks little about it – one gets the feeling that the word 'situationship' or its Spanish equivalent would mean nothing to her. She recognises the judgement of others, of being laughed at, but this recognition does not draw any urge to respond. She has met the dogs in the middle, adapting to their lives without losing all her human behaviours, or wanting to.

What does freedom mean to her? I wonder if the question would mean anything to her or if she would care to articulate a response.

I had taken a break from writing this text. Absentmindedly, I had opened another tab to read the news. I see that the Israeli military has refused to leave southern Lebanon by a date set out in a ceasefire agreement, that Belarus is preparing to host another election which is set to extend the rule of its authoritarian leader still further, that the legal protections afforded to queer people in the United States – such as they were – have been revoked by executive order.

My dog continues to sleep soundly. Perhaps the freedom we see and envy in our dogs is the fact they do not have to think about their freedoms at all.