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Encountering the Cat: Developing an Aesthetic of Coexistence and a Reading of Kazushiro Soda's *Peace* (2010)

Abstract

This essay examines the way in which Soda's unobtrusive and observational documentary aesthetic facilitates an intersubjective encounter between man and animal, attuning one to non-anthropocentric forms of attention and gesturing towards modes of co-existence and community. The essay prepares this discussion by developing a mutual alignment between the gaze of the cat and the gaze of the camera, emphasizing their shared powers of defamiliarization and re-orientation.

During a performance in Vojtěch Jasný's 1963 film *Cassandra's Cat*, a young woman, elevated by a swinging seat and holding a cat wearing dark spectacles, addresses an audience.¹ As she removes the glasses from the cat, the room fades to dark, the camera holds on the cat's wide-eyed stare, and a swirl of bright colors filter the image. The camera, adopting the gaze of the cat, punctures habituated reality with a synesthetic unveiling of the townspeople's virtues and flaws: lovers glow in reddish hues, thieves turn a dull grey, hypocrites blush in shades of violet, and a brilliant blue emanates from the sincere and pure. Does this not resemble our own daily experience of looking a cat in the eyes?

The gaze between human and cat can be understood in the tradition of thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne, Paul Valéry, and Jacques Derrida as a site of disquieting speculation and revelation, an interspecies encounter that foregrounds the phenomenological gap between human and non-human species. Furthermore, this interspecies encounter between human and cat is recurrently framed as producing a peculiar unease. The peculiarity of this unease manifests in its capacity to turn introspective, forcing one to

recognize him or herself as alien to what Valéry calls an "animal system of ideas," and to re-evaluate an anthropocentric understanding of human being and knowing.² The cat's world or thoughts are often cast as isolated and unknowable, as Jorge Luis Borges describes in his ode, "To a Cat": "More remote, even, than the Ganges of the setting sun / yours is the solitude, yours the secret."³ Even in fictional worlds, like the phantasmagoria of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the cat does not answer questions; it only poses them.⁴ For artists and theorists alike, the cat is a totemic stalwart of unreadability whose contemplative gaze produces a sense of existential angst and curiosity. However, what is disturbing about the cat's frequent appearance in philosophy and literature is that, metaphorically and literally, we commonly turn away from that gaze, assign it a zone of privation, and deny the exchange a salience beyond angst and unknowing. Even if the philosophical and literary encounter with the cat provokes productive questions and lines of inquiry—animal rights, animal suffering, animal thought—the cat is rarely returned or engaged with on a direct, literal, concrete level. Instead, the cat is relegated to abstraction, a technology of contemplation rather than a responsive or enlightening being. As Donna Haraway so aptly questions in response to

Derrida's encounter with his cat and his subsequent digression into discussion of animal suffering: "say the philosopher responded?"⁵

Just as philosophy and literature draw upon the cat as a figure for existential speculation, so does cinema share a persistent fascination with cats. It is not just that the cat remains a recurring presence throughout cinema and media history—most animals enjoy moments of celluloid immortality—but rather that its appearance is privileged frequently by directors as being loaded with an excess of meaning, untranslatable signifiers that ignite a line of desire and inquiry while resisting conclusive assertions within discourse. For directors like Agnès Varda, Alain Resnais, and Chris Marker, the cat is their "totem animal," a constant presence throughout their works whose importance seems to lie in both their enigmatic status and a personal attachment and identification with the cat.⁶ The works of avant-garde filmmakers like Alexander Hammid, Stan Brakhage, and Carolee Schneemann similarly stress a personal attachment and relationship with their cats, as their quasi-autobiographical works like *Private Life of a Cat* (Hammid, 1944), *Cat's Cradle* (Brakhage, 1959), and *Kitsch's Last Meal* (Schneemann, 1976) stress the interwoven relationship and intimacy of human and cat life in domestic settings. While the cat's presence in cinema and media culture witnesses a variety of forms, ranging from anthropocentric flesh puppets (e.g. the manipulated movements of "Fatso the Keyboard Cat") to fetishized cuties (e.g. the droopy ears and pained mews of countless Scottish Fold YouTube videos) the directors listed above defer anthropocentric or fetishized representations of the cat, instead opting for a documentary aesthetic that deeply respects and engages with the cat and their alternative mode of perceiving the world.

This paper will focus on developing a theory of how one encounters the cat's gaze in cinema and the productive relationship between humans and cats fostered through the mediation of cinematic apparatuses. Through Kazushiro Soda's *Peace* (2010), I will argue that the cinematic gaze can approximate or at least mirror the cat's powers of defamiliarization, creating a temporary mutual alignment between the cat and apparatus. This alignment between animal and machine can be understood as unfolding the

cat's potential for attuning humans to new modes of being and relation, expanding and defamiliarizing our environment and habituated perception of the world. It is the cat's simultaneous nearness to and distance from human life that interests Soda, who explores the tension between the cat's estrangement from and intimacy with human life and the ways in which addressing this tension can forge interspecies communities between man and animal. In order to prepare discussion of Soda's film, this paper will develop a series of theoretical paradigms: first, the philosophical tradition of encountering the alterity of the animal's—and particularly the cat's—gaze, and second, the role of the cinematic apparatus in mediating human and animal encounters.

"Why the Cat?": Preparing for the Encounter

The cat's gaze cannot be considered as totally separate from the indifference of other animal gazes. One can easily cite the dark abyss of the grizzly bear's eyes described by Werner Herzog in *Grizzly Man* (2005), the unflinching stare of the owl in Chris Marker's *an Owl is an Owl is an Owl* (1990), or the ambivalently expressive gaze of Balthazar the donkey in Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) to develop similar theories of animal-human relations that resemble the cat and human encounter via cinema.

But why the cat? This paper is not arbitrarily privileging the cat/human encounter, but rather, responding to historical trends, cultural obsessions, and philosophical traditions which have consistently centered on interactions with the cat. In one respect, this paper is informed by what Jacques Lacan refers to as the cat's status as a *d'hommestique* animal: an animal "presumed to be outside of language, but who are nevertheless affected by the unconscious through their intimacy with humans and thus their proximity to, and haunting by, human language."⁷ In the tension between the cat's domestic familiarity and its wild, contingent, indifference, a uniquely "ambivalent dialectic of desire and disease" emerges that expresses the cat's entangled origin as a wild creature and its recuperation into domestic arrangements.⁸ A privileged interest in the cat is also driven by Derrida's "passion of the animal," expressed in his lecture on his relationship with his cat, "The

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Animal That Therefore I Am”: “seeing oneself seen naked under a gaze that is vacant to the extent of being bottomless, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret.”⁹ It is this particular confluence of ambivalent feelings initiated by the cat’s gaze in which Derrida’s concept of the “animal *séance*” comes to light: “the single, incomparable and original experience of the impropriety that would come from appearing in truth naked, in front of the insistent gaze of the animal, a benevolent or pitiless gaze, surprised or cognizant. The gaze of a seer, visionary, or extra-lucid blind person.”¹⁰ While Derrida locates the “animal *séance*” in the absolute otherness of his cat’s gaze, this paper will extend this “*séance*” to include the word’s French connotations with the film screening, framing the camera as an equally insistent gaze, a mechanical seer capable of exposing the world naked, unfiltered by man. In the recombinant relation of cat and apparatus, a doubled “*séance*” emerges, attuning one to new modes of approaching and familiarizing oneself with the cat’s negotiation of the world.

Paul Valéry’s “Animalities” places the cat within the category of animals that most “disquiet man,” an animal whose “shape, gaze and gait have in them something psychological.”¹¹ Valéry describes this “enigmatic aspect” of the cat to “work upon the nerves...as they were themselves hideous *private thoughts*,”¹² suggesting that the privation of the cat’s cognizant gaze horrifies in its inaccessible otherness, or that the cat’s penetrating and seemingly all-knowing gaze fantastically materializes one’s own private thoughts. For Valéry, the “disquiet” of an animal like the cat is that no one seems to know the cat and the cat seems to know everything, as its insistent and bottomless gaze registers an unknowable intelligence that can neither be confirmed nor denied. Valéry recognizes that the danger in meeting the gaze of the animal does not arise from the animal itself; rather, it is the “defense mechanisms” with which humans respond—whether they be humor, fear or imitation—that “constitute the real danger.”¹³ One could align our common YouTube encounters with the cat, through humor, imitation and violence, as “defense mechanisms,” ways in which we ignore a “most

obscure and most important world” of the animal.¹⁴ In a sense, the broad history of man’s relation to the cat through deification, disparagement, and sentimentalizing can be understood as a series of “defense mechanisms” aimed at avoiding the gaze of the cat and, by extension, excluding the possibility of an animal world and animal thought. This recurrent denial of animal agency and animal thought is not only a willful expression of ignorance but, more pressingly, becomes the ethical grounds by which merciless mistreatment and abuse is inflicted upon animal life.

In isolating the peculiar gaze of animals like dogs, cats, and fish, Valéry recognizes in these animals’ gazes a “notion of point of view, and of being-viewed by.”¹⁵ The animal gaze is insistently exclusionary, imagined as an inaccessible “point of view” and “reserve” for an “animal system of ideas”; a gaze in which man is a symbol or signifier that he is utterly ignorant of.¹⁶ Instead of reverting to “defense mechanisms,” Valéry’s writings accept man’s exclusion from pure access to animal thought, decentering an anthropocentric notion of phenomenology and opening up the possibility towards acknowledging the existence of alternative forms of perception and attention. In a short quotation in *Analects*, Valéry expresses this anti-anthropocentric sentiment in describing a fly walking on a mirror, suggesting that a fly would likely be unconcerned with a human desire to see one’s reflection; rather, the fly sees “on the smooth shining surface a host of very tiny things that it finds interesting but that we lump together under the names of dust and dirt.”¹⁷ While Valéry is obviously speculating on an inaccessible fly-gaze, he frames the potential of an animal gaze to be in its powers of defamiliarization and attention, renewing the surface of a mirror through attuning oneself to “tiny” particles uninterpretable by human perception. It is in the animal gaze’s potential for defamiliarization and fostering new forms of attention that one can begin to draw a connection between the animal and the camera.

Jennifer Faye’s “Seeing/Loving Animals: André Bazin’s Posthumanism” expands upon cinema’s relation to animals and nature, reframing Bazinian realism as “not merely the replication or record of the world as we humans perceive it... rather,

[Bazinian realism] reveals the details of animate and inanimate life that are lost to anthropocentric attention and history.”¹⁸ Similar to Valéry’s discussion of the animal gaze, cinematic attention has the potential to “show us the limits of human vision,” defamiliarizing our habituated patterns of looking and offering a “mode of intersubjective spectatorship” capable of bridging the “experiential gaps” between human and non-human beings.¹⁹

Bazin’s fascination with cinema and the animal arises from two distinct aspects relating to the camera’s technological basis. First, the “nonliving agent” of the film camera removes human intervention in the creative process, allowing for the contingency of nature to “imprint itself both photochemically and phenomenologically”; the “impassive lens” of the camera renews our habituated and preconceived perception of the world in a “virginal purity.”²⁰ In both cases, the camera’s technological basis allows nature to supplant the artist, undoing anthropocentric attention by liberating the world from a perception based on “human desire.”²¹ Faye ties Bazin’s notion of cinematic realism to Walter Benjamin’s concept of the optical unconscious, stressing their shared interest in the camera’s ability to unveil the details and spaces of nature that “typically elude our apperception.”²²

Developing Bazin and Benjamin’s shared theory of cinema’s revelatory capacity, Faye draws upon Miriam Hansen’s rereading of the aura and auratic perception to develop an understanding of cinema’s role in facilitating intersubjectivity between humans and animals. While Benjamin’s concept of the aura is usually drawn in relation to cinema through the cinematic image’s inherent objectivity and reproducibility, destroying the uniqueness or aura of an artwork and confronting “us with the conditions of human self-alienation,” Hansen argues that an “auratic mode of experience may return ‘through the back door of the optical unconsciousness.’”²³ Hansen contends that the defamiliarized word unveiled by the camera is “nothing but the material origin—and finality—that human beings share with non-human nature.”²⁴ Rather than view aura as an indication to the singular human presence in an artwork, aura is reframed by Hansen as a shared materiality: “[a] uniqueness and transience common

to humans, animals, artworks, and things.”²⁵ For Hansen, the film image’s objective unveiling of the world—optical unconsciousness—is a testament to the common material basis that equally unites and subjects all things and beings to contingency and decay.

While the camera’s unveiling of a shared materiality unites man and animal as equal subjects, it is through auratic perception that the potential for intersubjectivity between man and animal is fostered. Benjamin explains auratic perception as such:

Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.²⁶

This mutual exchange of looking and being looked at that constitutes the experience of auratic perception can be further developed through Paul Valéry’s concept of “exchanging looks.”²⁷ Described by Valéry as a “simultaneous, reciprocal limitation,” to exchange a look relies on exchanging the self and other: “You take my appearance, my image, and I take yours. You are not I, since you see me and I don’t see myself. What is missing for me is this ‘I’ whom you can’t see. And what *you* miss is the ‘you’ I see.”²⁸ In *Animalities*, Valéry describes this exchange of the “gaze-in-gaze” as “virtually double negation,” a convergence between beings by which the inscription of one in another is necessitated on the denial of one’s self.²⁹ To look at a cat is to take the cat’s image and for that cat to take yours: an acknowledgement of a cat’s point of view that reciprocates your human point of view. Although the potential for this intersubjective exchange between man and animal is made available in cinema, it is commonly denied through the cat’s anthropocentric deployment in cinema—the cat becomes service to human narratives, humor, and aesthetics.

While popular YouTube videos primarily

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prevent a respectful or non-anthropocentric relation to the cat through brief spectacularized images, there are notable exceptions. Located on the peripheries of YouTube, usually viewed by fifty to a hundred video scavengers, a substantial media practice of cat videos capture chance encounters of cats: a cat walks through a garden, a group of cats stare at falling leaves, a cat chases another cat through a field and then stares at the ocean, a cat stares at passing cars in the dark of night.³⁰ In these videos, one's encounter with the cat is unburdened by anthropocentric comic disparity, innocuous cuteness, or scientific curiosity. Rather than the subject of projection, mockery, or fetish, the mundane yet fascinating actions of these cats draws one to engage with these images in a way that diverges from the popular YouTube cat video. The viewer, confronted by a lack of explicit purpose or meaning to the video, is encouraged to acknowledge the cat not as performer or actor but rather as another life, initiating an intersubjective exchange of looks. As the viewer looks into the screen, effectively adopting the gaze of the camera, and stares at the cat, he or she is, in a sense, looking back onto him - or herself through the gaze of the cat—acknowledging that he or she is beholden by a creature capable of returning the gaze that has been turned on it. Furthermore, the often slow pace of these videos allow for one to contemplate the otherness of the cat's negotiation with the world and attune oneself to the cat's relations of speed and slowness in its environment. In watching a cat navigate through a garden—wandering between plants, licking the morning dew off leaves, batting a flower, staring off into the distance—one becomes witness to the cat's unique negotiation of his environment, uncovering alternate relations to the world and new forms of attention. In this sense, the interaction with the cat via moving image technology renews the world through a doubling effect, as our habituated perception is defamiliarized through both the large-scale transformation of the camera on the subjects it captures as well as the cat's own play and interaction with its environment.

The transformative powers of the cat and the camera can be diagnosed thusly: both the cat's gaze and the camera suffer from incessant amnesia; the world renews itself with every blink or cut. The cat has the uncanny ability to stare at a mundane object,

an ordinary environment, or even its owner with a gaze that belies its expected familiarity. One always meets a cat for the first time. Likewise, in every cut of the camera, the world is radically splintered, transformed, presented anew, and imbued with a singular perspective on the subject it captures. One always meets a camera for the first time. Moreover, it is an infectious amnesia, as the act of watching a cat or a film has the potential for one to get lost, to forget, and most importantly, to relearn. It is in this relearning where the potential of the cat's gaze via cinema emerges in the works of Soda, a filmmaker who brings to light a world which has been unlearned by anthropocentrism, a world in which animal and human collide and inform each other. For Soda, his aesthetic is one of coexistence: *un animot séance du cinema*.

A Circle of Cats: Coexistence and Community in Kazushiro Soda's *Peace*

During an interview with Kazushiro Soda concerning his aesthetic of observational documentary, Soda described the impetus of his style in Bazinian terms: "In our normal lives, we don't really observe the reality we see. We overlook most of the details of what we see. But when we look through the camera, the common scenery that everyone had unawares passed by is suddenly not familiar anymore."³¹ Recalling Bazin's notion of the camera's capacity to reframe preconceived forms of attention, Soda understands the camera as a device of defamiliarization and renewal. For Soda, his particular approach to documentary filmmaking is a practice void of scripting, exposition, and research. Freed of preconceptions, Soda's filmmaking unravels organically, filming whatever interests him, allowing the camera to draw out certain stories and discovering their thematic resonance and connections through the associational process of editing. Contrary to the dictates of his filmmaking practice, *Peace* originated from a commission by the DMZ Korean International Documentary Festival to make a film about peace and coexistence.³² Hesitant to undertake such a broad preconceived theme, one that for Soda "sound[ed] too politically correct...almost cliché," he nearly declined the offer.³³ Soda changed his mind after casually videotaping his father-in-law, Toshio Kashiwagi,

feeding some stray cats in his neighborhood in Kokayama, Japan. Observing the peaceful community of stray cats, Soda soon became aware of a male “thief cat” who threatened their unity, invading their territory and stealing their food.

Reminded of the problems humans face in negotiating community space, Soda began to conceive of a documentary that explored issues of coexistence through a community of cats. However, while shooting the relationship between his father-in-law and his cats, Soda also became interested in his father-in-law’s work as a welfare taxi driver and the way in which he cares for his clients. Following these two narrative threads and encountering a range of animal and human stories, Soda indirectly arrived at a film that explores coexistence among humans and animals and the ways in which both can mutually inform each other. Soda’s filmmaking regards animal life within an ambiguous continuity with human life, drawing upon the impassive and equalizing vision of the camera as a tool to illuminate and mediate this relationship. André Bazin, explaining the camera’s potential to combat anthropocentrism, wrote that “man in the world [of cinema] enjoys no a priori privilege over animals and things.”³⁴ Likewise, Soda grants man no “privilege” over animal, embracing the decentering vision that cinema enables to renew the world in a equalized vision of shared materiality and agency between man, animal and thing.

Peace begins with the sounds of mewing cats, a call of undifferentiated desire. Soda’s father-in-law, Toshio Kashiwagi, feeds and pets a group of stray cats, including a mangy thief cat that stands apart from the group. As the thief cat proceeds to disrupt, frighten, and steal food from the group of cats, the camera repeatedly meets his gaze. Lingering on the thief cat’s gaze, Soda asks viewers to contemplate their lack of understanding. That is, while viewers can recognize conflict between the cats, they remain alien to the animal politics of the community: why is the cat ostracized from this community? Why does the cat steal? What is he thinking? Rather than answer these questions, the expressive gaze of the thief cat tends to have an inward psychological effect, placing viewers outside of an animal system of ideas. Soda’s resistance to rationalizing the cat community’s animal politics throws such concepts of property and theft into relief, creating an

unresolved tension between the anthropocentric label of “thief cat” and the cat’s expressive and unknowable gaze. It is in Soda’s impulse to remain an observer within these animal interactions through which “the enigmatic aspect” of the animal emerges, highlighting the inaccessible otherness and “disquiet” of the cat community. Furthermore, in Soda’s negotiation between Toshio’s shared proximity with the cats and the film’s unobtrusive, yet intimate aesthetic, the film poetically articulates Lacan’s conception of *d’homestique*: the cat community is both intimately enfolded into Toshio’s domestic routine while operating under its own system of ideas.

The viewer’s phenomenological displacement is mirrored in the following scene, in which Toshio is shown caring for one of his welfare patients. His first client, a man with a congenital development issue that limits his physical and verbal capacity, demonstrates a mode of expression that, like the cat, is difficult to properly signify. While at moments he is able to verbalize words that express his desires, like “coffee,” his ambivalent utterances and expressive gaze constantly remind us of our inaccessibility into his thought process and perception of the world. While no one can claim to access another person’s mode of perception, Toshio’s clients heighten this realization, as their physical and verbal impediments become external reminders to their unique negotiation of the world. As well, Toshio’s voluntary service to aid people afflicted with congenital and physical issues has a political dimension, implicitly responding to Japan’s long history of eugenics and extreme prejudice against the disabled. Toshio’s respectful engagement with human and animal life allows a political dimension to enter the film without explicitly imposing meaning onto Toshio’s acts.

Soda’s interest in displacing the viewer from context and explanation extends throughout the film, as he repeatedly transitions between segments with footage unrelated to the narrative: an elderly lady walks painfully slowly towards and past the camera, a child falls to the ground crying, a group of turtles strike statuesque poses in the sun. Disparate and without context, these occurrences work towards widening the breadth of the film’s scope, attuning viewers to the varying speeds and slowness of other living beings. Appropriately, Soda

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brands his practice of filmmaking as observational documentary, as his gaze is content to remain at the level of observation, resisting the documentarian urge to explain or to impose meaning on his subjects.

While it is clear that the film's observational gaze and its lack of contextualization or exposition reinforce our inaccessibility into its subjects, the film nevertheless presents the possibility of bridging these experiential gaps while affirming and sustaining their difference. Breaking down the kanji signs for the film's title into its individual characters reveals a semiotic link to the way in which Soda unravels the film's coexistent philosophy. While the first character signifies flat, connoting peace's traditional association with equality, to be on the same level, its second character is a signatory combination of an ear of millet and a mouth, suggesting the act of eating. The recombinant relation of the first and second character connotes *to bring things together into a circular shape*. While it may be a signatory accident on Soda's part, the semiotic suggestion that peace is dependent on a coming together and sharing of food can be identified recurrently through Soda's film, most prominently in the film's cat narrative. Although Toshio is unable to communicate linguistically with his community of stray cats, the food he shares with them constitutes the foundation of his relationship with them, as well as the tension that disrupts their unity, as the thief cat disrupts their coming together by stealing food. While Toshio cannot understand the thief cat's motives, he nevertheless feeds him as well, indiscriminately engaging with all of the cats through the act of sharing. Although initially hostile and exclusionary, in the film's film scene, the thief cat looks into the camera, meows, and rubs himself against a grey and white cat. While the grey and white cat initially recoils with a hiss, both cats gradually begin to eat side by side. Responding to this cat-to-cat encounter, Toshio remarks "the thief cat seems to get along now. Yep. Little by little...he's behaving like an official member, which means other cats have accepted him." Although it is impossible to understand the nuances of the two cats' exchange and bonding, one can identify its outcome in the thief cat's entrance into the circle of cats and their shared meal. The film's final image, a circle of cats eating together, physically materializes the Japanese character for peace, imaging a peaceful

coexistent relationship of cats forged through Toshio's compassionate respect for animal life. Albeit phenomenologically separated, the film puts forth the act of sharing food as a means to widen the circle of experience between man and animal: we all eat, and while we eat, we are at peace.

Extending beyond Toshio's cat encounters, the act of sharing food also constitutes Toshio's relationship with his clients: the verbal impasse between Toshio and his first client's speech impediments are only overcome when the client manages to repeat the word "coffee," Toshio and his second client share a silent meal in a sushi restaurant, Mr. Hashimoto offers tangerines to Toshio's wife and she prepares a meal for him. While the majority of Toshio's clients are capable of expressing themselves, Soda recurrently captures and emphasizes moments in which verbal expression is limited. The act of sharing food is thus framed as a silent communion, a way in which experiential gaps are bridged and mediated.

Aside from the community of cats, the other recurring narrative thread in the film follows three visits with the welfare patient Hashimoto, an elderly man suffering from lung cancer. During Soda's final visit to Hashimoto with his mother-in-law, Hashimoto begins to recall wartime Japan, referring to the disposability of soldiers: "The price tag of a man in war was 1.5 sen"—the price of a postcard back to one's mother. Elaborating, he explains that it was an era in Japan in which no one complained about dying: "We were so cheap and disposable...we were educated that way...we were so proud of it." Opening up the film's reading of peace's signification, Hashimoto describes how the government sponsored Peace brand cigarettes to mark the end of wartime. Through the brand of Peace cigarettes, peace becomes ambivalently extended to mark the end of war, as well as the catalyst for Hashimoto's lung cancer. Hashimoto's melancholy recollection of wartime Japan's treatment of its citizens reminds the viewer of an exclusionary period in the history of Japan, developing a contrast to the acts of kindness and togetherness emphasized throughout the film. After finishing his speech, Hashimoto remarks "I wonder who will take charge of my funeral service, cremation..." to which Toshio's wife replies, "I will realize your wishes." The mother's act of kindness

juxtaposed against an ornament of a cat, caught in Soda's wandering gaze, a symbol that in this film signifies companionship and community. Symbolic accidents like this litter the film as Hashimoto also wears a tie with an image of a cat to the hospital, receiving warm compliments and bringing joy to the nurses and doctors that he encounters.

While Toshio's actions can be understood as a model by which coexistent relationships between animal and man can be constituted, it must also be stressed that Toshio refrains from imposing himself onto their community. Rather than attempt to domesticate and restrain them to his household, he allows the cats to come and go as they please. Describing his relationship with the cats, Toshio remarks:

[M]ost of the cats eventually disappear. When the number of cats exceed a certain level some voluntarily disappear...older cats hand it over to the younger ones... it's in their nature... really mysterious... I don't know where they go. No matter how hard I look for them I can't find them...it's like they are starting a new journey...so mysterious...for the past 20 years I've had many cats, four or five at a time...but they all left me one by one... they all quietly disappear one by one... such a mystery...and the younger ones remain.

Toshio's nonverbal and fluid relationship with his cat community calls anthropocentric conceptions of community as a relation of sameness and commonality into question. As suggested by Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*:

The community that becomes a *single thing* (body, mind, fatherland, Leader...) ...necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness. The truth of community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being.³⁵
In Toshio's lack of imposition onto the cat

community, his recognition of their separate bodies and modes of being, and his resistance to domesticate or restrain the cats, allowing them to come and go as they please, the community of *Peace* retreats from a "being of togetherness" to a "being-together": a fluid bond between distinct identities. It is in the phenomenological displacement between cat and human in which the "truth of community" arises, as "in a certain sense community acknowledges and inscribes the impossibility of its community."³⁶ Nancy's paradoxical assertion suggests that rather than understanding community as a fusion of entities absorbed into a "common-being," community is a "being-in-common," a reciprocal exchange, a "mutual interpellation" of identities that sustains differing modes of being. It is a way of being singular-plural: "you (and/and/is) (entirely other than) I."³⁷

In a similar way, Nancy's sense of community, and its extension of shared agency and individuality across entities, resounds with Derrida's substitution of the word animal for *animot*. *Animot*, a chimerical semiotic assemblage that accounts for an animal in the singular (*l'animal*), plural (*l'animaux*), and reflexively, its referential designator (*mot* or word), seeks to remedy the reductive categorization and homogenization of all nonhuman living creatures as "the animal."³⁸ Rather than view animals as "common-beings," *animot* ascribes the animal the potential to be being-in-common: distinct entities capable of mutual interpellation with animal and human life. It is through Toshio's voluntary, respectful and fluid interaction with animals in which *Peace* implicitly adopts the animal designator of *animot*, considering the multiplicity of animal life, animal communities and animal-human communities without absorbing them into a "*single thing*." In *Peace*, coexistence and community is not a pre-formed idea, but rather a fluid and contingent negotiation of entities, always in a process of becoming and undoing. Toshio respects the mysterious nature by which cats enter and exit his life. As cats come and go, for Toshio, the circle remains: that allusive and un-co-optable unity, stretching from the larger communities of Okayama to Toshio's backyard.

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Luke Kuplowsky is a graduate of the University of Toronto's Cinema Studies Masters Program. His academic interests revolve around Hong Kong Cinema, found footage and amateur filmmaking. Luke also dedicates his time to musical projects and films short, absurd films with his brothers.

Notes

- 1 Vojtech Jasný, *Cassandra's Cat* (Prague: Filmovye Studio Barrandov, 1968).
- 2 Paul Valéry, "Animalities," in *Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Volume 2: Poems in the Rough*, ed. H. Corke (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 82.
- 3 Jorge Luis Borges, "To a Cat," *The Gold of the Tigers: Selected Later Poems: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Alastair Reid (New York: Dutton, 1977), 45.
- 4 Lewis Carroll, John Tenniel, and Roger L. Green, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: And, Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971). Derrida elaborates on Carroll's enigmatic cat in his work *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.
- 5 Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 19.
- 6 Carol Mayor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida*, La Jetée, Sans soleil and Hiroshima mon amour (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 9.
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