



White Dog

Director: Kornél Mundruczó
Country: Hungary
Date: 2014

A review by Manohla Dargis for *The New York Times*:

The hand that feeds — and also brutalizes — is righteously bitten in “White God,” a Hungarian revenge fantasy that’s like nothing you’ve seen on screen before. The story is as simple as a parable, a campfire story, a children’s book: A faithful animal, separated from its loving owner, endures, suffers, struggles and resists while trying to transcend its brutal fate. The director, Kornel Mundruczo, has said that he was partly inspired by J. M. Coetzee’s devastating novel “Disgrace,” but the movie also invokes haunting animal classics like “Black Beauty” and “The Call of the Wild.”



Like Buck, the four-legged hero of “The Call of the Wild,” the dog protagonist in “White God,” Hagen — played with full-bodied expressivity by the canine siblings Bodie and Luke — is a mixed breed. For his closest companion, a solemn-faced 13-year-old named Lili (Zsafia Psotta), Hagen’s ancestry isn’t an issue, but it is one for those state officials who tax dogs that aren’t purebreds. Lili’s father, Daniel (Sandor Zsoter), who has custody of her for a few months, has no interest in paying the tax or keeping the dog, which is how Hagen ends up on the streets of Budapest, initially alone, then in the hands of a cruel master and then with a pack.

That pack in all its barking, panting, tail-wagging glory is the big payoff in “White God,” which features 250 or so dogs that were trained for the movie, not a computer-generated pooch among them. Mr. Mundruczo has said that his movie was shot using the American film industry’s guidelines on the use of animal performers. That’s not entirely reassuring given the abuses that nonetheless occur during productions, as a ghastly 2013 exposé in *The Hollywood Reporter* affirmed. Still, viewers concerned about the welfare of the dogs, especially in some of the tougher scenes, should pay close attention to the cunning editing and camera angles as well as all those happy tails. Mr. Mundruczo has also produced, smartly, a reassuring behind-the-scenes video that’s available on YouTube.

All this won’t make viewers out of people who believe that animals should never be used, period. Those who don’t care how we treat animals may wonder what any of this has to do with a movie, much less a review. Yet it is our bonds with other animals, our obligations and our sympathies, that make “White God” more than a gimmick movie. These are questions, Mr. Mundruczo suggests, that also extend to creatures that we, godlike, designate as meat, not pets, to borrow a formulation from Michael Moore’s “Roger & Me.” What are nonhuman animals to us? In Mr. Coetzee’s “Disgrace,” a character who helps out at a shelter in which animals are euthanized says of dogs, “They do us the honor of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things.” In “White God,” the dogs respond with their own kill policy.

In classic narrative fashion, Mr. Mundruczo works the setup like a burlesque fan dancer, teasing out the reveal bit by bit. He introduces Lili and Hagen together while



they're sharing the frame and playing a quietly portentous game of tug-of-war. Lili's mother has gone off on a lengthy trip with her husband, leaving the girl with her father, who Lili demonstrably doesn't much like. Mr. Mundruczo at first seems to share Lili's aversion; at the very least, he knows how to stack the story decks: Daniel isn't just a dour, unsmiling sad sack, he's also a fallen man who now works as a slaughterhouse inspector. You first meet him in an antiseptic room in which, after workers gut and skin a dead cow, he plunges a gauge in the innards, declaring it fit for consumption.

Unblinkingly gory, this evisceration foreshadows other violence to come. It's a tough but critical scene because, while Mr. Mundruczo has a sharp sense of humor, evident especially in his use of horror-movie tropes, "White God" isn't a comedy or a Disney-like anthropomorphized romp. The camera gets down on all fours, metaphorically, and shares Hagen's point of view, showing you what the world looks like around our knees. Yet Hagen isn't a wee human in a fuzzy costume; he doesn't have a digital mouth, talk to other animals or share his thoughts. The radicalness of the movie is that it asserts he doesn't need to be like a person for you to be on his side. He is a dog, and that's all he needs to be.



Hagen and Lili are separated not long after moving in with Daniel. Once they're divided, the story divides too, forming parallel narrative tracks. For much of the movie, Mr. Mundruczo switches back and forth between Hagen and Lili as they look for each other, underlining their similarities, friendships, close calls, minor triumphs and anxious, searching, long runs down unfriendly streets. Hagen finds a pal (a scene-nibbling Jack Russell terrier named Marlene); Lili flirts with a boy who plays in her orchestra. Both Hagen and Lili are soon forced on a tight leash. She has to deal with her

tyrannical father and a similarly patriarchal orchestra leader; Hagen, meanwhile faces far worse after he's sold by a vagrant first to a dealer (Mr. Mundruczo) and then a vicious trainer (Szabolcs Thuroczy).

The brutality of the training, which culminates with an ugly fight that's a frenzy of slamming bodies, ominous growls and bloodied muzzles, isn't for the weak of heart. But these scenes represent movie sleight of hand at its finest, as do the sequences of Hagen making like Jason Bourne while escaping pound workers, hurtling down alleys, darting around corners, racing across terraces and even bursting through an apartment window into the lap of its understandably surprised inhabitant. In time, Hagen stops running from his oppressors and instead — flanked by a glorious mutt army in a series of soaring, astonishingly choreographed scenes — heads straight at the humans who have done him and his friends lethally, morally, wrong. After years of domination, nature is biting back.

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