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## Narcissus and *The Lobster* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015)

She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.

Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all. It is not.

Samuel Beckett. "Dante and the Lobster."

In all the places of the planet, and inside every cell, there is a Narcissus who is this very instant copying himself.

Agustín Fernández Mallo. *Implosió (cel.lular)*.

Poor David. As he sits on his living room sofa, the right-hand side of his face and his glasses in view, we hear the voice of his wife off-screen and deduce that she is leaving him for another man. His only question, asked in a neutral tone, is whether her new man wears contact lenses or glasses. There is no moral judgement on his wife for her infidelity: David (Colin Farrell) is the one who will be punished, and the reason for this is that he has become single again in a society that only sanctions being part of a couple. His question to his wife, strange at first, turns out to be fundamental to the logic of compatibility at work here. Opposites do not attract: similarity is the only prerequisite for a relationship, and one's dominant trait – for example, being short-sighted, having a limp, having frequent, inexplicable nose-bleeds, or a beautiful smile – is what one also seeks first and foremost in a partner. Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Lobster* (2015) thus presents a darkly humorous vision of a world in which likeness is the only sought-after foundation for love. Narcissus lives on through such a mirroring search for one's match, and a related mythological heritage links the human to the animal world, compulsorily outlawing singletons.

Just after the scene in which his wife says that she is leaving him, David is led from his home to a minibus that will transport him to the fortress-like hotel that has

been set up explicitly for matchmaking. The voice-over of the woman he will eventually fall in love with narrates his passage from married life to his newly single status, her initial vocal presence a reversal of Echo's evolving relation to Narcissus in myth – a voice before a body – that then resounds throughout. In Ovid's tale "Narcissus and Echo," many lust after Narcissus's beauty as he grows into a man, but it is Echo 'still a body, not a mere voice' (Ovid, 110), who stands out, follows his tracks, and becomes enamoured with him before being rejected by him. Punished by Némesis who hears the cry of one of his many scorned admirers, Narcissus eventually falls in love but can never obtain his object of desire, since he falls for his own reflection. Echo, now voice alone, is moved to pity as she watches his decline and echoes his final farewell. As he crosses the river Styx to Hades, the mourning laments continue, but his body is nowhere to be found: 'only a flower with a trumpet of gold and pale white petals' (Ovid, 118). While the walls of the hotel in *The Lobster* are bedecked with still-life paintings of flowers, the punishment for remaining single is not to be turned into a flower, like Narcissus, but, rather, an animal.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are tales of transformation, a large number of which involve the gods turning people into animals at will and vengefully, normally for stepping out of place and rebelling as did Narcissus. In *The Lobster* the room to which the singletons are taken when they run out of time and fail to find a partner is called the Transformation Room. In the hotel there is no divine intervention, though, just a set of stringent rules enforced by all-too-human managers who extol the virtues of going two-by-two into a secure future in the postdiluvian world beyond the hotel, in order to avoid being turned into animals. David explains to the hotel manager (Olivia Colman) that he wishes to become a lobster, if at the end of the standard forty-five day period he has not found a partner, and if he has been unable to extend this period

through the shooting sprees the singletons are taken on in the woods. These hunts involve stunning and capturing a renegade loner, a large group of whom live clandestinely in the area surrounding the hotel, and whom he joins in the second half of the film, meeting his soul mate in an equally stark rule-bound set-up in which human contact and attraction are now just as strictly forbidden. David breaks the rules within both communities. Unlike Narcissus, David does fall in love with a woman who exists in excess of her opening voice-over, albeit in the wrong place and at the wrong time according to the laws of the different spaces he inhabits, but this is still governed by an attraction based on similar traits: the woman, played by Rachel Weisz, is nameless and referred to only in the credits as the short-sighted woman. Falling in love by command, according to a set of rules, and within a time limit is what David questions through his transgressions, yet love and likeness are bound together throughout.

*The Lobster* thereby returns to a classical theme that, as Julia Kristeva notes, has nourished intellectual and psychic life in the west for centuries (Kristeva 1987 [1983], 104). Within the post-9/11 era, the myth resonates with Lanthimos's cinema more generally, which reflects repeatedly on the relationship between originals and copies, and joins with other 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophical and artistic interrogations. In his 2015 exhibition *Implosió (cel.lular)* at Es Baluard, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, in Palma Mallorca, the Spanish writer and physicist Agustín Fernández Mallo recalls that the 21<sup>st</sup> century was effectively inaugurated by the collapse of a paradigmatic example and symbol of duplication: the Twin Towers (Agustín Fernández Mallo, 2015). Contemporary considerations of the copy, the double and duplication in the arts and science debate what can or cannot be duplicated, reflecting on the significance of the copy, and returning to the problem

that Narcissus faced when he looked in the water. From *Kinetta* (2005) to *Alpeis/Alps* (2011), through *Kinodontas/Dogtooth* (2009) and his role in *Attenberg* (Athena Rachel Tsangari, 2011), Lanthimos explores imitation within tightly rule-bound, closed groups. *The Lobster* extends the exploration of rule-governed structures, now externalizing and rigidifying laws of attraction attached to relationships. Drawing upon philosophical and theoretical explorations of mimesis and imitation – from the work of Judith Butler and other queer theorists, through that of René Girard, to that of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – but then looking elsewhere – most notably to the work of Emmanuel Levinas – my discussion here will focus both on the unrelenting search for similarity and sameness in this film as well as the possibilities it affords for glimpsing a position of radical alterity beyond the mirror of the human self. *The Lobster* exposes the risks of externally imposed and internally engrained imitative structures founded in the replication of likeness, and this article joins with it in asking, in the name of love, whether there is any way out.

### **Matching and Mimesis**

*The Lobster* is Lanthimos's third collaboration with Greek screenwriter Efthimis Filippou (*Dogtooth*, *Alps*) and Lanthimos's first English-language feature. It won the Jury prize at Cannes 2015, following on from the award of the prize of Un Certain Regard for *Dogtooth* in 2009. In their edited volume on Greek cinema, Lydia Papadimitriou and Yannis Tzioumakis comment on the phenomenon of *Dogtooth* and its place within 'the exceptional category of Greek films that have crossed the national borders' (Papadimitriou and Tzioumakis 2012, 9). The choice to film in the English language in *The Lobster* (an Irish-UK-Greek-French-Dutch co-production) with an international cast builds on this desire to extend further beyond Greek shores.

Lanthimos's work falls within the period of what Greek film historian Vrasidas Karalis explains many have termed the New Greek Current but with a language that is 'not reducible to its cultural particulars' (Karalis 2012, 273). The book chapter that Karalis devotes to this most recent period of Greek cinema highlights the figure of the stranger as hero, referring to both the stranger from beyond Greece and the stranger within. As with the Freudian characterization of the strangeness of the uncanny as once familiar but now alienated through repression, however, the human other in the context of Lanthimos's films seems too close to the self to be the purveyor of alterity (Freud 1985 [1919], 363-64). Instead, self and other are part of overtly inculcated mimetic systems in which duplication both sustains and threatens the status quo.

The exploration of the relationship between the original and the copy from Lanthimos's earliest films onwards chimes with Judith Butler's performative theorization of identity and, in *The Lobster*, with its explicitly queer implications. Butler explained how the hierarchy of the logic of the (heterosexual) original and the (homosexual) copy could be undermined by the very mimetic repetitions that serve to keep it in place, such that the copy would repeat with a difference that calls into question the status of the original, changing it in the process, and altering the entire structure of relations (Butler 1990). The re-enactments of violent or death scenes in *Kinetta* by a trio of two men and one woman show how indistinguishable the re-enactments are from the 'real' thing. In *Alps*, there is another closely-knit small group similar to that of *Kinetta*, but who substitute for the dead this time in order to help relatives with the grieving process. The process of copying in each film brings out proximity to the original event or exposes the constructed status of relationships, but each time, in spite of this performative subversion, the copy always lacks something and gives itself away. For example, the woman who stands in for a couple's dead

daughter, a tennis player, in *Alps*, goes out of control, repeating lines in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Furthermore, a final death scene in *Kinetta* almost kills the woman who plays it out, who has to be rescued by one of the men she works alongside, but not before he photographs her limp body on the bathroom floor. In *Dogtooth* processes of imitative language acquisition are founded in a parental model that misinforms the children: word and conventional meaning are detached wherever the parents feel that their children should not speak the correct word, leading to sentences and their breakdown to the point of dog barking at times, worthy of the Theatre of the Absurd. In *The Lobster*, if a match based on likeness is not achieved, the management intervenes to reinstitute norms that are set out within a regulatory structure from the outset: conformity and uniformity (the hotel guests all wear the same clothes) are paramount here.

Among the information that David has to give to a receptionist upon arrival at the hotel, he is asked to specify his sexual preference. He queries whether bisexuality is an option, explaining that he once had a homosexual experience in college, but he is told that this category was removed due to several operational problems. In contrast to the fluidity of Butlerian performativity, founded on the questioning of the hierarchy of heterosexuality over homosexuality, David is required to fit within a binary structure that would not question the discreteness of either category, being either/or rather than both/and. Binary without being heterosexist – even though the homosexual counterparts of the heterosexual dating scene are not shown, aside from fleeting views of a couple of women dancing together – this society appears open to any kind of partnership at any one time, gay or straight; what it cannot accept is someone who floats free of being in a couple, and who is not actively seeking a partner. Cultural theorist Jo Eadie asked in a discussion of the meanings of ‘queer’ in 1994: ‘in a world

where it is not just compulsory to be heterosexual, but compulsory to be sexual, is celibacy queer?’ (Eadie 1994, 245). In the society of *The Lobster* singletons are subversive, regardless of whom they desire. They not only disrupt the coupling that serves the logic of reproduction and futurity that queer theorist Lee Edelman criticizes in his queering of straight culture (Edelman 2004), they also question the preservation of togetherness in the present that the authorities of this society repeatedly reiterate as a norm.

The ostensible perils of being single – a sign of this society’s perverse fear of singletons – are outlined to the hotel guests in mechanical displays of the benefits of being in a couple performed by the hotel staff, from avoiding choking by never dining alone to never walking on one’s own at night. These scenes are intercut with David in his room being stimulated by the maid to the point of getting an erection, and with Robert, the lisping man (John C. Reilly), having his hand held in a toaster in the dining room, after being caught masturbating in his room. The entire sequence is an extended reinforcement of the handcuffing of one hand that David, like all other guests at the hotel, undergoes when he first arrives in his room: to remind him how much easier it is to do things when he has not one but two of everything. Responding to this satirical take on being on one’s own, some initial reviewers felt that the film was a sustained comment on the pressures that are on people today to form relationships, while others noted the film’s proximity to the online dating scene. Liam Lacey indeed calls the film ‘a kind of match-making story for the age of Tinder and online-dating’ (Lacey 2015). Moreover, Colin Farrell speaks of the film’s similarity to online sites that match people in terms of things they have in common, noting the narcissistic basis of this set-up (Farrell 2015). For Freud, ‘[a] person who loves has, so to speak, forfeited a part of his narcissism, and it can only be replaced by his being



loved' (Freud 1991 [1914], 93). Two are needed for love rather than self-love, but Narcissus dwells in *The Lobster* at the very heart of the twosome: what one looks for in the other is what one sees in oneself.

As if mocking such matchmaking on the basis of similarity, the heartless woman whom David befriends with equally heartless declarations and acts for a while in order to become a couple, declares after he fails to come to her rescue when she pretends to choke on an olive: 'I think we're a match'. There is big business in matchmaking in contemporary western society: the US Match Group that owns the world's biggest online dating platforms – Tinder, OKCupid, Match – was to be floated on the stock market for an estimated value of £2.1 billion in 2015 (*The Observer*, November 15, 2015, 33). Lanthimos's film does not explore matchmaking in commercial terms but as law, from the management of the hotel to the outside world that David ventures into when he joins a group of the loners who go on a journey into the city for provisions. Security guards in a shopping mall check the fingernails and soles of shoes of those they stop and ask for their papers, making sure they are legitimately coupled and not from the renegade woods. The pursuit of likeness in this film is part of a generalized system of wanting to be like others, the insecurity of which is palpable precisely because it requires law enforcement: singles can never be allowed to be free because this may set a new norm.<sup>1</sup> As Stephanie Zacharek remarks astutely in her review of the film, this society must find the cruellest punishment for those who 'might just be a little too happy being single' (Zacharek 2015). The dominant model of coupling is spread thus through the mimesis of desire, but as René Girard has shown, this is fraught with animosity.

Girard writes: '[i]n human relationships words like *sameness* and *similarity* evoke an image of harmony. If we have the same tastes and like the same things,

surely we are bound to get along' (Girard 2013 [1972], 165). The problem emerges, however, when we share the same desires. It is desire for being that informs the mimetic structure and a perception that others have what we lack to make us happy: 'The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being' (164). With a societal structure in which everyone is required to be part of a couple comes the concomitant desire to be in one, to want what everyone else has, shown through the example of their desire. In *The Lobster* there is occasional rivalry for the same love object: David suspects that another loner likes his soul mate at one point and challenges him, going to great lengths to establish whether he is short-sighted or not. But the relevance of Girard's observations on the hostility and violence of mimetic desire pertain more widely to the society founded on pursuit of likeness, which is anything but harmonious or true.

The impossibility here is that of emancipating oneself. The normative law repeatedly represses the disruptive power of the category of the singleton in this film as performative iterations of identity are only legitimized when articulated as a couple formed by an attraction based on similarity. The singleton queers the system and must be brought back into line and into the rigidity of a straight or gay couple. While transformation is a disciplinary action, it is anything but a straightening out of the situation, since many a singleton will now wander through the shots of the film albeit as a member of a different species, and in some respects, through the metamorphoses, this film joins with those scholars who asked in an edited volume what it might mean to queer the human (Giffney and Hird 2008). But this process too is articulated in the same terms as the search for a human partner. The hotel manager presents the transformation process to David as a second chance to find a companion, and it is again voiced in terms of finding one's like: he is reminded that a similar type of

animal to himself is what he will obviously need to seek out in a mate. The Greco-Roman origins of Ovid's tales broaden out geographically and historically in the metamorphoses inflicted on the singletons and also relate to tales of transformation in more recent times.

### **From Humans to Other Animals**

The animal transformations of the film connect with but are different from earlier European and absurdist 20<sup>th</sup> century metamorphoses – from Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa to Eugène Ionesco's rhinoceroses – since a semblance of choice and absence of spontaneity inform the individualized process of what animal each person becomes. David announces his desire to become a lobster in cool, calm and considered terms, and there is no palpable fear of this transition, contrasting with the central character Bérenger in Ionesco's *Rhinocéros/Rhinoceros* (1959), who declares 'J'ai peur de devenir un autre...' (I am afraid of becoming an other) (Ionesco 1959, 174).

Furthermore, there is no retention of human subjectivity through the metamorphoses of *The Lobster* as there is in Kafka's *Die Verwandlung/The Metamorphosis* (1915) throughout which Samsa reflects on his predicament with apparent lucidity. Writing in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explain: 'to become a beetle, to become a dog, to become an ape... rather than lowering one's head and remaining a bureaucrat, inspector, judge or judged... To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold...' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975], 13). Becoming is a non-imitative process in which two entities come together and produce something common to neither and its transgressive potential, recognized in *Kafka*, is a function of desire. In *The Lobster*, in contrast, and beyond the initial choice offered to the hapless

singletons, the law controls the transformation from human to animal such that the transition cannot represent a subversive line of flight in the form of desire and does not permit the person to escape the system. The metamorphosis is also more extreme than in *Attenberg* (Tsangari), which features Lanthimos, and in which the possibility of living imaginatively in another creature's world is explored without a change of species. In *The Lobster* the single people who escape the transformation process by running away and seeking refuge in the woods are hunted down regularly like the animals they have yet to become.

The film sets up parallels between pursuing a partner and capturing a renegade singleton in the woods. Towards the start of the film, the manager and her partner (Garry Mountaine) host a ballroom dance, which begins with a fixed frame shot of them standing stiffly in front of their band as they embark on a rendition of "Something's gotten hold of my heart". David's approach to the dance floor and to asking the woman who has frequent nosebleeds (Jessica Barden) to dance is filmed in slow motion. Momentarily an extract from Richard Strauss's "Don Quixote" replaces the singing. David is living out the knightly fantasy, and the stirring strings accompany his passage across the floor. The Strauss variations return later in the film when David goes as part of a group of four loners to the city to buy provisions. A slow motion sequence shows them travelling down an escalator before entering shops and browsing, as if in wonder, at what is on display, selecting items as well as catching each other's gaze from time to time. David glances down when the short-sighted woman links arms with him as their interconnection here harks back to the earlier ballroom sequence through the music, in the hunt for love.

The hunt for rogue singletons that follows the ballroom scene is accompanied by a haunting Greek song of lost love and is also filmed in slow motion. Accurate

shots bring down loners and extend the hunters' stay at the hotel. Near misses cause tranquilizer darts to sear into damp tree bark in the dark greens and browns of the sylvan shade. The song that accompanies this sequence is "Apo Mesa Pethamenos"/"Dead Inside," performed in the Greek language by Danae Strategopoulou, with poignant lyrics that suggest depth of suffering pertinent to David's situation but pervasive of the entire scene:

Back when you loved me, you asked me one morning  
While we talked, what could life mean  
I then turned to you and said for some it's wine  
For some glory, for others riches, but for me it is you.

Now that your heart has changed and you love somebody else  
You wonder, they tell me, how my heart still goes on  
But aren't there lots of people like me [who are also]  
Dead inside and alive on the outside.<sup>2</sup>

The slower pace of this sequence, accompanied by the melancholic melody, makes it stand out, as did the famous hunt scene in Jean Renoir's *La Règle du jeu/The Rules of the Game* (1939) for the opposite reason of the increased pace and number of shots in contrast to the rest of this classic. In the closing sequences of Renoir's film, the aviator André Jurieu is described as having been shot like an animal at the hunt, recalling the rabbits and pheasants that are shot earlier at the hunting party where the interwoven deceitful love relations are laid bare. The society in *The Lobster* is overly controlled, in comparison to that of Renoir, which is out of control for its fickle love and self-absorption, yet there is still a critical focus here on a society where something is wrong with the search for and sustaining of love. Lanthimos's hunt requires that

humans hunt humans to save their own skins and to turn the outlaws into animals. As Benjamin Dodman notes in his review, ‘the premise is that monogamous relationships are what distinguish us from beasts. Those who fail to find a partner are therefore unworthy of the human race’ (Dodman 2015). Although the focus of the film is on human relationships, a wide variety of animals appear throughout, and it is difficult to look at any of the animals in the film without wondering whether they too were once human, as they look on.

Some of the animals that appear in the latter half of the film wander past nonchalantly in the back of shots – a flamingo, a camel, a peacock, a pony – suggesting their belonging to another world: these familiars of our world who inhabit another, one which, as Luce Irigaray puts it, we humans do not know (Irigaray 2004, 195).<sup>3</sup> From the outset, and in addition to a wild and wonderful coexistence, though, animals are also killed, confirming Akira Mizuta Lippit’s sense that animals in modernity never entirely vanish but exist rather in a state of ‘*perpetual vanishing*’ (Lippit 2000, 1). While there may be no retention of a human subjectivity when humans are transformed in this film, this does not stop those humans who are left behind from continuing to think of the animal as the human they once were, securing the preservation of similarity across an apparently unbridgeable divide, and anthropomorphizing the animal as a result.

David brings his dog, Bob, with him to the hotel, who was formerly his brother: as he explains to the receptionist, his brother was at the hotel a couple of years ago but did not make it. When the heartless woman kicks the dog to death to test whether he really is heartless too, she wakes David up to tell him that she has killed his brother, not his dog. The inhabitation of the animal by the human is something that Ovid touches upon in *Metamorphoses* when he warns against the eating of animals in what

stands as an early passionate plea for vegetarianism, since the winged souls of humans can live on in wild beasts: ‘The creatures we see may well embody the souls of our parents or brothers or people to whom we’ve been bonded – of human beings at least’ (Ovid, 616). He concludes: ‘If an animal harms you, destroy it; but do no more than destroy it. Cleave to a diet that sheds no blood and is kind to all creatures’ (616). Closer to the present, and for Emmanuel Levinas, vegetarianism is founded in knowledge of suffering, a key element of Jeremy Bentham’s approach to animals too, and humans have an obligation to other species on this basis (Levinas 2004 [1975], 49-50). Levinas’s ethics has not been as prominent to date as other philosophies in discussions of the place of non-human animals in film, in part due to the emphasis that he places on human relations.<sup>4</sup> The commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is the foundation of Levinas’s anthropocentric ethics, which prioritizes the Other through an encounter with the face (*visage*) in the context of human relations: ‘The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face (...) The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me’ (Levinas 2007 [1961], 50-51). In this film, although the commandment is broken repeatedly there is a point of contact between the human and non-human animal that nonetheless connects with his ethics and broadens an understanding of the face.<sup>5</sup> It is worth elaborating further on the relationship between Levinasian ethics and the non-human animal in order to bring out its pertinence to Lanthimos’s film.

In a rare moment of attention to animals in his work, Levinas tells of his extraordinary encounter with a dog, named Bobby. There were seventy men in the forestry commando unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany that Levinas was part of, and as he explains: ‘The French uniform still protected us from Hitlerian violence. But the other men, called free, who had dealings with us or gave us work or

orders or even a smile – and the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes – stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes’ (Levinas 2004 [1975], 48). One day, about halfway through their captivity, a stray dog came into their lives for only a few weeks before he was chased away. Levinas notes: ‘He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men’ (49). Where other people stripped these prisoners of their humanity and dignity, Bobby made them human again through his recognition of them, his canine countenance not that of a human face, not that of the Levinasian *visage*, but capable of conferring humanity in a way that people did not. In the interview that follows the translation of this piece in *Animal Philosophy*, the questions take Levinas’s ethics out of its comfort zone and ask him to think about one of his central concepts, the face, as possibly not only human. He says that more specific analysis is needed and he never pursues this in detail elsewhere. But his recognition that, while humans have priority, other animals also have faces, leads him to confirm that the ethical extends to all living beings (Levinas 2004 [1975], 49-50). For Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, the face speaks and it is through language that the ethical face-to-face encounter takes place, constituting the separated non-relation that enables self and Other to be in contact without the latter being reduced to the idea that the former has of them or to an image (Levinas 2007 [1961], 53-81). When the question of the non-human animal is broached, linguistic communication is circumvented, but a different mode of address is shown to be possible, which has central relevance to film and to this discussion of *The Lobster*.

Derrida, deconstructing Levinas and noting the problem in his philosophy more generally of prioritizing the human, suggests that the animal gaze, rather than



sole contact through human language, offers one of the best ways of thinking about radical alterity (Derrida 2002 [1999], 380). Yet what Derrida closes his reflections with is already evident in Levinas's prisoner-of-war experience with Bobby. Derrida writes on the basis of being seen naked by his own cat:

Wherever some autobiographical play is being enacted there has to be a psyche, a mirror that reflects me naked from head to toe. The same question then becomes whether I should show myself but in the process see myself naked (that is reflect my image in a mirror) when, concerning me, looking at me, is this living creature, this cat that can find itself caught in the same mirror? Is there animal narcissism? But cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror? (418)

To respond with a further question to Derrida: was not the stray dog the primary mirror of the men of the camp, granting them a human status that their fellow men did not? Bobby opened the question of a relation between himself and Levinas that was more than a narcissistic reflection, and was in fact a shattering of the mirror, akin to the asymmetry of Levinas's ethical relation, this time between dog and man.<sup>6</sup> Dogs are not the only animals to afford access to a position beyond likeness that recognizes alterity in *The Lobster*, but they are the most prevalent to feature and be mentioned in the film. Furthermore, Bob is the only proper name other than David to feature in the closing credits. Dogs are a point of reference throughout that give pause on the passage between humans and other animals that exceeds the punitive transformation process.

Literary scholar Colin Dayan, writing about her enduring relation to dogs throughout her life, suggests that it is time to begin to revisit what we mean by the human and to have humanity marked by uncertainty. Her sense of ethics is 'to locate

oneself in relation to a world adamantly not one's own' (Dayan 2016, xvi). Hers is not an explicitly Levinasian ethics but shares with his philosophy a fascination with what cannot be known about the world beyond one's own, which in her case is that of dogs. It is through the eyes of dogs that she replaces certainty with mood, as she is interested in feeling something that cannot always be understood, something that is perceived without being comprehended (xvi). She notes how dogs 'become the medium for apprehending the fate of all creatures left behind in the glitz of modernization' (122), the errant dog and errant person becoming aligned. The dogs of the films that Dayan is interested in, like Levinas's Bobby, and Bob in *The Lobster* see from a different perspective, one from which humans in general and spectators of the film never see. It is this blockage of vision that the film acknowledges as fundamental to an alternative way of thinking about love.

### **A Tale of Love**

When David tries to disguise tears in the bathroom upon seeing the gruesome sight of Bob's dead body in a pool of blood, the heartless woman marches him off to the management for faking the heartlessness that made them a match. He escapes and, with the help of the maid, stuns her with a tranquilizer gun and delivers her to the Transformation Room. In a dissolve, the white door of the room gives way to a tree-lined road that leads from the hotel, and the effect of this slow filmic transition is that David seems at once to be coming out of the room in the hotel and emerging elsewhere, running haphazardly into the outside world. This, the short-sighted woman's voice-over narrates, was the start of his new life with the loners.

The singletons dance alone, wearing headphones and listening to electronic music, and they dig their own graves. The enforced isolation of the singleton is not

the abrogation of social activity, however, and escape from the hotel is a point of entry into political action that exposes false relationships. The loners launch an attack on the hotel one night and the yachts that house the couples, aided by the hotel maid, to expose the lie at the heart of people's relationships. Exposing the fakery connects again with the original/copy logic within the film in a different sense, revealing now how the former is still valorised. There is such a thing as love that is not based on a false foundation, and while it may be performatively constituted in the same way as the copy, it is the inauthenticity of the latter that is now exposed. This is the start of the emergence of an asymmetry akin to that of the Levinasian ethical relation within the very coupling that sought to suppress alterity through pursuit of symmetrical likeness.

When the hotel manager's partner is given the option by the renegade loners of dying for his wife or shooting her instead, he says that she would struggle to live on alone and that it is best that he is the one who lives. The key test of how much love there is in a relationship here is whether one would die for one's partner. For Lanthimos indeed, speaking in interview, the film does not profess beliefs about coupling; it questions, rather, 'whether there is love, and how you find it, how [...] you realize it, and what you are prepared to do for it' (Lanthimos cited in Asp 2015). As if responding to this directly, and in complete contrast to the manager's partner, David declares on the first trip to the city when play-acting that he is in a couple: 'I love my wife so much I could die for her, that's how much I love her.' Where he feigned feelings for the heartless woman in the hotel, now he has strong feelings for the short-sighted woman but is prohibited from acting on them publicly, so the public performance in this situation tells the truth as part of an act.

The love story of *The Lobster* between David and his short-sighted partner is thus lived out in the first instance as a performance that masquerades as play-acting but is real, and there are other moments that replace direct communication but permit them to declare their love for one another beyond words. As with the language that derives from movement in *Kinetta*, in the second half of *The Lobster*, David and his lover develop a secret code, a form of sign language that involves the whole body moving without speaking and that supplements their ordinary verbal exchanges with each other in private. They constitute their love performatively, heartfelt but legible across the surface of their bodily movements, and this can only be understood as part of a secret system of communication which is the corollary of their trysts. Akin to such privacy, the relation between lovers is the only place in Levinas's work where all others are excluded: 'It excludes the third party, it remains intimacy, dual solitude, closed society, the supremely non-public' (Levinas 2007 [1961], 265). Yet while reference to the beloved of Levinas's amorous relation suggests her passivity, the short-sighted woman is as active as her lover, the *amante* (lover) of whom Irigaray writes, rather than the *aimée* (beloved) of Levinas's vision of fecund love (Irigaray 1993 [1984]). Both he and she are venturing into unknown territory, through the face-to-face encounter and beyond.

The first time that we are shown the coded exchange of gestures, it is preceded by a synchronized dance together. A pony walks by in the back of the shot, as they listen in a glade on separate headsets to Nick Cave's "Elisa Day," a disturbing track that narrates how a man kills his lover, and which David sings again later. Then, in slow motion, with her explanatory voice-over and accompanied by the adagio second movement in D minor of Beethoven's String Quartet No 1 in F Major Op 18, the sequence shows some of their moves. The embodied movement communes with the

non-diegetic music that externalizes emotion and feeling where none is otherwise apparent in declarative verbal expression or tone of voice. They arouse suspicions in a subsequent visit to the city that are then confirmed when she drops her diary during the hunt. Her voice-over ends here, giving way to the hotel maid, who has now defected to the loners, reading out extracts from her diary on-screen. The loner leader (Léa Seydoux) takes charge of splitting the couple up by having her blinded.

The blinding breaks the lovers' short-sighted bond: yet with her now sightless, the relationship based on likeness is taken to an extreme through David's willingness and apparent need to become like her again. There is no pragmatic thought that he could be more useful to her as a sighted partner. Love blinds quite literally here, and there is irrepressible violence throughout the film that chimes with the recognition of its place in the vision of love presented philosophically through the work of Alain Badiou (Badiou 2012 [2009]). Yet where Badiou focuses on difference in togetherness, distinguishing his position from that of Levinas, it is, rather, an unknowable otherness in separation, refracted through non-human vision that this film reveals, drawing closer to a Levinasian position through his brief but suggestive observations on its extension to all living beings. While David will kill for his lover – from the dead rabbits he presents to her, to leaving the loner leader gagged and bound in an open grave – and he will pursue similarity in the name of love to the bittersweet end, he will also gesture towards an alterity and love that remain intact beyond the transformations and killings of humans and other animals that otherwise inform the film.

What David is about to inflict on himself and what his lover has already had inflicted upon her is a punishment worthy of the Greco-Roman gods – the fate of Tiresias or Oedipus – even though both escape being metamorphosed into animals, as

they would have been if captured and returned to the hotel. The last time we see David is in a profile shot, from a distance, looking at himself in the mirror with a steak knife poised in front of one eyeball and paper towels tucked into his shirt collar and stuffed into his mouth. The ultimate act performed to be true to his love will eradicate sight, and the sense that drew Narcissus to himself as he stared into the pool and fell in love with the person looking back at him is blacked out. The black screen that replaces the final image in conclusion – she is left waiting for him to return to her at the table of the motorway service station restaurant as the film cuts to black – removes our vision too, albeit less viciously than what David is poised to do. As with the ending of *Dogtooth*, in which the cut to black follows an image of the boot of the father’s car in which the daughter has hidden, it is possible to read this psychologically as the world without visual images that David has now entered to join his lover. Yet Lanthimos’s other films also cut to black abruptly and permit no such obviously subjective reading. The specular relation comes to an end without invoking any identification with inner vision, and the spectacle of a Buñuelian assault on the eye is never shown. David chooses sameness and ultimately blindness but by shattering the mirror of the self-image and surrendering narcissism to a realm beyond sight, leaving spectators too with a position from which we cannot see.

Over the black screen and closing credits, the dreamy melody of Tonis Maroudas and Sophia Loren’s rendition of “Ti’ne afto pou to lene agape?”/“What’s this thing called love?” plays from *Boy on a Dolphin* (Jean Negulesco, 1957), set in Greece, in which Sophia Loren plays a sponge diver who finds an ancient brass statue of a boy riding a dolphin, which is said to have the magical power to grant wishes. The lyrical Greek duet brings the male and female voice together in ways that the imagery of *The Lobster* kept separate in its final sequence, before giving way to the

sound reminiscent of the traffic outside the motorway service station restaurant where she was left, but also similar to the rush of waves in the sea, somewhere between films, between humans and other animals, between the present and an imagined future, over the credits on the black screen. The words ask what love is:

I love you, I love you, I love you.

What's this thing called love

What is it, what is it?

That secretly guides our hearts

And that everyone who's known it, feels nostalgic for it.

What's this thing called love

What is it, what is it?

Laughter, tears, sunshine, rain

Our life's end as well as its beginning.

Never, never, no lips

Have been able to find an answer for it.

What's this thing called love

What is it, what is it?

That makes you want to sing the song

I love you, I love you, I love you.<sup>7</sup>

The film leaves us in the dark with an open-ended interrogation of love that resonates far beyond Greek shores, extending through time, and which gestures ultimately beyond what can be seen and known, joining thus with a Levinasian perspective. The blankness of the black screen recalls the film's most radical position of otherness, that

of the gaze of other animals from which position humans cannot see, as Narcissus is laid to rest without being consigned to oblivion. [7527 words]

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<sup>1</sup> Less anxiously than the approach to being single in this film, a recent BBC iWonder study asks ‘Is Single the New Married?’ and questions whether there is already a new norm: see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z2cdxsg> [accessed 10 May 2016].

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Olga Kourelou for transliterating this song from the Greek, and for clarifying that the gendered mode of address is from a man to a woman whose heart has changed.

<sup>3</sup> Laura McMahon and Michael Lawrence also note the existence of a world that extends beyond our own and the non-human animals’ lack of interest in our interest in them (McMahon and Lawrence 2015, 16).

<sup>4</sup> The initial philosophy and film scholars to take up Levinas in the realm of film studies focused on the centrality of the human in his work either tacitly or explicitly. See, for example, the articles in Cooper 2007. More recently Aaron McMullan has explored the question of the non-human animal in the death film using Levinas’s ethics. See the paper abstract for the 2011 *Film-Philosophy* conference (McMullan 2011) and his unpublished doctoral thesis (McMullan 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Here I join with literary scholar Colleen Glenney Bloggs who reads against the grain of critical interpretations of Levinas that understand that the ethical call cannot issue from the non-human face. See, for example, Colleen Glenney Bloggs 2012, especially chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> My own reading of Levinas at this point is in tune with Karalyn Kendall’s on co-evolution, in which she understands his work to challenge the hierarchy between human and canine. See Kendall 2008, 185-204.



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<sup>7</sup> I thank Olga Kourelou for transliterating this song from the Greek. The original Greek song is longer than the one used in the credits.

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