

ON YEAR OF THE DOG



"Animals are like us, they live for love."
—Newt, to Peggy, in *Year of the Dog*

Year of the Dog (Mike White, 2007, 35 mm, 93 min., United States).
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BY JON DAVIES

American screenwriter Mike White's sole directorial effort, *Year of the Dog* (2007), starring elastic-faced comedienne Molly Shannon, presents one of the most nuanced and compelling representations of the love and empathy of a human for non-human animals that I've encountered. Somewhere in Los Angeles, Peggy Spade works as an executive assistant in a socially awkward corporate office. Peggy is polite and pleasant to her comically high-maintenance co-worker friend, Layla, and her volatile, self-centered boss, Robin; as well as to her neurotically "perfect" sister-in-law, Bret, brother, Pier, and their two small children. Peggy's real affection is entirely for her beagle, Pencil, whom she loves more than anything in the world: he brings her a simple but all-suffusing sense of joy (concisely illustrated in the film's opening montage). He completes her. When Pencil is accidentally poisoned one night on a neighbour's property, his shocking death forces Peggy to return to the community of the human, where she tries unsuccessfully to integrate with her own species. As the film charts Peggy's journey towards becoming increasingly committed to animals and their welfare—which manifests itself as both psychological downward spiral and ethical self-actualization process—Peggy ultimately finds meaning and happiness outside of reproductive heterosexuality and wage slavery in animal rights activism.

White films Peggy and Pencil together as if they are a couple in a glorious romantic relationship, in sharp contrast to the discomfort that pervades the former's interactions with co-workers, relatives and neighbours—other human beings, basically. Portrayed with great pathos, Pencil's tragic demise utterly eviscerates Peggy. Their private love becomes public as Peggy's formidable grief begins to isolate her from the people around her. Bret, for example, a monstrous blonde played by the great Laura Dern, can't fathom the depth of Peggy's pain—she is far too self-deceptive to confront tough feelings. Meanwhile, Layla (Regina King) suggests insensitively that maybe Pencil died so that Peggy's love life can flourish. Peggy indeed attempts an uncomfortable date with her oafish neighbour Al (John C. Reilly), which goes sour when he announces himself to be an avid hunter and tries, unsuccessfully, to put the moves on her after she insists on poking around his garage for evidence of whatever killed Pencil. (Over the course of the film, Peggy will hold Al more and more responsible for

Pencil's passing; he becomes the target of her rage and righteous indignation.)

Though dismissing the dating world with a firm "yuck!," Peggy does briefly find a shining hope for companionship and understanding in doughy man-boy Newt (Peter Sarsgaard), a frumpy vet clinic and SPCA worker who coaxes her to adopt an aggressive dog named Valentine in order to save him from euthanasia ("I'm just desperate because I don't want to see him die—but no pressure"). Their relationship blossoms as he simultaneously trains Valentine and guides Peggy through her first awkward steps towards a life devoted to animals (politicizing her in the process). She starts volunteering at an animal shelter, becomes vegan and circulates a petition around the office—for which she is promptly scolded. (In revenge, she starts embezzling funds from work to support animal rights activities.) Newt helps build up Peggy's new identity. Unfortunately, like Peggy, the sexually ambiguous Newt (short, no doubt, for "neuter") has more functional relationships with animals than he does with people, and he fecklessly tells

Peggy he isn't "able" to be in a relationship. She is crushed. Peggy's lesson from yet another human-on-human letdown is: you can't count on people the way you can on animals; an animal isn't "petty" and can't "backstab" you, as Newt had pointed out earlier. Caring for and trusting animals more than people quickly entrenches Peggy's marked difference from others.

On the surface, White's darkly dramatic satire resembles a gentler version of Todd Solondz's wonderfully caricatured, analytic films on the hypocrisies of middle-class American life. White cuttily portrays the mores specific to the sterile homogeneity of office culture by filming people head on, detached from one another and laid bare like bewildered, existentially solitary anthropological specimens. Behind the humour, however, lies an overwhelming feeling of sadness and sense of mortality. Brought to life through oddly mannered performances, his characters desperately seek satisfaction and completion in other people, but no one matches up. Desire is always unfulfilled because its objects are too fragile and too flawed to fill another's lack, except, however, the objects about whose thoughts and feelings one can never be certain of. The animals fill Peggy's desire, and it is to her credit that she returns the favour by trying to improve their lives at all costs.

After going through the disappointment of her relationship with Newt, Peggy's love for animals quickly evolves into a fervent radicalism. She is finally severed from those around her when she begins actively proselytizing—a well-meaning practice but one to which no one in the land of the free wants to be subject. Peggy takes her niece, Lissie, and nephew, Benji, to a sanctuary for rescued farm animals after sponsoring animals in their names. Her interactions with the animals at Paradise Farm are presented as utopian: understanding gazes, soulful interactions and genuine communication between her and the noble beasts. It is the place where she belongs, as much a paradise for people like her: *she* is a beast of burden in need of sanctuary, one of the chickens trapped in a factory farm unable to "spread her wings." The experience is transformative. Immediately afterwards, when she almost forces the children to see the "hell" of the Poultry Queen slaughterhouse and describes the machinations there as a "holocaust," a line in polite society has clearly been crossed.

With her behaviour becoming increasingly unstable, Peggy's ill-conceived, often vengeful, radical acts become more extreme—particularly after undergoing

the trauma of Newt euthanizing Valentine without her permission following his fatal attack on disabled dog Buttons. In a particularly affecting scene, Peggy re-asserts her agency over life and death by taking all the dogs awaiting euthanization that day at the shelter home with her. She is soon fired from work for theft, and she snaps slightly. Her house is destroyed by the constantly barking dogs, but her emotional brain is functioning quantifiably: more dogs=more love in her life (even though Newt had counselled her that there are limits as to how much love there is to go around). Peggy's immersion into animal rights activism was clearly too much too soon, and the love and care she feels for the animals is too enormous when compared to what she can practically manage as a single individual—she can't save them all. Sleepless, Peggy loses control of her appearance as the stress of having to take care of so many creatures renders her gnarled and haggard. Eventually, she stalks and attacks Al with a knife—"I just wanted him to know what it felt like to be hunted"—after finding the toxic snail and slug bait Pencil had consumed accidentally in the big dumb guy's garage.

While Peggy seeks help and pulls herself back from the brink, she returns to a normal life only fleetingly. Satisfyingly, the film ends with a startling discovery on her part, and a resolution rarely encountered in American film. Peggy stoically accepts that she cannot find happiness in a romantic relationship or among friends and family, and chooses a life of kinship with fellow animal rights activists, because their fight is her love. Accepting that she cares more about animals than about people means that she is certainly willing to defend them even if it discomforts people and upsets the rigid social order around her. As a result, she departs her life and the expectations she has failed to meet and instead devotes herself to a radical politic based in a cross-species empathy that many regard with disdain because they do not see it as a "real" cause but one that is in the terrain of "wackos."

Watching *Year of the Dog*, I couldn't help but think of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), in which the eponymous novelist has reached such a ripe old age and status in the literary world that she unashamedly subjects everyone to her diatribes in favour of animal rights. She feels she has earned the right to speak her mind with as much withering self-righteousness as she can muster—regardless of social norms, and without fear of being disliked. Beyond the question of Peggy's particularly keen de-

votion to animals, her fervent *belief* in something out of the ordinary, and her willingness to make a fuss about it, makes everyone extremely uncomfortable. Belief transcends reason and the pursuit of individual freedom, the quest for personal advancement replaced by devotion to a greater, more abstract and ultimately perhaps unrealizable cause. In an age where "the personal is political" has mutated into "the political is personal"—and traditional forms of collective activism are eschewed in favour of more attractive individualized and mediated forms of point-and-click political expression—this endeavour now seems positively unfashionable, even naïve. While Peggy's leap of faith into the cause of animal rights is filled with awkward—even disastrous—moments, White has an incredible amount of empathy for his protagonist and her foolhardy courage to stand alone for what she believes in. So much so that it is infectious, and Peggy's solitude is vanquished by our solidarity with her. As she departs Los Angeles on a bus full of fellow protestors, heading to Dallas for a demonstration against animal testing, Peggy reads a letter to the ones she has left behind (both those on-screen and those in the audience):

If you all didn't think I was crazy, I'm sure you will now. How do I explain the things I've said and done? How do I explain the person I've become? I know I've disappointed everyone and I'm sorry for that. I wish I was a more articulate person. I believe life is magical, it is so precious, and there are so many different kinds of life in this life, so many things to love. The love for a husband or a wife, a boyfriend or girlfriend, the love for children, the love for yourself. And even material things. This is my love. It is mine. And it fills me and it defines me. And it compels me on. ♦

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