Through the eyes of dogs
by Colin Dayan, 2017

With the onslaught of finance capitalism that excludes any life that does not consume or profit, the mutual entanglement between stray dogs and the humans that care for them endures. Our experience of such collective, relational, and unsettling life promises to foreclose a history of disregard. In *Taşkafa, Stories of the Street* (2013), Andrea Luka Zimmerman presses us to see, through a street dog's attentiveness, what might otherwise escape us: something indecipherable but also indispensable.

Where else is there to go, except into the eyes of dogs? To see through their eyes is to see something beneath, or outside of judgment, reason, and calculation. In shifting our stance and changing our tack, we follow their lead. In Zimmerman's film, what she calls a 'feature-length documentary essay', viewers are kept in close contact with the dogs that lead to her human interlocutors. We move with them - the dogs and the city dwellers interviewed - as if film is the only medium capable of eliciting feeling so intense that we learn to be attentive to what we usually ignore.

Taşkafa premiered at the Istanbul International Film Festival in April 2013. By May, campaigning and protests over plans for the demolition of Gezi Park - part of Istanbul's Taksim Square - to make way for an Ottoman-style shopping center were met with police repression. Police fired rubber bullets and water cannons; dogs were teargassed along with people. Pictures of dogs wearing masks and protestors helping them recover from tear gas circulated over social media. I cannot forget the image of a masked dog sleeping on her side, forming a kind of pillow for her human companion, who also slept. She appeared on tweets as 'the Riot Dog of Istanbul'. Though the government did not ultimately raze the park, the Emek Cinema and other historic buildings nearby were demolished so that a luxurious shopping and entertainment complex could be built on the site.

Against economic expedience, what Zimmerman calls 'the driving impulse of our world today', *Taşkafa* explores the coexistence of humans and animals and fights the 'desire to cleanse Istanbul of its non-domestic and formally untamed animal life (dogs, cats, and urban wild creatures) because they do not conform actually, or aesthetically, to the processes of gentrification.' The dogs of Istanbul have been living in the streets for centuries, a part of their neighborhoods. Although Zimmerman says, '*Taşkafa* is not finally about dogs', in just over an hour it gets as close as possible to a document of the dog's point of view, caught in a close-up of a dog's eyes or following a dog's stride. It is through dogs, and their ways of seeing - suffused with the sights or talk or sounds of all the creatures in their midst - that we learn what counts most for people on the verge of losing everything that matters to them.

'It was the dogs . . . they are first of all themselves; creatures of presence, with and amongst people, in busy streets.' Exploring 'the fate of such animals', Zimmerman says, 'is perhaps a reminder of the violence of modernity, where all that did not belong to its idea was banished from sight.' Her camera makes the connection with what is not yet lost but what

we have forgotten to see. Divisions such as human and nonhuman sit uneasily in their customary positions. No longer merely contradictory or opposed, they are intermeshed in the heat of an engagement equally shared, a nuanced and particular passion. Through remarkably unobtrusive yet keenly observed interviews, Zimmerman shows how, as she says, 'people still, and especially now, seek to be part of a larger context, one that respects other creatures and wishes them to play a significant role in their lives.'

When the film begins, we hear birds and we see a dog lying on his back in a town square, feet up, head back, mouth slightly open, his shadow making light even more embodied than we can imagine. We hear the voice of John Berger reading from his novel *King: A Street Story* [1999]. He speaks as the dog, leading us into his life and that of the homeless couple he has joined in a trash-strewn wasteland at the edge of a city and on the verge of a bustling motorway. The dog's front legs move ever so slightly, like wings gliding in the air, lazily, as if to stretch off toward the heavens. 'Me, if I want to look at the sky, I have to do one of two things: either I put my head back, far far back into the howling position, or I lie with my legs in the air in the position of surrender. And from either of these two positions I can watch the stars and name the clouds.'

We are in the world of the dog, at its eye level. It is as if the most ordinary thing has become marvelous, as if a dog's footfall can lead us to revel in sentience that is apprehended only through what lies beyond human life. Golden sunlight reflects off the buildings, and we are in the world again, but not as before. Then, a dog's silhouette bounds over a spot of green and comes before us.

The dog is Taşkafa, both a real dog and also a legend on the streets of Istanbul. 'Taş' means 'stone' or 'rock', and 'kafa' means 'head': 'Taşkafa' refers to someone who is dumb, strong-willed, or stubborn. In the case of a dog, especially a street dog, it suggests strength, the will to survive. On his back with his legs up in Galata Square at the beginning of the film, now Taşkafa runs past a man called Cevat, who explains that the city authorities 'sterilised him and then he lost his balance.' Before that, there were other dogs that went 'wherever Taşkafa went.' 'He was their leader. He was noble.' Then Aylin, a resident interviewed for the film, speaks: 'When Galata became popular, posh neighbors from posh areas started moving here. They weren't used to having the gates open. They all installed gates that closed automatically, against theft.'

Replicated across the scenes of the film in multiple ways, Taşkafa possesses all the selves that ever saw or now think about him. That legacy of unconditional endurance shapes these stories of the street with heightened life. Their grace owes a great deal to respect for what can never be possessed. We accompany dogs wandering as if lost through the graves of a cemetery and we hear how dogs are left behind, poisoned by the municipality or disposed of, living, in the graveyard.

Taşkafa bears witness to what is left behind in the glut of modernization, tossed off as trash in a world where only profit matters. With the onslaught of greed and consumerism, the reciprocity of street dogs and the humans that care for them persists. Neither wild nor domesticated, these dogs occupy an intermediate space. They protect and attend to their

companions, whether canine or not. Something like the spiritual gist of the place, these dogs also carry history in their bones. 'Dogs are the ritual presence of the streets from the past', we are told. 'In a sense, they are owners of this place.' Never bored, they also remind inhabitants of all that is stubbornly alive and precious through a social intelligence that is not human. 'Humans are wild', a grocer says. 'We kill people, animals, and destroy nature. Is there anything more savage than that?'

As the film proceeds, we are led back in time from Taksim Square to the islands off the coast of Istanbul. The street dog disposal of 1910 occurred on the island of Sivriada. In the film we read the memorial to the tens of thousands of dogs 'left to die and eat each other here.' It reads: 'After this event, people changed the name of this place from Sivriada to Hayırsızada, meaning "the wicked island."' A year later another attempt to rid the city of dogs failed when thousands of dogs were rescued from Sivriada. For four hundred years Istanbul's leaders have tried to get rid of the stray dogs, but, as Zimmerman explains, the 'city's street dogs have persisted, thanks to an enduring alliance with widespread civilian communities, which recognize and defend their right to coexist.'

The bold enmeshing of humans and dogs - and the seagulls, pigeons, chickens, and cats in their midst - requires that we suspend our beliefs and put aside our craving for final answers. We learn about suffering but in a way that does not elicit pity. The experience of loss comes without the self-aggrandizing concern that says more about the one caring than about those who suffer. We learn about the connection between pet ownership and personal prestige, between buying a purebred dog and living with a dog that is free, a creature that is neither status symbol nor property or possession. 'Soon everything will be owned', a young man named Zaza laments with a smile.

Toward the end of *Taşkafa*, we are shown what the government considers the best kind of shelter for animals. Behind a fence hundreds of dogs, some on long chains, are scattered among new doghouses in a parched and desolate land. Pushed out of Istanbul and dumped into forests, dogs eke out their lives beyond the murmurs of humans and away from their sight. Through the dogs' eyes and their exacting intimacy - fast vanishing registers of habits and dispositions - we also sense a world of humans devoid of spirit and bereft of communication.

Taşkafa was filmed just as Turkey's Ministry of Forestry and Water was defending a controversial amendment to its animal protection law. The ministry explained: 'The proposed law aims to make animals live. The aim is to prevent bad treatment of animals, clarify institutional responsibilities, and to strengthen the mechanisms of animal ownership.' For some the idea of making animals live in isolation or coercing ownership does not capture the attachment of persons to their neighborhood dogs. Though unowned, these dogs are with humans without being made over in their image. The ministry calls the dog preserves 'natural habitat parks', 'wildlife parks', or 'natural life parks', but according to animal activists they are more accurately called 'death camps' or 'concentration camps.' Without food or water and without the human contact they once knew and still seek, these dogs are left alone - free to die. We see them in this film, barking, running to and fro,

desperately crowding, moving toward the fence, jumping, whining, forlorn, terror in their eyes.

Zimmerman's film ends with a return to the first appearance of Taşkafa, or rather the dog that lives on through her spirit. This dog is located deep in the senses of both viewers and inhabitants, part of the landscape of cities thought obsolete by stylish urbanites with their fancy-collared dogs who sport sweaters and follow along on leashes. In this glorious and fleeting scene, a bird gets stuck against a window, its wings frantically beating. We hear Berger's voice. 'The bird does not believe in the glass. It thinks itself in the sky. It pauses fluttering.' Time after time, it beats against the pane. We see the dog on his back, the dog we knew from the beginning. Then a 'miracle' happens. Somehow the bird, blindly thrashing, finds an opening. In a breathtaking moment, 'The bird knows immediately that it's back in the sky.' With these words, the dog's legs become sunbeams. He turns over onto his belly, gets up, shakes off sleep, looks around, and walks away.

How to make sense - in the most literal meaning of sentience, in the matter of feeling - of what humans have destroyed and built up on the rubble of tradition and out of the ruin of lives? We know as we watch these dogs that they are besieged. Once the very soul of the city, they are biding their time, out in the dumps. They are left to die against this desolate backdrop. But their displacement is never divorced from its cause. Through the dogs' eyes, we sense a world devoid of spirit, ravaged of communion: the high-rise developments, the spruced-up neighborhoods of the neo-Western globalised citizen.

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