

We Are Animals: The Allegorical Potential of Animals in Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs*



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Introduction

Wes Anderson is mainly known for his cult movies *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). In 2009, he created *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*, based on Roald Dahl's story. This movie adaptation was his first stop-motion film starring loquacious animals. On 23 March 2018, Anderson released his second stop-motion film, *Isle of Dogs*. This movie also featured talking animals, "all handled with Anderson's signature combination of archness, impeccable style and painful emotion" (Rosenburg). The movie was well received by critics¹ and was nominated for an Oscar, Golden Globe, and BAFTA award in the best animated movie category. Anderson also received a Silver Bear for his work as best director during the 68th Berlin International Film Festival.

On the level of story, *Isle of Dogs* portrays how talking canines are deported from the fictional Japanese city Megasaki to Trash Island, in order to be exterminated in camps by wasabi gas. Through this story, the film presents a myriad of social themes such as social ostracism, deportation, and imprisonment, but also political themes such as totalitarianism, the creation of laws by a dominant socio-political group against others, and aggressive state propaganda against minorities.

Because the film is simultaneously an animated picture involving talking animals and a work of socio-political critique, the movie and its central themes can be perceived differently by both children and adults (Rosenburg). For children, *Isle of Dogs* tells the tale of a boy's desperate quest to find his lost dog. For adults, however, themes of imprisonment such as dogs in camps allude to American soldiers in Japanese POW camps, Japanese

¹ Major English news outlets such as *The Atlantic* and *Wall Street Journal* reviewed the movie as "refined and poignant" and "astonishing [and] touching" respectively. *New York Magazine* even praised the movie as "sui generis."

American citizens in American internment camps, and the large amount of Jewish people in German concentration camps. For many adults watching the film, animals, and the dogs specifically, become allegorical vehicles for historical tenors. Moreover, contemporary political philosophies such as Trumpism² are also respectively scrutinized, criticized, and satirized in the film, adding another layer of political allegory to this richly allusive film. In turn, the references to the various events that took place during the Second World War draw out contrasts and parallels with current American politics, emphasizing that history can repeat itself, according to Anderson.

Specific academic research and critical elaborations on *Isle of Dogs*' possible allegorical meanings and its intertextual relations to earlier animated animal allegories remain meagre due to the film's still recent release. The elaborations that exist are mostly non-academic articles and reviews written by major news outlets around the time of the movie's release. While Lauren Wilford's *The Wes Anderson Collection: Isle of Dogs* discusses many important facets of the movie, the book focusses mostly on the influence of Japanese cinematography and the creation of the dolls rather than the historical contexts to which the film alludes and the current political significance of the story. By dissecting the film's allegorical potential, intertextual relations with previously produced animated political allegories, and its satirical content, this thesis will fill a current academic gap in the research on *Isle of Dogs*.

In the following chapters, this thesis will decipher and explicate the allegorical and satirical potential of animals in *Isle of Dogs*. It will argue that the movie's clever references regarding contemporary American politics and historical events actually highlight its

² Trumpism depicts Donald Trump's political approaches and philosophies. Ron Christie, "a Republican analyst who worked in the White House of George W Bush," especially explains that Trumpism is "what the president believes on any particular moment on any particular day about any particular subject; he could believe he's against climate change on Monday, and Tuesday, he could come back to you and say I am the most ardent believer in climate change, but by Wednesday he could go back to his previous position" (Sopel).

allegorical potential. In turn, Anderson uses this intertextuality as a tool to express his personal views on these themes (Wilford 250). With the talking dogs performing the function of allegorical vehicles, Anderson created a perfect platform to send out a plea to his audience for a stronger, cooperative society and a change in America's current politics. Opting for an animated movie allowed Anderson ample control over his imaginative work and "to be heard far and wide without fear of compromise" (McCloud 212) because of the malleability of the medium. To further underscore the polysemous nature of the film and its broad appeal, an empirical study will determine how the movie's references and allegorical themes differently impact the children's and adults' viewing experience, and will also prove that the interpretation of an allegory cannot be controlled fully by the maker of the allegory.

The first chapter will present the critical methodology employed to analyse the film. This methodology will explain and outline the theories and definitions used throughout the thesis's other chapters. Specific analyses of earlier animal allegories appear in chapter 2. These texts and cartoons have been selected due to their influential status to later works and Anderson's movie. Moreover, this chapter will also discuss how the definition of allegory has evolved through the ages and different works. The intertextuality and the allegorical and satirical potential of *Isle of Dogs* will be thoroughly scrutinized in chapter 3. Finally, the results of the empirical research on the different viewing experiences of children and adults and the interpretation of the movie's allegory by the public will be discussed in chapter 4.

1 Methodology

The methodological framework for this thesis consists of a combination of literary-critical and empirical methods. Firstly, previously published and released animal stories and cartoons will be analysed to determine *Isle of Dogs*' intertextual relation to key allegorical forebears. This comparative analysis will be conducted through the lens of theories about allegory and animal allegory developed by Oerlemans, Ortiz-Robles, Spiegelman, and Tambling. Ortiz-Robles defines allegory as “a narrative figurative construction often used for didactic purposes, whereby a story or character is made to represent an alternative story or character” (Ortiz-Robles 178). The earlier animal allegories analysed are Miguel de Cervantes's *Dialogue Between Scipio and Berganza* (1613), Disney's *The Thrifty Pig* (1941), Edmond-Francois Calvo's *The Beast is Dead* (1944), both George Orwell's and Batchelor & Halas's *Animal Farm* (1945 and 1954 respectively), Robert Taylor's *The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat* (1974), and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1996). *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* has also been consulted for both these works as well as *Isle of Dogs* to determine the meaning behind certain common phrases, allegorical stories and references.

Secondly, the theories of intertextuality by Allen and Sanders regarding allusion, appropriation, and satire will inform the analysis of *Isle of Dog*'s thematic and formal relations to classic and contemporary cartoons such as *Animal Farm*, *Maus*, *The Beast is Dead*, and *The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat*. Intertextuality is concerned with the way in which various textual media, or ways of perceiving texts and topics are incorporated into other texts through unique forms of reference such as appropriation, quotation, and allusion.

Allusion, appropriation, and satire are three often reappearing critical terms within intertextual studies. As such, these terms need to be properly defined. A reference that is allusive is a “limited figure” of the “structural whole” (Allen 98). It is common for these references to be very cryptic as they could only refer to a very small segment of a very dense

work of art.³ Indirect references to different works or notions are called appropriations. By appropriating a work, “[works] become one’s own.” This “means that [these works are] never wholly one’s own,” but that they “[are] always already permeated with traces of other [works or] other uses” (Allen 28).⁴ Finally, a satire is a work or “a text which ridicules or ironically comments on socially recognizable tendencies or the style or form of another text or author” (Allen 225). Most, if not all, satires contain a “moralistic intention” (Allen 225) to criticize certain elements of its source work. Therefore, satires are often made to express concerns in a humoristic or light-hearted manner. The following arguments will explain how Anderson’s film alludes to, appropriates, and satirizes various historical events and contemporary American right-wing politics to explore a multitude of themes.

As *Isle of Dogs* is riddled with various cinematographical, historical, and political references, it is often complex for the audience to depict the movie’s actual meaning or to determine a set allegory. In other words, Anderson has created a work that can be viewed or interpreted in many different ways by the audience,

most of which are correct. Because of that, the audience is given a large amount of freedom to interpret the film's message or meaning. However, the interpretations are not endless as they are still set by contexts, intertexts, themes, genre elements and formal properties of a work. Fig. 1 displays how the story’s meaning might differ per person. For example,

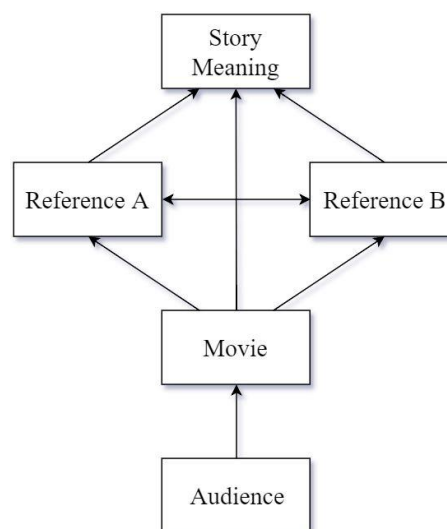


Fig. 1 Interpretation chart.

when a person from the audience notices a certain reference yet not a different reference, it

³ This is comparable to how Anderson subtly alludes to events from the First and Second World War in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

⁴ For instance, in *Isle of Dogs*, Anderson appropriated the Japanese culture to create his own faux-Japanese setting.

becomes possible that the story's generated meaning is entirely dissimilar from that of a person who actually notices the other references, neither or all of the movie's references. Because of that, "an allegory rests on few a priori assumptions, but requires a negotiation of probable common grounds for interpretation and engagement" (Hunter 266).

To further support the points made in this thesis, interviews, movie reviews, and Wilford's *The Wes Anderson Collection: Isle of Dogs* (which has been co-authored by Anderson himself and a large portion of the cast and crew) will be utilised to accurately determine the movie's central themes and references and to regulate far-fetched clarifications of *Isle of Dogs*. Scholarship on historical events, such as the aforementioned prison- and interment-camps, will also be utilised to regulate historical facts in the allegories and intertextuality analysed. For that matter, Daws's research on Japanese POW camps in *Prisoners of the Japanese* (1996), Robinson's research on American internment camps in *A Tragedy of Democracy* (2010), and Gutman's research on Nazi-German ideology and concentration camps in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (1998) have been chosen. Information regarding contemporary politics will be gathered from various major and reputable news outlets. Moreover, the movie's screenplay allows for easily extracted quotes from the script that allow a better understanding of some themes, references, and contexts because of the script's elaborations on certain expositions.

Finally, a limited empirical study has been conducted to determine the extent to which children and adults interpret the movie differently, especially to confirm the conveyed animal allegory. This empirical study was developed in the tradition of the various "qualitative approaches" (Hakemulder 30) discussed in *The Moral Laboratory*.⁵ Permission was given to screen the film on 21 February 2019 at De Bunders primary school in Veghel and to interview

⁵ Besides the "qualitative approaches" (Hakemulder 30), Hakemulder also discusses a multitude of different empirical reader-response studies in *The Moral Laboratory*. By juxtaposing these studies, the true relevance of these studies are determined and evaluated in this work.

the children who have watched the film. After this screening, a total of twenty-eight children were interviewed. Of these interviews, English translated transcriptions from the interviews that were held in Dutch have been made available in the appendix for referential material and as a proof to elucidate some of the results. On 16 April 2019, a self-organized screening of the film for adults was set up. This screening was promoted through the Albion Association, the Popular Culture course of the BA English programme at Leiden University, and the Literary Studies Facebook group. During this screening, nine adults were asked the same questions as the children through a form. These questions will be further explained in chapter 4. Babette van Velzen, who currently is a student at the International Tourism Management program at the Tio University of Applied Sciences in Eindhoven, helped to conduct the interviews and to process the results from the screenings. Thanks to her abilities, she proved to be a valuable aid for the creation of the screenings' end results. Astrid Erll's *Memory in Culture* and Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* will also be used to theoretically frame and explain the logic behind some of the gathered results. Naturally, all participants that have been interviewed remain anonymous for privacy reasons. Instead, the participants have been given a number for identification and comparison instead.

2 Animal Allegories as a Genre

From medieval times until the present day, animals have been deemed useful metaphorical vehicles in telling stories. On a base level, allegories are “historically associated with the personification of abstract qualities” (Ortiz-Robles 178), such as greed, love, and honesty. However, allegories are “more recently thought to be the rhetorical matrix which sustains the theory of tropes” (Ortiz-Robles 178). In other words, the definition of allegory now represents an overarching term which encapsulates all possible applications of the definition and its methods of referencing in comparison to only being linked to the basic or classic allegory. This chapter presents a specific analysis of both the usage of animals and allegory in both classic and contemporary cartoons. This is to determine the different definitions of allegory, understand how animals act as allegorical vehicles, and how they act as a source of inspiration in creating the allegorical story of *Isle of Dogs*.

Especially during medieval times, animals were given various allegorical statuses in certain modes of storytelling, mostly in allegories. These statuses often derived from medieval bestiaries, which were guides “to animals that included descriptions of the symbolic meaning of textual animals” (Oerlemans 297). In terms of their allegorical meaning, the animal descriptions consisted of plain “A equals B” (Tambling 27) equations. For example, a dog stood for loyalty and healing characteristics. Thus, classic animal allegories did not consist of latent meanings but of quite overt, and sometimes obvious, descriptions of what animals stood for which were didactic in nature. Because of the abstract human traits with which the animals were closely associated, the animals also often appeared as characters in fables and folktales to efficiently satirize mankind’s “contemporary life and events” (Dent 1169). As such, the moral messages of the overtly didactic stories, were easily recognizable and comprehensible by the readers.

One of the most well-known medieval beast epics is *Reynard the Fox* (1170). In this tale, the loquacious animals “allegorically reveal an explicit vice or virtue, or some other form of folk-wisdom” (Oerlemans 297), which has the function to satirize aspects of mankind. Even though many variations exist of this beast epic, the medieval bestiaries explain that the fox’s characteristics are “cunning, mockery, pride, arrogance and charm” (Ortiz-Robles 66). Because of that, as Ortiz-Robles argues, “the text’s characterization of Reynard already tells us something about how other characters regard him, as well as about how we should understand his deceptive character and thus about how we ought to judge him” (67). Hence, the readers were able to already predict the tale’s moral purely based on the animal’s intrinsic allegorical value which derived from the bestiaries.

An early-modern European text containing talking dogs is Miguel de Cervantes’s *Dialogue Between Scipio and Berganza*. Published in 1613, the short text tells the story of Berganza and Scipio, two dogs which have received an “unexampled favour [from] heaven” to conduct “intelligent discourse” (Cervantes). In the story, the dogs recount all the experiences in their lives. However, as the story progresses, it becomes evident that their verbal gossiping would be as harmful as physical biting if dogs were able to loquaciously express themselves. Specifically, Cervantes presents his audience with an allegorical tale that teaches its readers that not only physical violence, but also words can greatly hurt.

More importantly, Cervantes’s text shows an evolution that allegories do not portray simple “A equals B” (Tambling 27) explanations anymore. Cervantes implicitly acknowledges that by letting Scipio and Berganza discuss their own tropes: “what I have heard highly extolled is our strong memory, our gratitude, and great fidelity; so that it is usual to depict us as symbols of friendship” (Cervantes). However, by mocking their previous owners and friends, it becomes obvious that they are not that friendly or gratuitous as they describe themselves. If anything, it proves that they are certainly not the loyal and healing

characteristic animals as described in the medieval bestiaries anymore. Therefore, the book can be regarded as both an allegory on the harm of gossiping and a satire which undercuts the straight, classical allegory of animals. In other words, it becomes obvious that the animals used in allegories become more polysemous as the standard images increasingly become “associated with diverse meanings” (Tambling 27) in contrast to the classical tropes.

Since Cervantes’s work appeared, plenty of other allegorical and non-allegorical works with animal protagonists have been published. Jane Spencer explains that the late eighteenth century saw a vogue of stories revolving around animals, of which the most notable examples are Dorothy Kilner’s *Life and Perambulations of a Mouse* (1783), Sarah Trimmer’s *Fabulous Histories* (1786), and Edward Augustus Kendall’s *Keeper’s Travels in Search of his Master* (1798). Many of these stories were innocuous children novels such as Beatrix Potter’s immensely popular *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902). Yet, the purpose of allegorical animal characters has shifted radically since the Great War. For instance, animals started to more prominently appear in propagandist posters to promote certain politics. However, the animal allegory, and the allegory in general, really started to evolve into a complex concept around the Second World War when the political aspects became incorporated in various texts and cartoons. One of the first serious political animal allegories concerning “what was going on in the real world” (Shaw 99) was Karel Čapek’s *War with the Newts* (1936), which ends “on a note of pessimism and warning” (Shaw 102) about the dire consequences of the rise of Nazi Germany.

In the beginning of the Second World War, the Canadian government commissioned Walt Disney to create anti-Nazi propaganda cartoons. One of them was *The Thrifty Pig*, released in 1941 and created by Ford Beebe. At first, the cartoon comes across as a harmless and entertaining children’s cartoon about *The Three Little Pigs*. Nevertheless, with the Big Bad Wolf depicted as a Nazi and the blaringly large words that promote war bonds,

demanding that you should “lend your savings” to “invest in victory” (Beebe), it becomes obvious that this cartoon is in fact a political adaptation of the folk tale. For instance, the cartoon displays how the Nazified Big Bad Wolf is unable to break the house that was built on war bonds (see Fig. 2). This exemplifies that the cartoon and the story in itself can also be regarded as a polysemous allegory, as it both still depicts the traditional fable, but at the same time was a propagandist tale on how



Fig. 2 *The Nazified Big Bad Wolf blowing against the war bonds house (Beebe)*

Germany would have no chance of winning the war because of war bonds. Moreover, the Big Bad Wolf as an animal becomes allegorical for a “tangible and immediate enemy” (Shale 33) that was Nazi Germany, whilst the pigs become allegorical for Canada’s “patriotism” (Shale 35). In the case of this cartoon, it appears that the animals are suitable vehicles for a political allegory, pushed as a propagandist measure of the Canadian government to further amplify the nation’s patriotism. In fact, it shows that propaganda and classic allegory go hand in hand as both seek to educate the audience, even though their ultimate purposes radically differ.

In 1944, Edmond-Francois Calvo published his graphic novel *The Beast is Dead*. The graphic novel explains the history of the Second World War as a children’s tale with animals as the main characters. However, since the war was still ongoing during its publication, the ending presents a fantasized conclusion in which the French are the ultimate victors. In fact, the ending is a moment of French self-glorification as it depicts an imitation of the French Revolution. According to Michael O’Riley, the work is a piece of “self-castigating [...] national narcissism” (41), which narrates “the trauma of national crisis in terms of quasi-ethnic affiliation and identity” (42). In that case, the animals are rather “stereotypical animal figures, creating allegories for nationhood and political affiliation” (O’Riley 43). This is comparable with how Winston Churchill is depicted as a strong bulldog and ally, simply

because England was often portrayed as a bulldog because of Churchill's possession of a bulldog as a pet (see Fig. 3). It can also be argued that portrayals of the inherent characteristics of the corresponding animals are given, just as the medieval "A equals B" allegories. For example, just as in *The Thrifty Pig*, the wolf is also portrayed as a Nazi (see Fig. 4). Calvo himself

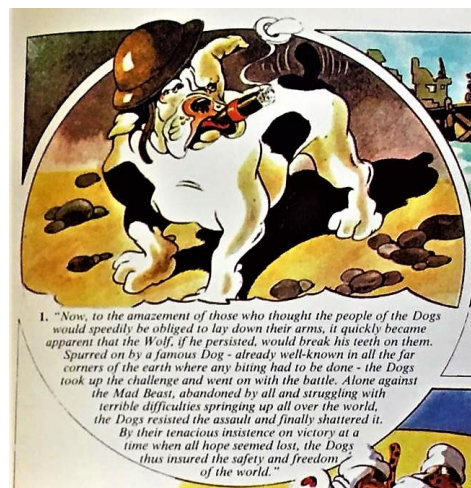


Fig. 3 Bulldog Churchill (Calvo 37)

explains this choice of animal by calling Adolf Hitler and the Nazis the "most hypocritical, most treacherous [wolves] you can imagine" as "in Germany everybody is born without a heart" (Calvo 7). Juxtaposing Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 also shows that the Allies are presented as strong characters, while the Axis are portrayed as silly



Fig. 4 Wolf Hitler, pig Göring, and polecat Göbbels (Calvo 46)

characters. This is because "one has to be able to differentiate between friend and foe" (Calvo 8) within a work of propaganda. To sum up, the graphic novel is not per se a profound allegory, but more of a French glorification of the Allies and defamation of the Axis.

In 1945, a mere two weeks before the official end of the Second World War in Europe, George Orwell published *Animal Farm*. Just as in *The Beast is Dead*, the main characters are "stereotypical animal figures" (O'Riley 43), this time creating separate allegories for political ideologies and civilian life. This is perceptible with how Old Mayor alludes to the Marxist ideologist, Boxer the workhorse refers to the working class, the sheep are the faithful common folk, and how the bourgeoisie, upper-class is portrayed as the pigs. Nevertheless, on an allegorical level, the animals and story in *Animal Farm* collectively stand for "the Stalinist purges and a trenchant satire of totalitarianism" (Ortiz-Robles 172). With the commandments

of Animalism, such as “whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy” and “all animals are equal” (Orwell 15), the animals strive “to topple the humans who exploit them” (Ortiz-Robles 172). These commandments based of animal characteristics enable the story to be read as an allegory for the October Revolution. When the final commandment eventually transforms into the novel’s infamous quote: “ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL, BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS” (Orwell 90), the political and civilian injustice that the animals are enduring is highlighted. The injustice reaches its zenith at the end of the novel when the animals notice that “the creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig; [...] it was impossible to say which was which” (Orwell 95). This passage’s anthropomorphism, in which the animals are depicted in “a human form” (Ortiz-Robles 278), alludes to Cervantes’s *Dialogue Between Scipio and Berganza*, as it shows that the animals are as cruel as humans when they possess human characteristics. But on the contrary, it is obviously allegorical for that humans can be as savage as animals as well; a behaviour that should not be condoned and fought against.

Following the success of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Halas & Batchelor’s produced an animated adaptation of the story in 1954. Their cartoon shows a high degree of fidelity to Orwell’s narrative. However, one of the key differences is found in the ending. Shortly after the animals discover that “the creatures outside looked from pig to man” (Orwell 95) (see Fig. 5), the cartoon adds a new scene in which the animals visually revolt against the pigs and overthrow them. The addition of this new scene



Fig. 5 The clothed, human looking pigs (Halas & Batchelor)

is quite radical as it ultimately alters the meaning of the ending. Considering the date of the adaptation’s release, it makes sense that this extra scene, which creates the ending’s new

meaning, would allude to the Marshall Plan and the involvement of Communist Russia in Europe. In that sense, the cartoon becomes a plea that people should not condone and rise up against the practices of Russia during that time. Therefore, Halas & Batchelor's film should be understood as a "reinterpretation" of Orwell's *Animal Farm*, since the story is put "in new context" and is reworked and revisioned for a new audience (Sanders 123).

Although often suggested,⁶ it is a common misconception that the *Tom and Jerry* cartoons in the 40s and 50s refers to the Second World War; their names simply do not allude to British Tommys and German Jerrys. The similarity of the names is mere coincidental, and the creation of their names was purely random as "their names were [separately] chosen from hundreds of suggestions submitted by studio employees in a contest held at MGM, the film company that launched them" (Dent 1392). Furthermore, Tom is almost always outsmarted by Jerry. It would not make sense for an American film company during that period to constantly portray the seemingly figurative German mouse as the ultimate victor in an allegorical conflict with the British cat. If anything, it would be more logical if the names were reversed, or that Tom would constantly outsmart Jerry, so that it became a propaganda like cartoon, just as Disney's *The Thrifty Pig*.

In 1974, Robert Taylor released the absurd animated film *The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat*, a sequel to Ralph Bakshi's original animated version of the famous satirical Crumb cartoon. The movie shows how a stoned feline named Fritz recounts his previous lives. In his third life,⁷ Fritz was a Nazi. This was one of the first depictions of a cat as a Nazi (see Fig. 6), not yet with a specific latent meaning as was apparent in the Nazism of a wolf. However, it is possible that the portrayal is not completely coincidental, as Fritz was "a nickname for a German [which] was widely used by British Forces in the First World War [before] it was

⁶ On community-based websites such as *Reddit* for instance.

⁷ The third life is a clever word play on the third Reich, which was the term used for the Nazi German empire.

largely replaced by Jerry” (Dent 561) in the Second World War. The movie’s actual story is in fact an allegory of how not to live a proper life. Matters such as sleeping with someone else’s wife, being a Nazi, and being racist against



Fig. 6 Fritz the Cat as a Nazi in his third life (Taylor)

African Americans are satirically glorified. Yet, in Fritz’s case, the undertaking of these foul deeds ultimately lead to the punishment of death. Therefore, the story should be labelled as an ironic allegory because it “says one thing and means another” (Tambling 175). That being said, the story’s allegory actually portrays and satirizes mankind’s naivety regarding what is considered living a good life, as Fritz is adamant that he “lived the best lives [he] was capable of” (Taylor). Even though Fritz does evaluate his life decisions at one point and call his interactions in his past lives “minor infractions of society’s rules” (Taylor), he makes clear that he is still not fully aware of the harm he causes to others. Due to that, in an absurd and ironic way, the audience is presented with an allegorical cautionary tale on how to live a decent life without harming others.

Art Spiegelman published *Maus* in 1996.⁸ Of the discussed works in this chapter, *Maus* most clearly shows the contemporary “mobility of allegorical forms” as it becomes more difficult to “represent one single allegorical state” (Tambling 53). Whereas *The Beast is Dead* deals with “the trauma of national crisis” (O’Riley 42), the traumas discussed in the stories of *Maus* are more personal and is allegorical for both Vladek’s experience of being a Holocaust survivor who lived in Poland during WWII, but also for how Art carries Vladek’s trauma at the same time. Due to that, Spiegelman uses the animal allegory as a form to reach

⁸ The information in this paragraph was also already largely explored in my previous essay “Imagining the Unimaginable: How Cartoons Convey Trauma and Catharsis through Artwork and Drawings” which was written for Leiden University’s American Comics Against the Code MA course.

catharsis, which is the “purgation or purification” of emotions achieved through art (Baldick). These stories exhibit “a painful resurfacing of events of traumatic nature” (Bal viii): Spiegelman both meditates on his father’s harsh past but also on the troublesome and depressing creation process of *Maus*. For that matter, *Maus* portrays how trauma is witnessed by a second person; the “second person [needs] to act as a confirming witness to a painfully elusive past” (Bal x). Yet again, both Art and the audience act like “mediators” as witnessing the recount of Vladek’s narrative is a “potentially healing act” (Bal x). In Art’s case, the witnessing of the audience is the only available mediator for Spielman’s trauma and memories of his father’s recounts. Spiegelman explains that the artwork in the comic format was ideal for “restructuring [his] father’s narrative” (*MetaMaus* 165). The allegorical usage of animals in the artwork allows the audience to empathize more easily with the characters as they can project themselves on the animals. At first glance, the animals of *Maus* are allegorical for the “cat-mouse metaphor of oppression” (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 113). In this case, the cats portray the Nazis and the Polish Jews are portrayed by the mice. Nonetheless, the utilisation of animals in the graphic novel also mitigates the trauma and the actual horror people had to endure. Spiegelman himself elucidated that the “animal masks [allowed] to approach otherwise unsayable things” (*MetaMaus* 127). The frame of Art sitting on a pile of dead bodies (see Fig. 7) is quite a shocking image, yet the image is made more feasible because of the unrealistic animals. The



Fig. 7 Spiegelman's portrayal of humans as mice (Spiegelman, *Maus* 201)

grotesque animals essentially function as a filter to weaken the traumatic nature and to make the story more accessible for a wider audience. The execution scene (see Fig. 8) is another good example for how the animals are being utilised as a filter for traumatic scenes. The image of the



Fig. 8 The execution scene (Spiegelman, *Maus* 63)

cartoony cats executing the mice slightly mitigates the horror of realistic executions. It even almost gets a dark humoristic tone due to the absurd looking and laughing cats. Contrarily, if this were a realistic photograph, people laughing during an execution would have been considered highly disturbing and traumatic. As was mentioned earlier, both Art and the audience are mediators for Vladek's traumas whilst the audience is a mediator for Art's traumas. Yet with this graphic novel and the animals in the artwork, a certain healing process has been created which makes catharsis possible. Spiegelman even calls the animal "cipher" to be more "real" as it allowed his "emotionally charged expressionistic rendering of [his] own trauma" to be more prominent (*MetaMaus* 149).

The aforementioned texts and cartoons show that animal allegories have evolved from having a simple "A equals B" (Tambling 27) equation to having a more postmodern nature where the audience must determine the story's allegorical value due to the increasing polysemous nature of allegory.⁹ It also shows that allegories, even though they most often appear in cautionary tales, are also a useful tool for propagandist or cathartic means. Using animals as a vehicle to convey a message or to tell a story allows authors to have more liberty in persuading, convincing, or communicating with their audience. This is because animals

⁹ Important to note is that not every cartoon or text containing animal characters, such as *Tom and Jerry*, contains an allegory. Plenty of cartoons with animal characters have simply been made for the purpose of entertainment rather than being didactic.

offer a filter to detract from real life which, in turn, eases the audience into fathoming the cautionary tales, traumatic experiences, and even propaganda. But most importantly, especially in *Maus* and *Isle of Dogs*, the anthromorphism offers the audience a blank slate to conveniently project themselves upon the offered animalistic vehicles due to their “similarity” (Ortiz-Robles 113) with mankind. Therefore, often unconsciously, the audience actually are the animals themselves; or as Franz Kafka would argue: “to animalise is humane” (9).

The following chapter will elucidate how the aforementioned works tie in with the allegorical story of *Isle of Dogs*, but also how the movie cleverly creates a polysemous allegory with its plethora of unique appropriations and allusions to historical and political themes and events.

3 Dissecting the allegorical and satirical potential of *Isle of Dogs*

Isle of Dogs has been talked of as a metaphor and a response to the rise of Trump, despite the fact that the movie has been in the works for many years. [Bill] Murray says: ‘It’s kind of a miraculous collision, a coincidence that these things are happening. It wasn’t intentional to be this political, I mean who would have thought the politics of this movie would resonate with the politics of the world, that the extremity of the Kobayashis trying to eradicate dogs would be such an allegory of what’s happening on the planet, in my country? So, it’s a coincidence but I think that happens with real artists, they kind of feel something before it gets there.’ (Aftab)

While the movie is a celebration of Japanese cinematography, such as how Akira Kurosawa’s movies were shot and directed, and features “Japanese voice actors and iconography,” *Isle of Dogs* “isn’t really about the East Asian nation” (Coomes). Anderson has created a faux Japanese setting to mostly satirize non-Japanese, American-centric history, politics, and social matters.¹⁰ For instance, the creation of the fictional Japanese Megasaki City creates an “ordinary otherworldliness” (Wilford 11). This fictional geography has been “integral” (Wilford 11) in Anderson’s films since *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). However, even though *Moonrise Kingdom*’s geography highlighted that “for [its] characters, it’s the heart, not the compass, that fixes one’s position in the world,” *The Grand Budapest Hotel*’s geography already created an allegory about “World Wars I and II [...] with the Prussians, the Fascists, and the Communists blurring into one persistent threat to happiness” (Wilford 11). Even though *Isle of Dogs* follows *The Grand Budapest Hotel* in its

¹⁰ In 1597, Thomas Nash and Ben Jonson created the play *The Isle of Dogs*, which was a satire on England and its nobility. It is possible that Anderson was inspired by this play and gave him the idea to create a satire on America, its history, and its politicians.

depiction of an allegorical setting, it is a stop-motion film unlike the aforementioned movies. This is of great importance, as this style of animation gave Anderson more creative freedom to bring his political and historical imagination alive, which would have been less possible if it were a non-animated movie.

On the level of allegory, Lynette Hunter argues “that one piece of writing may be an allegory if the reading constitutes it as such, while at another time it may be read more generically as utopian or satirical or even realist” (266). In many post-1960s movies and texts, the allegory truly “insists on historical materiality, the separate contexts of the writer, the words and the reader that come together in the moments of the text” (Hunter 267). This is also true for the allegory created in Anderson’s *Isle of Dogs*. Therefore, the allegory of the story relies on the audience’s “awareness of otherness, flexible interpretation, and contradiction” (Hunter 267) to create their own custom perceived allegory based on the multi-interpretational allusive vignettes throughout the movie. Due to that, with the possible outcomes of the movie’s allegory, Anderson explores “the complexities and difficulties of speaking about the not-said, or more interesting, the not-yet-said” (Hunter 266).

3.1 Prologue and Exposition

Every major character is introduced during the exposition stage of the movie’s plot, prior to the movie’s start of the first part. Both the prologue and the exposition serve as the narrative foundation for the upcoming parts in the film and do not offer detailed appropriations and allusions yet. As soon as the prologue starts after the narrative introduction, Mayor Kobayashi¹¹ is visually presented as the first main character. During this

¹¹ Mayor Kobayashi’s puppet resembles the facial structure of Toshiro Mifune, Kurosawa’s leading actor in most of his films. The fact that Anderson chose Mifune’s facial structures further exhibits Anderson’s fascination for Japanese cinematography and especially for Kurosawa’s movies.

opening scene, Mayor Kobayashi is seen talking to a crowd at a congress which presents “a Riefenstahlian” (Brody) rally. In Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, Adolf Hitler’s and the Nazis’ rallies were propagated. The first scene definitely alludes to these grotesque rallies (see Fig. 9).

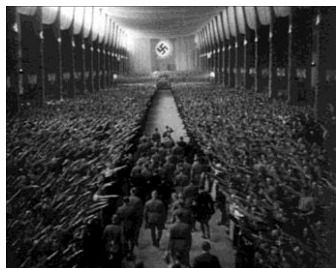


Fig. 9 Nazi rally in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*



Fig. 10 Mayor Kobayashi’s poster at the rally (Anderson)



Fig. 11 Pigs’ posters in Halas & Batchelor’s *Animal Farm*

As seen in Fig. 10, a giant poster of Mayor Kobayashi hangs on the stage during the rally, overlooking the people. The campaign poster reads, in tiny letters translated from the

Japanese text above it, “For the Greater Good of Megasaki City” (Anderson 97). This is the first subtle allusion to American politics, as it echoes Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan. In addition, Kobayashi’s appearance and



Fig. 12 Donald Trump at one of his own rallies (Getty Images)

performance present a Japanese defamiliarized version of Trump as well. For instance, Kobayashi’s character copies Trump’s speech rhetoric and his overall character design and silhouette resembles Trump’s physique (see Fig. 12). Through this representation of the film’s central antagonist, Anderson makes it possible for the audience to perceive Kobayashi as a satirical portrait of Trump. Moreover, for an audience member who picks up the subtle allusions, the film suggests that Trump governing style has authoritarian traits.

Yet, the poster also alludes to Halas & Batchelor’s *Animal Farm*, as the giant posters of the story’s supreme leaders (see Fig. 11) also overlook the animals of the farm. Moreover, Kobayashi’s character is also already portrayed as a totalitarian leader such as Hitler or Stalin

because of his speech about social ostracism and deportation. He pleads that the ill dogs are being deported to a better place than Megasaki. This is comparable with how the wounded Boxer in *Animal Farm* is being brought to a “Horse Slaughterer and Glue Boiler” (Orwell 82) instead of the promised utopian “Sugarcandy Mountain” (Orwell 78). Similarly, the dogs are sent to the dystopian Trash Island instead of a peaceful Isle of Dogs. Therefore, the poster’s slogan, Kobayashi’s appearance, and the theme of deportation also present the movie’s first controversial link between a totalitarian leader such as Hitler and Trump. This link is controversial as Anderson alludes to one of history’s infamous and egregious periods to present a critical reflection on the current American political and social climate.

After the rally, the movie introduces the dogs Chief, Duke, Boss, Rex, and King on Trash Island, which is also called the Isle of Dogs.¹² Superficially, during this introduction, these dogs are seen fighting against rival dogs over food. However, more latent meanings are actually presented during the fight. For instance, Chief bites off one of the dog’s ears, literally presenting the “dog-eat-dog” saying where a “ruthless competition” (Dent 413) is needed to achieve or to obtain something. As they are fighting over food, it becomes obvious that the canines are living a “dog’s life,” a literal “miserable existence” (Dent 414). This saying is further emphasized as Rex mentions that he is unable to “stomach any more of this garbage” (Anderson 9). These sayings also represent the simple “A equals B” allegorical technique found in many early allegories, as it is almost impossible to interpret a saying differently than its historical meaning.

¹² Noteworthy is that Isle of Dogs also is a peninsular in the centre of London. It is unclear where the isle’s name actually originated from. It is possible that the name derives from the fact that “dead dogs washed up on the left bank of the shore” (Dent 735). This explanation fits with the film’s theme, as the ill dogs are literally left for dead on the isle.

3.2 Part 1: The Little Pilot

The first part opens with Atari's plane crash.¹³ What is important about this plane crash, is the depiction of the initial crash, explosion, and one of the dogs' reaction to it. As Megasaki is a wordplay on Nagasaki, the mushroom cloud emitted from the plane crash (see Fig. 13) definitely alludes to America's nuclear bombings on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945. Since Boss wears an American baseball outfit, it becomes



Fig. 13 Boss's reaction to Atari's crashed plane's explosion (Anderson)

obvious that the dogs portray American POWs in this scene. The introduction also already made clear that they live in almost the same dire conditions as the "human beings [who] were worked and starved and beaten to the point of death" (Daws 22). Yet it also presents the "little brotherhoods" (Daws 20) of these soldiers and thus the dogs. Boss even responds to this explosion with an excited "wow" (Anderson 13) rather than concern. Even though the "wow" might sound as a relief from the torture that "went on to the last moments of war" (Daws 19), it can also be perceived as a shock, as American "POWs were killed as well when the Americans dropped A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (Daws 19). The combination of this certain character's reaction and the explosion creates an allegorical vignette that alludes to America's war with Japan during the Second World War. Therefore, it can also be argued that the name tags that the dogs carry become literal dog tags of, in this case, American soldiers and thus personify them.

¹³ This scene subtly refers to David Bowie's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, purely because Anderson called the silver space suit "so Ziggy Stardust!" (Larson) in an interview with *New Yorker*. Just like most alien films and Bowie's character in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Atari falls to the earth and cannot be understood by the dogs when they try to communicate with him.

One of the many allusions to Japanese cinema is presented in the following scene, as the theme song of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* is played by Atari for the dogs whilst he is holding a speech. In *Seven Samurai*, the moral of the story is that you should always be able to conquer or achieve something with few people, no matter what kind of person you are. Thus, the music becomes for the storytelling in understanding this scene. In that sense, Chief becomes an appropriation of Kikuchiyo from *Seven Samurai*; Or as Bryan Cranston, who voices Chief, explains it: "he's the stray, the castaway runt, the odd one out" (Wilford 64).

During Atari's speech, Duke mentions that he wished that "somebody spoke his language" (Anderson 28). Obviously, barking is not understandable by humans, thus it is difficult for the dogs to let their voice be heard. Yet it also shows the difficulty of having one's voice be heard, just like the victims of camps and suppressing politics. This is explored in more detail in the movie's second and third part. On the contrary, Chief expresses himself often with "I bite" (Anderson). This refers to Cervantes's allegory found in *Dialogue Between Scipio and Berganza*; his verbal defence is as belittling and as harmful as his physical biting.

Another instance that focusses on a form of speech is portrayed during the hospital flashback. This scene exhibits how Atari is able to talk to his guard dog Spots with an in-ear communication device, which would otherwise be impossible without such a device.

Superficially, the scene refers to Karl Krall's experiments with telepathic dog connection (see Fig. 14) to "measure the mental radiation between the two minds" (Krystek). Yet, the scene is allegorical in the sense that it shows that communication between everybody, no matter the race or other factors, should always be possible. These references to

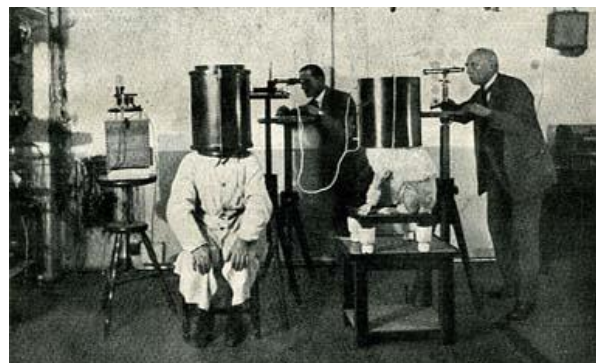


Fig. 14 Karl Krall's telepathic dog connection experiments (Krystek)

communication show that Anderson wanted to emphasize the importance of speech and

communication: even though it can either harm or alienate, speech and communication also have the ability to liberate when coupled with mutual respect, tolerance and understanding.

The liberative aspect of speech becomes most apparent at the end of part one which introduces one of the film's crucial subplots: instead of dogs or other animals, it concerns demonstrating human high school students¹⁴ who are "spreading their message through the media, protests, marches, and speeches" (Alexander). Jason Schwartzman, one of the movie's co-writers, explains that "basically, we have all these adults who are not listening to their hearts or conscience, and no one is seeing the great corruption happening. That led us to the younger people, who have to see through the BS. Their minds are more agile. And they have a say" (Alexander). Therefore, on an allegorical level, the students stand for the historical student protests in Japan. The Marxist Zengakuren "were raising hell against bad pedagogy, lack of student self-government, and the militarist regime" (Wilford 56) in Japan since 1948. In *Isle of Dogs*, the student protesters in the classroom act in the same way as the Zengakuren and, throughout the movie, "expose a perversion of the democratic process" and "incite a citywide protest" (Wilford 56).

3.3 Part 2: The Search for Spots

During the start of the second part, the dogs talk about their former lives in Megasaki. Not only do their stories show that the dogs are dependent on their masters, it also displays the dog in a natural form. With the dogs' dependency, an emphasis on the inherent characteristics of animals as in the medieval bestiaries and *Reynard the Fox* is made. At the same time, it also shows that the dogs, essentially portraying common people, need strong

¹⁴ Interestingly, *Isle of Dogs* was released one day before the student-led demonstration March for Our Lives. Nevertheless, in an interview with USA Today, Anderson revealed that the movie's release date was "an amazing coincidence" and that "it obviously was not planned that way" (Alexander).

leadership in order to achieve anything, even if it is a search for the return of a stability in their life. On the one hand, the film suggests that strong leadership is what is needed for social cohesion. On the other hand, this same leadership also caused them to be exiled. In that case, this scene becomes a satire on right-wing politics. Just as how a totalitarian leader such as Hitler wanted to create social cohesion by deporting all non-Aryan races, such as Jews, Donald Trump wants to create social cohesion amongst the Americans by deporting all the country's immigrants, such as Mexicans. This is carried out by "enforcement officials [who] have been directed to seek the deportation of anyone in the country illegally" (Shear). For that matter, the dogs can be perceived as either a depiction of the Mexican or Jewish common people.

The scene at Mayor Kobayashi's meeting alludes to the Wannseekonferenz, during which the "endlösung," which is German for the "final solution" (Gutman 81), was discussed. During this conference, "a solitary killing center signifying the will of Nazi Germany to annihilate the Jews" (Gutman 81) was revealed. Similarly, during the meeting in *Isle of Dog*, multiple attendees sit at a "black-lacquered conference-table" (Anderson 37) to discuss how to get rid of Megasaki's dogs. The different attendees at this meeting can be compared with multiple Second World War historical figures. Firstly, Chairman Fujimoto-san alludes to Göbbels, as he "secretly introduced mega-quantities of infected fleas" to create "an unprecedented animal-disease out-break" (Anderson 37). However, these fleas were introduced to let people believe that dogs are bad, therefore creating a false truth and propagate lies just as how Göbbels created propaganda to let German people believe that non-Aryan people are vermin.¹⁵ Secondly, General Yamatachi-san alludes to both the SS and the Nazi soldiers in general as, just like the deportation of many Jewish people to internment

¹⁵ Adolf Hitler, and thus his following, often referred to the non-Aryan races as "rats" and "the vermin of mankind" (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 115) in his campaigns and in *Mein Kampf*.

camps, he “oversaw the deportation of over 750,000 caged-animals to a nearly uninhabitable, off-shore refuse-center” (Anderson 38). Thirdly, the creation of the “most promising artificial life-form” (Anderson 38), which is the robot dog,¹⁶ alludes to the concept of the *übermensch*. The movie’s perfect robot dog is comparable with the German preference of having blonde hair and blue eyes. Moreover, it is also in line with the Nazi rhetoric that “pets are parasitical on human societies, deriving sustenance by exploiting our gullibility but offering nothing in return” (Ortiz-Robles 78). Therefore, the creation of an artificial pet would eliminate all perceived gullibility. Finally, Yakuza Nakamura-san, “Head of the Clenched-Fist Gang” (Anderson 38) alludes to the SS and Nazi collaborators such as the Dutch NSB which shut down all political opposition against the NSDAP as he and his gang “eliminated all Pro-Dog opposition through the use of bribery, extortion, intimidation, and violent force” (Anderson 38).

The meeting is rounded up with a final speech by Mayor Kobayashi which actually summarizes and appropriates the entire Wannseekonferenz: “Brains have been washed. Wheels have been greased. Fear has been mongered. Now we prepare for the final stage of our conspiracy theory: the permanent end to the Canine Saturation-crisis” (Anderson 38). Obviously, Anderson’s mentioned “permanent end” (38) refers to the Nazi’s *endlösung*. However, the mentioned created illness amongst dogs during the meeting also alludes to the xenophobic rhetoric employed by Trump, who labelled Mexicans a pest and as spreaders of disease during his presidential campaign. The disease in the film was made by the government as an excuse to remove all dogs from Megasaki. This is exactly what Trump did rhetorically during his campaign to create an excuse to remove all of America’s illegal Mexican

¹⁶ The robot dogs also stand for “technology, industry, and the military” which stands “between the line of human and animal, between human and nature, and having to advocate for them both” (Wilford 39).

immigrants, as he described the Mexican immigrants as a “‘tremendous infectious disease’ [that] poured across the U.S.-Mexico border” (Winders 291).

After the meeting, Kobayashi’s created camps are being shown for the first time. The sign that hangs over the camp immediately makes clear that the camp appropriates the Auschwitz internment camp as it clearly resembles the infamous “ARBEIT MACHT FREI” sign hanging in front of Auschwitz’s entrance (see Fig. 15 and Fig. 16).



Fig. 15 Auschwitz’s ARBEIT MACHT FREI entrance sign (Auschwitz Museum)

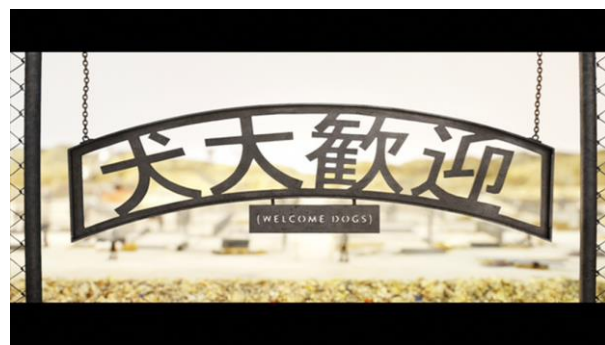


Fig. 16 Isle of Dog’s dog internment camp sign (Anderson)

Auschwitz “has become a symbol for the Jewish catastrophe in Europe” (Gutman 81). By appropriating the events of the Holocaust, *Isle of Dogs* “looks closely at deportation, internment in a prison camp, and the threat of extermination, all from the perspective from the victims” (Brody). The Holocaust was a prominent event for America as “a commitment to ethnic identity was gaining prominence in mainstream American culture” (Landsberg 115) ever since the 1970s. Thus, by presenting the Holocaust, Anderson is able to “confront their past, their present, and their future” (Landsberg 115). But also, by “dwelling on the Holocaust, America has been able to evade its real historical responsibility to blacks, Native Americans, and Vietnamese” (Landsberg 115). As such, Anderson offers a controversial reflection on “the xenophobic, racist, and demagogic strains of contemporary American politics” (Brody).

Not only does the camp allude to the Holocaust and Auschwitz, it also alludes to Trump's explicit denial of Mexicans and oversea immigrants in his many campaigns and current political practices. Visually, the camps in Anderson's film slightly resemble Trump's Mexican immigrant camps (see Fig. 17).



Fig. 17 American Mexican immigrant camps (Blake)

Because of that, a stark and controversial contrast is already presented by juxtaposing the Auschwitz concentration camp with the American Mexican immigrant camps. Even though the camp in *Isle of Dogs* is surrounded by gates, the isle is also inescapable because of the sea surrounding it. The narrator mentions that swimming to the mainland is “too far to dog-paddle” (Anderson 47), therefore creating the sense that the sea is a closed border. This is comparable with Trump's wall and closed borders. Just as how Kobayashi created a figurative border with the sea to get rid of Megasaki's ill dogs, Trump's “‘beautiful’ wall built between Mexico and the U.S. (and paid for by Mexico) was a necessary solution to the ‘problem’ of immigration” (Winders 291). Due to the film's complex intertextual referencing between the past and the present, Trump's immigration policies are brought eerily close to a revival or preserving of the “true” American people, just as how Hitler desired a rise to power of the Aryan race. In addition, Trump's policy was not the first American governmental policy that ostracized races or specific groups of people. It is comparable to the policy of interring Japanese citizens in American camps during the Second World War, as they were found to be enemies of the state. This event “has often been referred to as the worst civil rights violation by the federal government during the twentieth century” (Robinson 1). This allusion is of great necessity as, according to Robinson, “most ordinary people [...] have never even heard of them” (Robinson 3). Moreover, “assorted right-wingers,” such as Trump, even “deny or rationalize the removal of Japanese

Americans from the West Coast and the institution of camps” (Robinson 3). With these references, the film highlights America’s “deep national anxiety over immigrants and potential threats to national security” (Robinson 3).

Oracle’s ability to look into the future draws inspiration from the allegorical absurdity of Taylor’s *The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat* which “says one thing and means another” (Tambling 175). Her so called visionary ability actually derives from the ability of being able to understand television. Even though Oracle’s ability to understand television works out in the story, it can also be perceived as a cautionary notion of not believing everything that is said in the media. It is a satire on the rise of “fake news,” which is the false information and hoaxes that are being spread with ease of the internet. Nevertheless, it sometimes occurs that larger media outlets, such as news channels on the television, take these pools of information for granted without factchecking. This causes a further spread of false information to the common people. In turn, as most of the major news channels are reputable sources, the general public easily take this information also for granted. In other words, if someone is fully up to date with the news, it does not make them necessarily wise as there always is a slight possibility that the news contains misinformation. This also leads to the creation of extremely biased opinions on all kinds of matters; it causes for having a misinformed knowledge which leads to misinterpretations of various matters, as will be discussed in chapter 4’s results.

The owl first appears in this chapter and somewhat resembles Moses the raven in *Animal Farm*. Even though Moses symbolised the organized Orthodox church in the Russian state, they are both messengers. In contrast to *Isle of Dogs*, Moses’s messages were not believed and regarded as lies to manipulate the other animals, while the owl in *Isle of Dogs* speaks the truth and gives intel about Megasaki and the dog camps to enforce the dogs their rebellion. In that case, even though a bird is often portrayed as a messenger, these two examples show that an animal in texts does not have an inherently fixed positive or negative

connotation. This connotation is only created by the author or by the audience if the text is open for interpretation. Even more so, the owl also portrays that symbolism changes over time, as, in medieval times, owls were often considered birds of “evil omen” (Bedard). Nevertheless, especially in the renaissance, owls later became the birds of “wisdom,” as an owl was the pet of “the Goddess Minerva who was the goddess of wisdom” (Bedard). Thus, the fact that the owl speaks the truth in *Isle of Dogs* derives from a transformation in the animal’s symbolism. Therefore, the owl can now be contrasted with *Animal Farm*’s Moses which would otherwise be less possible if the owl kept its symbolism of the medieval times.

3.4 Part 3: The Rendezvous

Once Atari has found his lost dog Spots, the opening of the third part resembles the main premise of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: a journey to find someone, only to return disappointed. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow and his crew embark on a voyage deep into the Congo jungle in search for the illusive Kurtz. Once they have found Kurtz, Marlow is disappointed as this mysterious individual turns out to resemble a madman more than a charismatic leader. On his way back to civilization, one of Marlow’s crew tells him that “Kurtz was dead” (Conrad 66). Yet the mystery of Kurtz lives on. In Conrad’s novella, Kurtz is a symbolic figure as much as a real person. Just as his life, actions and subsequent mental deterioration can be understood as representing the mental and physical effects of an empire. In turn, his death can be read symbolically; it can be understood as the death of the colonial ideals Kurtz once embodied, as the atrocities to which they lead are laid bare. In Anderson’s film, Atari’s reunification with Spots also becomes a symbolic event, as the voyage unravelled the atrocities caused by Mayor Kobayashi. In that sense, just as *Heart of Darkness* engages symbolically with the direct historical context of empire building, when read

allegorically, Atari's voyage contains many vignettes which allude to either the Second World War, Trump's misconducts, or both which would otherwise be untold without the voyage.

In the same tradition of the voyage to seek Kurtz, Atari, Chief, and the other dogs have travelled over Trash Island to search for Spots, only to find out that Spots no longer wants to be Atari's guard dog. Atari's reunion with Spots also presents a conceit, which is "a concept, or an image, [...] which finds an unusual parallel between two dissimilar things" (Tambling 174), of Odysseus's reunion with Argos. Whereas Argos "died of joy" (Dent 414) because of his master's return, Spots is not that enthusiastic to see Atari again and rather wants to part ways.

The dog experiments in the Kobayashi factory allude to the Nazi experiments on concentration camp inmates. Whereas the aforementioned experiments of Karl Krall were innocent of nature, the Nazi experiments were nefariously cruel. Especially Josef Mengele's "work in racial genetics" (Gutman 318) to create the perfect illness free German is another depiction of "humans' drive to dominate nature" (Ortiz-Robles 15). Yet again, Kobayashi factory also alludes to a historical financial motive. The factory is Anderson's interpretation of "zaibatsu, a term for the family-controlled business monopolies that dominated Japan until the end of World War II" (Coomes). Therefore, when the dogs are breaking out of the Kobayashi factory, the scene resembles *Animal Farm's* animal revolution, as they avert themselves against Communist-like collectivisation and labour, yet they also rally against the inhumanity of the Nazis' experiments.

The dogs looking through the fences in the camp once again alludes to the various historical camps and the theme of internment, such as in part 2. On the basic premise, by looking through the fences (see Fig. 18), the dogs find out that they are

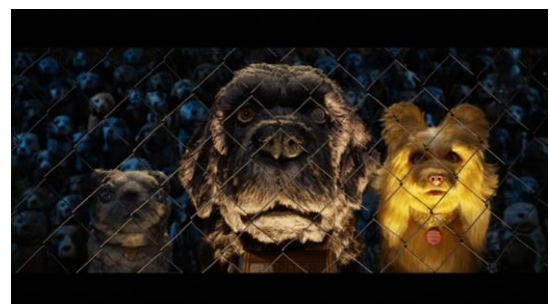


Fig. 18 Dogs looking through the camp's fence (Anderson)



Fig. 19 Margaret Bourke-White's photos of Buchenwald



Fig. 20 Maus's depiction of inmates in a Jewish internment camp (Spiegelman 226)



Fig. 21 Mexican immigrants held captive in American camps (Flores)

imminently going to be exterminated by Wasabi Gas¹⁷ and want to escape. Visually, the scene resembles Margaret Bourke-White's photos of Buchenwald, (see Fig. 19). This specific photograph has been appropriated many times by many different artists, as it also appears in *Maus* (see Fig. 20), since the photograph is iconic for portraying the helplessness of the Holocaust's victims. Yet, it also resembles the many photographs that exhibit the non-humanitarian living conditions of the Mexican immigrant camps (see Fig. 21). With that, the movie personifies present events with events from the past.

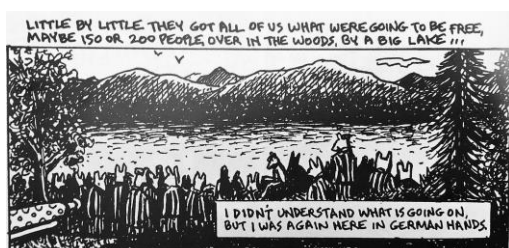


Fig. 22 Maus's characters overlooking the lake (Spiegelman 266)



Fig. 23 The escape of the main characters in *The Plague Dogs* (Rosen)



Fig. 24 Mexican immigrants crossing the American border over the Rio Grande (Moore)

Similarly, as the escaped dogs are overlooking the sea, the figurative barrier between being held captive and freedom is being made visual, just as how *Maus* portrays it (see Fig. 22). Additionally, traversing the sea also symbolises how illegal Mexican immigrants traverse the Rio Grande to cross the American border (see Fig. 24). But more importantly, this scene, and also the movie's third part in its entirety, also alludes to Martin Rosen's film adaptation of

¹⁷ This appropriates the events of gassing the Jews with Zyklon B.

Richard Adam's *The Plague Dogs*. In Adams's *The Plague Dogs*,¹⁸ "it follows the exploits of two dogs that have escaped from an animal testing facility, on the run from authorities who believe they're carrying bubonic plague" (Wilford 35). In that sense, the Kobayashi factory in *Isle of Dogs* appropriates *The Plague Dog*'s basic premise. But what's more important, is that this scene resembles Rosen's *The Plague Dogs* movie in its usage of colour and a particular scene where the two lead characters are escaping from the authorities by sea (see Fig. 23).

3.5 Part 4: Atari's Lantern

At the beginning of part 4, the dog's overthrow Mayor Kobayahsi's final rally, which alludes to the victory of the "dogfaces of World War II" (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 130). In that sense, the overthrow portrays how the American soldiers defeated the Germans. However, in an interview with *USA Today*, Anderson explains that "when [they] started the movie, there wasn't any effort to make anything political. It really just started with these dogs and figuring out their story" (Alexander). Yet, when the writers were exploring the nature of Mayor Kobayashi's character and his actual reason for banning all the dogs, "the story evolved to incorporate an opposing political force for change" (Alexander). In that case, this opposing force does not come from the dogs but from the protesting youth: the students.

As a form of protest, Atari performs a haiku at Kobayahsi's rally with a pseudo-Japanese accent: "What-ever-happen? To-man's-best-friend-o. Falling-spring-blossom" (Anderson 86). Especially the animation that is shown after the haiku's performance portrays

¹⁸ The following excerpt from *The Plague Dogs* confirms that *Isle of Dogs* is an appropriation of Adam's story: "Men aren't allowed there unless the dogs like them and let them in." "I never knew. Just out there, is it, really? What's it called?" "Dog," said Snitter, after a moment's thought. "The Isle of Dog" (Wilford 35).

the figurative social and cultural genocide that mankind is committing (see Fig. 25).

Anderson explains Atari's haiku as that "he's giving up on the adults" (Larson). As such, the Anpo protest in 1960 is appropriated here. During this protest, the



Fig. 25 Still after Atari's haiku (Anderson)

Japanese students wanted to protect the Japanese sovereignty by protesting against the renewal of the Security Treaty with the United States. The student protesters "took to the streets" and the Zengakuren "forced the resignation of the prime minister shortly after" (Wilford 56), just as how the students overthrow Mayor Kobayashi's reign in the movie.

With Mayor Kobayashi's resignation and his change of heart caused by the students' overthrow, *Isle of Dogs*' expressionistic and cathartic nature becomes most evident. In the movie, Anderson expresses his plea for a better America, just as how Halas & Batchelor's *Animal Farm* expressed a plea for a non-Communist Europe. Because of that, *Isle of Dogs* is allegorical in the sense that Anderson created "a particular temporal and social location that asked [the] readers to re-think their own concurrent settings" (Hunter 268). Moreover, by sharing his pleas in an interdisciplinary manner, Anderson is "thrilled to see students making their voices heard in the real world, too" (Alexander). Anderson explains that he is "electrified, moved and fired up when [he sees] people thinking about and doing right, opening their hearts and minds" (Alexander). In other words, the movie makes apparent that Anderson hopes that the youth is going to make a change in the contemporary politics. Especially, he wants to see the youth make a change against Trump's political practices, as becomes evident by the many allusions to Donald Trump himself and his practiced plans in the film.

Especially during this final part, it becomes apparent that the fictional Japan¹⁹ “is a plot device that creates a vague sense of unfamiliarity” for the Western audience; the entirety of *Isle of Dog*’s Megasaki alludes to America’s own “incomprehensible people and culture” (Coomes). Just as W.S. Gilbert’s *The Mikado* used ‘the Far East’ “as a vehicle to satirize British politics” (Coomes), Japan becomes “a sort of mirror-America” for Anderson (Brody). With the theory of authorship²⁰ linked to American cinematography, a director has a “crucial say” over the movie’s script, style, and editing, therefore eminently “influencing the shape and the look of a film” (Hillier). With Anderson’s dominance in the creation of the movie, it becomes evident that it is mainly Anderson’s views on American politics that are expressed in the movie’s script and art. This is confirmed in Wilford’s extensive book about *Isle of Dogs*, as Anderson himself reveals that, next to the addition of the “dogs and the garbage dump,” a “government” (Wilford 24) was an essential part in creating the movie’s story.

In conclusion, with the aid of several allusive vignettes, an allegory can be created by the audience that history repeats itself. If the references to the Second World War are mostly picked up by the audience, then, on the one hand, the movie can be perceived as an allegory depicting the various events of the Second World War. If the references to American politics are mostly picked up by the audience, then, on the other hand, the movie can be perceived as an allegory depicting various events of contemporary American politics. However, when all of the major allusions and appropriations are picked up and combined, Anderson contrasts the events of the Second World War to warn about the current American politics. In other words, the past personifies the present. In that sense, the audience has to determine whether Anderson’s movie presents an allegory on the various events of the Second World War, American politics, or that the movie uses the events of the Second World War to present a

¹⁹ Moreover, during this scene, Mayor Kobayashi saying “Risupekto!” is “a Japanized pronunciation of respect that isn’t used in colloquial Japanese” (Coomes).

²⁰ The auteur theory was initially developed within French film criticism.

cautionary allegory for contemporary American politics. When the allegory of the movie is indeed a warning against contemporary American politics, then the allegory's purpose is to make people think about the current politics and actually stand up against it, like the student protests, and not let their voice be unheard to make a change.

The following chapter will present and analyse the outcome of an empirical study conducted to determine how the movie's polysemous allegorical potential is realised, interpreted, and close-read by both children and adults. Moreover, it will also present deviations and correlations between these two groups and the reason behind most of the results will be completely elucidated. The analysis verifies Anderson's emphasis on the polysemous nature of *Isle of Dogs*. In that sense, the empirical study confirms the aforementioned possible allegorical interpretations of the movie, especially with the adult audience.

4 Empirical Study of Viewer Response

Plenty of articles and reviews of *Isle of Dogs*²¹ mention how this formally and thematically challenging movie can be enjoyed by both children and adults. However, as the previous chapter has shown, the movie contains quite dense and complex references to historical, political, and social themes that, while enhancing the film's allegorical potential for adults, will unlikely be picked up or understood by children at a first experience of watching the film. Thus, claiming that *Isle of Dogs* can be thoroughly enjoyed by both children and adults²² is somewhat naïve, especially without any substantial proof of viewer response. Therefore, I conducted a small empirical study of viewer response to determine the extent to which children and adults interpret and react to the movie differently, especially in relation to its status as a polysemous animal allegory that draws the viewers' attention to the parallels between current domestic politics in Donald Trump's America and the world's political situation at the time of the Second World War.

To determine whether *Isle of Dogs* actually can be enjoyed by different age groups and whether audiences of different ages react differently to the movie, all participants were asked the same three questions during screenings. Firstly, the participants had to comment whether they enjoyed the movie by giving their personal opinion of it. These responses allowed me to pinpoint how different age groups might react differently in terms of their emotional involvement with the film. Secondly, the participants had to explain what the movie was about or whether it referred to anything outside of its own fictional universe, according to them. This question allowed me to highlight how different people interpret the movie differently and showcases that children definitely only pick up the superficial narrative at

²¹ For instance, Brody's, Larson's, and Rosenburg's articles and reviews.

²² Such as Rosenburg's article "Saying a movie is for children shouldn't be an insult" does, as she superficially explores what it means when a movie for adults is also said to be "for children." Rosenburg also tries to determine whether "we are underestimating what kids are capable of handling." However, this article only presents speculation and does not offer any tangible proof.

best. And finally, the participants had to explain which part of the film, or which specific scene struck them the most. The final question was especially relevant to determine whether children might unknowingly have noticed certain historical or political references, or to show any possible correlation between scenes of interest between children and adults.

In terms of method, the empirical enquiry was developed in the tradition of the various “qualitative approaches” (Hakemulder 30) discussed in *The Moral Laboratory*. In Hakemulder’s work, various empirical studies exploring how fictional narratives can affect a reader’s worldview and thus participate in his “moral education” (1) are analysed. These empirical studies aimed to determine how an audience perceives certain works, and how an audience creates emotional bonds with a work that influences their ethical stance. Hakemulder explains that “many educators believe that narratives can be more effective instruments in teaching moral lessons than philosophical treatises” (7). But as my discussion of allegory and my analysis of *Isle of Dogs* has shown, even narrative fictions ostensibly containing a clear moral can be polysemous and therefore difficult to pin down when it comes to their “educational value.” In order to determine how different readers understand *Isle of Dogs* in different ways, the first and second sections in this chapter will discuss the children’s and adults’ responses to the movie respectively. The final section will juxtapose those results to draw conclusions about how they perceived *Isle of Dogs*.

4.1 Children’s Responses to *Isle of Dogs*

To determine how children would respond to *Isle of Dogs*, a screening was held on 21 February 2019 at De Bunders primary school in Veghel, The Netherlands. With the school’s

permission, a total of twenty-eight children around the ages of 9 and 10 were interviewed²³ to gather their responses to the film. Complete transcriptions of these interviews are available to read in appendix A. What follows is the report compiled from the results of this screening.

First of all, the results gathered from the survey conducted following the screening have soundly confirmed that most of the children do not concretely pick up most, if any, of the implicit references, such as the Holocaust, in the story. However, some of the children were aware of certain themes that refer to historical, political, or social events. Nevertheless, they were unable to explicitly link those themes to the movie's references, therefore not fully grasping the inherent meanings behind both the themes and references to these events. Interestingly, during the screening, a single child in the audience repeatedly questioned whether the dogs are humans, meaning this child was aware that the dogs symbolised something more complex than the movie superficially presents. Against my anticipation, this response was not repeated as an answer during the interviews but still presented an intriguing observation.

In general, the children were more interested in the scenes with the dogs and puppies than the humans. In other words, they were not mainly interested in the political laden scenes such as Mayor Kobayashi's meetings and rallies. This is logical given their age as children are generally not occupied and experienced with politics yet and, therefore, do not have any political frame of reference that allows them to adopt such a reading stance. Besides the large interest in dogs, other children were mostly interested in the fallen plane, the bitten-off ear, and the start of the journey. The large interest for these scenes is easy to explain, as they happen at the beginning of the movie. Some, and in this case quite a few children apparently lost focus during the screening and therefore payed little attention to the rest of the movie, in

²³ This was accomplished with the aid of Babette van Velzen. Important to note is that verbal interviews were conducted instead of filling in forms by hand to prevent possible illegible children's handwriting or incomplete answers. Both the children and the adults remained anonymous prior, during, and after the screenings.

which the story became increasingly complex due to the culminating political events. It also explains why some of the children regarded the movie as boring and found it difficult to understand. In addition, the happy ending, during which the dogs are saved, was also mentioned a few times as a favourite scene. Nonetheless, this proves nothing special as it just presents a general climax, also involving dogs. Yet, it does prove that the children have a common understanding of the kind of films they usually watch in which talking animals have fun adventures with a good ending, such as *Ice Age* (2002) and *Madagascar* (2005). The children take these kinds of films as their interpretative framework and, due to that, they will understand *Isle of Dogs* as a somewhat leftfield version of these kinds of films in which a group of talking animals go on a grand adventure, get into serious trouble, and are saved in the end.

Even though the children were unable to explicitly recognize any of the references, they did notice some of the movie's latent themes. Regarding these themes, nine out of twenty-eight children, namely Child 1, 5, 11, 13, 14, 18, 20, 22, and 25, noticed some of the political themes, such as Mayor Kobayashi's interference or the creation of laws against others. These nine children also noticed most of the other political and social related themes. For instance, of these nine children, Child 5, 11, 13, 18, 20, 22, and 25 explicitly noticed the theme of social ostracism in out casting the dogs. Moreover, Child 1, 13, and 14 also noticed the theme of aggressive propaganda, such as the created lies and stimulation of false prejudices about a race.

Regarding the movie's perceived all-round difficulty, a majority of the children who did not like or understand the movie blamed the English language. This is because the children are either not proficient in the English language or are not willing to read the Dutch subtitles. Interestingly, even though Child 7 found the story difficult and was turned off by the specific style of animation, this child still noticed social ostracism. Similarly, even though

Child 26 only noticed the superficial storyline, the notion of deportation still struck the child as confrontational. To be exact, Child 26 found “the beginning where the dogs were sent away [...] sad.” These two children’s accounts in particular, and the previously mentioned ones as well, largely prove that Anderson did accomplish making a movie with certain themes that are easy to pick up, no matter the harshness or difficulty of the presented themes, or even the English language for a non-English speaking audience.

In that sense, for children, especially the favourite bitten-off ear scene can be treated the same way as how Spiegelman as a child listened to how his mother Anja talked about her experiences during war time: “she’d refer to things without giving me any context or background and they mostly served to terrify me as a kid” (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 14). In other words, the children are still presented with the complex and sometimes horrific notions, but they are unable to fully comprehend them yet. This mostly derives from their experience of watching entertaining children’s films and the naïve optimism of the animated animal stories that are such ubiquitous in children’s entertainment today. *Isle of Dogs* can therefore be regarded as a fictional narrative that can function as a “teaching tool,” as Hakemulder claims. The usage of animalistic characters allows “to approach otherwise unsayable things” (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 127) and teach about the horrors of history and certain politics in a nuanced manner. Even though children might not fully understand the complexity of such themes and horrors yet, movies such as *Isle of Dogs* eventually “enchant kids, introduce them to big ideas, and train them to be lifelong consumers of arts” (Rosenburg).

4.2 Adults’ Responses to *Isle of Dogs*

To determine how adults respond to *Isle of Dogs*, a screening was held on 16 April 2019 at Leiden University. A total of nine adults were present during this screening to fill in a

form by hand, containing the same three questions asked to the children for comparison's sake. The complete answers given on the forms are available to read in appendix B. What follows is a report on the results from the survey conducted at this screening.

In essence, this screening also aptly confirms that, generally speaking, the adults do pick up most of the implicit references in the story. In contrast to the children, they are obviously more capable of linking the notions presented in the movie with certain historical, political, and social references. However, this also means that the adults are more consciously presented with “events of traumatic nature” (Bal viii) than children by noticing the references to, for instance, “Nazism, (right-wing) extremism, racism, discrimination” (Adult 3), “the eradication of the Jews in WWII” (Adult 7), and the American politics of “Trump” (Adult 8). With a few exceptions, most of the adults agreed on the political ideas to which the movie referred. This proves that, even though the allegory in *Isle of Dogs* is relatively free to interpret differently²⁴ by the audience, Anderson was successful in making a movie that is cryptic, yet still understandable in the same way for many people.

Noteworthy to discuss is that Adult 1 presented a troublesome overinterpretation of *Isle of Dogs*. Of all the results, Adult 1 was the only adult who took issue with the dogs' “heteronormativity” and the main character's “privilege.” This privilege refers to the American nationality of Tracy. In the case of Tracy, Adult 1 echoes that some “critics have taken issue with the depiction of a white student leading her Japanese counterparts” (Alexander). However, Kunichi Nomura, who voices Mayor Kobayashi, argues against this issue as, “often, one group is persuaded when an outsider brings a different perspective to see what's happening. Here, that's Tracy” (Alexander). If anything, Tracy actually invites “the xenophobic wrath of the demagogic ruler” (Brody), further underlining the movie's stance

²⁴ As long as they fit the movie's contexts, intertexts, themes, and formal properties.

against racial prejudice and racism instead of focussing on racial privileges. In other words, even though the movie's allegory allows for very free interpretations, some interpretations are too far-fetched and do not fit the movie's contexts. On the one hand, this creates dangerous over- and misinterpretations that other people might believe and copy as their own opinion when they watch or read certain articles in the media. As became apparent, some of these interpretations even have to be debunked by *Isle of Dog's* actors to save the movie's integrity. On the other hand, it ironically solidifies one of Anderson's points made in the movie; the audience should create their own opinion and not solely trust on the media for completely correct information. Nevertheless, no matter how an adult might perceive the movie, Anderson succeeded into making a cryptic movie for his adult audience. Because of that, the audience is able to interpret the movie's allegory as they see fit. Combined with the previous results, it can be concluded that *Isle of Dogs* can indeed be enjoyed by both children and adults, even though both age groups perceive and handle its notions and references differently.

4.3 Contrasts and Parallels

When juxtaposing the children's and adults' responses from the screenings, a few intriguing contrasts and parallels are created. Obviously, it is evident that children do not pick up certain references and thus do not share the same "traumatic recall" (Bal viii) that adults would experience. Yet, by noticing the harsher themes and notions, the children already "discover that the world is more complicated" (Rosenburg) than they already knew. However, it is important to note that the movie creates a prosthetic memory which is beneficial for both the children's and adults' viewing experience.

Alison Landsberg describes the prosthetic memory as an “experiential, sensuous and affective dimension of media” (Erll 133). Especially when watching a movie, “an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history” (Erll 133). Therefore, historical events such as the Holocaust are made experienceable and understandable for children and, due to that, prosthetic memory is a good “teaching tool” (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 127) to introduce them to these events. Furthermore, prosthetic memory also allows “to shape the person’s subjectivity and politics” (Erll 133). This is both important for children, as they are motivated to create a personal opinion about complex matters, and for adults, as their already existing opinions about politics and history can be altered or shaped even further. Moreover, this prosthetic memory also gives adults “a more personal, deeply felt memory” (Erll 133) who have not experienced these past events but still know what they refer to. Especially with Holocaust memory, “as the last survivors are dying, the possibility of transmitting something like living memory becomes more and more precarious and ultimately impossible” (Landsberg 111-112). Thus, a movie like *Isle of Dogs* keeps such memories artificially alive in the audience’s mind.

Based on the given answers, one of the differences between adults and children is that the children looked for the movie’s entertainment value rather than its meaning, compared to the adults who explicitly mentioned references and “allegory” (Adult 7). This is somewhat based on the basic standards of general animated shows for children on the television which have the purpose to entertain rather than challenge the audience to seek hidden references. Due to that, the children do not yet associate more latent meanings with cartoons and animated films. This simplified view on cartoons and animated films is demonstrated by the fact that Atari often gets confused for a Chinese girl by children; they simply are not focussed on gender or race politics, in contrast to Adult 1’s overinterpretation.

Another difference is found in the form of expression. Children were more prone to express with emotion laden words such as “fun” (Child 4), “creepy” (Child 9) and “sad” (Child 11) with their explanations. Adults rather expressed themselves by looking at the movie’s aesthetics and art, calling it “typical Wes Anderson style” (Adult 6) and having beautiful “techniques/Claymation” (Adult 9). In other words, Adults were more prone to value the movie’s artistic merit whilst the children were more prone to value the movie’s entertaining and emotional value.

Both the children and adults express their likings for the dogs. However, for the adults, this actually is based on the literary-critical concept of the uncanny, as developed from Sigmund Freud’s essay. According to Rosemary Jackson, Freud’s definition of the uncanny in fantasy fiction “functions to discover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight” (65). Portraying non-human characters instead of actual realistic humans, such as the film’s cartoonish and whimsical dogs, rather generates “feelings of a positive nature, and with the circumstances and the objects that call them forth, rather than with the opposite feelings of repulsion and distress” (Freud 219). Yet, this allows the audience to perceive the canines’ allegorical elements with more ease as they can easily create a “projection” (Jackson 66) of themselves on the animals, just as discussed with *Maus*. Without this, allegorical values would more easily be disregarded by the audience because of repulsion or inaccessibility. Therefore, the uncanny is ideal for creating an allegory with animals because it “uncovers what is hidden” (Jackson 65) by locating the audience “in another person or thing” (Jackson 66).

Finally, a shared favourite scene between both the children and the adults is the washing of Chief. This scene portrays the difference between the visual and the subject. Where children found it visually “funny” as “you could see [Atari’s] underpants” (Child 12), The adults noticed how the scene marked the subjective moment that Chief “changed his

opinion about pet-dogs” (Adult 2); as Chief is being washed, he literally is being cleansed of his depression²⁵ and is able to drop his façade. Even though it once again highlights the children’s focus on entertainment and the adults’ focus on meaning, it also highlights how Anderson succeeded in making scenes that are equally intriguing for all age groups, yet giving the scenes different perceptions because of the visual level for the children and the thematical level for the adults.

²⁵ As Chief was a black dog prior to the washing, it also refers to the saying “black dog” which is “a term for a bout of severe depression” (Dent 151).

Conclusion

As the results have shown, Wes Anderson's allegorical *Isle of Dogs* borrows iconic imagery from historical and current events that audiences can recognize to create a cautionary parallel between what is happening in America today and what happened in Europe and Asia during the Second World War. Even though the movie contains a myriad of appropriations and allusions to political and historical events, *Isle of Dogs* can still indeed be enjoyed by both children and adults, albeit on a superficial and visual level for children and a thematical level for adults.

On the level of allegory in *Isle of Dogs*, it can be concluded that Anderson wants to present that history repeats itself. In other words, the past personifies the present. Yet, the audience has to determine whether the movie presents an allegory on the various events of the Second World War or whether it uses these events to present a more complex allegory for contemporary American politics, especially those practiced by Donald Trump. Nevertheless, both explanations would be valid as the film is very open for interpretation within its context. It can also be concluded that, in contrast to animal allegories and cartoons such as *Dialogue Between Scipio and Berganza*, *The Thrifty Pig*, *The Beast is Dead*, *Animal Farm*, *The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat*, and *Maus*, the animal allegory in *Isle of Dogs* relies on both the roles of the humans and the animals rather than just the roles of the animals themselves. Therefore, the dogs are contrasting agents for the actions made by the humans and vice versa.

That said, the empirical study of audience response has successfully shown that adults and children perceive the movie differently in their own contexts based on their age. On the one hand, the children show that the film can still be enjoyed without really pinpointing a set allegory. On the other hand, they also show that the movie can be regarded as an educative introduction to history and politics. It has also shown that children are more concerned with the visual aspects of the movie in the sense of entertainment rather than seeking for a latent

meaning in the visuals or the story itself. However, the adults are more prone to look at the visuals as an art form and try to interpret it in conjunction with the thematic allusions and appropriations presented to determine the film's possible allegory according to them. Moreover, the enquiry has also shown that the film's allegory can be overinterpreted outside of its context by adults, therefore completely missing Anderson's points and, thus, not perceiving his pleas and warnings he wanted to exude about current American politics.

Hopefully, this thesis will be a valuable and critical contribution on both animal allegories and allegories in general, as well as how modern allegories are able to be perceived differently by different audiences.

Appendix A: Children's Responses Transcriptions

Child 1

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I actually quite liked it as there were a lot of tense moments, I like tense thingies!

According to you, what was the movie about?

-That people no longer loved dogs and later they do again. That is because the major erased their memories.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The funniest thing in the movie was that little plane that suddenly appeared and fell down.

Child 2

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I would have enjoyed it more if the movie was in Dutch.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-It was about dogs who were fighting against robot dogs to protect the little man who fell out of the plane.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-When the plane fell down.

Child 3

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was pretty nice!

According to you, what was the movie about?

-Dogs wanted to escape from an island because there was only trash and they wanted to return to their masters.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-Too many parts, I can't choose!

Child 4

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was fun, but the English language was annoying. I also did not understand the story.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About a little dog, and another little dog, and another little dog!

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-All the parts with dogs!

Child 5

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was a nice adventure!

According to you, what was the movie about?

-There was a major who decided that dogs were forbidden in a country and that they, therefore, were sent to a different dog country elsewhere. When they arrived, they experienced all kinds of adventures. Then, a boy arrived in a little plane. He returned with the dogs to tell everybody that dogs should be accepted again.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-All the dogs in the movie.

Child 6

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was funny, because it was funny.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About Chinese people and dogs; The dogs were sent to a place with garbage, then a girl crashed with her plane, and then the dogs helped her.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-When the dog's ear was bitten off.

Child 7

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I did not understand it well because it was a difficult movie and the animation was bad.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About dogs who went to an island because nobody wanted to think about dogs anymore, I think.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-I don't know.

Child 8

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I thought it was boring in the beginning, but it became better later on.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-People first liked dogs, then they did not anymore. Then they were sent to a different island and then they returned to... Not sure anymore.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-When the dogs returned.

Child 9

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I thought it was good. I also found it creepy and I find that fun.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-A girl lost her dog and dogs were sent to another country.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The violence, especially when the ear got bitten off.

Child 10

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was nice.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-He was looking for a dog and then he found the dog which also saved him. It was nice because of that.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The moment that the dogs saved the pilot from the crashed plane.

Child 11

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was sad and strange.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-The major wanted to remove all dogs and the boy wanted to save the dogs from their fate.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-When the dogs were saved.

Child 12

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Some bits were a bit creepy and some bits were a bit tense. Luckily the movie had a happy ending which I like.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-Someone who wanted the dogs gone and someone who wanted to save the dogs. Movies also tend to have happy endings most of the time, so it is a good thing that the dogs win.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The funniest moment was when he was washing the dog, because you could see his underpants.

Child 13

Did you enjoy the movie?

-No, it was boring and there the story was a bit random.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-There was this boy who was the son of a major. The major really loved cats and hated dogs. He also sabotaged some results to make the dogs look even worse, so all dogs had to leave to Trash Island. Then the boy went to that island to look for his dog, Spots.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-That they wanted to fight for food but that they were actually pretty mannered instead of being wild.

Child 14

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Yes, it was interesting because it was a stop-motion movie with a lot of interesting objects. The story was nice as well.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About a boy who lost his dog and searched for him. Then he finally found him. Then it was about some sort of debate about a dog serum because the dogs were ill.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-That the girl was reunited with Nutmeg.

Child 15

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Yes.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About a dog who went missing and about a little boy who went looking for him.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-I liked everything.

Child 16

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Yes, I found it funny.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About dogs who were imprisoned on an island.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-Not sure, but I did like the ending.

Child 17

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Not really, I thought it was bad and boring. I like my movies tense!

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About a boy who arrived on an isle of dogs to look for a dog.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-Not a single part.

Child 18

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I thought it was kind of funny at times.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About dogs who were expelled by the major or president.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-I liked the diversity, yet I found the movie to be too long.

Child 19

Did you enjoy the movie?

-A bit funny. There were a lot of boring bits as well.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About animals!

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-There were many funny parts. I cannot choose one.

Child 20

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I really liked it! At first, I did not understand it, yet I gradually started to like and understand the story.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-It was about a girl who had an accident. Then the dogs helped her. Yet, her uncle did not like that and wanted them gone. In the end, the girl won, and the dogs were allowed to stay.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The happy ending! Because I liked how the dogs were saved and were able to stay again.

Child 21

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I really liked it, but it was also sad at times.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-It was about a boy who was the son of a major who passed away a long while ago. This boy is also looking for his dog.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-I liked that Spots had puppies. Yet I thought the dogs were going to be poisoned, so that was kind of sad.

Child 22

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Yes!

According to you, what was the movie about?

-There were some people who disliked dogs. Because of that, they send them to a garbage place. Then a little boy in a plane arrived to look for his dog Spots.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-I really liked when the plane crashed at the garbage place. Also, how did you create the movie?

Child 23

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was pretty fun!

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About the dog Spots. But it was especially about dogs who were not allowed in a country anymore because people did not like them anymore.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The ending, because the dogs were allowed to return to their country.

Child 24

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was both funny and exciting!

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About a boy who was looking for a dog. Then he found his dog and the major had changed his mind.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-I enjoyed seeing the puppies!

Child 25

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I found it pretty enjoyable, but the beginning was difficult for me to understand.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About a boy who wanted his dog back, yet the major had signed a law that dogs were no longer allowed in the country. Thus, the boy started to look for his dog and experienced all kinds of things.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-I really liked the beginning when the pilot started looking for his dog with the other dogs.

Child 26

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was fun! Some parts were funny, yet some parts were sad and tense at the same time.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About a boy who wanted to find his dog, Spots.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-All the funny parts! Yet the beginning where the dogs were sent away was sad.

Child 27

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was alright.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-About a girl who had lost her dog and then she found another dog.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-I liked every part. But I really liked the beginning when the dogs started to help her.

Child 28

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Really funny and exciting, and also sad at times.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-It was about a dog who was lost. Then the dog finds his brother.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-That an ear was bitten off.

Appendix B: Adults' Responses

Adult 1

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I enjoyed the movie. I thought it was cute and had an interesting style. The compulsive dog-heteronormativity was unnecessary though. (Also, I love Oracle)

According to you, what was the movie about?

-I saw parallels with the rule, rise and fall of the totalitarian regimes in how misinformation was spread and accepted by people, how governmental conspiracies can brainwash masses, how people protesting are branded as conspiracy theorists and silenced, but also in how people bonding together and uniting together can change the fate of a group marginalized by a regime. Though a privileged person is often needed to recognize their privilege and side with the oppressed group to give them a voice.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The death of the science guy struck me as I saw parallels with people dying under suspicious circumstances and their deaths being branded suicides in certain countries in the world.

Adult 2

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Yes, it's a good story. I liked that you understood the dogs but not the people. This way you saw the movie through the eyes of the main characters.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-I think it's about a man in a high political position who tries to do the right thing by banning sick dogs and later not being able to admit publicly that he was wrong, which he does at the end, but loses his position, about the dogs, the wronged ones, who had to escape and fight for their freedom, which they only got with help from the owl and the little pilot.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The part where Chief changed his opinion about pet-dogs.

Adult 3

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I did. I found it a beautiful movie, both for its story and the way it was made/filmed.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-I think the movie was a reference to bits of multiple things: Nazism, (right-wing) extremism, racism, discrimination. I think the movie was about the effects of hate on and the discrimination of a minority and about how far people can go with their opinions.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The scene in which Atari gave Chief a bath, because it was just a simple scene, but one with great meaning for the rest of the movie, for it changed Chief and his relationship with Atari.

Adult 4

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Yes, it provided a very refreshing view on life as a minority, equality, the east-west divide, dictators and dogs.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-It refers to dictatorship, the power of minorities, east and west as divided but still both people, and hands a longing for equality to an audience.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The bar conflict between Tracy and Yoko because of the East-West Divide.

Adult 5

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Yes, I surely did enjoy the movie. There are so many references to and general links to everyday problems that humankind is suffering to at the moment which fuelled my intention to think more deeply about the concerned matters.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-A great movie which excellently displays many adult themes. The struggle between good and evil is central in this film and is exemplified in many matters. The everyday problems like the oppressive regime of Kobayashi, the personal issues of individuals with authority and the cruel misbehaviour of the ruling elite are vital in this wonderful tale in which a small boy wants to better the world for everyone.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The greatest part is the one where the little boy hears about the assumed death of his beloved dog. All the other problems are just irrelevant to a little child at this moment what I find really beautiful.

Adult 6

Did you enjoy the movie?

-I liked it very much, mainly because of the typical Wes Anderson style and structured chaotic storytelling. It was funny and touching at the same time and really well animated.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-I think the movie tried to tell that you shouldn't always believe what you hear and see. Always think for yourself and question why you should or should not trust

something/someone. And maybe also that people/things can change, no matter how bad things may seem.

And also, dogs are awesome! :)

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-Chief's change of attitude.

Adult 7

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Yes, aside from the fact that the style of Wes Anderson is just great in itself, its also a great story about a boy who just wants his dog back. There's also a good balance between the seriousness of the topic and the humour.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-It's an allegory for the eradication of the Jews in WWII. An entire species is deported to a nearly inhabitable location. Propaganda that promotes hate for these species is distributed and broadcasted. Any opposition is repressed and faced with violence (such as the scientist). This propaganda is based on unscientific evidence and lies. The population is brainwashed to the point where they betray the dogs they used to love.

The mayor gets the population riled up easily by blaming problems on a specific group in society; scapegoating.

The story of Atari bravely travelling to Trash Island to get his dog back gets twisted by the media to induce even more hate towards dogs. This propaganda leads to a situation where the total eradication of dogs becomes socially acceptable.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The part where Atari gives Chief a bath and, after that, become friends. And Chief accepts that being a pet isn't all that bad cause it means having someone who loves you (that was just heart-warming).

Also, the part where the mayor sees that "he had no honour" and changes his mind about killing the dogs.

Adult 8

Did you enjoy the movie?

-It was fun! Part 3 was a bit confusing with all the flashbacks, but overall it was a nice story. The allegory was obviously there, but it wasn't on the nose (as in, it did not distract from the plot itself).

According to you, what was the movie about?

-To some extent the main plot reminds me of Trump putting the children of undocumented immigrants in cages (but that may have happened after the movie came out).

In a more general sense, a dictator who reigns (supposedly) unopposed, but who in reality murders his opponents, and who systematically isolates himself of those who weaken him > by telling the people it is for their own benefit.

>Propaganda to enact the magnification of a particular group, etc.

>Extremist discourse (Trump, Hitler).

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The puppies were very cute, lol. But otherwise, I do find it interesting that an American girl is presented as the saviour? (I also found it a bit unbelievable that the mayor appeared to see reason in the end). > But the right-hand was even more radical which was I think an interesting touch (no one wants peace in office).

Adult 9

Did you enjoy the movie?

-Yes! This screening is the fourth time that I have seen the film. I find the filming techniques/Claymation beautiful. Combined with Wes Anderson's comedic timing it remains a great movie after the first three watches.

According to you, what was the movie about?

-Forcefully living in exile (allegory is applicable to multiple historic events > of course the WWII references seem to be prevalent (dogs being put into "discipline camps" and all the abused dogs would represent the wrongly treated people that were tested on; for example, the experiments performed on twins). It seems to take on the question of identity in a repressive world. Should you become obedient (like most of the healthy Trash Island dogs), or should you be anti-establishment (Chief) or create your own identity regardless of where you come from (Nutmeg). The fact that all of the dogs come from different backgrounds shows how baseless the accusations against them are, how the only actual thing uniting them is their nature, the one thing they positively can't change. All of the aboriginal dogs have a bad reputation but proving the dogs wrong once they explain how the situation actually occurred, further implying that the majority of the population have a strong bias towards their group.

On a lighter note, the movie encompasses family values, how just being part of someone's family means you belong, regardless of what your background might be.

Which part in the movie most struck you?

-The introduction of the film, where the entire history is laid out in front of us. The narrated introduction by Jupiter and Oracle is one of the funniest scenes in the movie. The drawn style is different from the rest of the movie and stuck with me long after watching the movie. The puns in that part are also very carefully chosen.

List of Illustrations

Fig.	Source
Cover	<i>Isle of Dogs</i> Original Soundtrack album cover courtesy of Wes Anderson, Randall Poster, and ABKCO Music & Records, Inc.
1	Interpretation chart courtesy of Max Bosch.
2	<i>The Thrifty Pig</i> still courtesy of Ford Beebe, The National Film Board of Canada, and Walt Disney.
3, 4	<i>The Beast is Dead</i> frames courtesy of Edmond-Francois Calvo and Abi Melzer Productions.
5, 11	<i>Animal Farm</i> still courtesy of Halas & Batchelor.
6	<i>The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat</i> still courtesy of R. Taylor and A-film.
7, 8, 20, 22	<i>Maus</i> frames courtesy of Art Spiegelman and Penguin Books.
9	<i>Triumph of the Will</i> still courtesy of Leni Riefenstahl.
10, 13, 16, 18, 25	<i>Isle of Dogs</i> stills courtesy of Wes Anderson and 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.
12	Donald Trump rally photograph courtesy of Getty Images.
14	Karl Krall photograph courtesy of Lee Krystek.
15	ARBEIT MACHT FREI photograph courtesy of the Auschwitz Museum.
17	American Mexican immigrant camp photograph courtesy of Mike Blake and Reuters.
19	Buchenwald photograph courtesy of Margaret Bourke-White, Time & Life Pictures, and Getty Images.
21	Mexican immigrants photograph courtesy of Sergio Flores and The Washington Post.
23	<i>The Plague Dogs</i> still courtesy of Martin Rosen.
24	Rio Grande photograph courtesy of John Moore and Getty Images.

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