



From Literary Dogs to Popular Heroes: Representing Canine Consciousness Across Media

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Abstract

Adaptation studies have spent a lot of energy on fidelity, how closely a film tracks its source novel, and comparatively little on what happens to an animal's mind when it moves from page to screen. This article looks at that gap through two well-known dog stories, Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and Garth Stein's *The Art of Racing in the Rain* (2008), alongside their film versions directed by Chris Sanders (2020) and Simon Curtis (2019). The method is close reading of the novels paired with comparative film analysis, set mainly within adaptation studies but borrowing from Critical Animal Studies and popular literature scholarship. London and Stein build canine consciousness in almost opposite ways. Buck's inner life comes through his body, instinct, struggle, and the slow education of the wilderness, while Enzo's comes through reflection, memory, and a narrator's eye trained on the humans around him. Their films keep that basic difference intact but translate it into different audiovisual vocabularies, and yet, oddly, both end up in roughly the same emotional place: companionship, loyalty, and an affective shorthand popular audiences can read instantly. Cinema does not just carry these stories across media; it reworks them into something culturally legible, sanding down some of the literary strangeness along the way. The argument brings adaptation studies, Critical Animal Studies, and popular literature scholarship into one conversation, since none of them alone explains how literary animal consciousness gets remade for the screen.

Keywords: Adaptation Studies, Popular Literature, Critical Animal Studies, Canine Consciousness, Popular Cinema.

1. Introduction

For a long time, dogs have been used for narrative work in popular literature. Writers often portray them as loyal companions with strong survival instincts, living closely with humans while experiencing the world in ways that humans do not fully understand. These narratives

Article History: Received: 10 June 2026. Revised: 20 June 2026. Accepted: 10 August 2026. First published: 31st August, 2026.

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Published by: Adrija Press, India.

Citation: Mishra, Ushasree. (2026). From Literary Dogs to Popular Heroes: Representing Canine Consciousness Across Media. *Newliteraria Journal* 9:1, 115-126. <https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v09i1.012>

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extend the limits of the page. They get adapted, reshot, recast, and in the process, they pick up new audiences and, I would argue, new meanings. That migration matters. Adaptation isn't just a marketing afterthought; it is one of the main ways popular culture decides how animal lives get imagined and felt.

Dogs occupy a strange middle ground. They are familiar enough as most readers have lived with one. Yet they are genuinely other. They perceive the world through smell and sound, and a social logic that is not ours. That tension is useful for a writer. A dog protagonist lets you explore companionship and ethics from a nonhuman angle without pretending the species gap doesn't exist. So, when a story like this cross from novel to film, the challenge isn't really about staying faithful to the book. Literature builds animal consciousness out of narration and description, while film has to do it with bodies, cameras, sound, and editing. The real question is how a film makes nonhuman experience visible without either turning the dog into a furry human or making its experience so alien that nobody in the audience can follow it.

Adaptation studies has mostly moved past asking whether a film is faithful to its source; that argument is more or less settled. What has got the less attention is the specific problem of nonhuman consciousness which asks how does a film actually rebuild a literary animal's mind. Scholars working in Critical Animal Studies have analysed anthropomorphism and species boundaries, and adaptation theorists have thought hard about cultural negotiation across media, but the two conversations are discussed under the same umbrella. Add the discourse of popular literature to this. It tracks how stories circulate and gain new cultural meaning as they travel. Three bodies of work touch this problem, each from a different angle. Yet they do not quite meet in the middle.

This article tries to sit at that intersection, using a comparison between Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and Garth Stein's *The Art of Racing in the Rain* (2008/2019), and their film adaptations: Chris Sanders' 2020 version and Simon Curtis' from 2019. I picked these two on purpose, because they build canine consciousness in almost opposite ways. London gives Buck almost no interior monologue; the reader has to infer what he is thinking from what he does and how his body responds to a brutal new environment. Stein does the reverse when he states that Enzo narrates the whole novel, with memory, philosophy, and human emotional life. So, the two films inherit very different problems to solve, even though both are, on the surface, just dog movies.

I am less interested here in whether the films are faithful to the books (that question, frankly, does not get us very far) and more in how adaptation reconstructs canine consciousness as the story moves across media. My argument, briefly, is that popular cinema does not simply reproduce these literary dogs; it reshapes them according to what mainstream audiences expect emotionally. And the strange thing is that despite starting from such different literary models, Buck and Enzo's films land in roughly the same emotional register, something close to a shared emotional intelligibility. Species difference does not disappear, but it softens just enough that a broad audience can connect with it.

Adaptation studies used to be preoccupied with fidelity, meaning how closely does the film track the novel, and what did it get 'wrong'? That framework has mostly fallen out of favour, and for good reason because judging a film purely by what it leaves out treats it as a lesser copy, not as its own thing. Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn (2013) make this case directly, arguing that adaptations are autonomous works reinterpreting a story for a new audience and a new historical moment, not pale imitations. Julie Sanders (2016) pushes the point further with her distinction between adaptation and appropriation, suggesting that texts pick up new ideological weight every time they are retold. Thomas Leitch (2007) goes so far as to say fidelity should not even be the criterion; films are critical readings of their sources,

not attempts at equivalence, and Robert Stam (2005) frames the whole process as dialogic, a negotiation but not as a one-way transfer. These analyses have done a lot to move the conversation from what got lost to what got made. But there is a gap as almost none of this work asks what happens specifically to nonhuman consciousness in that process. Human characters, narrative structure, intertextuality, all these get more attention than animal subjectivity. That is the gap this article is trying to work in.

Critical Animal Studies asks a different question. It examines how representation constructs animals, not how stories change across media. Steve Baker (2001) argues that animal imagery is never neutral; it is shaped by whatever cultural anxieties about identity and power happen to be circulating at the time. John Berger's (1980) account of the historical split between humans and animals under modernity makes a related point from a different angle. As everyday contact with animals shrank, representation had to do more of the work of mediating that relationship. Donna Haraway (2008) moves past the idea of animals as symbols altogether, treating humans and companion species as co-constituting each other through everyday contact, a framework that fits dog narratives especially well, since companionship is usually the whole point. Susan McHugh (2011) and Cary Wolfe (2003) both push towards reading animals as subjects with their own modes of perception, rather than as narrative devices standing in for some human concern. None of this is about dogs specifically, but it provides a vocabulary for asking what a text is actually doing when it tries to represent a nonhuman mind.

Then there is popular literature scholarship. It is less concerned with fidelity or representation and more with circulation such as how stories travel, who they reach, and what cultural work they do along the way. John Storey (2021) frames popular culture as an arena where meaning is continuously produced and renegotiated, not a fixed body of texts waiting to be consumed, though he is careful to set this against the older culture-industry critique, which would read the very convergence this article tracks, two divergent literary minds settling into one accessible emotional register, less as negotiation and more as commercial flattening, the market narrowing what an animal mind is allowed to mean. I find the negotiation model more persuasive here, but the tension is worth naming instead of assuming away. Animal stories fit neatly into this broader picture, constantly remade across formats, and few studies ask the more specific question this article is interested in: how does adaptation reconstruct the literary model of animal consciousness itself, given that page techniques do not transfer directly to a screen?

Put the three together and the shape of the problem becomes clearer. Adaptation studies explains how stories change across media but mostly ignores nonhuman minds. Critical Animal Studies thinks hard about nonhuman minds but does not usually ask what happens when a story moves to a new medium. Popular literature scholarship tracks circulation without digging into the representational mechanics. This article tries to hold all three at once, using *The Call of the Wild* and *The Art of Racing in the Rain* as a test case for how popular cinema takes two very different literary models of canine consciousness and, somewhat surprisingly, brings them out the other side looking emotionally similar.

Stated plainly, the objectives of this study are threefold where it first aims to identify how London's and Stein's novels each construct canine consciousness on the page; second, to examine how their respective film adaptations translate that literary consciousness into audiovisual form; and third, to assess what is gained, lost, or transformed as canine subjectivity moves from a literary register into a popular cinematic one.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

My main theoretical anchor is adaptation studies, in the sense laid out by Hutcheon (2013), Leitch (2007), and Stam (2005): adaptation as interpretation and reconstruction, not

reproduction. Each film is treated here as its own cultural text, reorganising the novel's material according to what a different medium can actually do, but not measured against a standard of accuracy. Critical Animal Studies sits underneath this as a supporting framework. The question is not whether these dogs behave like real dogs (a biological question no literary or film analysis can answer) but how the texts construct a version of nonhuman experience that still feels recognisably canine while remaining emotionally legible to human readers and viewers. Popular literature scholarship adds a third layer, a reminder that these texts pick up new meaning every time they circulate to a new audience or medium. None of the three frameworks does the whole job alone, which is part of why all three are in play here.

Methodologically, this is a qualitative comparative study built on close reading and comparative film analysis. The aim is not to score how closely each film matches its novel; that would just be fidelity criticism under a new name. Instead, the analysis looks at how each medium constructs canine consciousness on its own terms, then asks what changes, and what does not, when the novel's strategy is translated into a film's strategy. For the novels, that means attending to narrative voice, focalisation, embodiment, and how the text handles sensory perception and interspecies relationships. For the films, it means examining how image, sound, performance, editing, and, where relevant, voice-over do that same work. The London/Sanders and Stein/Curtis pairs were chosen because they tackle the same basic representational problem from opposite directions, and reading them side by side makes both strategies more visible than either would be alone.

The study examines two novels and their corresponding film adaptations:

- Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and Chris Sanders' film adaptation *The Call of the Wild* (2020).
- Garth Stein's *The Art of Racing in the Rain* (2008/2019) and Simon Curtis' film adaptation *The Art of Racing in the Rain* (2019).

These pairs were chosen, in short, because they push the same underlying problem, namely how to build a credible nonhuman mind in a popular narrative, from two different directions. Although separated by more than a century, both narratives have found wide readership, successful adaptation, and lasting cultural visibility, which makes the comparison less an apples-to-oranges exercise than it might first appear.

The discussion is limited to two English-language novels and their feature-film adaptations. Production history, box-office reception, and audience research are also outside the frame; this is a study of representational strategy, not industry or reception. No claim is being made about whether Buck or Enzo behave like real dogs; that question sits outside what a literary or film analysis can responsibly answer. The aim is to understand how literature and film construct, translate, and reconfigure canine consciousness within stories built for popular audiences. One methodological note is the film-specific claims below are based on a direct viewing of both adaptations, supplemented by published criticism where it offers an interpretive claim instead of a purely descriptive one.

3. Reconstructing Canine Consciousness Across Media

Up to this point, the argument has been that adaptation is less about fidelity than about reconstruction. It takes a literary narrative and rebuilds it, with new tools, for a new medium. That argument gets more interesting once the consciousness in question belongs to a dog in preference to a person. Human interiority has familiar conventions to lean on narration, performance, decades of shared cinematic shorthand. Canine protagonists do not get that luxury; literature and film both have to suggest a nonhuman mind without either making the

dog basically human in a fur suit, or making the animal so genuinely other that nobody watching can connect with it. London and Stein propose two genuinely different epistemologies, and their film adaptations inherit those different starting points even as both eventually arrive at something more emotionally uniform. The literary side comes first, then the cinematic side, before the two are pulled together.

3.1 Two Literary Models of Canine Consciousness

When I sat the two novels side by side, what struck me first was not the plot. Obviously, a sled dog's survival story and a golden retriever's reflections on racing and mortality do not have much in common on the surface. What struck me was how differently each book lets the reader in. London and Stein are both asking readers to live inside a dog's experience, but they start from opposite assumptions about how that is even possible.

Take the opening of *The Call of the Wild*. London does not give Buck a single line of introspection. The reader meets him through his position on Judge Miller's estate, his territory, his routines, the casual authority he is used is left to read his inner life off his behaviour but not being told it directly. For me that is a deliberate choice. London wants consciousness to emerge slowly, through action and through Buck's changing relationship to his environment, rather than handing it to the reader up front. The effect is that Buck stays recognisably a dog. The novel never quite lets the reader forget the species gap, because it never fully translates Buck's experience into human language to begin with.

Stein does almost the opposite, and it is worth sitting with how different the choice is. Enzo introduces himself already capable of memory, interpretation, even something like philosophical speculation. There is no slow build; the reader is inside his head from page one, and his narration does not just report what happens, it actively interprets it, revises itself, circles back. Ordinary domestic moments, a conversation, a silence, somebody's tone of voice, become things Enzo turns over and tries to make sense of. He puts it plainly enough himself early on: "I've always felt almost human", he says, adding a few lines later that his soul is "very human" (Stein, 2008/2019, pp. 2–3). So, where London asks readers to infer consciousness from the outside, Stein hands consciousness over directly and trusts the reader to notice, eventually, that it remains tethered to a dog's body and a dog's senses.

This reflective habit is not limited to small domestic moments. Enzo spends a fair stretch of an early chapter working through his own theory of reincarnation, reasoning his way towards the idea that a soul "marries" body and spirit "in a wonderful package called a human being" (Stein, 2008/2019, p. 18), the kind of speculative, slightly absurd philosophising that a purely embodied narrator like Buck never attempts. And the reflection has stakes attached to it. Enzo is also aware, in a way Buck mostly is not given how the wilderness setting keeps him isolated from human law, of how little legal standing a dog actually has; he notes elsewhere that dogs are kept under "constant supervision of people, and are immediately put to death when found living on their own" (Stein, 2008/2019, p. 20). That observation lines up neatly with what Critical Animal Studies scholars describe as the precarious legal and cultural status of nonhuman animals, dependent entirely on human frameworks for whatever protection or meaning they receive (Baker, 2001; Haraway, 2008). Enzo's reflection, in other words, is not just a narrative device. It is also a fairly clear-eyed account of his own vulnerability.

I keep coming back to this as a difference between two ways of knowing, not just two writing styles. London treats experience as something lived first and understood later. Buck does not arrive in the Yukon possessing insight, he earns it through pain and repetition. The clearest example is the man with the red sweater, where Buck learns, in the most physical way possible, that "a man with a club was a lawgiver" (London, 1903, p. 33). That is not an abstract

lesson. It is inscribed on the body before it could ever become something Buck might put into words, if he had words. A little later in the same chapter London makes the mechanism explicit when Buck's domestication "fell from him", and "instincts long dead became alive again" (London, 1903, p. 62), until by the chapter's close "the ancient song surged through him and he came into his own again" (London, 1903, p. 63). Knowledge, in other words, is not something Buck arrives at by thinking; it is something that resurfaces in him, almost against his will, the same pattern recurring throughout the novel through snow, hunger, the sled-dog hierarchy, and violence, each one teaching Buck something through adaptation but reflection.

Stein runs the logic in reverse. Enzo's understanding grows out of sustained attention to human behaviour over physical struggle. He keeps returning to memory, language, mortality, and, racing, which functions less as a hobby and more as a kind of philosophy for him. These are the ways of thinking about how to handle uncertainty as he puts it during one of Denny's long racing seasons, "I am a racer at heart, and a racer will never let something that has already happened" derail him (Stein, 2008/2019, p. 74). Where Buck has to survive his environment, Enzo has to interpret his.

I do not think this should be read as instinct versus intellect, though, and it is worth being careful not to flatten the comparison into something that neat. Both novels hold onto canine embodiment even while taking different routes towards reader empathy. Buck's physical encounters pick up emotional weight without much introspection at all; readers feel for him because of what happens to his body, not because the text explains his feelings. And Enzo's reflective voice never floats free of his senses either such as smell, proximity, the physical fact of being a dog in a room with people. This keeps grounding his philosophy even at its most abstract. What differs is the narrative function of the body. In London, the body generates consciousness. In Stein, consciousness continually returns to the body, which keeps it honest whenever it drifts too far into pure reflection.

The human relationships in each book follow the same logic, which is one of the more interesting things about reading them together. London makes Buck earn trust slowly, through shared labour and hardship; his bond with John Thornton means something specific because of what they have survived together, which is why London can write, without it feeling sentimental, that "love, genuine passionate love, was his for the first time" and that "love that was feverish and burning, that was adoration, that was madness, it had taken John Thornton to arouse" (London, 1903, p. 163). Stein starts from the opposite end when Enzo and Denny are already close before the novel even begins, and the closeness is the condition for Enzo's observation, not its reward. Enzo even seems aware of the limits of his own vantage point as narrator; describing the period after Eve's death, he admits that "much of what I will tell you about the ordeal that followed Eve's death is a reconstruction based on information compiled by me from secondhand" knowledge (Stein, 2008/2019, p. 196), a small but telling moment where the reflective narrator concedes that his reflection has gaps. So there are two very different emotional economies at work, London's built on transformation through hardship and Stein's on interpretation through intimacy, even though both books, in the end, want readers to see the dog as something more than a symbol.

Reading the two side by side leaves me fairly convinced that canine consciousness, at least in popular literature, is not one thing. It is at least two different representational strategies solving the same underlying problem, namely how to make a reader believe in a mind that is not human, from opposite directions. And that matters for what comes next, because each strategy hands the filmmakers a completely different problem to solve. One novel needs a film that can show bodily knowledge without narration to lean on. The other needs a film that can preserve reflection without simply filming a voice-over track for two hours. That is the hinge the next section turns on.

3.2 Reconstructing Canine Consciousness in Popular Cinema

What, then, do the films actually do with these two very different problems? Neither Chris Sanders nor Curtis can point a camera at the novel's technique and expect it to translate; film simply does not have access to the same toolkit. There is no sustained narrated inference, no first-person voice running underneath every scene (Curtis does use voice-over, but more on that shortly). What both directors have instead is image, sound, performance, rhythm, and editing, and they have to build canine consciousness out of those materials from scratch. It is worth noting, too, that the two productions chose almost opposite solutions at the most basic level of casting. Buck is played entirely by computer animation, built from a motion-capture performance by the stuntman and Cirque du Soleil performer Terry Notary, while Enzo on screen is a real golden retriever named Parker, with the reflective voice supplied separately by Kevin Costner (Burns, 2020). One film manufactures a body; the other borrows a real one and dubs in the mind.

Sanders' problem, inherited straight from London, is how to show bodily knowledge without ever being able to narrate it. The novel lets readers infer Buck's consciousness through his physical encounters with a hostile landscape. The line about the man with the club again, where the lesson lands entirely through pain and submission rather than explanation. A film cannot replicate that through prose, so Sanders leans on a different tool: editing rhythm but not narration. In the red-sweater sequence, around the eleven-to-thirteen-minute mark, the scene actually cuts back and forth fairly quickly between the man swinging the club and medium-to-close shots of Buck growling and lunging, rather holding on a single unbroken take; the hesitation before submission comes through Buck's physical performance, lowering his head, whimpering, more than through camera stillness (Sanders, 2020, 11:00–13:00). It probably helps that Sanders came to live-action directing from animation, having previously directed *Lilo & Stitch* and the first *How to Train Your Dragon*, both built around expressive nonverbal protagonists; reviewers have noted that this background shows in how confidently the film handles Buck's body language without making him talk (Burns, 2020).

The landscape itself receives the same treatment. London uses language to keep mediating Buck's relationship to the wilderness as it changes; Sanders does this visually, alternating between wide shots that establish how vast and indifferent the terrain is and tighter shots that bring the viewer back to Buck's specific, immediate response to it. During the mail-delivery sequences under the musher Perrault, roughly twenty-five to thirty-five minutes in, this alternation is explicit as sweeping wide shots reduce the dog team to a tiny speck crossing immense, indifferent snowy peaks, then the editing cuts to tight tracking shots on Buck's face to register his exhaustion or surprise (Sanders, 2020, 25:00–35:00). That alternation is not just visual spectacle for its own sake; it is doing the same representational job the prose was doing, only through spatial rhythm instead of sentences. And because Buck obviously cannot talk, performance carries an enormous amount of weight, such as posture, pacing, the angle of a gaze, a moment of hesitation before a decision. The quiet stretches with Thornton work the same way; in the waterfront scene roughly forty-seven to fifty minutes in, where Thornton first really talks to Buck about the son he lost, the film holds on extended two-shots and steady close-ups rather than cutting away, letting the held gaze itself carry the "mutual recognition" the relationship depends on (Sanders, 2020, 47:00–50:00). None of this turns Buck into a furry person reciting feelings. If anything, it does the opposite, keeping him recognisably canine by letting his body do the talking, the same job it was doing in the novel.

Curtis is solving a different problem entirely, because Stein already grants readers direct access to Enzo's reflective mind through first-person narration. The risk for a film adaptation here is not how to visualise instinct; it is how not to flatten reflection into pure plot, the way film so often does when something has to actually happen on screen. Curtis' solution, more

literal than Sanders', is simply to keep the first-person voice and let Costner read it, beginning almost immediately as the narration starts within the film's first seconds, over a framing device of an elderly, ailing Enzo waiting on the floor for Denny, and runs in something close to the near-continuous monologue critics noted on release (Curtis, 2019, 0:00–3:30). The clearest example of how the film translates Enzo's embodied perception specifically, rather than just his commentary, is the illness sequence, around the forty-one-minute mark as Eve is in bed with a headache, Enzo presses his nose to her forehead, and Costner's narration describes a smell of decaying leaves and "a dark, pooling rot" coming from inside her head (Curtis, 2019, 41:00–43:00). It is a small but exact translation of a sensory, pre-verbal form of knowledge, the cinematic cousin of the smell-the-wind passages in *London*, even though it arrives to the audience through a line of narration rather than through silence. The racing sequences carry a related kind of translation. During the rain race roughly twenty minutes in, the editing supports close-ups of water on the visor and slow-motion shots of tires losing traction over conventional sports coverage, while the narration insists that "the car goes where your eyes go", treating the race as a meditation on attention in contrast to a contest of speed (Curtis, 2019, 19:00–21:00).

There is a line from the novel worth dwelling on here. Stein has Enzo say, early on, "Gestures are all that I have" (Stein, 2008/2019, p. 1). I do not think that line is just a throwaway bit of pathos; it reads almost as a statement of method, both for the novel and, in a more complicated way, for the film. The trouble is that the film does not fully commit to the method the line describes. Several reviewers argued on release that Curtis and screenwriter Mark Bombback lean so heavily on Costner's voice-over that the film ends up telling rather than showing, undermining exactly the kind of gestural communication Enzo claims for himself (Pettis, 2023), and a direct viewing bears this out: across the film's 109-minute runtime, the narration rarely goes more than two or three minutes without stepping back in to interpret events for the audience (Curtis, 2019). I am not sure that criticism is entirely fair to the film's quieter stretches, but it is a reasonable one, and it marks a real limit on the argument I am making here: redistributing reflection across gesture and framing is something this adaptation gestures towards more than it consistently achieves.

Two films, then, solving two genuinely different problems with genuinely different tools, but arriving at a shared goal: keep the dog emotionally accessible without making him stop being a dog. There is probably no single cinematic equivalent for literary consciousness, no formal device that just translates narration into film one-for-one. What both adaptations actually do is invent medium-specific solutions to medium-specific problems, whether that means building a body out of motion-capture data or dubbing a voice onto a real one, and what survives the trip from page to screen is not technique, exactly. It is closer to representational purpose i.e. a commitment to keep the animal mind both legible and genuinely other.

3.3 Converging on a Shared Emotional Register

Having traced how each film solves its own formal problem, it is worth stepping back to ask why the solutions converge emotionally at all. *Buck* and *Enzo* come from completely different literary traditions, and *Sanders* and *Curtis* solve completely different formal problems in adapting them. And yet, watching both films back to back more times than I would like to admit while writing this, they leave you with a remarkably similar feeling. Not the same plot, not quite the same tone, but a similar emotional shape. Why?

Part of the answer, I think, is simply about audience. A novel can sit with ambiguity for two hundred pages if it wants to; nobody is forcing a reader to finish it in one sitting, and a patient reader will follow interior reflection wherever it goes. A mainstream film does not get that luxury. It is playing to a much wider, more heterogeneous audience, usually in one sitting, and it needs to establish emotional attachment quickly, not because filmmakers are lazy but

because that is simply the medium's economy. Accessibility stops being a nice bonus and becomes closer to a structural requirement.

This shows up most clearly with Buck. London's novel avoids sentimentality. For instance, violence, hunger, and hardship shape Buck's development, while his turn toward the wild remains uncomfortably fierce, not comforting. After Thornton's death, Buck runs off with a wolf pack and becomes the "Ghost Dog", a local legend who raids camps and, the text implies, kills the Yeehat hunters responsible for killing his master (London, 1903, pp. 227–228). Sanders keeps the wolf pack and the broad shape of Buck's transformation but quietly drops the revenge plot against the Yeehats along with most of the novel's racial framing. In the film, it is the antagonist Hal who tracks Thornton to his cabin and shoots him; Buck, arriving just after, fights Hal and kills him by forcing him into the burning cabin instead of massacring a village, and Thornton's last words to Buck, "It's okay, boy. You're home", are delivered in a held two-shot rather than narrated (Sanders, 2020, 1:25:00–1:28:00). The film's final sequence, around the film's ninety minute mark, then lands on Buck not just joining the wolves but visibly running as their leader alongside a mate and what reads on screen as a litter of pups, the pack howling from a ridge as the screen fades, an image that, interestingly, still echoes the novel's own closing suggestion that the Yeehats later noticed wolves in the region with "splashes of brown on head and muzzle" (London, 1903, p. 227), as though Buck's line persisted (Sanders, 2020, 1:30:00–1:32:10; Burns, 2020). At the same time, the film turns up the emotional volume on Buck's human relationships, especially with John Thornton showing more close-ups, more carefully held moments of mutual recognition, pacing built around connection rather than survival alone. Survival still drives the plot, but emotional attachment becomes the thing that makes survival matter to the audience watching it, even as the story's harder edges, including its uncomfortable racial politics, get sanded down along with everything else.

Something comparable happens with Enzo, even though the novel he comes from is a very different kind of book, heavier on philosophy, mortality, even reincarnation, genuinely willing to slow the plot down so the reader can sit with an idea. Curtis keeps that reflective voice but shifts the emotional centre of gravity towards the family's lived experience (joy, illness, grief, the ordinary texture of a household) rather than sustained meditation on big questions. This is not really a loss, more a redistribution because Enzo's reflection moves out of pure narration and into performance, framing, and the rhythm of the edit, so that audiences remember him less for what he says and more for how steadily he is simply there.

What both films suggest, taken together, is that popular cinema does not erase species difference to manufacture empathy, and it does not insist on strict biological realism to preserve it either. It lands somewhere in between. Buck keeps responding to the world through his body; Enzo keeps interpreting it through memory and observation. Audiences experience both qualities less as alien animal behaviour and more as feelings they can recognise and sit with. Difference gets negotiated, not erased, which tracks with Baker's (2001) broader argument that animal representation tends to render nonhuman life meaningful through human frameworks of interpretation without ever quite reducing it to them.

This shift changes how agency works in both films, and it is worth pulling that thread out specifically. In the novels, the dogs often know things the humans around them do not. For instance, Buck survives because he picks up embodied knowledge simply unavailable to the people watching him, and Enzo repeatedly senses emotional tension nobody else in the room has noticed yet. The clearest statement of what Enzo's knowledge is actually for comes near the end of the novel, when a dying Eve asks him directly to "take care of Denny and Zoë for me, Enzo", adding that "they're so wonderful when they're together" (Stein, 2008/2019, p. 161); whatever Enzo knows, the novel is explicit that its purpose is relational, not private. The

film changes this specific moment rather than reproducing it when in the hospital deathbed scene, roughly seventy-two minutes in, Eve instead tells Enzo to relay a message to Denny, that she is no longer afraid of death because of what Enzo taught her, spoken as direct dialogue rather than narrated reflection (Curtis, 2019, 1:11:00–1:14:00). The specific words change, but the function does not. In both versions, Enzo is addressed as a relational confidant rather than a private knower, which is exactly the kind of substitution adaptation tends to make, swapping content while preserving the structural role. Both films keep that relational capacity but relocate where it matters more broadly. Agency shows up less as solitary adaptation or private philosophical insight, and more through companionship, protection, and sacrifice, things a dog does for somebody rather than things a dog figures out on his own. It is a relational version of agency rather than a purely cognitive one, and that reads less like a simplification than a translation suited to how film works.

If I had to put the whole comparison in one sentence, it would be that popular cinema does not seem to remember literary dogs for the specific, often strange ways they know the world. It remembers them for the relationships they make possible. Buck's physical struggle and Enzo's reflective voice remain essential to who they are in the novels, but by the time they reach the screen, both have been folded into something closer to companionship, made legible and durable enough to circulate well beyond the books they came from.

4. Conclusion

This piece set out to push past fidelity talk and ask a narrower, perhaps more interesting question: what actually happens to a literary animal's mind when it crosses from page to screen? Reading *The Call of the Wild* and *The Art of Racing in the Rain* against their film adaptations, the answer I keep landing on is that adaptation is not really a transfer at all. It is closer to a rebuild, using whatever materials the new medium happens to have on hand.

London and Stein hand us two genuinely different models of canine consciousness. Buck's comes from the body, instinct, and a long, often brutal process of adapting to an unfamiliar place. Enzo's comes from reflection, memory, and a narrator's habit of turning ordinary moments over until they yield some kind of meaning. Sanders and Curtis inherit those two different problems and solve them in correspondingly different ways. Sanders through landscape, movement, and a camera that stays close to Buck's body; Curtis through a voice-over that shares the work with gesture, framing, and silence rather than carrying the whole film on its own. Neither director produces a visual equivalent of the novel's narration, because no such equivalent really exists. What they do instead is solve a new, medium-specific version of an old problem.

What surprised me most, writing this, is how clearly the two films converge despite all that divergence. Buck and Enzo stay distinct as literary and cinematic figures, certainly, but both adaptations end up organising canine subjectivity around more or less the same emotional vocabulary through loyalty, resilience, care, a kind of ethical attentiveness audiences can read instantly. That convergence is not really a loss of literary nuance, at least not in any simple sense. It is closer to a different kind of mediation, one that makes nonhuman lives legible to a much wider audience without collapsing them into purely human terms. London leaves Buck running with the wolf pack, "side by side with the wild brother, yelping as he ran", on his way to becoming the half-legendary Ghost Dog of Yeehat memory (London, 1903, p. 227). Popular cinema, it turns out, is happy to keep the wolves and the running, just not the legend that frightens people. Curtis closes his film on a different but oddly matching gesture because he doesn't show Enzo's death directly. Instead, the film gives him one last high-speed lap with Denny in a vintage Ferrari, the dog resting his head on Denny's shoulder in an unscripted moment of physical affection, before dissolving into a montage of memory from Enzo's own

point of view and fading out without ever depicting the moment of death itself (Curtis, 2019, 1:36:58–1:38:50). The story then jumps forward eight years to a racetrack in Italy, where a boy introduces himself to a now-successful Denny as Enzo, his father noting that the boy is “a race car driver at heart”, and Denny tells him he reminds him of an old friend (Curtis, 2019, 1:39:15–1:41:20). Buck’s ending pushes outward into myth; Enzo’s loops back into reincarnation, the same theory of the soul he worked out for himself early in the novel (Stein, 2008/2019, p. 18). Different mechanisms, same instinct. Popular cinema keeps wanting these dogs to continue past their own deaths, just never in quite the unsettling way the books first imagined.

Bringing adaptation studies, Critical Animal Studies, and popular literature scholarship into the same conversation suggests something larger than just “these two films are alike”. What moves across media here is not only plot or narrative form; it is the whole representational architecture through which audiences are invited to imagine a nonhuman mind. That is, admittedly, a claim built on just two case studies, and it is worth being upfront about that limit. There is room to push this further (animated adaptations, streaming-era animal narratives, graphic novels, cinema outside the Anglophone mainstream), and it would be worth testing whether the same pattern of literary divergence followed by cinematic convergence holds up elsewhere, or whether *The Call of the Wild* and *The Art of Racing in the Rain* are simply an unusually neat pair to compare. Either way, adaptation does more than move a story from one format to another. It quietly reshapes how audiences are allowed to feel about the animals living inside that story.

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