THE SUBVERSIVE ANIMAL: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF YORGOS LANTHIMOS'S FILMS *THE LOBSTER*, AND *THE FAVOURITE*

by

CHANDRE MAU

STUDENT NUMBER: 67142818

submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS (DFENN95)

in the subject

ENGLISH STUDIES

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

Supervisor

PROFESSOR ALLYSON KREUITER

Date

2026

DECLARATION

Name: **CHANDRE MAU**

Student number: **67142818**

Degree: **MASTERS OF ARTS IN ENGLISH STUDIES (DFENN95)**

Title: **THE SUBVERSIVE ANIMAL: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF YORGOS LANTHIMOS'S FILMS *THE LOBSTER*, AND *THE FAVOURITE***

I declare that the above dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

5-15-2026

SIGNATURE DATE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Kreuiter, for her dedication, patience, and unwavering support throughout this journey. Thank you for guiding me through this process and for putting up with a very difficult student at times. Your encouragement and commitment truly made this work possible. I also want to give my deepest thanks to my partner. Thank you for enduring a very tired and often very grumpy spouse during this process.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the destabilization of boundaries between humans and non-human animals in Yorgos Lanthimos's films, focusing on *The Lobster and The Favourite*. It argues that these works challenge societal structures through open-ended, ambiguous narratives that resist clear resolution. My study focuses on the porous boundaries between human and animal identity, where non-human animals reflect the grotesque, vicious, and depraved behaviour of human characters. I introduce the term "animalhuman" to describe the reversal of the human–animal hierarchy and the therianthropic portrayal of humans whose cruelty makes them animalistic, showing these boundaries as socially constructed. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of the grotesque and carnivalesque, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's ideas on monstrosity, I analyse the hybrid, excessive bodies that cross borders and resist containment, arguing that these unstable figures subvert anthropocentrism and expose the myth of human civility.

Keywords: Yorgos Lanthimos, The Lobster, The Favourite, grotesque, abject, monster, non-human animal, animalhuman, transgression, subversion.

Contents

INTRODUCTION 6
CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND 20
CHAPTER 2: THE LOBSTER 32
CHAPTER 3 – THE FAVOURITE 58
CHAPTER 4 - CONCLUSION 82
BIBLIOGRAPHY 88

INTRODUCTION

Consistently pushing the boundaries of contemporary cinema, Yorgos Lanthimos stands out as a filmmaker acutely attuned to the strange and disquieting dimensions of human existence. Lanthimos has established himself as one of the most provocative voices in contemporary cinema, distinguished by his ability to disrupt traditional narrative forms and interrogate the foundations of societal structures, while his narratives typically conclude with open-ended ambiguity withholding any clear resolutions. Lanthimos is often described as a filmmaker "obsessed with boundary-crossing," a quality reflected in both the content of his films and their wider cultural resonance (Falvey 2022: 3). Fundamental to Yorgos Lanthimos's oeuvre is his exploration of the porous boundaries between human and animal identity, a theme introduced in the Greek film *Dogtooth* (2009) and developed further in his English-language films, including *The Lobster* (2015), *The Favourite* (2018*), The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), and *Poor Things* (2023). Across these works, Lanthimos consistently employs animal representations to interrogate themes of metamorphosis, transformation, and hybridity, which grow increasingly prominent throughout his oeuvre. I plan to undertake a critical analysis of Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Lobster* (2015), and *The Favourite* (2019) focusing on his rich and subversive representations of human and non-human animals.

The Lobster is a dystopian film that follows David, a recently divorced man, who is sent to a hotel where single individuals must find a romantic partner within forty-five days or be transformed into an animal of their choosing. The film is divided between the rigidly controlled hotel and the woods inhabited by the "Loners," a group composed of those who have failed to find partners and where the rules of the hotel are inverted and romantic attachment is strictly forbidden. Yet both spaces are governed by equally oppressive and artificial social systems, in which non-human animals, function both literally and symbolically as manifestations of failed humanity, desire, and exclusion. As humans hunt one another and exhibit forms of cruelty and behavioural conditioning more disturbing than any natural animal instinct, the film persistently collapses the boundary between human and non-human animal existence.

In contrast *The Favourite* is a historical period film with a distinctly topsy-turvy twist. Beneath the grandeur of court life, aristocratic society becomes carnivalesque and performative as Lady Sarah Churchill and servant Abigail Masham engage in a manipulative rivalry for the favour of the fragile, yet grotesquely excessive, Queen Anne. Non-human animals permeate the entire film and this is particularly apparent in Queen Anne's treatment of her seventeen rabbits as instantiations of her deceased children. Duck races, horse riding, and lobster racing transform the court into a spectacle of absurdity and cruelty. In doing so, the film collapses the boundary between supposedly civilised human behaviour and animality.

The Lobster is a dystopian film that follows David, a recently divorced man, who is sent to a hotel where single individuals must find a romantic partner within forty-five days or be transformed into an animal of their choosing. The film is divided between the rigidly controlled hotel and the woods inhabited by the "Loners," where romantic attachment is forbidden and the hotel's rules are inverted. Yet both spaces operate through equally oppressive and artificial social systems, in which animals symbolise failed humanity, desire, and exclusion. As humans hunt one another and display forms of cruelty more disturbing than any natural animal instinct, the film collapses the boundary between human and non-human existence, while animals continually cross the frame and linger within its visual landscape as persistent reminders of this unstable divide.

Central to my argument is that Lanthimos's films consistently feature non-human animals that occupy a liminal space. I show that the chosen films challenge the perceptions of the human and non-human animal which is pivotal to what I have termed the "animalhuman". This conceptual inversion of the human-non-human animal hierarchy will allow me to unmask the manner in which the human characters are represented as hybrid or therianthropic forms. The cruel and often violent behaviour of the human characters towards the non-human animals reveals them as animalistic or animalhuman. It will become apparent that Lanthimos's portrayal of the human characters' animality highlights how the human–non-human animal boundaries are socially and culturally constructed.

I employ the theoretical lenses of the grotesque and carnivalesque, as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin as well as Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's

conceptualisation of the monster. These theoretical lenses will allow me to expose the destabilisation of categorical boundaries that are so present in my chosen films. Bakhtin's account of the carnivalesque centres on inversion, mockery of authority, and material excess, while his formulation of the grotesque body describes a form "blended with the world, with animals, with objects" and unbounded by "clearly defined limits" (Bakhtin 1984: 19, 315). Using the concept of the grotesque will allow me to show how the bodies, categories, and identities exceed their limits to destabilise fixed hierarchies which open interpretative space because they refuse closure and transcendence. This is especially suited to an exploration of Lanthimos's unsettling depiction of the human/non-human animal dichotomy (1984: 19, 21). Similarly, this excess and disruption of boundaries is central to Julia Kristeva's formulation of the abject which is found on the "ambiguous and the in-between" as it transgresses "borders, positions, rules" and is never fixed nor stable (1982: 4). Kristeva's abject will allow me to explore the breakdown of the body and its identity in the films because it offers support for my argument that examines the unsettling of the coherence of his human characters as they "stray on the territories of animal" (Kristeva 1982: 12). Lanthimos's excessive human bodies with their unstable behaviours manifest not as an external abject threat, but as inherent to the human form that is distorted, unruly, and resistant to containment. These transgressive qualities of the abject and grotesque in their liminal state of ambiguity make them necessarily monstrous as they resist containment and transgress categorical borders, just as both modern and ancient hybrid monsters do (Cohen 1996: 6). Cohen characterises the monster as a "hybrid" that combines "incompatible traits" and defies easy categorisation, representing an external element that originates from within, thus subverting and disrupting conceptual boundaries (1996: 6-7). Employing these theoretical lenses, my analysis critically examines the non-human animals as subversive figures that exceed allegorical or metaphorical readings, without discrediting the fact that such readings retain rich analytical validity since they are, after all, intricately tied to the hybrid language of the monstrous grotesque. I aim to show how Lanthimos renders his human characters increasingly unstable, positioning hybridity as the site where the abject, the monstrous, and the grotesque intersect to unsettle the stable classification of the human. As will be argued, Lanthimos employs the non-human animal as a subversive figure in his narratives to critique the fragility of constructed human realities and challenge anthropomorphic assumptions, as they reflect back to the viewer the grotesque and monstrous behaviours of the human characters. In other words, my argument upends the idea of the human as civilised and

moral, arguing instead that Lanthimos's portrayal of his human characters reveals them as grotesque monsters who are cruel and depraved in contrast to the behaviour of the non-human animal in his films.

In *Blurring the Lines between Victim and Perpetrator*, Pierre Simon Gutman's reading of Lanthimos's *The Favourite* and *The Lobster* effectively recognises the grotesque atmosphere generated by the persistent juxtaposition of "innocuous animals" with the "undignified behaviour of the human protagonists" (Gutman 2020: 94). I contend that it is precisely this juxtaposition that reveals the non-human animals as the film's most subversive agents whose quiet, composed presence throws the human characters' malignant and depraved conduct into sharp relief. In *Animal Life and the Moving Image* Laura McMahon and Michael Lawrence suggest that rather than focusing on the symbolic and metaphoric functions of animals, the true potency lies in honing in on the ways in which animals' physical presence and behaviours are represented in films that effectively challenge hierarchical structures and foster more equitable interspecies relations (2015: 17). This perspective informs my analysis by focusing on the actual presence and representation of the non-human animals in my chosen films as not simply symbolic and metaphoric ornaments but as active, disruptive presences. Lanthimos's portrayal of human characters deconstructs their apparent civilised, enlightened, and moral appearance, exposing them as grotesque monsters. The decision to focus exclusively on *The Lobster* (2015) and *The Favourite* (2019) was taken as these films more overtly juxtapose the human and non-human animal behaviour, where Lanthimos' films *Dogtooth* (2005) and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2018) contain less evident animal presences. *Dogtooth* has been extensively theorised within existing scholarship. However, it poses a limitation, because it was filmed in Greek. In *The Killing of the Sacred Deer* the non-human animal, the deer, is symbolic of ancient Greece myth. In the more recent film, *Poor Things* (2023), Lanthimos renders human-animal hybridity and corporeal transgression explicitly, as he constructs a modern Frankenstein narrative. In the films, *The Lobster* and *The Favourite,* non-human animals are situated as oblique, dispersed, and structurally embedded, demanding a more rigorous engagement with how they are represented. As Ina Karkani notes in *Ontological Adriftness in Lanthimos films,* Lanthimos invites the viewer to feel their way around an "ambiguous fictional space" in which human and animal figures mark an "extreme collapse between the figural and the real", a disruption that departs from conventional modes of representing both humans and animals

(2022: 67). The non-human animals in *The Lobster* and *The Favourite* occupy an uneasy proximity to the human figures, alternately positioned as cherished and included companions or as exploitable bodies subject to killing, hunting and consumption. Across the films, these shifting configurations accumulate as a dispersed visual logic in which human-animal relations are repeatedly reconfigured without producing literal hybrid bodies. It is only in the final scene of *The Favourite* that Lanthimos makes his interest in hybridity explicit, deploying a visual strategy that superimposes human faces with animal bodies to create a layered visual composition of human-animal admixture. Even here, hybridity remains abstract rather than materially explicit, particularly when contrasted with the overt hybrid constructions foregrounded in *Poor Things*. Therefore, The *Lobster* and The *Favourite* offer a more productive critical terrain for developing an original and sustained analysis allowing for both conceptual depth and interpretive specificity without relying on overt imagery or already well-established themes of human-animal transgression. At the same time, my reading keeps the non-human animal integral, as they are necessary for demonstrating how Lanthimos destabilisation of the human-animal boundary exposes the fragility of human propriety.

Lanthimos' non-human animals are presented both as real presences and as metaphorical constructs, yet their representation often reinforces anthropocentric narratives. In *The Animal Logic of Contemporary Greek Cinema* Rosalind Galt critiques *The Lobster* for its overt anthropomorphism, arguing that the film subordinates' animals to human allegories (2017: 8). For Galt, the transformation of humans into animals serves as punishment for societal nonconformity, reducing animals to symbols of human failure rather than exploring their autonomy. While the visual presence of animals like flamingos and peacocks may seem to challenge anthropocentrism, Galt agues, they remain tethered to human concerns, failing to "escape the anthropocentric frameworks they ostensibly critique" (2017: 9). In her article*, Dog, Lobster, Deer, Rabbit: Yorgos Lanthimos's Animal Metaphors*, Savina Petkova attempts to circumvent this critique by examining how the non-human animals in Lanthimos's films challenge anthropocentric views rather than adopting them (2022). Petkova argues that, while Lanthimos's films indeed retain anthropocentric human-animal hierarchies as they "are there but not themselves", Lanthimos's symbolic use of animals is exaggerated to serve a "deliberate ethical purpose" (Petkova 2022: 218, 220). Petkova draws from Akira Mizuta Lippit's concept of the "animetaphor", in his book *Electric Animal*, to

explore the figurative and linguistic threshold where humans confront their constitutive other; the animal, to frame the significance of non-human animals in *The Lobster* (Petkova 2022: 275; Lippit 2000: 163;). Lippit frames animals in cinema as "living metaphors" or "animetaphors" that disrupt anthropocentric codes through a "fantastic transversality" that merges literal and figurative meanings, collapsing the real and symbolic boundaries" (Lippit 2000: 163-165). Lippit builds his concept from Jacques Derrida's book, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), in which he argues that the category "the animal" is a violent linguistic construction that collapses the multiplicity of non-human beings into a single, mute "Other", thereby securing the human's claim to subjectivity and reason (Derrida 2008: 400). From this, Lippit develops the term "animetaphors" to argue that non-human animals in film exist in a "spectral state", where they are neither fully present nor absent, thus revealing unspoken human-animal connections (2000: 162). Building on this, Petkova argues that Lanthimos's animals are "nonhuman creatures stretched out of shape into ironic extremes," functioning as significant signifiers that challenge human exceptionalism and social norms (2022: 150-151). Petkova's argument is undeniably compelling and indeed effectively builds on Lippit's "animetaphor". However, it introduces limitations as her reading risks reducing animals to mere symbols, again possibly reinforcing anthropocentrism rather than dismantling it. Cary Wolfe's critique in *Animal Rites* identifies this tendency in many philosophical traditions, including Derrida's work, to lean on abstract frameworks that risk overlooking the embodied realities of animals (Wolfe 2003: 34-35). The reduction of animals as metaphors for human reflection, argues Wolfe, reinscribes privilege even as it critiques it. However, Wolfe suggests that this move reflects a philosophical deflection, seeking solace in systematic reasoning rather than confronting the tangible "flesh and blood" realities that demand ethical attention (Wolfe, 2003: 34-35). Therefore, rather than interpreting the animals as purely metaphoric or symbolic, I will focus on the actual physicality of the non-human animals and how they are represented in the different scenes in Lanthimos's films. Vivian Sobchack's *Carnal Thoughts* (2004) underscores that cinema's unique power lies in its ability to render the materiality of bodies, both human and nonhuman, tangible. For Sobchack, this focus on corporeal realism disrupts abstract theorisation by grounding ethical engagement in sensory experience and lived reality of both humans and non-human animals (Sobchack 2004: 53-56). Jonathan Burt offers an equally valuable critique in his book *Animals in Film* arguing that Lippitt's approach neglects the material and historical significance of animals, whose imagery carries specific ethical and cultural connotations that resist subsumption under

abstract semiotic theory (2002: 30) For Burt, Lippit's "animetaphor" risks reducing animals to "pure signs" or "spectral presences," thus reinforcing their erasure rather than highlighting their significance (Burt 2002: 29). I prefer Burt's articulation of non-human animals in film as a form of rupture in the field of representation that effectively dismantles anthropocentric frameworks and challenge human narratives and hierarchies through their disruptive presence. This relational agency allows non-human animals in film to shape meaning and provoke significant responses by "redressing the imbalance in human-animal relations by outlining the impact animals have on humans" rather than remaining passive symbols (Burt 2002: 11, 31). While Lanthimos's portrayal of non-human animals depicts them as innocent and docile, which invites anthropomorphic interpretation, I argue that Lanthimos deliberately contrasts the behaviour of the non-human animals to the grotesque excesses and moral decay of the human characters in my chosen films. As I will show, the non-human animals serve as effective foils, reflecting societal ethics that are inescapably enmeshed in human practices of looking and knowing, where meaning is shaped and constrained by anthropomorphic lenses (Burt 2002: 31). In connection to this, I find value in Lewis C. Seifert's ideas on human animal hybridity in folk tales. In *Animal-Human Hybridity in d'Aulnoy's "Babiole" and "Prince Wild Boar,* Seifert observes that animals in these tales carry these same "metaphorical meanings" that relate not to the animal but more to human concerns, therefore remaining anthropomorphised just as they appear in Lanthimos's films. Seifert contends that while it might appear that "the animal disappears before the human" echoing Petkova's remark that Lanthimos's animals "are there but they are not themselves," Seifert does not consider this the case (Seifert 2011: 244; Petkova 2022: 218). Instead, Seifert argues that animals, no matter how anthropomorphic "always pose an existential problem for humans" (Seifert 2011: 244). He argues that folk- and fairy-tale animals typically retain distinct nonhuman traits, such as reasoning and speaking like humans, yet remain fundamentally "Other" (Seifert 2011: 245). This resonates with Lippit's "animetaphor" which "always anticipates its own disappearance" and exposes the boundaries humans impose on animals through language and metaphor (2000: 166-167). Ultimately it is Seifert's emphasis on hybridity that sets them apart. In his analysis of animal-human hybrids in folklore, Seifert emphasises their hybridity as a means to challenge human-animal hierarchies while retaining their distinct nonhuman traits, setting them apart from anthropomorphic depictions (2011: 244-245). In opposition to the arguments raised by Galt and Petkova, Seifert makes the point that animals in folktales are "anthropomorphic or symbolic

representations" and serve to figure "human virtues, vices, foibles and dilemmas" that he considers provide a mirror image that is rendered more faithful because it is "non-human in appearance" (2011: 244).

Marina Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* observes that fairy tales historically tend to focus on a narrative of the metamorphosis of non-human animals like wolves, bears, pigs, or warthogs into animal grooms, to be wed to the human female character. These creatures, she notes, were historically regarded as "very real threats to humans" (1996: 28). As non-human animals in film are read as being anthropomorphised so too were very early non-human animals and characters. Jacques Derrida, always heavily interested in the subjectivity of non-human animals, argues that old fables, and tales of such fabulation, were exclusively humancentric since the non-human animals as "moralising" figures are ultimately anthropomorphised to serve human moral and cultural narratives (2008:36). However, the existential problem Seifert refers to is human rationalist thought in juxtaposition to the non-human. Seifert, in his examination of hybrid animal-humans in fairy tales, asserts that human-animal characters extend beyond metaphorical representations and argues that the boundary between humans and animals, symbolically navigated via animal transformation tropes, continuously acts to affirm and shape human identity (2011: 244). This implies that human identity is never fixed or stable, unlike the fixed notion of identity in rationalist thought. Thus, rather than reading human-animal transformations in a rationalist manner, Seifert's argument poses a direct challenge to this conceptualisation. As such I find Seifert's work relevant to my argument because it offers an alternative, like Petkova, to the conventional interpretations of anthropomorphism and the representation of animals. Nevertheless, though Seifert's article is important to my analysis of Lanthimos's work, there remains a focus on human identity and perception in his argument that still subtly places the non-human animal in a lesser position. In his article, the idea that the animal becomes humanised and that the human does not possess any of the "lesser" characteristics generally associated with the non-human animal characteristics is still subtly present. In their article *A Different Logic': Animals, Transformation, and Rationality in Angela Carter's The Tiger's Bride*, Caroline Webb and Helen Hopcroft indicate that while fairy tales tend to privilege the importance of human characters in transitional tales, the human-animal metamorphosis not only challenges traditional views of human identity but also serves to highlight and evaluate the specific

identity and worth of that character within the story (Webb and Hopcroft 2017: 317-318). This argument, whilst interesting, again privileges the human and human worth or morality against that of the non-human.

Fairy tales commonly use the morphing from human to animal as a learning mechanism for human behaviour, rather than really engaging with the non-human animal's position or role. Lanthimos's films challenge the perceptions of the human and non-human animal where the moral message, and return to the norms of society in fairy tales, is revealed as unlikely for the human characters in *The Lobster* and *The Favourite*. It is the non-human animals that continue to exhibit integrity and the existential problem in the film is that of animalhuman behaviour. My own employment of the term "animalhuman" is one that engages with the manner in which Lanthimos complicates the viewer's ideas of human behaviour in relation to that of the non-human animals present in the chosen films. What the viewer is confronted with is the monstrous and grotesque animality of the human characters which is unsettling because it directly confronts the human viewer with humanity's violent and destructive behaviour in relation to the inoffensive nature of the non-human animals. Lanthimos's human characters as animalhumans are hybrid creatures. As Jessica Hughes argues in *Dissecting the Classical Hybrid*, these figures were often depicted with grotesque features, indicating a cultural dialogue about the natural and the unnatural and served as a powerful medium for exploring and challenging established norms and boundaries (2010: 104-105). Building on this, I contend that Lanthimos's non-human animals' function to subvert traditional hierarchies by exposing the vices and heinous behaviour of the human characters in the chosen films. Rather than anthropomorphising or humanising the non-human animals, his films preserve their composure and opacity, using their presence to expose the instability, excess, and cruelty of human social formations without collapsing the animal into a human analogue. In this way I aim to show that Lanthimos employs non- human animals, in their composed and innocent representation, as agents against which to offset the actions of the human characters. Therefore, my reading considers the non-human animals as powerful figures of subversion as they mirror back the "less than noble actions" of the human characters. Following Seifert, the non-human animals provide a mirror image that is rendered more faithful precisely because they are "non-human in appearance" (2011: 244).

Scholars such as Michael Lipiner and Nathan Abrams in *Animal Instincts: Fear, Power, and Obedience in the Films of Yorgos Lanthimos* argue that Lanthimos's depiction of animals "pitted against humans as a metaphor" and "humans that mimic animals" reveal "humanity's inescapable animal nature", evident in the violent and oppressive behaviours of Lanthimos's human characters (Lipiner and Abrahams 2022: 189). Such a reading, however, risks reinscribing a negative valuation of non-human animals by treating violent brutality as intrinsically animalistic, rather than as a product of human social and political formations. In this respect, their argument echoes Thomas Hobbes's claim in *Leviathan* that humans inherit their "brutish" and "nasty" tendencies from instinctual animal drives, thereby necessitating the imposition of social contracts under a sovereign authority to restrain such violence (Hobbes 1982: 79, 83, 90). My argument directly opposes this position. Rather than attributing these traits to non-human animals, I contend that Lanthimos exposes the very qualities humans project onto animals as originating within the human characters themselves, revealing brutality and domination as fundamentally human constructions rather than animal instincts. In line with this, I argue that Lanthimos subverts classical attributions of "animalistic" qualities to non-human creatures by presenting his human characters as embodying a moral and ethical corruption that by far surpasses the innocence of the non-human animals located in my chosen films.

Cary Wolfe makes a compelling point about humanism's reliance on rationality, specifically "reason" and "language," understood as "the traditionally distinctive marks of the human" that "flourish quite reliably beyond the species barrier", continues to function as the dividing line between humans and animals, thereby excluding non-human animals from ethical consideration and reductively construing them as instinct-bound beings (Wolfe 2003: xii, 18). Therefore, I have constructed my own neologism "animalhuman" as a conceptual inversion of the human–animal hierarchy. Thus, this term acts as a critical gesture which aims to expose the labile nature of the human characters' hybrid forms. In *Animal Rites* the term "humanimal," is introduced as a designation for hybrid entities that blur the lines between human and non-human animals, challenging the notion of a fixed and dominant human identity (Wolfe 2003: 1). The term "humanimal" underscores how human–animal boundaries are not inherent but socially and

culturally constructed and therefore advocating for decentring the human subject (Wolfe 2003: 1, 49). A counterpart to this term can be found in the "animalized human" which is used by Cary Wolfe and Jonathan Elmer in in their 1995 article *Subject to Sacrifice: Ideology, Psychoanalysis, and the Discourse of Species in Jonathan Demme's Silence of the Lambs*. The term "animalized human" denotes the violent and monstrous behaviours concealed beneath a façade of sophistication, a dynamic exemplified by normatively deviant figures such as the cinematic cannibal Hannibal Lecter (Wolfe and Elmer 1995: 117). In considering the amalgamated term "humanimal" as a designation for hybrid entities that blur the lines between human and non-human animals, and the monstrosity contained in Wolfe and Elmer's unhyphenated "animalized humans," I have opted instead to redefine the human–animal, or humanimal, as "animalhuman," merging the terms without any hyphenation, separation, or omission (Wolfe 2008: 1; Wolfe and Elmer 1995: 117). This choice reflects a deliberate integration, emphasising the inseparability of human and animal characteristics. I consider this conflation as one that provides a more fluid term with which to explore the human characters in their hybrid transgression in my chosen films. In examining Lanthimos's narrative use of hybridity, I consider how this is present in the human and non-human figures where the alterity of the human characters is situated in both their conjunction and juxtaposition to the non-human animal, ultimately transfiguring them into "animalhumans". I intentionally employ the term "animalhuman" to emphasise a key aspect of the films' critique that by positioning the non-human "animal" before the "human", a deliberate inversion of the human/non-human animal hierarchy shifts into place.

Bakhtin's account of the carnivalesque centres exactly on this inversion of authority, and material excess as his formulation of the grotesque body describes a form "blended with the world, with animals, with objects" and unbounded by "clearly defined limits" (Bakhtin 1984: 19;27). The human characters' excessive bodies and unstable behaviours manifest the abject not as an external threat, but in their animalhuman development, a hybrid state that is something inherent to the human that is distorted, unruly, and resistant to containment (Kristeva 1982: 4,12). The characters are far less human and much more monstrous as they are "difference made flesh," "disturbing hybrids" that "refuse easy categorization" in their bodily and behavioural transgressions that is located firmly in their animalhuman state (Cohen 1996: 6-7). The originality of my study lies in the shifting of critical attention away from the non-human animal as an isolated symbolic or

allegorical figure, while at times still showing how these symbolic and allegorical features fold into the ancient grotesque and monstrous. However, my reading is more focused on the relational interplay between the human characters and how their grotesque and monstrous behaviours are highlighted by the non-human animal presences. I argue that Lanthimos's films invite the viewer to imaginatively align human behaviour, bodily excess, and moral disintegration with the non-human animals that surround them, producing a gradual transfiguration of the human into the animalhuman. While the dissertation acknowledges that a broader literary and cinematic engagements with humananimals and anthropormorphism, might add a wider comparative analysis of these traditions and their societal contexts, this lay outside the scope of the present study. The primary focus of this dissertation remains the close analysis of Lanthimos's films. Nevertheless, this study has opened up avenues for future research that may further expand on these concerns. This approach fills a critical gap by demonstrating how the films' critique of human exceptionalism operates not through the animal as an external other, but through an imaginative convergence that renders the grotesque monstrosity immanent to the human construct.

In the first chapter, I establish and explain the theoretical framework that underpins my analysis of Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Lobster* (2015) and *The Favourite* (2019). I extrapolate on Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of grotesque realism and the carnivalesque to show how his understanding of the body as unfinished, excessive, and transgressive provides a basis for interpreting Lanthimos's representations of the human and the non-human bodies and behaviours. Bakhtin's grotesque will inform my discussion of how Lanthimos's characters disrupt idealised forms of humanity through corporeal distortion and boundary transgression (Bakhtin 1984: 315-317). I outline Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, elaborating on how her ideas about impurity, collapse, and disorder reveal the instability of identity and meaning within Lanthimos's films. Kristeva's abject along with the grotesque will form the main theoretical framework for my exploration of Lanthimos's hybrid figures, those whose excessive, unstable bodies reveal what must be expelled to maintain the illusion of a coherent self (Kristeva 1982: 4, 12). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's Monster Theory will provide further support for my examination of how the grotesque and abject merge into monstrosity as "difference made flesh," a "disturbing hybrid" that "refuses easy categorization" (1996: 6-,7). The adoption of these theoretical positions will support my contention that Lanthimos's characters are monstrous precisely because they expose the fragility of human

boundaries and the moral corruption underlying civility. I elaborate on the construction of my own neologism "animalhuman", which I employ to explore Lanthimos's narrative use of hybridity in his portrayal of the alterity of the human characters as situated in both their conjunction and juxtaposition to the non-human animal.

In Chapter 2, I focus on *The Lobster* (2015), which forms the foundation of this analysis due to its overt engagement with human–animal transformation and the breakdown of species boundaries. By grounding my argument in Bakhtin, Kristeva, and Cohen's concepts, I show how *The Lobste*r's transgressive hybrid figures collapse the boundaries of the human and non-human animal thereby revealing the moral instability of humanity, exposing the fragile boundaries separating the human from the animal. I contextualise my development of the term animalhuman and explain how placing the term animal before human assists to critique the ideological nature of human exceptionalism and reframes Lanthimos's non-human animal figures as agents of subversion rather than symbols of otherness (Wolfe 2003: 1, 73). I situate my argument within existing scholarship on Lanthimos's treatment of the human–animal binary in *The Lobster* engaging with the works including but not limited to that of Rosalind Galt (2017), and Savina Petkova (2022). I examine how these scholars interpret the function of animals in Lanthimos's films and demonstrate how my argument diverges from and extends their analyses. I argue that this film establishes the grotesque logic that underpins Lanthimos's cinema, where humanity's efforts to regulate instinct and emotion lead to moral, social, and ontological collapse. Although the film appears less visually grotesque than *The Favourite*, I show that it enacts the grotesque conceptually through its portrayal of odd, stilted human behaviour, a mode of performance that renders the human as an artificial, estranged, and mechanised creature

In chapter 3 I turn to *The Favourite* (2018), a film that is far more saturated with explicit grotesque imagery than *The Lobster*. Although fewer non-human animals appear on screen, those that do are more central, occupying greater visual and symbolic space within the film. I show how the presence of Queen Anne's Rabbits, Racing Ducks, Shooting Birds and Horses are strategically symbolic. The representation of these non-human animals will be examined as counterpoints to

the grotesque excesses of Queen Anne's court. I do this to highlight the moral, political, and corporeal degeneration of the human characters and how the non-human animals act as inverse mirrors to such degenerative behaviour. The grotesque, I argue, operates as both a physical and moral condition that destabilises ideals of civility and containment and my analysis will reveal how Queen Anne, Sarah Churchill, and Abigail Hill specifically transgress such ideals and devolve into hybrid monsters. Furthermore, these characters will be shown to embody different forms of the abject. Queen Anne's leaking, diseased body and maternal grief position her as physically and emotionally abject. Sarah, though outwardly composed, reveals a more complex abject hybridity through her strength, authority, and association with the horse. This connection I claim acts as a form of animalhuman fusion that transgresses traditional female roles and blurs boundaries between mastery and subjugation. The character Abigail embodies the morally abject through deceit, opportunism, and performative cruelty, her actions exposing the grotesque underside of social mobility and human ambition. Their monstrosity resides not in biology but in excess, of desire, emotion, and ambition that reveals the grotesque instability of humanity itself. In contrast, I will argue that Lanthimos's non-human animals in the film, though peripheral, embody restraint, composure, and dignity, functioning as silent foils that expose the moral and behavioural decay of the human figures and court.

This dissertation concludes with a final chapter that synthesises the central arguments developed throughout the preceding chapters, drawing together their theoretical, analytical, and thematic connections. In this closing section, I reflect on the implications of my position, and situate the study within broader critical and scholarly discourses, whilst suggesting aspects that might be considered for further study in relation to Lanthimos's more recent film *Poor Things* (2023).[1]

[1] Lanthimos has recently released two further films *Kinds of Kindness* (2024) released shortly after *Poor Things* (2023) and *Bugonia* (2025). These lie beyond the scope of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The grotesque has long functioned as a means through which cultural forms are able to interrogate the very constitution of the human through opposition to what is considered "not human". According to the *New Oxford English Dictionary* the term is historically rooted in the description of ornamental forms that fantastically interweave human, animal, vegetal, and architectural elements, producing hybrid configurations in which boundaries between species and forms collapse (OED, 2nd ed., vol. VI, 1993: 707). Across its historical variations the grotesque has evolved into a contemporary understanding of anything that transgresses stable boundaries, and is "distorted, strange, absurd, repulsive, or bizarre" in both bodily and behavioural norms (Abrams and Harpham 2013: 157). In Lanthimos's films, the grotesque materialises where the binary between the human and non-human animal blur, generating distorted, unnatural and utterly bizarre forms and behaviours that unsettle socially constructed notions of such categorical constructs. Nepomuk Zettl highlights the grotesquerie in Lanthimos's films as being founded on an uneasy immediacy between the human and non-human figures, where the distorted human interactions and illogical behaviours, transgress socially constructed representational systems (Zettl 2022: 135). In my analysis I aim to show that Lanthimos's grotesque aesthetic draws on both ancient and contemporary understandings of the grotesque, at times operating through subtle narrative elements. These elements sometimes echo the archaic logic of metamorphosis rooted in myth and fable while at other times are reframed as archaic structures with distinctly modern and contemporary visual distortion of bodily and behavioural transgression. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund offer a systematic examination of the grotesque's pervasive presence across contemporary culture, analysing how grotesque forms materialise in literature, the visual arts, and cinema. The authors show how various scholars highlight the significance of the grotesque's ability to blur boundaries, often through the juxtaposition or amalgamation of the familiar and the alien, or via the transformation of recognisable elements into entities that are markedly strange (Edwards and Graulund 2013:13). Lanthimos's films carry a distinctly grotesque cinematic language that foregrounds a distortion of boundaries and strong elements of dehumanisation, that Ruth Perlmutter considers are definitive features of the *Cinema of the Grotesque* (1979). This language

of dehumanisation and distortion are, according to Perlmutter, qualities that generate such unease in the viewer that they create a "growing uncertainty over what constitutes normality and how to distinguish it from abnormality" (Perlmutter 1979: 168). Perlmutter's position that "no widely accepted single definition of the grotesque can exist" underscores the problem of the grotesque's lack of definable qualities (Perlmutter 1979. 168).

n *The Grotesque: First Principles* (1976) Geoffrey Galt Harpham describes it as "the slipperiest of aesthetic categories" and in his later work in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982) he highlights, as the title suggests, that the grotesque is defined by its structure of contradiction, its refusal to resolve opposing elements, and its status as a "species of confusion" (Harpham 1976: 4; 1982: 3). Leonard Cassuto's definition of the grotesque, as an exclusionary term, correlates with this as he describes it in *The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* as "both one thing and another, and thus neither one", encapsulating its enduring resistance to stable definition (Cassuto 1997: 6). In his book titled *The Grotesque*, Philip Thomson defines it as an embodiment of a "paradox of attraction/repulsion" that persist in a mix of "incompatible elements without resolution" (Thompson 2017: 51). Prior to this, Sylvie Debevec Henning critiqued the structural foundations of the grotesque in her 1981 article *Forme In-Formante: A Reconsideration of the Grotesque*, arguing that the grotesque's defining "ambiguities and tensions" cannot be resolved, which ultimately weakens its reliability as a classificatory term, since nothing within the grotesque remains entirely self-identical or wholly distinct from other forms (Henning 1981: 118). As she concludes, "where we would find boundaries and barriers, there are instead only overlays and imbrications" (Henning 1981: 107). Henning's critique finds a clear correlative in the culminating scene of *The Favourite*, which is Lanthimos's most concentrated visual articulation of the grotesque imagery of "overlays and imbrications" through visual superimposition, with the faces of the human characters spliced into one another and layered with images of rabbits within the same frame. In line with Henning's critique of the grotesque Katherine Connell in her work *The Precarious Politics of Yorgos Lanthimos's The Favourite*, argues that Lanthimos's "striking visuals exceeds the critical coherence of the references mobilised to realise them", becoming "troublingly ambiguous," so much so that "meaning is completely withheld therefore failing to sustain interpretive clarity" (Connell 2019: 11). However, for my work this formulation is productive rather than weakening. This structural indeterminacy is

sustained in the theoretical articulation of the concept of hybridity which is integral to my analysis of the films. Therefore, my neologism the animalhuman functions not merely as a reference to a hybrid creature that the characters develop into, but as a conceptual tool that challenges and reconfigures the categorical boundaries of the "human" and "non-human animal." The omission of the hyphenated gap becomes a visual metaphor for this boundary dissolution, as the term itself linguistically embodies a fluid and hybrid identity that unsettles conventional distinctions. The animalhuman is structured as an "interstitial process of admixture in which heterogeneous elements" which are brought into proximity within a "third space of enunciation", produce "meanings that are neither unified nor resolved but negotiated through difference" (Bhabha 1994: 37-38). Similarly, Lanthimos's non-human animals are a structural paradox yet a powerful and meaningful one. They are visibly present yet excluded from having any form of authority, making them subversive figures that highlight Lanthimos's worldview in which hybrid bodies enhance rather than threaten identity. The term animalhuman is closely is associated with the concept of the therianthrope, which is derived from the Greek words for "beast" and "human", which is rooted in dualism and alterity (Robertson 2013: 7-8). "Therianthropes are animal-humans" in that they are both animal and human yet neither, occupying a liminal, "neither/nor" space (Robertson 2013: 16, 24). As Liz Gloyn argues in *Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture*, there remains a lack of sustained scholarship on how classical monsters and hybrid figures have infiltrated modern cultural production (2019: 2). This gap in scholarship further underscores the need for a grotesque-focused reading of Lanthimos's work, as his films draw on these enduring monstrous archetypes to challenge contemporary notions of identity, and species boundaries. This absence opens up a space for an interpretation of Lanthimos's work as relying on and reviving the monstrous therianthropic archetypes in order to challenge contemporary notions of identity, morality, and species boundaries.

In *Monsters in Greek Literature* (2021), Fiona Mitchell argues that monsters in ancient Greek texts are useful lenses to explore the way societies construct the world because of how they break boundaries, highlighting where such "boundaries are perceived to lie" particularly through hybrids which "belong to no species properly" (2021: 12). Beyond physical boundaries, Mitchell suggests that contemporary monsters also challenge behavioural and social norms, questioning the necessity of certain cultural conventions (2021: 14). While any form of alterity may be inscribed across the

monstrous body, Cohen emphasises that monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, and sexual serving as a dialectical counterpart that embodies the "outside from within our own realm" (Cohen 1996: 7). In Michel Foucault's *Abnormal Lectures*, he offers a historical reading of the monster as a cultural figure by tracing the shift from a visibly deformed body to a "monstrosity of character" in which what is considered monstrous becomes internal and behavioural (2003: 56). Foucault notes that by the eighteenth-century, monstrosity took root in conduct rather than appearance, evolving into a figural "human monster," whose threat lies in moral deviance rather than anatomical disruption (2003: 73–74). Georges Canguilhem argues that as science stripped physical deformity of its mythical weight, the monster lost conceptual clarity and faded into abstraction (2002: 130, 138). It is Lanthimos's reimagining of monstrosity, not through grossly disfigured monsters, but through the allusion to the human characters' grotesque attributes, which allows him to reveal their underlying cruelty, excess, and perversion, thereby figuring hem as "human monsters" (Foucault 2003: 74). Lanthimos's human characters are not monstrous because they look different, but because they reveal that monstrosity is already embedded in the human. In *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), Noël Carroll addresses the idea that monsters in horror and fantasy are not necessarily defined by extreme hybridity or visual complexity, but rather by how they challenge the viewer to actively participate in constructing their monstrosity. These monstrous animalhuman figures symbolise impurity and threaten moral order through their behaviours and are defined by their incompleteness and contradiction, inviting the viewer to fill in the gaps (Carroll 1990: 43). Carroll argues that such monsters are often composed of familiar elements and are not monstrous because of their outlandish combinations, but because they embody contradiction and incompleteness. These figures invite the viewer to resolve their ambiguity, creating a sense of unease through what remains unspoken or unformed (Carroll 1990: 43). Alexa Wright, in her work *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture*, similarly contends that the monster is the site where the monstrous and monstrosity converge, yet the truly monstrous resides in that which resists representation. While monsters may symbolise or materialise monstrosity, she argues that the "most disturbing forms are those that cannot be fully articulated or contained" (2013: 4). Savina Petkova has argued that the human-animal transformation in Lanthimos's films is "only visible by way of cinematic elision; the spectator's suspension of disbelief is a prerequisite for the film's premise to function," thus the transformation itself serves as a metaphor for our imaginative capacity to shape the human as a specific kind of

subject (Petkova 2022: 153). Accordingly, I read the animalhumans not as a literal, physically realised human/non-human animal hybrid, but as an imaginative, composite configuration that can be pieced together through the exaggerated, aberrant behaviour of Lanthimos's human characters that are continually juxtaposed to the behaviour of his non-human animal representations. In this way Lanthimos draws the viewer into a strange fantasy world in which such transgressions reveal the malignancy beneath civilised behaviour.

As abject beings, these animalhuman hybrids embody the collapse of meaning, provoking horror precisely because they blur the line between subject and other, culture and nature. They are abjectly marked by contradiction and incompleteness as they provoke both repulsion and fascination (Kristeva 1984: 2). These animalhuman hybrids, I argue, are threatening because they "violate our standing categories" as they defy the structures that hold meaning together (Carroll 1990: 43). Their excessive corporeality and erratic behaviour reveal the abject not as an external intrusion but as an inherent, unruly element that is internalised. I argue that the human subject defines itself through the abjection of the animal, that is, by expelling the animalistic dimension as that which threatens the coherence of the human. Kelly Oliver, in her work *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human,* argues for the usefulness of the abject to interrogate theories of the "other, feral, and wild" (Oliver 2009: 5). As Oliver reminds us, the "animal always bites back," thereby reopening the question of the human-animal boundary and revealing that such abjection of the non-human animal is never fully complete (Oliver 2009: 1). Ina Karkani observes in her chapter on *The Lobster,* that Lanthimos "stages a cultural context in which animal transformation is the ultimate terrifying consequence of failing to conform to social expectations" (Karkani 2022: 105). This transformation signals the collapse of the coherent human subject, prompting development into an animalhuman figure, and the human characters in this film engage in grotesque and increasingly desperate behaviours to escape transmogrification. Ironically, these ritualised performances uncannily resemble stylised mating displays in non-human animals, yet rather than embodied or instinctive expressions, the human characters' behaviour is cripplingly awkward, self-conscious and imitative. In *The Favourite*, animality does not operate as an explicit punishment as it does in *The Lobster*, but as a condition already internalised. Rather than attempting to suppress animality, the characters displace it onto one another through predatory social behaviour as they bait, wound, and try to outmanoeuvre each other in a competitive struggle for their "lion's share"

of Queen Anne's sovereign power. This produces a court culture structured by hunting rather than pairing, in which survival depends on aggression, deception, and opportunistic adaptation. The characters oscillate between transgressive behaviours and exaggerated bodily performances, limping, vomiting, collapsing, seducing and using the body as an instrument of strategy. *The Favourite* reframes animality not as a loss of humanity, but as the very logic through which human power relations are organised and sustained. It is precisely this collapse of behavioural restraint and bodily propriety that situates the film within what Julia Kristeva, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival, terms a space in which transgression exceeds mere excess and becomes a destabilisation of social morality itself (1980: 47). Kristeva describes this transgression of social morality as enacted through liminal figures that occupy contradictory states and collapse normative distinctions (Kristeva 1980: 49) Lanthimos establishes the human characters as unsettling because they refuse neat categorisation in their impurity, contradiction, and unprincipled actions. They are neither fully human nor fully animal, but hybrid animalhumans.

Through grotesque bodies and animalhuman behaviour, Lanthimos exposes the fragility of human exceptionalism. At the same time, the quiet, dignified presence of non-human animals' challenges anthropocentric authority. The behavioural excess, affective suppression, and bodily degradation of the human characters in my chosen films no longer disrupts social order but instead structures it and renders Lanthimos's characters unsettling precisely because they resist stable categorisation. Instead, they exist as animalhumans whose grotesque bodies and behaviours unsettle moral, ontological, and humanist certainties. As Karkani argues, Lanthimos's animal-human transgression opens up the potential for "thinking bodies out of place, bodies that do not belong, bodies that threaten to violate familiar ontological boundaries as we have come to know them" (2022: 71). By opposing the closed, completed classical body with the open, excessive grotesque body, Bakhtin dismantles the fantasy of human transcendence, through carnival's logic of degradation, what is elevated is "brought down to earth," returning it to the "material bodily stratum" grounding subjectivity in flesh, permeability, and material continuity rather than ontological distinction (Bakhtin 1984: 21). While Bakhtin's theory was not explicitly formulated to dismantle the hierarchical distinction between human and animal, I suggest that the non-human animal's proximity to earthly materiality nonetheless marks it as a subversive figure that exposes the contingency of human exceptionalism. Yet, Terry Eagleton critiques Bakhtin's celebratory

account of carnival arguing that carnival functions as "a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art" so that carnivalesque laughter and satire amount to controlled dissent rather than genuine transformation (Eagleton 1981: 148). However, Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia, in *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess*, argues that Bakhtin's carnivalesque grotesque provides the most effective literary mode for challenging authoritarian and hierarchical structures precisely because it refuses closure and transcendence, thereby rendering it especially suited to dismantling human exceptionalism (2011: 420). As Bakhtin explains, the grotesque body is "not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries" but is "unfinished, outgrowing itself, transgressing its own limits," collapsing the hierarchical structures that I contend challenges human superiority over non-human animals (1984: 26). As Biscaia observes, "springing from the Bakhtinian grotesque body theory, Kristeva goes further by 'gentrifying it'" revealing how the same bodily openness and degradation celebrated by carnival can also operate as sites of sacrifice, abjection, and corporeal risk (2011: 145).

This is critical to my reading of the films which I do not consider to rely on the regenerative, but instead are spaces in which the human-animal boundary falters, thereby enabling disruption and abject threat. As Nepomuk Zettl suggests, Lanthimos's films feel "wholeheartedly... absurd, albeit from a certain distance," as they merge catastrophe with the mundane to produce a sense of the "strange yet familiar" (Zettl 2022: 134). This interplay between the familiar and the alien is central to Lanthimos's cinema and the grotesque located in his films is part of an estranged world in which reality dissolves completely and life appears as "an empty, meaningless puppet play" (Kayser 1981: 186). I contend however, that Lanthimos's use of the grotesque is not fully distancing; instead, it addresses contemporary anxieties through a reality that is only slightly defamiliarised. However, Michael Steig argues that in the "true grotesque we are kept aware of the connections between the alien world and our own" (Steig 1970: 254). The absurd, alienating scenarios in Lanthimos's films do not offer resolution or clarity, but rather sustain the chaotic instability that keeps viewers suspended between the familiar and the strange, the human and the inhuman (Stieg 1970: 253). In Lanthimos's films, grotesque exaggeration and human-animal hybridity are not simply surreal flourishes but confront the audience with the dark truths of human behaviour while retaining the importance of the non-humans without anthropomorphising them. I find particular value in

Jonathan Burt's articulation that "metaphorical associations that collapse into each other," produce a state of "semantic overload" (Burt 2002: 11). A subversive reading grounded in Burt's formulation allows Lanthimos's non-human animals to exceed and ultimately escape their fixed metaphorical associations, enabling what he describes as a moment of "semantic overload" that ruptures representational coherence and, by extension, the cinematic frame itself, rather than containing the animal within a stable symbolic function (Burt 2002: 10). Read alongside Marios Psaras's argument that Lanthimos reframes the "sufficient human" through "amalgamations and re-assemblages of the animate and the inanimate, human and non-human, animal and human animal" my reading of the films, foregrounds not so much synthesis but hybridity and its persistent failure to stabilise the human as a coherent category (Psaras 2022: 270). As Zettl points out, in Lanthimos's worlds "irrational behaviour" is often employed to comment on the irrational condition of the characters existence, a theme that returns in his "interest in human- animal relations" (2022: 141).

Bakhtin's grotesque retains a connective tension between the familiar and the alien and he situates ambiguity not as a failure of meaning but as a generative mode in which bodies, categories, and identities exceed their limits to destabilise fixed hierarchies, and open interpretative space (1984). Whilst Bakhtin's carnivalesque grotesque foregrounds bodily excess as regenerative, Biscaia demonstrates that Kristeva's concept of abjection is necessary to account for the visceral, violent, and exclusionary dimensions of embodied transgression that Bakhtin leaves under-theorised (Biscaia 2011: 145). Lanthimos's cinema enacts this same process of violence and defilement: his human–non-human crossings, exaggerated corporeal behaviours, and scenes of ritualised humiliation generate animalhuman figures whose bodies and actions literalise the mingling and contaminating of boundaries, destabilising species divisions and unsettling the coherence of the human. The animalhuman figures in Lanthimos's films are not merely hybrid symbols but active agents of disruption, whose presence undermines hierarchical stability from within while the non-human animal figures in the film provide a stable counterpoint that highlights the destabilisation of the human characters while the non-human animal remains fully itself. Steve Baker's claim that non-human animals function as the most "radical undoers of hierarchical thinking" is particularly resonant. The deliberate inversion in the term "animalhuman" highlights the alignment of human characters with traits typically projected onto animals, qualities often seen as "lesser

than". Bakhtin's grotesque is much like the fable, that operates through a similar inversion in a "lowering in all that is high" to expose the folly and pretensions of human characters (Bakhtin 1984: 19). Biscaia argues that myth releases the grotesque from being merely an aesthetic expression of contradiction by situating hybridity within a cosmology in which the natural and the magical are continuous. In mythic narratives, "contradiction is simply absent," even in formations that would otherwise appear impossible, such as "animal/human" admixtures; myth thus provides the "necessary background" that explains the grotesque's tendency toward the relation between "part and whole" (Biscaia 2011: 110-111). In similar manner, my formulation of the animalhuman as a grotesque hybrid grounded in mythic logic rather than contradiction becomes a composite form in which human and animal features coexist without requiring resolution. Bakhtin's grotesque hierarchy-reversal allows the non-human animal to remain non-anthropomorphic while still functioning as a destabilising force, since the carnivalesque inversion of rank and category renders visible the collapses of power, species, and moral order that Lanthimos's animalhuman figures enact.

The mythic grounding that Biscaia highlights, is what Lanthimos appears to draws upon, mobilising both ancient and contemporary mythic structures to lend his grotesque hybrids their critical force and affective power. As Bruce Shaw argues, Bakhtin's carnivalesque framework remains applicable to a critical reading of such fable-based traditions, where animal figures operate through satire and inversion to expose social hierarchies rather than resolve them (Shaw 2010: 45). Shaw goes on to say that the overturning quality of carnivalisation is a critical aspect of defamiliarisation, suggesting that the carnivalesque with its changing nature works alongside societal shifts (Shaw 2010: 33). Chris Danta notes in *Animal Fables after Darwin* that "the fable elevates the animal by endowing it with speech. But it also degrades the human by showing it' speech to be the expression of baser instinct," revealing "the hypocrisy of the human in its relation to and treatment of the animal" (Danta 2018: 47). In a similar vein, Jeremy B. Lefkowitz notes that granting animals speech renders fables "fantastic, obvious fictions"; yet by simultaneously exposing the limits of animal speech and the predatory realities of animal life, such narratives remain dependent on assumptions about how real animals behave (Lefkowitz 2014: 5). However, Lanthimos reworks this fable tradition through a grotesque lens, using non-human animals and the absurd behaviours of humans to evoke mythic and fabular inversions. In Lanthimos's films, the

non-human animals remain voiceless, their silence subverting the traditional logic of the fable. By withholding speech, Lanthimos inverts the moralising structure that typically grants animals language to serve human didactic ends, exposing instead the violence of anthropocentric interpretation itself. Therefore, Lanthimos's films are not "fantastic, obvious fictions" in which non-human animals are endowed with human language. They remain resolutely mute and corporeally present. Their lack of speech grounds their representation in a disquieting realism that denies the comfort of allegory, transforming the non-human animal into a material, affective presence that mirrors back human depravity. Seifert argues that the power of animal-human hybrids lies in their ability to challenge hierarchies while preserving their distinctly nonhuman traits, setting them apart from anthropomorphic figures (Seifert 2011: 244-245). I argue that in Lanthimos's films, the non-human animals likewise serve as mirrors for human virtues and vices, yet their reflection is sharper because they remain non-human both in appearance and in behaviour. Although Lanthimos does not humanise the non-human animal figures, the notion of hybridity remains crucial as they point to how "monstrosity and grotesquery merge in hybrid forms" disrupting the borders separating what is acceptable within the categories of human and non-human (Edwards and Graulund 2013: 52). I suggest that the transmogrification from human into animal that occurs in Lanthimos's ostensibly realist films, results in the human characters evolving into "monstrous deformation of realist norms of human nature" in which human identity dissipates into a form of "sublime fiction" (Duncan 2019: 17). The animalhuman is composed of "incompatible traits" that are embedded into the monster, always carrying seemingly external elements from beyond which "always originates from within" human nature (Cohen: 6-7). In Lanthimos's films, non-human animals operate as foils that reveal to the human characters their profound monstrosity.

In *The Philosophy of Horror* Noel Carroll notes that the monster is often confronted with a "mirror" and fails to recognise itself, only belatedly realising that the horror it perceives is its own reflection (Carroll 1990: 20). The non-human animal's presence reveals the true monstrosity of the human characters, whose cruelty, apathy, and moral decay render them, to borrow Timothy Beal's phrase, "paradoxical personifications of otherness within sameness" (Beal 2002: 4). Yet this foiling effect reveals the calculating and malicious traits of the humanity of the animalhuman characters that display a far more "profound monstrosity concealed beneath a façade of sophistication" than the

non-human animal figures (Wolfe and Elmers 1995: 117). As Dani Cavallaro observes the abject body loses clear contours and appears to merge with its surroundings, becoming "interstitial and/or contradictory" (Cavallaro 2002: 91). In Lanthimos's films these interstitial bodies emerge through the figure of the animalhuman, beings whose grotesque hybridity challenges cultural boundaries by unsettling the separation between non-human animal and human. The disturbing threat these figures pose lies precisely in their excessive and ambiguous forms which violate the integrity of the socially accepted body and the "legitimate cultural order" (Cavallaro 2002: 200-201). These figures resist containment within normative categories in their collapsing of binaries such as human/non-human animal, civilised/savage, and subject/object. These animalhuman figurations unsettle not because they are unfamiliar, but because they return to us what we try to disown, namely that of the grotesque core of our own civility. In so doing, they reveal a state of liminality that disrupts boundaries, evoking both fascination and disgust in its challenge to the distinction between self and other (Kristeva 1982: 1, 4). Philip Thomson's assertion that the grotesque is defined by an "unresolved clash of incompatibles" emphasises the grotesque's ambiguity and its refusal to offer coherent meaning (Thomson 1972: 27). The attraction and repulsion of the grotesque is elicited by the abject as it "beseeches and pulverizes the subject", compelling and confronting us with what needs to be excluded to maintain societal norms and boundaries of self (Kristeva 1982: 7). In this way the animalhuman operates in an abject threshold that challenges the normative contours of the human subject. Wolfe describes the "humanimal" as a "hulk, a wrecked structure or vessel, an object of care and salvage, a valued 'end in itself' rather than a tool, an abject 'thing' or found object" (Wolfe 2003: xiii). By inverting the "humanimal" into "animalhuman," the inversion emphasises the disturbing qualities within the human that are falsely attributed to animals because humans "reject" and "eject" the characteristics associated with the non-human animal in order to stabilise identity and to demarcate the boundaries between self and other to avoid straying into the territories of the animal (Kristeva 1982: 1, 12). Yet, the human characters in Lanthimos's films are marked by "sinister, scheming, and shady" traits, those aspects of identity that society deems both repulsive and alluring, fundamentally undermining humanist ideals and rendering them abject (Kristeva 1982: 4). The term "animalhuman" thus collapses these demarcations, bringing to the fore the repressed, often uncomfortable instincts within, ultimately destabilising human identity as a "terror that dissembles" (Kristeva 1982: 2). Unlike "humanimal," which hints at coexistence, "animalhuman" is an unsettling presence that reveals latent impulses,

desires, or vulnerabilities within Lanthimos's human characters, traits they might otherwise disown. There is little in the films that indicates a coexistence. Rather, in Lanthimos's films, the grotesque and the abject destabilise fixed identity and reinforce the monstrosity of hybridity, producing figures that disturb, unsettle, and remain unresolved. In the next chapter, I apply this theoretical framework to my examination of Lanthimos's film *The Lobster.* I will specifically analyse human-animal transgression drawing on scholars such as Savina Petkova and Rosemary Galt, whose interpretations of animal representations in Lanthimos' are pertinent to my argument. I will contend that the non-human animals in *The Lobster* do not disappear into human meaning but rather act as foils that mirror the grotesque, abject, and morally degraded behaviour of the human characters (Seifert 2011: 244-245). In doing so, the chapter will demonstrate that *The Lobster* critiques human exceptionalism by revealing that the true site of monstrosity lies not in "animality", but stems from the construction of humanity itself.

CHAPTER 2: THE LOBSTER

This chapter examines key scenes in Lanthimos's film *The Lobster* (2005) that subvert the human/non-human animal binary through the use of grotesque imagery. I begin by analysing how the settings, subtle yet deeply grotesque, function as stages for ritualised performances that expose human decorum as a fragile veneer masking brutality and moral decay. This is particularly apparent in the banquet and dining hall scenes in the hotel that is a central space in the film. I then turn to the film's central scenes, where the grotesque transformation of humans into animalhumans reveals the moral void underpinning their world. The analysis proceeds to examine the representation of the woods that form a part of the landscape surrounding the hotel and the human group known as the Loners, a supposed alternative to the hotel but which paradoxically replicates its grotesque logic, intensifying the film's critique of animalhuman extremism. The hunting sequences that occur further expose the ritualised pursuit of transformed humans and the contradictions embedded within the human/non-human animal hierarchy. The aim of this chapter is to analyse *The Lobster* through the lens of the grotesque with a specific focus on the transgression of human/non-human animal boundaries. I will argue that Lanthimos uses grotesque and abject traits to define his human characters, figures I term animalhumans, to expose their moral corruption, cruelty, and violence. At the same time, non-human animals, I will show, are depicted as unobtrusive and dignified, offering a stark counterpoint to the grotesque hybridity of the human characters. The primary objective is to demonstrate how Lanthimos critiques human exceptionalism and moral systems by juxtaposing grotesque human behaviours with the uncorrupted presence of non-human animals.

The opening scene of the film delivers a jarring initiation into *The Lobster*'s grotesque plot. On a desolate country road, beneath an overcast sky stripped of colour, a woman pulls her car over and calmly exits. The environment is strikingly barren. The pale, muted landscape evokes an unsettling sterility, devoid of life or warmth. There is no score, no dialogue, only the ambient sounds of wind and distant birds, emphasising the oppressive stillness. She approaches a grazing donkey that stands passively at the roadside, oblivious to her intent. Without hesitation or expression, the woman raises her handgun and shoots the donkey multiple times in measured succession. The shots are loud, stark ruptures in the otherwise hushed soundscape, each echo amplifying the unnaturalness of the act. The donkey staggers, then collapses. Initially the scene appears absurd, a

spectacle of unprovoked cruelty that resists immediate rational explanation. There is no context offered, no backstory, no psychological framing, only the act itself. Visually, Lanthimos employs wide, static framing that isolates the woman and the donkey within a vast, indifferent space. The composition emphasises their smallness against the surrounding emptiness, subtly invoking the void that underpins the film's surrealistic world. The washed-out colour palette, greys, browns, and dull greens, mirrors the emotional sterility of the act. The absence of close-ups distances the viewer from any possibility of empathy, forcing an uncomfortable observational position where the violence is displayed without sensationalism, yet deeply disturbing in its restraint. This stark minimalism intensifies the unsettling mood, confronting the viewer directly with the disquieting spectacle of violence that will define the film's world. The woman's expression remains fixed, unemotional, and stony, transforming the violence into something clinical rather than passionate. This absence of visible emotion detaches the act from personal motive, situating it within the film's larger critique of systemic cruelty and indifference. The grotesque absurdity of this moment introduces the audience to the central theme the film will explore, namely the destabilisation of the human/non-human animal boundary and the exposure of the immoral and barbaric within human behaviour. The donkey's passive death becomes not just an act of violence but a symbolic rupture, inaugurating the setting where identity, species, and morality will unravel.

This ambiguity blurs the human/non-human animal boundary and reveals the film's perverse logic, where revenge, desire, and identity converge in monstrous hybridity. As Rosalind Galt observes, the act "at once depends on and problematises dominant attitudes to animals," demonstrating that "animals, their lives and their representability are at the very medium of *The Lobster's* critique" (2017: 22–23). This moment also recalls the historical projection of human anxieties onto equids, as Mark Griffith argues, "the noble horse, the lazy donkey, and the ambiguous mule are not objective descriptors, but human categories shaped by humanistic self-definition and anxiety about blurred boundaries" (2013: 2). In *The Lobster*, the grazing donkey embodies this ambiguity. At first, it appears as a passive, idle creature, seemingly fulfilling the stereotype of the "lazy donkey", but within the film's grotesque framework, it is something more. It is not merely an animal; it is a former human, a liminal figure suspended between states, akin to Griffith's ambiguous mule. This in-betweenness evokes "what disturbs identity, system, order... the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982: 4). The donkey thus becomes abject, neither fully human nor fully

animal, eliciting revulsion and violence precisely because it threatens stable identity. The woman's violence, then, is not merely cruelty but a grotesque assertion of the fragile human/non-human animal divide, an act of disavowal that violently rejects the discomforting truth that this "donkey" may once have been just like her. The callous woman, rather than the donkey, emerges as the true monstrous figure, embodying calculated brutality and moral corruption. This human behaviour far surpasses the false "animalistic" claims projected onto non-human animals. I consider that the murdered donkey represents more than a victim of cruelty but becomes a medium through which the film interrogates the human/non-human animal boundary and the ways in which non-human animals are constructed within cultural, moral, and cinematic frameworks that objectify them. The dignity of the non-human animal seems to magnify the grotesque transgressions of the human woman. In a hierarchy reversal, where societal norms are turned upside down, Lanthimos reveals "a grotesque degradation, a lowering of all that is high" (1984: 19). This grotesque lowering does not debase the animal but the moral collapse of the human and I suggest that this scene underscores how in *The Lobster* Lanthimos privileges the non-human as the ethical counterpoint to human corruption**.**

This inversion recalls the logic of the fable, where animals function less as degraded others than as mirrors held up to human vice**.** The inversive qualities of these tales necessitate a hybridity that distorts both the body and behaviours. In order to examine Lanthimos's human - non-human animal interplay, I have coined the term animalhuman where the deliberate inversion of "animal" before "human" collapses the human/animal binary, forcing viewers to reconsider anthropocentric assumptions. Unlike the human characters, non-human animals are depicted as innocent and harmless, without the cruelty and deceit that define their human counterparts. The behavioural transgressions of the human characters ensure that they are rendered abject and seem to disturb "identity, system, and order" thereby confronting the audience with the collapse of the "cultured" human (Kristeva 1982: 4). By positioning non-human animals as dignified and humans as grotesquely transgressive, Lanthimos forces the audience to confront the hidden evils within human identity, as he destabilises traditional moral and anthropocentric pre-eminence. By constructing grotesque, morally degenerate animalhuman figures, Lanthimos challenges the illusion of the notion of humanity, revealing that it is the human characters, not the non-human animals, who are truly monstrous. Petkova has noted that in the scenes in the film animals are "not

themselves" which implies that they are stand-ins for something else, or that they remain symbolic forms and therefore anthropomorphised (Petkova 2022: 249). In similar vein, Rosalind Galt argues that *The Lobster* "in no way resists or refuses objectification or anthropomorphisation of the animal" (2017: 8). Lewis Seifert argues that anthropomorphism does not diminish the animal but instead reframes it. While the animal may seem to "disappear before the human," it reflects "human virtues, vices, foibles, and dilemmas" more truthfully because it remains "non-human in appearance" (Seifert 2011: 244). He goes on to say that these figures do not lose meaning through anthropomorphism; rather, they "always pose an existential problem for humans" (2011: 244). Identifying the animals in *The Lobster*, Ina Karkani suggests that they are "indexical markers for existential crises" which disrupt the human/non-human animal binary and generate an "ambiguous fictional space" where the figural and the real collapse (2022: 66). The donkey-shooting scene exemplifies this ambiguity and its lack of narrative explanation makes the viewer distinctly uncomfortable as it reveals the darker tendencies hidden beneath the veneer of human rectitude. This moment in the film typifies how Lanthimos challenges anthropocentric logic. While the animal cruelty and death may at first seem purely demonic or gratuitous, it is the grotesque that activates their critical function. Rather than serving only to shock, Michael Steig reminds us that the true potency of the grotesque lies exactly in these moments that provoke reflection on the moral structures that permit such violence (Galt 2017: 7–8; Steig 1970: 253). In *The Lobster*, this shooting of the donkey does not rely on spectacle alone but unsettles the viewer through its stark, non-contextualised violence. The grotesque functions here not as abstraction but as what Vivian Sobchack terms a "visceral presence" which acts as an affective disruption that collapses the distance between viewer and image (1992: 245). These moments disrupt the human/non-human animal binary by foregrounding the real suffering of the non-human body, confronting audiences with their own assumptions about moral superiority and the limits of human decorum. The grotesque thus becomes a mode of ethical engagement, unsettling stable categories of identity and compelling a re-evaluation of what it means to be human. Together, Bakhtin's grotesque realism, Kristeva's abject, and Cohen's monster theory illuminate how these visceral scenes dismantle the illusion of a stable human identity.

The grotesque disrupts idealised forms by "degrading" the human to the level of the body (Bakhtin 1984: 19), while the abject marks the "collapse of meaning" at the boundary of self and other (Kristeva 1982: 4). Cohen's monster "polices the borders of the possible", and in *The Lobster*, the animalhuman does precisely this because its hybrid form disturbs, unsettles, and forces a confrontation with the grotesque truth of the human condition (Cohen 1996: 12). A collective employment of these theories enables a reading of non-human animals in Lanthimos's film that avoids anthropomorphism, instead foregrounding how their representations amplify the grotesque hybridity and moral transgressions of the human characters. In her book *Animal*, Erica Fudge argues that the animal often becomes "that which cannot be known but through which knowledge is produced", revealing more about the human than the animal itself (2002: 8). This epistemic instability is precisely where, as Mark Dorrian argues they collectively "threaten in all their disproportion and transgression" whenever anthropomorphosis emerges (2000: 314). In *The Lobster*, it is this threat, activated through the animalhuman, that unsettles anthropocentric logic and exposes the grotesque nature of human identity. As noted by Petkova, the human/non-human animal transformation in Lanthimos's films is only visible through "cinematic elision; with the spectator's suspension of disbelief a prerequisite for the film's premise to function" (2022: 150). This elision mirrors the grotesque's power to disrupt fixed boundaries, leaving the viewer disoriented, caught between categories, and forced to confront the instability of identity (Edwards and Graulund 2013: 32). This disruption of human identity evolves into a form of sublime fiction, characterised by what Ian Duncan describes as a "grotesque or monstrous deformation of realist norms of human nature" (Duncan 2019: 17). By distorting realist norms of human nature, *The Lobster* exposes the fragility of the category "human" as something neither fixed nor superior, but contingent, performative, and easily unravelled (Duncan 2019: 17). The grotesque transformation reveals that what separates human from animal is not essence but regulation through social rituals, disciplinary systems, and performative identities that maintain the illusion of categorical difference. Ultimately, the donkey scene functions as a threshold, marking the entry into a cinematic world governed by ambiguity in which identity dissolves and monstrosity emerges. The monstrous does not stem from the non-human animal, but from the human whose violent attempt to distance herself from animality paradoxically produces her own hybridisation. Through this act, the woman becomes an animalhuman figure, her humanity destabilised as the boundary between species collapses into a grotesque fusion. As Michel Foucault reminds us, hybridity is specifically the

"blending" of human and animal features or different species, and constitutes the essence of monstrosity, situating this grotesque transformation within broader discourses of hybrid embodiment and monstrous identity (Foucault 2003: 56, 63).

The animal, within this framework, becomes both more and less than the human; it is the site onto which human anxieties about loss of control, instinct, and non-rational embodiment are projected. Yet paradoxically, non-human animals in *The Lobster* are positioned outside this grotesque economy of regulation because they do not participate in the human fiction of boundary maintenance. The grotesque is not the animal itself, but the human who approaches the animal state while attempting to preserve an illusion of mastery over it. Here, the film adopts the logic of a fable but inverts it. In classical fables, animals often stand in as moral metaphors to teach humans lessons about proper conduct, virtue, or folly. In *The Lobster*, this moral clarity is replaced by grotesque ambiguity as humans are stripped of their autonomy and subjected to absurd, punitive rituals that transform them into animals. The fable's traditional hierarchy, where animals serve to reflect human superiority, is reversed and humans become monstrous. This monstrousness is not because they resemble non-human animals, but because, in their desperate attempts to police the human/non-human animal boundary, they expose the violence embedded within the very construction of the human itself. I propose that Lanthimos's use of non-human animal functions as a reflective device, projecting back the monstrous and grotesque vices of the human characters, thereby exposing the commonly held belief of human superiority (Seifert 2011: 245). While *The Lobster* incorporates elements of both Kayser's and Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the grotesque, Lanthimos's grotesque is not entirely alienating, it engages with societal anxieties through a slightly estranged reality (Falvey 2022: 101). In this film the transmogrification of human to animal is itself never shown, and this omission creates an abject, liminal space. Here, the soon-to-be-animalhuman figure is suspended between states, no longer fully human, not yet fully non-human animal. Unlike Kayser's nihilistic grotesque that allows for no moral corrective, Lanthimos invites a critique of moral corruption and cruelty within human behaviour. This moral critique is central to the concept of the animalhuman, wherein the behaviours of the human characters in the film; betrayal, cruelty, and manipulation, are offset by the dignity and grace of the non-human animals present. Lanthimos represents non-human animals in multifaceted ways, positioning them as more than mere symbols or allegories. At times, they occupy the periphery of the screen, subtly

disrupting the human-dominated narrative. At other moments, they inhabit liminal spaces, existing in a threshold state between human and animal, challenging hierarchical distinctions and embodying a profound hybridity. Non-human animals also intrude upon and destabilise the visual order of the film, subverting expectations and undermining human-centric storytelling. At their most grotesque, non-human animals merge with human bodies or objects, forming hybrid amalgamations that unsettle fixed categories. This layered representation reinforces the film's thematic preoccupation with transgression, hybridity, and the grotesque, serving as a foundation for how *The Lobster* subverts human exceptionalism.

Building on these dynamics, several scholars have approached the film's human/non-human animal relations through the lens of Jacques Derrida's theories of alterity, identity, and the disruption of anthropocentric hierarchies. They argue that the film's portrayal of non-human animals serves as an ethical intervention, invoking Derrida's "animot" and "ahuman" to distinguish the human from the non-human animal (2008: 91-93). It is Derrida's animal gaze, which disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies and demands a more nuanced ethical engagement (2008: 3-6, 47). For instance, Sarah Cooper (2016: 175-176) examines how the film challenges human-centred hierarchies through Derrida's reflections on the gaze of his cat, while Marios Psaras interprets it as a critique of normative humanism, dismantling binaries and societal pressures of conformity (2022: 263). However, these Derridean readings emphasise alterity, positioning the non-human animal as radically other rather than engaging with its material presence within human frameworks. As Cary Wolfe indicates, "Derrida's approach risks reducing non-human animals to mere metaphors for human reflection rather than recognizing their corporeal and affective realities" (2010: 34-35). In doing so, such frameworks ultimately reinscribe human privilege, even as they attempt to deconstruct it (Wolfe 2010: 80, 82). Savina Petkova, similarly, argues that while Lanthimos's English-language films maintain human/non-human animal hierarchies, his exaggerated use of animals serves a "deliberate ethical purpose" (2022: 218, 220). Grounding her analysis in Derrida's animal gaze and Lippit's animetaphor, Petkova claims that Lanthimos's non-human animals function as "complex signifiers" that challenge human exceptionalism by exposing its violent exclusions (2022: 273). On the other hand, Lippit describes the animetaphor as a paradoxical fusion of non-human animal and metaphor, where each becomes the other in a fantastic transversality. This interplay animates language, creating a metaphor made flesh, a "living

metaphor" that is, paradoxically, not a metaphor at all, but rather an "antimetaphor" (Lippit 2000: 165). Whereas Barker mobilises Lippit's animetaphor to capture the grotesque entanglement of cinematic form and bodily hybridity, other applications of the concept remain tethered to anthropocentric frameworks that undercut their critical potential (2018: 3, 16, 17). Ultimately, Petkova's reading remains vulnerable to the very anthropomorphic critique she raises, as she describes the non-human animals as "there but not themselves" (2022: 218, 220). Moreover, her reliance on Lippit's "animetaphor", derived from Derrida's "animot", weakens her claims. As Wolfe notes, Derrida's "animot" reinscribes privilege while attempting to dismantle it, reducing the non-human animal to a metaphor for human self-reflection rather than engaging with its material existence (2010: 80, 82). Lippit himself acknowledges a paradox within the animetaphor, where:

> one finds a fantastic transversality at work between the animal and the metaphor - the animal is already a metaphor, and the metaphor is animal. Together they transport to language, breathe into language, the vitality of another life, another expression: animal and metaphor, a metaphor made flesh, a living metaphor that is by definition not a metaphor, antimetaphor, 'animetaphor' (Lippit 2000: 165).

Yet, this very paradox undermines its critical utility because if the 'animetaphor' collapses the boundary between the real and the figurative, it risks reducing the animal to an abstraction, ultimately reinforcing the anthropocentric structures it seeks to critique. These scholarly frameworks fail to resolve the issue Galt identifies when she argues that Lanthimos's films "depend on and problematize dominant attitudes to non-human animals," making their "representability central to his critique" (Galt 2017: 22–23). By focusing the on transformation of human to non-human in Lanthimos's work through grotesque hybridity rather than metaphor, I move beyond these limitations to interrogate how his films actively deconstruct the human/non-human animal divide. Rather than reducing these non-human animals to anthropomorphised symbols or mere allegories, I explore their subversive role in challenging human exceptionalism, much like the fusion of human and non-human animal figures in Greek myth and fables, where they serve as sharp counterpoints to human behaviour (Lefkowitz 2014: 26). In contrast, Michael Lipiner and Nathan Abrams argue that Lanthimos's animals are "pitted against humans as metaphors",

symbolising humanity's inescapable animal instincts (2022: 189). However, I argue that this position misrepresents Lanthimos's work, as it implies that violence and moral depravity are inherently non-human animal traits rather than distinctly human constructs. While non-human animals may appear peripheral to the human-centred narrative, they are integral to exposing the violent, perverse, and morally corrupt nature of the human characters, ultimately revealing them as grotesque animalhumans. By constructing grotesque, morally degenerate animalhuman figures, *The Lobster* inverts traditional narratives of civilisation and brutality exposing human characters as far more grotesque, abject, and monstrous than their non-human animal counterparts. This reversal not only challenges anthropocentric assumptions but also a long-standing literary tradition in which non-human animals serve as mirrors for human vice. *The Lobster* reflects the satirical nature of fables, shaped by ancient Greek myth and its subversive qualities, directly supporting my argument that Lanthimos's films critique human exceptionalism by using non-human animals to expose the depravity and moral failings of human characters. This is precisely what Arnold Clayton Henderson describes as a critique of "those who invent false charges to oppress the innocent" (Henderson 1982: 41). The central inversion is not located in the non-human animal but the animalhuman whose lack of morality and the ethical void is what defines the film's dystopian world.

This inversion recalls the logic of the fable, where animals function less as degraded others than as mirrors held up to human vice**.** The inversive qualities of these tales necessitate a hybridity that distorts both the body and behaviours. Unlike the human characters, non-human animals such as Bob the dog are depicted as innocent and harmless, without the cruelty and deceit that define their human counterparts. The behavioural transgressions of the human characters ensure that they are rendered abject, disturbing "identity, system, and order" and confronting the audience with the collapse of the "cultured" human (Kristeva 1982: 4). By positioning non-human animals as dignified and humans as grotesquely transgressive, *The Lobster* ultimately exposes the fragility and corruption underlying the enlightened human façade. Lanthimos forces the audience to confront the hidden evils within human identity, as he destabilises traditional moral and anthropocentric pre-eminence. By constructing grotesque, morally degenerate animalhuman figures, Lanthimos challenges the illusion of the notion of humanity, revealing that it is the human characters, not the non-human animals, who are truly monstrous. From the bizarre violence and

monstrous illogicality of the opening scene, the film moves into the life of the protagonist David, played by Colin Farrell, who is a recently divorced man. His arbitrary abduction, in which he is seen wearing what looks like a straitjacket and is boxed between two men, each holding one of his arms, steering him towards an unmarked panel van, immediately sets the absurdist tone of the film. David is transported to a secluded hotel where guests must find a romantic partner within forty-five days or face transmogrification into a non-human animal of their choosing. The viewer is placed into a dystopic world where bureaucratic codes dictate intimacy and identity. From the outset of David's arrival at the hotel, the ever-looming threat of becoming a non-human animal operates as an abject force that destabilises the character's fragile self-conception as rational, moral being (Kristeva 1982: 1, 3). The obsessive efforts to preserve their human status, the people who have come to the hotel reveal the grotesque emptiness of these social constructs whilst exposing the deep-seated anxiety about their proximity to animality.

The prospect of the body transgressing boundaries and merging categories, such as the blending of human and animal forms is a transition that those in the hotel cannot accept because it represents an excess, incompleteness and a continual becoming of their being (Bakhtin 1984: 315; 318). The hotel guests are permanently on edge because of the threat of becoming a non-human animal. They push this away through a strange performance of superiority that ultimately collapses into moral depravity. In this, they embody what Cohen defines as the monster's role becoming the "harbinger(s) of category crisis" (Cohen 1996: 6). In *The Necropolitical Aesthetics of The Lobster* (2023), Benjamin Eldon Stevens writes that "the monster's body becomes the site where sovereign power decides what counts as life and what must be marked for death" (Stevens 2023: 219). Stevens regards the monster as not inherently an aberration, but as a body produced by a sovereign power which in this case is the authority represented by the hotel. The hotel's management's authority to determine who remains human and who is transmogrified into a non-human animal becomes a form of monstrosity. However, I argue that in *The Lobster* monstrosity is not simply imposed by the authoritative structures of the hotel and woods, but emerges through the internalisation of regulatory logic. The people resident in the hotel perform and reproduce the behaviours demanded by the very systems that render them disposable. Monstrosity becomes a condition of compliance rather than a mark of non-human exclusion. This compliance is seen right at the beginning of David's arrival at the hotel when he is asked what animal he would like to

become should he fail to find a partner, the absurdity of such a request is not met with disbelief, but with David politely replying that he would like to be 'a lobster'.

It is the sterile environment and bureaucratic modes of interaction in the hotel environment that intensifies the sense of dehumanisation in the film. It is not just a transformation of the body that is threatened, but the violent collapse of identity into animalhuman ambiguity. This ambiguity remains a form of liminality in which the body is seen as "unfinished… transgressing its own limits" (Bakhtin 1984: 26). The characters at the hotel are not yet animals but are no longer wholly human; they are animalhumans-in-waiting. This in-between state constitutes a grotesque temporality suspended, anxious, and destabilising. The transmogrification becomes a parody of progress and represents a failure to meet the demands of coupling that leads not to death, but to becoming something that these humans see as lesser, as something base. The human becomes abjected not through expulsion of the foreign body, but through the looming collapse into animal form; "man straying on the territories of the animal" (Kristeva 1982: 4). The abject here is anticipation itself, the fear of bodily degradation, loss of language, and disintegration of social identity. The grotesque is not in the act, but in its imminence. The transformation into a non-human animal is stripped of any organic, natural, or mystical quality; it becomes administrative violence, where subjectivity is reduced to a form to be processed. Although the actual metamorphosis is never shown, it pervades the narrative, while structuring the behaviour and identities of the characters. It is precisely this absence that amplifies its grotesque power because the transmogrification remains unseen, unspoken, and all the more terrifying for it.[2] The abject here is anticipation itself, the fear of bodily degradation, loss of language, and disintegration of social identity. The grotesque is not in the act, but in its imminence. This constant suspension between human and non-human animal states produces a grotesque, abject, monstrosity, where stable identity dissolves and the boundaries of the body, and of subjecthood itself, remain in perpetual flux (Kristeva 1982: 4; Cohen 1996: 7; Bakhtin 1984: 317). This kind of "dehumanisation" of the characters as Ruth Perlmutter notes, carries the distinct "grotesque language of cinema" that produces an uneasy effect in the viewer and a "growing uncertainty over

[2] While the comparison to other representations of human-to-animal transformation, such as those found in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1913), is valuable, a broader comparative engagement with these literary traditions was beyond the scope of the present dissertation. The focus of this study remains the close analysis of Lanthimos's films and their specific construction of the "animalhuman" framework.

what constitutes normality and how to distinguish it from abnormality" (Perlmutter 1979: 168). This effectively sets the grotesque setting and tone of the film that is "marked by its transgression of that which is considered normal" (Edwards and Graulund 2013: 21-2). This grotesque instability, while largely grounded in narrative and character, is also inscribed into the film's formal composition. As Jennifer Barker argues, *The Lobster* exhibits what Akira Lippit calls a "fantastic transversality" between the human and the animal, what Lippit terms the animetaphor, a "metaphor made flesh" that becomes "a living metaphor that is by definition not a metaphor" (Barker 2018: 2; Lippit 2000: 165). Through slow motion, lateral tracking shots, and multi-rhythmic juxtapositions, the film enacts a kind of grotesque choreography in which human and animal identities become mutually entangled (Barker 2018: 3). This formal "animalousness," as Barker calls it, resists the binary logic of transformation into animal; instead, it figures bodies as already hybridised, already grotesque, destabilising both spatial and ontological fixity (Barker 2018: 9). Thus, Lanthimos's grotesque does not merely rest in the concept of transformation but rather exists in the movement of bodies themselves, suspending identity in a liminal "ing" of becoming (Barker 2018: 16-17). This grotesque movement is mirrored structurally by the absence of the transformation itself, centred around the transformation room-never depicted but persistently invoked as a psychic locus of abjection: "the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982: 2). Here the subject, stripped of coherence and expelled from symbolic intelligibility, is suspended in the liminal zone between human and animal, a threshold space where the animalhuman emerges as an imagined but never visualised hybrid.

To be transformed is not simply to become animal; it is to be expelled from the symbolic order of the human. Cohen's monster functions as a figure of precisely this instability. The soon-to-be-transformed are monstrous not in appearance but in potentiality. Cohen defines the monster as "the harbinger of category crisis," and it is in this anticipatory space that the hotel guests exist, caught between ontological states, neither fully sovereign nor fully discarded (Cohen 1996: 6). The monster in *The Lobster* is not always visible, it is latent, emerging through rituals of control, threat, and behavioural constraint. As Noël Carroll observes, monsters often occupy interstitial positions, violating categorical boundaries and embodying ontological contradiction; their monstrosity resides less in visual excess than in their destabilising ambiguity (Carroll 1990: 32, 43). In this sense, Lanthimos's animalhuman figures operate as grotesque contradictions, suspended between

species, identity, and meaning. The transformation threat functions as the grotesque engine of the film's world: it is the catalyst that unravels the illusion of fixed identity. Through this grotesque structure, Lanthimos creates a world where the human is revealed to be contingent, performative, and always on the verge of collapsing into animalhuman monstrosity. As the Hotel Manager, played by Olivia Colman (later Queen Anne in *The Favourite*), explains:

> Now, the fact that you'll turn into an animal if you fail to fall in love with someone during your stay here is not something that should upset you or get you down. Just think, as an animal you'll have a second chance to find a companion. But even then, you must be careful. You need to choose a companion that is a similar type of animal to you. A wolf and a penguin could never live together, nor could a camel and a hippopotamus. That would be absurd.

The Hotel Manager's words, spoken with bureaucratic detachment, normalise the threat of enforced metamorphosis by framing it as a "second chance," thereby masking coercion under the guise of opportunity. Yet her insistence that only "a similar type of animal" imposes rigid relational mandates so that the prohibition that "a wolf cannot pair with a penguin" appears coherent within the hotel's dystopian framework. Yet, its illogicality becomes apparent when confronted with the natural world, where such pairings are meaningless and impossible. This enforced logic reflects the grotesque's capacity to destabilise categories and expose the artificiality of human distinctions. The grotesque operates precisely in this space of contradiction, where human efforts to impose rational order on inherently unstable or irrational relationships reveal the permeability of boundaries we attempt to maintain. As Philip Thomson notes, "the grotesque thrives on the unresolved clash of incompatibles, on the tension generated by the co-existence of disparate elements" (1972: 27). Unlike a meaningless absurdism, the grotesque underscores the instability and porousness of constructs such as compatibility, identity, and moral coherence, forcing a confrontation with the uncomfortable proximity between order and disorder, human and non-human animal. Wolfgang Kayser defines the grotesque as estrangement and alienation, depicting a world of arbitrariness and moral void, which becomes "an empty, meaningless puppet play" (1981: 186). From this perspective, *The Lobster's* dystopian setting mirrors a world devoid of moral order, where arbitrary laws dictate fate and human bodies become grotesque not just through

transformation into animals but through their submission to ideological control. Conversely, Bakhtin's grotesque emphasises renewal and carnivalesque inversion, where hierarchies are subverted, and societal norms are ridiculed. The grotesque body "swallows up and gives birth at the same time", signifying both degradation and renewal (1984: 21).

Within the hotel, morality is grotesquely rendered through state-sponsored pantomimes. Guests are subjected to staged "educational" re-enactments, including a man choking to death when alone, and a woman being raped for walking without a partner. These performances are not just absurd they are grotesque in their ideological excess and bodily implications. By presenting exaggerated consequences for singleness, the hotel reduces moral life to a performance of survival. Here, the grotesque does not liberate but disciplines. These hotel enactments parody romantic morality by reducing it to grotesque physical causality. If one is alone, one chokes; if one lacks male protection, one is raped. This is not instruction but punishment disguised as romanticism. The grotesque lies in the absurd literalism of these sketches, where the human body is made to bear the burden of failed social performance and the fear of bodily collapse. The choking man's failed breath, the woman's violated body, both threaten the viewer with the image of the disordered, penetrable body that must be expelled from the symbolic order (Kristeva 1982: 4). These staged demonstrations expose the grotesque logic of this society, where absurd performances and enforced mimicry produce bodies that blur the boundaries between discipline, desire, and dehumanisation, exposing the farcical, moralising apparatus of life in the hotel. Through slapstick and absurd overstatement, moral instruction becomes theatrical, collapsing the distinction between reality and caricature. As Frances S. Connelly notes, the grotesque often employs "exaggeration and theatrical display to distort conventional forms, rendering them simultaneously comic and disturbing" producing a spectacle that exposes the instability of social norms through hyperbolic staging (2012: 10). This exaggerated performativity extends to the hotel's criteria for partnership, which reduces compatibility to superficial aspects such as shared physical traits or trivial idiosyncrasies. The characters feigning nosebleeds to secure a partner, further expose how conformity supplants authenticity. The grotesque here manifests in the evacuation of genuine intimacy, as love is reduced to hollow performance and subjectivity becomes a constructed facade.

A similar form of grotesque pantomime is present in the weekly hunting scenes that form one of the most unsettling visual and thematic manifestations of Lanthimos's filmic interpretation of societal anxieties, rules, and behavioural conventions.

These sequences, in which hotel guests are armed with tranquiliser rifles and tasked with hunting escapees, humans who have fled the hotel's system of coupling, collapse the distinction between human and non-human animal, predator and prey, and expose the unnaturalness of the human moral system that practices regulatory violence. Visually, the hunts, encouraged by the hotel management, are presented with clinical detachment. Bodies are seen dressed in identical neutral tracksuits, equipped with standard rifles, as they move through the forest in stiff, almost mechanical formations. The forest, which is traditionally a site of nature, is transformed into an extension of the hotel's disciplinary apparatus, a parody of a natural environment structured entirely on human ritualised violence. The camera often lingers providing a static view of these figures as they move through the trees, erasing individuality and presenting them as interchangeable servants of the dystopian system. There is a grotesque inversion and degradation displayed, that overturns the elevated, supposedly civilised human subject, revealing its animality, bodily violence, and base need for survival (Bakhtin 1984: 19-20). Lanthimos amplifies the absurdity of the scene with his signature deadpan tone when hotel staff casually issue rifles to guests and an impersonal announcement encourages guests to "enjoy your hunt." This bureaucratic casualness mirrors what takes place in the room where transmogrification of humans to non-human animals occurs, and where the administrative violence replaces organic or moral processes. The clinical language serves to normalise acts of predation so that monstrosity becomes a regulatory blending of human-animal distinctions under power systems (Foucault 2003: 56, 63).

One particularly grotesque moment occurs as the Limping Man (Ben Whishaw) returns triumphantly to the hotel lobby after a hunt. The receptionist mechanically records his extra days without acknowledging the moral perversity of his act. This visual scene emphasises Wolfe's critique of anthropocentrism, where even acts of predation are subsumed into a regulatory system of control that reduces bodies to administrative data (2010: 34-35). The tranquiliser itself carries symbolic weight. Unlike outright killing, which would establish a clear predator-prey hierarchy, tranquilising preserves the victim's bodily integrity, suspending them between life and death,

human and animal and producing precisely the limit between life and the corpse (Kristeva 1984: 3). The hunted bodies, unconscious and stacked like game animals, evoke a tableau where living beings are momentarily reduced to pure objecthood. The viewer is confronted not with spectacular bloodshed but with still, suspended bodies, silent but charged with uneasiness. The slow cinematography amplifies the estrangement, leaving the audience disoriented within the scene's cold logic (Sobchack 1992: 245). The hunters are simultaneously debased and empowered as they become authorised to perform violence on fellow humans who have fled the hotel. Reduced to quarry these human escapees become a sanctioned ritual of capture. Each tranquilised human equates to one added day of grace before transformation, exposing the commodification of life and identity. That the hunts target only humans, leaving non-human animals untouched, is telling because Lanthimos repositions the human as prey, rendering non-human animals strangely peripheral, and in so doing he inverts the very hierarchy that privileges human life. The tallying of successful hunts, in which each tranquilised human equates to one added day of grace before transformation, exposes the grotesque commodification of life and identity. Here, Lanthimos intensifies the ambiguity of identity, the hunters are not simply humans hunting humans, they are animalhumans, figures caught between ontological states, both hunter and potential prey. Each carries the latent possibility of becoming the hunted should they fail to find a suitable mate. They exist as "harbingers of category crisis" embodying both dominance and imminent collapse into the very animal state they police.

The non-human animals who are peripherally present in the forest during the hunting scenes are positioned outside this economy of regulation because they do not participate in the human fiction of boundary maintenance. The grotesque is not the animal itself, but the human who approaches the animal state while attempting to preserve an illusion of mastery over it. Here, the film adopts the logic of a fable but inverts it. Jeremy B. Lefkowitz observes that in classical fables, animals often stand in as moral metaphors to teach humans lessons about proper conduct, virtue, or folly (Lefkowitz 2014: 26). In *The Lobster*, the non-human animals remain silent presences on the margins of the forest and are unable to instruct the predatory humans who refuse to acknowledge or see them. In these hunting scenes, it is humans who assume the role of beasts, while the non-human animals (such as the peacocks wandering freely on the hotel grounds) maintain a serene, untouched distance, further heightening the reversal of hierarchy and mirroring back the true

nature of the characters (Seifert 2011: 244). Even the forest itself participates in this strange inversion. Traditionally a symbol of wild, untamed nature, it becomes an artificial theatre for regulated violence, a hybridised space where "ritual degradation and ceaseless excess" unfold (Stallybrass and White 1986: 8). This exposes how the "grotesque and monstrous threaten in all their disproportion and transgression whenever anthropomorphosis emerges" (Dorrian 2000: 314). Ultimately, the hunt operates as a parody of civilisation's logic where survival hinges not on empathy or morality but on violence, performance, and compliance with an arbitrary and bizarre system. Lanthimos shows that what separates human from animal is not moral superiority, but regulatory systems sustained by customs of control, violence, and obedience. This is precisely the surrealistic fiction that *The Lobster* dismantles, as the animalhumans reveal themselves to be monstrous in their desperate attempts to avoid becoming what they regard as the Other, in this instance the non-human animal that they have chosen to become. I propose that Lanthimos's non-human animals function as a reflective device that reveal the abnormal vices of the human characters, thereby exposing the myth of human superiority (Seifert 2011: 245).

This inversion of the human/non-human animal hierarchy finds its most tragic and intimate expression in the figure of Bob, David's brother who, not finding his mate in the required number of days, is transmogrified into a dog. Where fables once used animals to satirise human folly from a distance, Lanthimos collapses that distance entirely, embedding animal presence within familial structures and emotional intimacy. In doing so, he not only amplifies the stakes of transformation but also foregrounds the ethical disintegration of the human. Bob's fate encapsulates the collapse of kinship, dignity, and moral coherence in a world where the boundary between human and non-human animal is not only blurred but violently enforced. From the outset of David's arrival at the hotel, the looming threat of transformation into an animal becomes the centre of the film's logic. Bob, already transformed, embodies the aftermath of a process the film never visually reveals, amplifying the disquieting atmosphere. Bob embodies the film's core tension between humanity and the concept of non-human animality. His affection and loyalty, challenge the belief that only humans possess such attributes. He serves as a foil to the blatant animalhuman behaviour exhibited in the interactions in the hotel. This boundary collapses violently in one of the film's most shocking moments: Bob's brutal and premeditated murder by the Heartless Woman. This is the woman that David has pretended to love in order to avoid being transmogrified. For her Bob is both a threat

because as a non-human, who was previously human, he represents what she might become. David's obvious attachment to Bob is used against him when the Heartless Woman realises that David's expression of interest and love are a pretence. I would argue that her revenge is exacted to inflict as much pain as possible on David and because she now fears becoming non-human through this failure to obtain a mate. The horrifying act of murdering Bob is exemplified when she says to David, "I killed your brother. I left him to die very slowly. I was kicking him for ages". This reveals the extremes of her cruelty and any form of human decorum is stripped away. Her sadistic denial of kinship with the non-human animal who was human is an attempt to eject the abject recognition of shared vulnerability. As Hurley observes, the monstrous arises where this repressed kinship returns, disrupting the borders between self and other, human and nonhuman (1996: 144, 147). The woman becomes the grotesque animalhuman, a liminal, monstrous figure who embodies "difference made flesh" (Cohen 1996: 7). Her planned violence positions her not as rational or civilised, but as "fear incarnate," a being who disrupts cultural distinctions and inhabits a space between categories (Cohen 1996: 4-6). Her actions expose the psychopathic inhumanity that underlies her subjectivity in what Erica Fudge describes as the "horror at our kinship with animals," a bond that she is attempting to suppress through domination (2004: 8). By killing Bob, the woman attempts to sever this uncomfortable connection. Yet the very act confirms and exposes the fragility of human supremacy. Bob, passive, loving and silent, becomes a foil that magnifies the grotesque excess of the animalhuman actions of this woman. This moral inversion is central to the suspension of hierarchy and order where boundaries are suddenly rendered porous (Bakhtin 1984: 370). Within this dreamlike, carnivalesque world, Lanthimos stages the grotesque not as parody but as disruption, a form of dark satire that exposes the arbitrary and callous foundations of human exceptionalism (Kristeva 1986: 50; Clark 1991: 5). Bob's mutilated body, whimpering, bloodied, still partially human in spirit, becomes a physical site where subjectivity unravels. He represents "that which disturbs identity, system, order", a body rendered unclassifiable, his corporeality desecrated because he cannot and does not fight back and is seen as disposable because he is merely an 'animal' (Kristeva 1982: 4). His transformation from companion to abject corpse collapses the human/non-human animal divide and foregrounds the viciousness required to achieve it. This scene also crystallises what Galt identifies as *The Lobster*'s core tension in the film which she indicates "depends on and problematizes dominant attitudes to animals, making animal representation central to the film's ethical critique" (2017: 22).

Petkova argues that Lanthimos's non-human animals function as "complex signifiers" that challenge anthropocentric systems, but Bob's brutalisation shows that these signifiers are not metaphorical abstractions, instead they are materially and viscerally embodied (2022: 273). *The Lobster* forces the viewer into a confrontation with the corporeal realism caught in the sensory immediacy of Bob's destruction. The materiality of Bob's suffering, rendered in agonising detail, creates what Sobchack calls an "ethical and sensory confrontation," where violence can no longer be distanced or aestheticised (2004: 244, 247). In this moment, the film's distorted logic lays bare not just the instability of the human/non-human animal binary, but the lack of compassion that sustains it. The Heartless Woman, who might be the woman who kills the donkey in the opening scene, is a depraved animalhuman. These mirrored women enact deliberate, malevolent destruction of non-human animals, and both serve to expose the myth of human moral superiority. The transformations of both women are structurally and symbolically aligned as they cross the threshold into monstrosity not through animalistic instinct, but through actions of villainy. As Cohen writes, the monster is "difference made flesh", and both women embody this difference as they violate the very ethical codes that supposedly distinguish humans from non-human animals (Cohen 1996: 7). Yet their grotesque trajectories diverge in meaningful ways. The woman in the opening scene is framed in stark isolation, her act is wordless, ambiguous, even surreal. She becomes abnormal in a silent tableau that immediately destabilises the viewer's moral norms. By contrast, the Heartless Woman's violence is narratively embedded and emotionally charged. Her calculated murder of Bob is not only an act of domination but also a tactical manipulation within the hotel's regime of control. She verbalises her cruelty with cold detachment, which is a twisted and self-justifying unconscionable participation in an act of complete barbarity. Where the donkey killer's monstrosity erupts from outside the system, the Heartless Woman operates fully within it, taking perverse logic to horrific extremes. Together, these two women demonstrate how animalhuman transformation is not the result of becoming animalistic, but of enacting the twisted logic that reveals humanity's own moral disintegration. Their mirrored violence destabilses the binary between human and non-human from both within and without, showing that the monstrous lies not in being non-human animal, but in the excesses of animalhuman agency. They occupy a liminal zone: neither fully human nor beast, but a monstrous fusion of rational cruelty and primal brutality. This excess, as Bakhtin reminds us, is key to grotesque transformation and it is the extremity of their actions that reveals the fragility of cultural constructs and exposes the myth of

human as a preeminent being (Bakhtin 1984: 303). Ultimately, the Heartless Woman becomes a grotesque other who, through her excess and inhumanity, exposes the arbitrariness of the moral norms of the hotel and the proximity of the human to the traits of the Other. She is a monster that "dwells at the gates of difference," unsettling the borders we rely on to define civilisation (Cohen 1996: 7).

Heartless Woman's sadism and the fact that she can kill transmogrified Bob is a sadistic act, but one that is sanctioned within the rules of the hotel. The calculated murder of Bob and her emotional manipulation of David render her a grotesque hybrid of rational detachment and a monster of destructive Otherness (Cohen 1996: 14). Marios Psaras argues that *The Lobster* delineates Otherness as a determinant of moral worth, dictating which bodies are protected and which are disposable (2022: 273). Bob's death confronts this logic directly. Though dogs occupy a culturally privileged space as pets and companions, Bob is rendered abject, his death marking a rupture in the assumed hierarchy of value. Erica Fudge's assertion that non-human animals "pose existential and paradoxical challenges" is manifest here as Bob represents both kin and other, a mirror that reflects the animality in the human (2004: 3, 8). In *The Lobster*, it is not the non-human animal but the animalhuman who is portrayed as monstrous. Bob's death reveals this inversion: the animal is rendered dignified through suffering, while the human is transformed in a monster by the violence she enacts. By brutally collapsing the line between human and animal, the film presents monstrosity not as animalistic but as thoroughly human. The murder of Bob forces David, and the viewer, to confront moral collapse. As Angeli Koutsourakis notes, David suppresses his grief in conformance with the dystopian system in which he is situated, further promoting the emotional detachment and institutionalised inhumanity that define the world of the hotel (2022: 106). By brutally collapsing the line between human and animal, the film presents monstrosity not as animalistic but as thoroughly human. The two scenes, the donkey shooting and Bob's brutal murder encapsulate Yorgos Lanthimos's grotesque exploration of what I term animalhuman transgression, which dismantles the hierarchy of human superiority and exposes the moral degradation of the human characters. Using grotesque hybridity to critique anthropocentric norms, Lanthimos uses the non-human animal as symbolic figures that act to contrast and reflect the aberrant behaviour of the human character back at the viewer.

After avenging Bob's death by violently forcing the Heartless Woman into the transmogrifier, David's lack of conformity forces him to escape into the woods where he joins up with a human group known as the Loners, a rebellious faction that introduces an inverted grotesquery. The Loners are not fully expelled from the system, but remain its abject margin and from a "place of banishment" the group continues to challenge the dystopian social system of the hotel (Kristeva 1982: 2). Though positioned as a resistance group, the Loners reproduce a distorted inversion of the hotel's authoritarian logic, where the hotel mandates coupling, the Loners forbid it; where the hotel prescribes romance as survival, the Loners punish love as betrayal. Their rebellion, rather than dismantling the system, exposes its grotesque reach because both obedience and refusal remain founded on the human fear of becoming the animal Other. The Loners remain on the margins of the governing dystopic system but from a "place of banishment" (Kristeva 1982: 2). Their existence as escaped singles destabilises the rigid binary between coupled civilisation and animal transformation. At first glance, the woods appear to function as a space of resistance to the hotel's regime as the Loner's live an unregulated, nomadic, life that is free from the coercive logic of compulsory coupling. However, this freedom is illusory as the Loners operate under an equally rigid, if inverted, system of control. Where the hotel enforces intimacy through surveillance and deadlines, the Loners enforce solitude through prohibition and punishment. Romantic attachment is strictly forbidden, and the body is disciplined through immediate and often brutal retribution. This regime can be considered worse than that of the hotel. Where the hotel might exact a punishment by forcing the humans into becoming non-human animals, they still retain life and a form whose bodily barriers are not abject. The Loners punish by killing non-conformers, making them dig their own graves as part of the punitive apparatus of the woods. The act functions as a rehearsal of death through a forced, embodied acknowledgment of the fate that awaits those who transgress. The Loners' harshness is most clearly articulated through their punishment of those who violate the rule against intimacy. These members are subjected to extreme corporeal punishments in which lips and cheeks are cut in the "red kiss", eyes are blinded, and bodies are maimed in ways that permanently inscribe discipline onto flesh. These punishments are not corrective but exemplary because they function as deterrents that render the body itself a visible site of law. The forest becomes a space where violence is not suspended but redistributed, operating through ritualised bodily harm rather than institutional bureaucracy. Intimacy is not merely

discouraged but violently excised, producing a grotesque inversion of the hotel's logic rather than a genuine alternative to it.

Crucially, the Loners also hunt animals for sustenance, reinforcing the film's pervasive ambiguity around the human non-human animal boundary. The film never confirms whether these animals are former humans, yet the broader logic where failed hotel residents are routinely transformed into animals renders this possibility both plausible and ethically troubling. This uncertainty is crucial. By refusing to elucidate whether the hunted animals were previously human, the film sustains a condition of moral unease. Eating becomes potentially cannibalistic, and survival resembles the violent economy that governs the hotel. The forest's non-human animals seem indifferent to the repeated hunts, as they casually walk past at random moments or are a constant peripheral presence, suggesting a world in which brutality has become routinised rather than exceptional. David prepares traps, kills multiple rabbits, and his hands are seen covered in blood before he places the rabbit carcasses in a blood-soaked sack. This scene shifts into a detailed, almost culinary instruction for flaying, decapitation, gutting, stuffing, and roasting of the rabbits culminating in the declarative admission "That's my favourite food, rabbit". The scene simultaneously frames slaughter as provision and as intimacy because David leaves two dead rabbits beside the sleeping woman with whom he has established a rapport. The grotesque effect here arises from this forced cohabitation of care and butchery without any moral positioning governing these acts. Abjection is not only located in blood and viscera, but through the intimacy that is expressed through the butchered non-human animal body in this scene. Animalhuman tenderness becomes inseparable from the killing of non-human animals. The scene with the dead rabbits is marked by boundary instability because the rabbit is reduced to meat through dismemberment, while the "animalhuman" relationship is constituted through that same process in which romance equates to slaughter. Lipiner and Abrams make an interesting point about Lanthimos's use of "intertextual allusion", contrasting Lanthimos's portrayal of Queen Anne's rabbits in *The Favourite* as carefully housed, named, and treated as human children, to the "ghastly image of dead rabbits in a heap" encountered in *The Lobster* (2022: 204-205). The need to kill to survive in the woods does not represent liberation but a carnivalesque inversion that mirrors the hotel's authoritarianism. Both spaces discipline the body, regulate desire, and reduce the human social group to rule-bound survival. The apparent opposition between hotel and forest collapses

into a shared logic of control, revealing that the grotesque in *The Lobster* does not arise from excess alone, but from the symmetry between opposing systems that each deny the possibility of ethical, non-coercive forms of being. This contradiction exposes how both ideological conformity and rebellion reproduce systems of coercion (Harpham 1982: 3).

David's breakaway from the ideological conformity and social pressures in his relationship with Long-sighted Woman has extreme consequences. This time it does not result in death but in mutilation. On being caught, the short-sighted Woman is punished with the "red kiss". The "red kiss" is a form of punishment imposed on members of the forest community that show any form of romantic interest, a grotesque punishment in which the lips and cheeks of the rule breakers are sliced open, an act that operates as a perverse parody of sexual intimacy. The mouth, a central site of speech, desire, and relational exchange, is violently inscribed with punishment, transforming an emblem of connection into a marker of exclusion. This is an extremely visceral reworking of Bakhtin's account of the mouth as a primary site of exchange rather than concealment, opposed to the closed and private (Bakhtin 1984: 317). Yet rather than regenerative, the "red kiss" exploits precisely this openness. What should remain private, the characters' romantic attachment, is violently forced into visibility through bodily mutilation. The grotesque is thus stripped of its liberatory charge and redeployed as a mechanism of control. One of the most disturbing punishments occurs when Long-sighted woman is deliberately blinded. She is taken from the forest to a town doctor. Lanthimos represents this scene as sterile with an administrative calm as the short-sighted woman is restrained in a chair and immobilised. Importantly, Lanthimos withholds the most graphic moment because the removal of her eyes is not shown. Instead, the violence is conveyed through implication and aftermath. What the viewer is forced to confront is not the act itself but its monstrous effect, the irreversible transformation of her body and subjectivity. The blinding is experienced as bureaucratic, routine, and disturbingly ordinary. The targeting of vision causes monstrosity to emerge not through excess, but through enforced loss of the most powerful human relationship with the world - sight. As Barbara Creed argues such physical transformations are "monstrous" and 'its main symbolic function is to challenge definitions of what it means to be human' (1993: 137). Ian Corich and Laura Sedgwick contest that cinematic scenes in which parts of the body undergo painful transmogrifications in which one form supplants another result in monstrosity (2017. 74). In this way the short-sighted woman emerges as a monstrous and "horrific

new creature from within the human figure" she once was but is now non-human (Corich and Sedwich 2017: 74). Through the regulation of sight and the denial of speech, short-sighted woman is progressively aligned with the non-human animals of the woods, beings who see but cannot speak, so that her constructed monstrosity gives way to abjection not through inner depravity, but through enforced loss of sound and speech. Derrida writes that the non-human animal's gaze unsettles human sovereignty precisely because the animal sees but remains excluded from speech and law (Derrida 2008: 12-13). Kelly Oliver argues that animals occupy a constitutive outside of the symbolic order precisely because they are seen but denied response-ability, positioned as beings without recognised voice or address (Oliver 2009: 5, 7). Without speech or sight, short-sighted Woman becomes the human non-human animal Other. Where the violence of transmogrification into non-human animal in the hotel is hidden, the transformation of short-sighted woman into a human non-human animal is destructive. It reveals the humans in the film as brutal and animalistic. lacking any civilised veneer, and in contrast to the non-human animals that move through the forest, or Bob the dog. In contrast to the non-human animals that move through the forest, or Bob the dog. The Loners and all the humans present are depicted by Lanthimos as inherently loathsome, repugnant and gruesome.

David and the now short-sighted woman finally escape the forest into what appears to be ordinary civilisation. They enter a diner, a space marked by familiarity and social normalcy yet this apparent reintegration is immediately subverted by what follows. They have discussed David blinding himself so that they may be paired again, a decision that demonstrates how deeply the regulatory system has been internalised and how inescapable its logic remains even beyond the institutions that enforce it. Seeing, like loving, must be regulated, even at the cost of bodily integrity. This moment exposes a crucial distinction between the human and the non-human animal in *The Lobster*. The human does not merely submit to regulation but anticipates and performs it, willingly mutilating the body to maintain belonging, sameness, and social legibility. By contrast, the non-human animals that populate the forest are never shown engaging in such acts of self-negation but exist without symbolic compliance or bodily sacrifice. The grotesque thus belongs to the human, not the non-human animal. Lanthimos appears to locate monstrosity in conscious self-destruction rather than instinct or nature. The film's refusal to show whether David, like Oedipus, completes his own blinding sustains ambiguity with its promise of a possibly abject and grotesque act or

merely a closure without stable meaning (Bakhtin 1984: 317; Kristeva 1982: 4, 10; Cohen 1996: 7) Suspended between action and refusal, the scene positions monstrosity not as a completed transformation but as a perpetual state of becoming, in which humanity is defined by its willingness to violate itself in order to remain intelligible within an imposed order. In distinct contrast, Lanthimos is at pains to draw the comparison between the non-human animals' lack of need to commit monstrous acts or to wish that they were different. They seem outside of the dystopic system and as shadows they move on the periphery and are neither frightening nor dangerous. They are the foils which act to reflect back to the viewer all the violent, controlling, and brutal nature of the animalhuman and, thus, of the viewer themselves. Philip Thomson argues that the absurd in modern literature and film closely aligns with the grotesque, where the irrational and the bizarre disrupt normative structures so thoroughly that "the theatre of the absurd could almost be called the 'theatre of the grotesque'" (1972: 29-30). This is visibly present in Lanthimos's filmmaking, which has been associated with both the "theatre of the grotesque" and the "theatre of the absurd" (Lykidis 2022: 144). The film subverts animal fables by erasing the moral clarity typically found in them.

Where fables employ anthropomorphic animals to satirise human folly, *The Lobster* offers humans who become animals yet remain animalhuman through their underlying hybridity. The Hotel Manager's assertion that "A wolf and a penguin could never live together, that would be absurd", mockingly invokes fable logic only to undercut it. The fable's moral teleology is emptied out, replaced with grotesque absurdity. The animalhuman thus ridicules the certainty of traditional animal stories, destabilising species and ethics alike. In the woods, where loners claim autonomy, another bizarre regime emerges: one where intimacy is forbidden and transgression is met with mutilation. The "red kiss" punishment, slashing the lips of rule-breakers, demonstrates how even inverting the hotel's logic leads to the monstrous being seen as "a cultural body" as both the society in the hotel and that of the Loners are constructs of bizarre control. The animalhuman persists, not as a resolution but as an irresolvable tension. The short-sighted woman's blinding, deliberate, punitive, and irreversible marks the culmination of the many grotesque transformations. In *The Lobster*, Lanthimos's dismantling of human identity critiques the very myth of exceptionalism. He depicts humans as monstrous simply in their efforts to remain human. The animalhuman hybrid is not a symbol of devolution but an exposure of the ethical vacuity underlying so-called civilisation.

These hybrids do not redeem; they disturb. By centring the non-human animal before the human, *The Lobster* inverts fable, undermines morality, and grotesquely mirrors the human back to itself. In the next chapter, I examine how the film *The Favourite* (2018) retains a focus on the grotesqueries of the animalhuman in the court of Queen Anne. It is the power dynamics and performance in the court that become central to my examination of the interplay between the animalhuman/non-human.

CHAPTER 3 – THE FAVOURITE

In contrast to the bleak dystopian world of *The Lobster*, Lanthimos's later work, *The Favourite* (2018), is an historical period piece, yet, one that retains a focus on the grotesqueness of humanity. While *The Lobster* (2015) presents the animalhuman through unnatural stillness, frozen faces and emotionless gestures *The Favourite* (2019) marks a shift, where distortion takes a more expressive and theatrical form through the use of contorted faces and grotesque embodiments, which become central to the film's critique of power and performance. In this chapter, I examine how Lanthimos destabilises the human-animal binary through the concept of the animalhuman: a grotesque hybrid figure that embodies the collapse of civility, morality, and species boundaries. This grotesque hybridity is central to Lanthimos's critique of human exceptionalism, which unfolds through bodily abjection, cruelty, and inversion of hierarchies. In this chapter, I argue that the non-human animals function as ethical foils, silent, innocent, and uncorrupted, against which the grotesque monstrosity of the human is rendered visible. As Pierre Simon Gutman points out in his discussion of *The Favourite*, the persistent "juxtaposition of innocuous animals" with the "undignified behaviour of the human characters" generates a distinctly "grotesque atmosphere" (Gutman 2020: 94). I suggest that the grotesque behaviours, corporeal excesses, and ethical degradations of the characters Queen Anne, Sarah Churchill, and Abigail Hill construct them as grotesque hybrids whose bodily and affective transgressions dismantle the illusion of human superiority (Wolfe 2003: 6). Scott Romo argues that Lanthimos subverts "representations of regal superiority" by exaggerating and distorting history to expose "hubris, manipulation, and classism," thereby humanising the royals through cynical depictions of their "less-than-noble actions" (Romo 2019: 383-84). Similarly, I contend that Lanthimos animalises the characters, rendering them as animalhumans whose grotesque manipulation, cruelty, and bodily degradation collapse the pretence of humanity. I aim to show that Lanthimos deploys animalistic traits in a manner that highlights the stark contrast between the innocent behaviour of non-human animals against the erratic, grotesque behaviour of his animalhuman characters. Rather than anthropomorphising the non-human animals, Lanthimos uses them as figures of subversion as they mirror back the "less than noble actions" of the human characters. *The Favourite* visualises the grotesque not only as an aesthetic excess but details the collapse of the moral fabric of its human characters. Here, the grotesque emerges as a "charged ambiguity" creating a contested space for negotiating and

reimagining the power dynamics between the civilised human and the othered non-human, in which the animal is no longer subordinate but the measure of human moral failure (Siddique and Raphael 2016: 5). In *The Favourite*, this inversion unfolds within the intimate and often brutal exchanges of court life, where animalisation becomes a means of destabilising both social hierarchy and the human-animal divide. My analysis focuses on the key scenes in The Favourite, to examine how the human characters emerge as simultaneously human and non-human yet fully neither, as they oscillate between affection and cruelty. In doing so, I show that the film exposes animalhumans who harm, deceive, and dominate, behaviour that destabilises traditional assumptions that equate moral superiority, rationality, and ethical restraint with the category of the human itself.

Set in early 18th-century Enlightenment England during the reign of Queen Anne, *The Favourite* (2018) follows the shifting power dynamics between three women: Queen Anne (Olivia Colman), her advisor and lover Sarah Churchill (Rachel Weisz), and Abigail Hill (Emma Stone), a distant cousin of Lady Sarah who enters court as a servant and ascends to influence through calculated manipulation and relentless ambition. Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, is Anne's closest advisor, confidante, and long-standing intimate. She exerts substantial political influence through her proximity to the Queen, combining strategic acuity and uncompromising directness with a genuine investment in national governance. Abigail Hill is Sarah's impoverished cousin who enters the film as a disgraced aristocrat turned servant, asking for work at the court. Abigail begins as a scullery maid, seemingly timid yet desperate for survival. She slowly studies the dynamics of the court, recognising Anne's emotional vulnerabilities and Sarah's political control. Through calculated kindness, carefully staged innocence, and moments of bold manipulation, she gradually rises from servant to trusted attendant and finally to Anne's favourite. Anne's growing resentment toward Sarah's bluntness and political dominance creates the opening Abigail needs. As Anne and Sarah quarrel more frequently, Sarah becomes increasingly distanced from the Queen, unable to soften her approach or hide her frustration. Abigail steps into this widening gap with calculated gentleness, offering Anne the affection, attention, and emotional flattery Sarah refuses to perform. As Abigail gains Anne's trust, her tactics sharpen and she stages events to make Sarah appear unreliable and disloyal. When Sarah returns to defend herself, Abigail has ensured that her influence is already established. Exploiting Anne's insecurity and desire for devotion, Abigail

convinces the Queen that Sarah has betrayed her. This manipulation ultimately leads Anne to banish Sarah from court. By the film's end, Abigail has replaced Sarah entirely in status while the queen is left physically diminished and the country continues to slip into disarray. Although these figures are historically accurate Lanthimos offers us a distorted version of Anne's court and makes visible a grotesque continuum between the physical body and the social body.

The film unfolds within the confined, opulent yet decaying spaces of the royal court, a setting that mirrors the deterioration of its inhabitants. Lanthimos's use of fisheye lenses and distorted camera angles exaggerates the opulence of the court to the point of suffocation. Banquet scenes become arenas of excess, where gluttony, drunkenness, and decadence expose the characters' basest instincts. The grotesque, understood as the representation of exaggerated, unsettling, or distorted corporeality that disrupts normative boundaries, permeates the film's depiction of human behaviour and bodily presence (Edwards and Graulund 2013: 31). As Pierre Simon Gutman (2020: 92) argues, *The Favourite's* grotesqueness is produced through tonal instability and affective contradiction, shifting between "dread and caricature", in what Philip Thomson describes as "an unresolved tension" between disgust and laughter, often focused on bodily deformation, orifices, and alien elements (Thomson 1972: 27-28). While Gutman foregrounds tone, I argue that Bakhtin's grotesque more fully explains the hybridisation and moral collapse of the characters, and the film's critique of human exceptionalism. The film's visual and narrative language reinforces this grotesque collapse. Queen Anne's body is visibly marked by the debilitating effects of gout and illness, Sarah expresses authority through sudden physical aggression, and Abigail manipulates perception through the performance of injury and deceit. Such corporeal and affective excesses align with the grotesque's emphasis on bodily distortion and transgression (Stallybrass and White 1986: 8). This Bakhtinian grotesque, and such tropes of bodily distortion and becomings, recurs across the narrative: in Anne's infantilised attachment to animals, in Sarah's performative cruelty, and in Abigail's oscillation between victimhood and monstrous ambition. I demonstrate how the film's grotesque carnival, marked by cruelty, inversion, bodily fluids, and violent competition, reveals the collapse of civility and the monstrosity of the human characters. The monstrous is expressed through the characters' moral collapse, their betrayals, and their ruthless pursuit of favour and power. In contrast, non-human animals, particularly Queen Anne's pet rabbits, remain silent, passive, and non-deceptive. They function as foils to the aberrant human characters,

highlighting their degeneracy and moral failure without participating in the violence or corruption that ensues in courtly life. These animals occupy the periphery of the narrative, yet their presence amplifies the film's central concern with the collapse of human propriety and the fragility of moral order.

The opening scene, a seemingly serene image of horses pulling a carriage through the woods, invokes a pastoral calm that is quickly subverted. The horse, a traditional symbol of nobility and control, here foreshadows the grotesque inversions to come (Edwards and Graham 2011: 3). As the camera moves inside the carriage, Abigail is introduced not as a dignified traveller, but as a figure literally wedged between human detritus; two sickly children with snot-streaked faces, a potbellied man, and his grim-faced wife. These passengers are "bodies in excrescences", figures defined by their leaking, diseased, and excessive forms (Bakhtin 1984: 317). Opposite Abigail sits a one-armed amputee in military uniform. His missing limbs immediately marks him as a fragmented being and, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, disabled bodies often occupy the space of the grotesque, as "a spectacle of difference" that unsettles notions of normative concepts of bodily integrity (Garland-Thomson 1997: 11). The amputee turns to Abigail with a sinister smile, and though clearly uncomfortable, she returns the gesture out of feigned politeness. Already, this moment reveals the façade of manners masking Abigail's internal discomfort, a performance that hints at her emerging capacity for manipulation. While she appears passive, her response signals the beginning of her strategic self-presentation as her politeness is not sincerity but a calculated act. This foreshadows the duplicity and social scheming that will later define her as an animalhuman; a figure whose outward civility conceals inward ambition and moral decay. The scene continues with a jarring image of the amputee as he begins to masturbate in full view of Abigail and the other passengers. This act, while overtly obscene, is undercut by his physical limitation, introducing a surreal layer to the display. His unapologetic self-exposure transgresses social norms and transforms the carriage into a grotesque space of bodily excess and discomfort. An act that foregrounds the "base materiality of the body", in which sexuality and excretion are markers of the abject which is defined by its power to unsettle and contaminate social order (Grosz 1994: 192). Abject bodies like these, particularly disabled or fragmented ones, "provoke both fascination and repulsion, but are not necessarily monstrous unless they challenge or invert moral and social norms" (Shildrick 2002: 79). In this sense, the amputee embodies a grotesque and abject

presence but remains peripheral to the ethical collapse that defines the animalhuman characters. His public display of lewdness anchors in the grotesquery and sexual excess that will soon erupt within the court, offering an early glimpse of the world Abigail is about to enter

As Abigail exits the carriage, she slips and falls face-first into the mud, though it soon becomes clear this is no ordinary dirt, but excrement. Her body, humiliated and defiled, is left sprawled on the ground, while others pass by without concern. This fall is not merely physical but marks her descent into a world where social hierarchies are inverted and the distinction between purity and filth collapses (Bakhtin 1984: 21). Dirt and excrement, here, signal the collapse of bodily boundaries and the threat to the border of the living being (Kristeva 1982: 3). This moment of abjection frees Abigail from the constraints of fixed identity, allowing her to re-emerge as a grotesque hybrid that is both animalhuman and social interloper, whose liminality recalls Cohen's assertion that "the monster's body is a cultural body" that embodies fears, desires, and anxieties (1996: 4). Her body is stripped of dignity by contact with waste, producing a visceral tension of attraction and repulsion in the viewer, a dynamic Sobchack links to cinema's capacity to engage the spectator's senses in ambivalent, embodied ways (Sobchack 2004: 63). This sensory ambivalence mirrors the animalhuman condition as Abigail's degradation renders her both abject and compelling, collapsing the distance between human civility and animality, and positioning her as a hybrid figure who will destabilise the very hierarchies she will exploit in her favour. Abigail is received by Sally, one of the kitchen staff. Abigail steps into the bustling basement kitchen, smells herself and comments "This mud Stinks". Sally replies that: "They shit in the street round here. Political commentary they call it." This fall marks Abigail's descent into a world where social hierarchies are inverted and the distinction between purity and filth collapses. Sally leads Abigail through a door and she is met with open disgust, punctuated by Sarah's cutting remark: *"I didn't know the new sewer ended here."* Ultimately, this falling into excrement is essential to her transformation into something monstrous and this scene initiates a "category crisis," and the start of Abigail's transition into a figure who is an unscrupulous animalhuman. Geoffrey Harpham observes that grotesque figures "flourish in the confusion of margins and centre," thriving on the instability that unsettles the social order (Harpham 1982: 3). Abigail's refusal to remain contained within her prescribed station draws directly on this disruptive energy. Socially ambiguous, she is

no longer simply a woman of status or servant, but a liminal figure, a hybrid, poised between degradation and ascent.

When Abigail explains that she is a distant relative of Sarah's who has fallen from aristocratic standing and come to the palace seeking work "as something", Sarah responds, *"*A monster for the children to play with perhaps*?"* Abigail lifts her hands in a mocking monstrous pose and lets out a teasing growl in a moment of comic play. Sarah approves of this bold gesture adding that "a good sense of humour shows character" and tells a servant to give her shelter, food and something to do. Lanthimos's staging of this scene anticipates her cunning and her ascent as she develops into a powerful monster that has been "pushed to the farthest margins, only to return as monsters always do" (Cohen 1996: 20). Abigail watches everything in the court from her very first day and gains understanding of how to act in order to survive in a place that is ribald, disgusting, violent and decadent. This decadence, accompanied by a twisted sexualised violence, is most evident in the pelting scene. This is a topsy-turvy spectacle where luxury becomes violence and the civilised becomes a site of sadistic exhibitionism. Abigail briefly glimpses a group of aristocratic men participating in a peculiar courtly amusement in which they toss pomegranates at a naked man positioned as a living target. The imagery of bursting pomegranates against the naked man's flesh creates a sexualised and surreal image of blood and rupture that collapses into a spectacle of ambiguity as the viewer is unsure what is blood and what is pulp. The pomegranate has always been associated with female sexuality and fertility as well possessing aphrodisiac qualities. That such a sexualised symbol is being used in an all-male game inverts the feminine aspect and hints at an alternate sexuality at the heart of the court. The naked man's physical form devolves into that of the carnivalesque fool that is marked for humiliation and degradation (Bakhtin 1984: 21). The men's laughter, their mouths "gaping open", turns Queen Anne's court into a grotesque spectacle that shows the aristocratic pastime as a place where performative excess has supplanted decorum (Bakhtin 1984. 219; 318). The scene exposes the collapse of propriety within Anne's court, where masculine power is not through governance but through epicene theatrical amusement.

The duck racing scene offers another compelling instance of this. The scene unfolds in a dimly lit chamber, where a cluster of male aristocrats huddle around a makeshift racing track cheering, shouting, and goading the birds forward with manic enthusiasm. Their frenzied investment in this trivial spectacle, urging animals to perform for their pleasure, reduces them to figures governed by impulse, competition, and base instinct. Far from civilised they appear stripped of dignity. The scene's orchestrated chaos, with courtiers betting, shouting, and cheering over racing ducks, crystallises the film's grotesque vision of a political elite whose authority has dissolved into parody. The courtiers erupt into shouts with an intensity that mirrors the animals' frantic movements. They lean in, barking encouragement, craning their necks, and contorting their faces in exaggerated mimicry of the birds. Their flared nostrils, tightened mouths, and widened eyes slip into grotesque grimaces that erode the veneer of courtly refinement. In this moment, the distinction between human participants and non-human competitors momentarily dissolves, their features deforming in ways that exemplify exactly what Bakhtin describes as the human face taking on "the shapes of animals", which exposes the degeneracy beneath the aristocratic veneer (Bakhtin 1984: 316). Lanthimos here stages not simply a moment of amusement but a collapse of species distinctions. While the ducks remain dignified in their instinctive movements, it is the humans who adopt animalistic behaviours, barking, howling and posturing thereby undermining the assumption that reason and restraint are exclusively human. The ducks, meanwhile, mirror the humans' agitation, their darting movements uncannily aligned with the frenzied gestures of their owners. Rather than anthropomorphising the ducks, Lanthimos positions them as mirrors for human vice, reflecting competitiveness and cruelty while retaining their non-human distinctiveness, whilst in essence they are merely bewildered beings frightened by the noise. Here, Lanthimos does not blur categories so much as he inverts them in a true Bakhtinian fashion, using performance to show that decorum is not what separates the human from the animal, it merely conceals the grotesque impulses of which humans are capable of expressing. This inversion of expected human behaviour, paired with their degrading treatment of non-human creatures, reveals that beneath the surface of courtly manners lies a more primal nature where human and animalistic characteristics are intertwined. These men become animalhuman hybrids whose manipulation, cruelty, and bodily degradation collapse all pretence of decency. In this moment, the courtiers shed their aristocratic correctness, revealing what Alex Lykidis terms "vulgarity and tonal hybridity," signalling the visible erosion of the veneer of dignity and refinement (Lykidis 2022: 206).

This vulgarity is amplified in the Banquet scenes that are arenas of excess, where gluttony, drunkenness, and overindulgence expose the characters' basest instincts as these court members gorge themselves to the point of caricature as "eating and drinking" become "manifestations of the grotesque" (1984: 281). This carnivalesque atmosphere foregrounds the excessive functions of the material body, gluttony, drunkenness, and debasement, where "the banquet, with its brawls, curses, laughter, reveals the porous boundary between body and world" (Bakhtin 1984: 317). The open, fleshy carcass at the centre of the table with its blood-stained ribs held apart by a pair of deer antlers is juxtaposed to fresh fruit, berries, figs, citrus that overflow around and inside the exposed cavity of the carcass. The effect is both opulent and grotesque because the lavish abundance of the feast is inseparable from the raw violence of butchery, revealing the court's indulgence as a "victory over the world" and the non-human animal (Bakhtin 1984: 282). The aristocrats become what Cary Wolfe and John Elmer refer to as "animalized humans" as their monstrous appetite, concealed beneath their façade of sophistication, starts to show. These characters become hybrid figures that are neither human nor non-human animals and yet both. In this liminal state they are debauched forms that defy stable categorisation, neither civilised humans nor innocent non-human animals (Cohen 1996: 4). It is the defenceless carcass of the butchered non-human animal that stands in stark opposition to the human characters carnal appetites and effectively undermines them as "affirmative characters of human culture" (Wolfe and Elmer 1995: 117). The carcass functions as a transgressive centrepiece; a body pried open and reconfigured in ways that unsettle the symbolic boundaries of expected non-human animal corporeality. The vivid colour and intact skins of the fruit act as a sharp contrast to the torn meat and visible bone, producing a composition in which vitality and decay sit side by side. This uneasy abject interplay is fundamental to this scene and seems to thrive on "incongruous juxtapositions of beauty with horror, vitality with decay, and ornament with bodily matter" (Connelly 2012: 3;22). This in turn operates through the simultaneous pull of opulence and disgust in which the carcass becomes an abject object that is both "fascinating and repulsive" as well as being an image of "suffering and sacrifice" that is exaggerated by the material richness of sensuous colours, textures, and abundance of the fruit (Kristeva 1982: 158). Such grotesque juxtapositions organise the film's structural dynamics and is a space in which Abigail will soon belong to and flourish.

Abigail begins at the very bottom of the court's hierarchy scrubbing floors in the kitchens but she learns quickly to endure. She observes every figure in the court with a deliberate attentiveness guided by a "logic that always threatens to shift, invigorated by change and the desire to escape" her impoverished social position (Cohen 1996: 6). She seizes her first cunning opportunity to start gaining power in the dramatic scene when Queen Anne's screams of pain echo through the chambers of the court. The servants press an enormous slab of raw steak against Anne's inflamed and discoloured leg, a manifestation of severe gout, infection and, possibly, syphilis. Abigail uses this disorder to her advantage, stealing a horse from the stables and riding into the forest to gather herbs, from which she prepares a medicinal concoction that proves effective in soothing the Queen's pain. Abigail begins to "flourish in the confusion of margins and centre," thriving on "instability that unsettles the social order" (Harpham 1982: 3). Anna Leszkiewicz notes that historically Queen Anne was riddled with chronic illness, substantial weight gain, and sustained bereavement, enduring seventeen pregnancies marked by miscarriages, stillbirths, and the early deaths of all her children (Leszkiewicz 2019: 3). This is visually present in the film as she is represented as experiencing agonising gout and obesity that renders her practically disabled. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomas argues, disabled bodies occupy a grotesque space as a "spectacle of difference" that unsettles normative concepts of bodily integrity (1997: 11). As Anne oscillates between bouts of intense emotional instability and authoritarian outbursts, she lashes out at her servants, and her dependence on those around her renders her authority precarious. The illness of the crown is reflected in the cankered spaces of the court. Lanthimos's representation of Anne's excessively swollen legs, severe digestive ailments in scenes of abject, excessive vomiting and an infantile like dependency on her attendants, disrupts bodily containment and sovereign authority.

Days after Abigail assisted the queen, Anne is pushed through the courtyard in a wheelchair and stops when she notices Abigail, identifying her as the servant who prepared the leg remedy. "Where did you learn this?" the queen asks. "Outside the gates, Your Majesty," Abigail replies. "The forest teaches, if one is willing to listen." In this exchange, Abigail's status shifts from scullery servant to a figure of utility and knowledge, occupying the position of a "wise monster" within the court. Abigail's intervention challenges the court's established structures of medical authority, introducing a form of marginal knowledge that operates outside of sanctioned expertise because it has been relegated to the margins as witchery. Inevitably it returns bearing forms of knowledge

"all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside" (Cohen 1996: 20). Nevertheless, Abigail retains her "outsider" knowledge while actively gathering useful knowledge from within the court, rendering her into a more powerful yet insidious figure. It is Abigail's relationship with Queen Anne that allows for the blossoming and intensification of the monstrous dimension of her hybridity. The queen's lover and advisor Lady Sarah Churchill's initial jibe about Abigail being "a monster for the children to play with" is an ironic foreshadowing of Abigail's transformation into a "monster" for the Queen to play with. Abigail's body is used as an instrument of both intimacy and political manoeuvring. The animalhuman dynamic between Abigail and the Queen is premised on two aspects, firstly on Queen Anne's abject body, exposed and handled by Abigail in acts of care that blur tenderness with domination; and secondly Abigail's calculated use of her own body as a political tool, seducing the Queen to secure power. The leg-massage scene between Abigail and Anne marks a decisive turning point in *The Favourite*, both in the shifting power dynamic between Anne and Abigail and in the film's rendering of the Queen as animalhuman. By this point, Abigail has moved from the margins of court life into the Queen's intimate physical orbit, using the guise of care-giver to insinuate herself into spaces previously reserved for Lady Sarah. The scene's slow pacing and close framing emphasises the physical contact as a negotiation of access and control, with Abigail's ministrations becoming a calculated performance of service and seduction. As her hands climb Anne's legs, the Queen occupies an ambiguous register between pleasure and theatricalised pain; her body becomes "unfinished" and "transgresses its own limits," remaining "open to the outside world" (Bakhtin 1984: 26). Her body and desires are represented as a classic descent into the "lower bodily stratum" and is a marked "lowering of all that is high" to something that is markedly animalhuman (Bakhtin 1984: 19). The tactile proximity of skin, illness, and eroticism "disturbs identity, system, order" in its collapsing of the distinction between care and exploitation, the medicinal and the sexual. Abigail's manipulation channels the court's latent fears around class instability and female sexual agency that "incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (Cohen 1996: 4). Abigail's hybridity is therianthropic is situated between "neither/nor" as she can be perceived as both animal and human yet, at the same time, neither of these as she exceeds stable categorisation (Robertson 2013: 8, 16). The previously private dyad between Anne and Sarah is turned into a volatile triad that transforms seduction into a grotesque inversion of courtly etiquette (Cohen 1996: 6). Abigail is predatory yet domestic, intimate yet strategic, which renders her the embodiment of the court's moral, corporeal, and political

contradictions. Her refusal to remain contained within her prescribed station draws directly on this inversion of expected social positions, aligning her with both the monstrous grotesque and the animalhuman. As Seifert notes, animal-transformation tropes actively "affirm and shape human identity" by negotiating the human–animal boundary (Seifert 2011: 244). I suggest that Lanthimos's film radicalises this by making that boundary falter.

Against this backdrop of aristocratic excess and brutish behaviour, Lady Sarah Churchill emerges as an apparent exception. Churchill is introduced in *The Favourite* as a figure of commanding composure and aristocratic poise, her authority over Queen Anne and the court secured through a combination of sharp intelligence, brutal honesty, and emotional intimacy. Whereas Abigail rises to power through calculated manipulation, Lady Sarah is framed not only as a political operator but as a physical presence, someone who moves with precision, whose control over her body mirrors her dominance in courtly affairs. She confronts rather than deceives, wounds openly rather than corrupts quietly. Her authority rests on rational judgement and strategic precision exercised in what she perceives as the Queen's and the nation's best interests. Her upright posture signals dominance in courtly affairs, as she engages with male advisors as a political equal rather than a deferential courtier. In her relationship with the queen, she reveals her ferocity as a seductive, predatory animal, most visibly in her sexual treatment of Anne. Sarah's first sexual scene with Anne is marked by violent intimacy as she seizes Anne by the throat, drives her back against the wall, and forces her hand between Anne's legs. This scene is both seductive and an assertion of physical dominance, positioning Sarah as the active, controlling force within both the sexual encounter and the broader political dynamic. Queen Anne's authority, is "dethroned" through bodily domination, and lowered into the material stratum of flesh and craving, as she is degraded and her authority is reduced to vulnerability. This dynamic produces the abject as the distinctions between ruler and ruled, pleasure and disgust collapse. The violence of Sarah's grasp both repels and entices. Anne is humiliated as sovereign yet aroused as lover creating an abject pull of attraction and revulsion, where domination provokes desire and degradation becomes the condition of pleasure (Kristeva 1982: 4). Sarah's latent animalhuman state becomes visible through her overt territorial control over Anne's body.

Sarah's authority finds clear expression in her relationship with the horse as she rides astride rather than side-saddle, a posture historically reserved for men and thus a transgressive marker of female power in early eighteenth-century England (Hughes 2012: 87). Long associated with nobility, discipline, and control, the horse functions as a metaphor of Sarah's authority, positioning her, despite evident flaws, as the film's clearest articulation of a principled, yet imperfect, noble human (Edwards and Graham 2011: 3). Sarah rides with ease and confidence, as though the horse were an extension of herself. In these early scenes, the horse serves as both metaphor and instrument in its reflection of Sarah's ability to channel force through elegance, to remain composed, whilst always prepared for motion or violence. The duck-shooting sequence offers an insight into the court's predatory hierarchy, and reveals Sarah's strength and Abigail's ability to control her emotions. In this scene social dominance is expressed through calculated acts of violence masquerading as sport. During the duck-shooting excursion, Sarah raises her gun and, with calculated precision, fires a shot that grazes past Abigail at near-point-blank range. The act is staged not as casual sport but as a theatrical assertion of dominance and power before the assembled courtiers, collapsing the distinction between non-human animal prey and animalhuman rival. The violence of the gesture, framed against the backdrop of the hunt, places her within the "aristocratic aggression" that reduces both non-human animals and people to quarry. Abigail, does not react to the shot as she neither flinches nor protests. Her calm signals the emergence of a different kind of predator, one who hunts, not through public spectacle, but through stealth, manipulation, and insinuation. Sarah's near-point-blank shot at Abigail is less a jape than a public display of territorial authority, and "aristocratic aggression". However, the subsequent interruption of the scene by a page announcing the Queen wants Abigail alone in her quarters, signals a transfer in the dominance and power dynamics. Sarah is displaced from the Queen's affections, and Abigail's calculated survival shows a change in the courtly hierarchy. Both women, in collapsing the distance between violence and human politics, embody the animalhuman. As hybrid agents their power is defined by their ability to hunt, threaten, and displace within the confines of court ritual.

A different, yet similar, scene in the film is that of the pigeon-shooting which takes place outdoors on the estate, where members of the court gather for a recreational hunt. Both Sarah and Abigail are present and Sarah is seen actively participating and holding the gun as Abigail stands nearby

observing. Sarah offers Abigail a chance to shoot, but Abigail's reply "but they are so pretty" introduces a note of naïveté, echoing an apparently childlike sensitivity. Sarah's comment "Learn to fly faster, pretty will not save you, bird" encapsulates the grotesque fusion of politesse and cruelty that defines the court's social interchanges and status. Ironically, it is Abigail's prettiness, her youth, softness, and blonde delicacy that grants her privilege. The visual contrast between Sarah and Abigail reinforces this animalhuman aesthetic where Sarah, with her dark brown hair and military posture, is symbolically associated with her brown horse, strong, earthy and disciplined. Abigail, by contrast, has fair hair and softer demeanour appearing visually ornamental, almost akin to Anne's pet rabbits. Lanthimos disrupts this dynamic when Sarah shoots a pigeon and its warm blood splatters across Abigail's face in "a visceral tension of attraction and repulsion" (Sobchack 2004: 63). Lanthimos's stages this act not as a pure spectacle of cruelty but as a theatrical positioning of the hierarchy of the court. Abigail, now rendered grotesque by the blood splattered across her face, takes up a gun and successfully shoots a pigeon in response, in a direct act of retaliation and challenge. This scene is one where her prettiness conceals a capacity for cruelty. As Mary Russo notes the grotesque "disrupts the classical ideal by exaggerating, distorting, or displacing the beautiful" (1995: 8). In this way, the human characters emerge as "animalhumans" as their behaviour, exemplified by the brutal shooting of pigeons for sport, far exceeds the conventional and often inaccurate projections of humans as merely "animalistic." The pigeons themselves, by contrast, are caged, released, and then violently killed, their vulnerability and innocence underscoring the human monstrosity playing out in its deliberate pursuit of power politics and killing as amusement. This reveals a capacity for gratuitous and indiscriminate violence that exceeds any non-human animal impulse.

However, Sarah's power present in her symbolic unity with her horse begins to fracture when Abigail secretly poisons Sarah's tea, initiating a slow bodily deterioration that the camera captures with increasing intimacy and disorientation. As Sarah rides through the woods, her posture falters, her vision blurs, and the once-effortless bond between horse and rider begins to dissolve. Her literal fall from the horse marks not only a loss of physical control and courtly power but also initiates a symbolic fall away from human authority as the borders of her body are breached and become abject as she starts to die (Kristeva 1984: 4). This moment foreshadows fall into a state that no longer holds the hierarchical composure of the aristocrat above the animal, but one who begins to

merge with a more instinctual, bodily existence. Inan and Tunç Cox argue that the "physicality of the human and animal bodies in the film emphasizes a grotesque decay" as Sarah endures "violence and degradation" when she is dragged by her horse (2022: 32). This marks the pivotal moment in the transformation from perception of her as controlled in her manipulations. Sarah is thrown down from the horse into mud that represents a reversal of Abigail's failing into mud at the beginning of the film. Sarah's is a fall from power and position where Abigail's represents the start of her ascent within the court structures. Abigail has destroyed her rival using the subtle art of poison rather than more overt means, which underlines her deviousness. She wants her rival to die in pain and in this she resembles the punishments inflicted by the Loners in *The Lobster*. Her behaviour is far more animalhuman than is Sarah's very open and almost masculine power. Abigail's treachery fits well within the human intrigues, vendettas and noxiousness of Anne's court. Abigail, under her veneer is of pretty innocent, is wicked. She is an animalhuman whose vice is not present in the non-human animals in the film. The "pretty bird" has become grotesque in her effort to assume a mantle of power. Injured, Sarah is stripped of the horse's strength and noble qualities and reduced to physical vulnerability. The scene operates as a visual metaphor for her transition into the animalhuman because she is no longer the elevated rider, instead she is a grounded, wounded body. From this point forward, Sarah's behaviour becomes aggressive and reminiscent of a non-human animal's territorial defense and protection of its territory. The animal traits that once signified her control and authority become signs of her marginalisation with a body no longer dominant but damaged and weakened. The symbolic virility of horse and rider is evacuated and Sarah is rendered a grotesque embodiment displaced from power. This inversion of hierarchies is central to the film's shifting power dynamics. As Sarah becomes more unrestrained in behaviour, both in her physical suffering and her reduced capacity for symbolic and rhetorical control, Abigail rises through her scheming and cleverly masked malevolence. Under the veneer of subservience and fluffy blonde sweetness resides a duplicitous grasping at power and preferment. Unlike the educated and straightforward Sarah, Abigail is a she-devil.

Sarah gains consciousness in a disoriented state, slumped in a grimy bed, her face bearing a deep gash. Once a political figure at the apex of courtly life, Sarah now finds herself in a brothel surrounded by the coarse physicality of naked sex workers and the laughter of drunken men. This transition is not just geographical but a change in status because she is now in the "unofficial fleshly

realm of the collective" where the high is brought low and the official body collapses (Bakhtin 1984: 19). Her abrupt displacement into this carnivalesque underside of social order exposes the fragility of her former status and demonstrates how quickly the structures that sustain authority can collapse into materiality and the communal. Crucially, it is also at this moment that Sarah becomes a classical grotesque, her face gashed with a wound so "excessive" that it completely "disrupts her face's symmetry" (Bakhtin 1984: 317). No longer contained within the idealised image of noble femininity, Sarah returns to the castle with the mark of the monster materially inscribed onto her face. In this revenant state, her hybrid presence brings with it a categorical challenge. This abject return unsettles the very hierarchy of the court as it reflects its own underlying dissolution and warpedness. Sarah becomes what Miranda Johnson defines as an abject body that is "feral", "wild" and "wilfully monstrous" (Johnson 2014: 1). In spite of Abigail's attempt to kill her she returns with the intent to "bite back" (Oliver 2009: 284). She finds Abigail seated confidently among the Queen and other members of the courtly elite during a piano performance. Sarah is positioned at the margins of the frame, as an intruder, her revived body a living testimony to the monster that "polices the borders of the possible" (Cohen 1996:12). Her grotesque appearance is no longer congruent with the palace's opulent visual exterior and she is recognised precisely because of this. Sarah is received with gasps and sidelong glances as her presence disrupts the artificial veneer of courtly performance (Bakhtin 1984: 29). Sarah transgresses this seeming elegance and says to Abigail, "Oh dear, the servant is dressed in the clothes of a Lady. How whimsical". Abigail then calmly informs her that she has married into royalty, securing her position within the court. Shortly thereafter, Sarah meets the Queen privately in her bedchamber and urges her to dismiss Abigail, warning, "You must! She is a poisonous viper." Anne, however, lacks the depth or critical acuity to engage with this demand and fixates instead on Sarah's scarred, grotesque appearance. Though Sarah survives Abigail assassination attempt, her poisoned body renders her both more vulnerable and more truthful. She is stripped of her former beauty and social acceptance, and banished from the court by Anne on fabricated charges brought by Abigail. Displaced from her political "herd" at court and stripped of her role as Anne's closest confidante, Sarah moves through the landscape like a solitary, exile marked by an animalhuman watchfulness, calculated approaches, and rapid retreat. Her grace and loyalty are replaced by an edge of desperation and hostility, that "threatens to smash distinctions" as she becomes a hybrid of political cunning with the combative, territorial, and survival-driven behaviours of the non-human animal world. (Cohen 1996: 6). Sarah's

transformation thus reveals the instability of both her human and her symbolic-animal identities. She becomes a singular figure, part mythic monster, part abject body, displaced she shifts into the liminal state of the therianthrope, both animal and human yet neither, occupying a "neither/nor" space (2013: 8, 16, 24). Sarah is now a cultural body that draws together fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (Cohen 1996: 4). She remains tethered to courtly culture yet is positioned outside it and this dual positioning enables her to disturb identity and order, in her in-between and composite bodily and emotional state (Kristeva 1982: 4). Sarah is both feral yet dignified, and the malignancy that lies behind her scarring and loss of position exposes the violence that hides beneath the political manoeuvring in Anne's court. Her exile and return and her rivalry with Abigail lays bare the predatory logic of aristocratic survival and the evils of ambition. By the end of the film, Sarah is a figure in which Lanthimos combines the binaries of human/animal, integrity/inhumanity, and insider/outsider, confronting the viewer with the truth at the film's core which is the survival of the fittest within the grotesque political ecosystem that is Anne's domain. This survival requires the shedding of noble ideals and the embracing of the immorality that underpins the ambition of Abigail and others in the world of the court.

With her scarring, the dynamic between Anne and Sarah becomes sharply intimate and cruel, Anne recoiling at the sight of Sarah declares "Your eye, it scares me-get it away from me". The remark collapses affection into revulsion, framing Sarah's disfigurement as both a mark of otherness and a mirror of Anne's own bodily degeneration. It is this same dynamic of insult and intimacy that resurfaces in the "badger" scene, where Sarah's cutting observation further anchors Anne's animalhuman figuration in the language of grotesque degradation. This "badger scene" occurs when Anne prepares to meet the Russian ambassador, her eye make-up is so heavily applied it becomes a dark, mask-like pattern. Sarah punctures the ceremonial gravitas when she says "You look like a badger." The scene stages a carnivalesque "uncrowning," as it dismantles Anne's position as sovereign (Bakhtin 1984: 370). This absurd appearance breaches and melds the human royal with the non-human animal, undermining Anne's status as her badger-like appearance becomes as grotesque as that of Sarah. Queen Anne's character extends beyond metaphorical representation because "the boundary between humans and animals, symbolically navigated via animal transformation tropes, continuously acts to affirm and shape human identity" (2011: 244). In *The Favourite*, this boundary is not merely navigated but deliberately destabilised with Anne's

animalisation, whether through her bodily excess, volatile temperament, or Sarah's "badger" jibe, which forces a reconfiguration of what constitutes the human and non-human animal. Lanthimos collapses the royal self-image into a hybrid animalhuman form. Anne's image is also one associated with obesity, physical pain, and sexual openness. Her corporeality cannot be disentangled from her political vulnerability, because touch, caress, and bodily proximity become an animalhuman space over which Sarah and Abigail compete to gain social dominance, position and power. The Queen's body becomes the contested "territory" over which Abigail and Sarah compete. Sarah and Abigail both use physical intimacy to assert dominance over the Queen and to mark their place within the hierarchy of the court. However, these interactions are a suspension of hierarchies, as the monarch's body is treated not as an untouchable symbol of sovereign authority, but as a site of physical negotiation. In the Queen's private chambers, official decorum collapses into encounters marked by caresses, massages, and whispered seductions.

The boundaries between pleasure, care, and manipulation become blurred. This is not merely sexualised contact but a mode of grooming and control. The Queen's bedchamber becomes a carnivalesque space where sexual pleasure functions on many levels of indulgence, which yet remain barren. Sexual relationships in the film are seen as lesbian with hints at homosexuality amongst the men in the pelting scene. Though Sarah and Abigail are married their conjugal relationships are not shown. Neither of these women appear fertile. Sarah has no children and Abigail seems to physically avoid and ignore her husband. He has been a means to an end for Abigail, gaining her entrance into the lower levels of nobility. Anne, though she has endured many pregnancies, has no surviving offspring. All relationships at the court seem to consist of a topsy turvy extravagant hedonism, where anything goes. There is little morality and fewer scruples and the veneer of civilised behaviour has ceased to exist. There remains only the animalhuman drive for politic advancement, privilege and power at any cost. The merging of the sexual and political spheres in *The Favourite* reflects a carnivalesque inversion of order, where bodily intimacy becomes a means of destabilising established social boundaries which are eroded as the line between the private and the public, the physical and the political dissolves (Bakhtin 1984: 10, 26). Where Sarah's sexual tactics with Anne are overt, Abigail's are slow, calculated, and cloaked in the guise of tending to Anne's illness, masking strategic intent beneath gentleness and fake concern. Crucially, Abigail never betrays her distaste for touching Anne's afflicted body, though her facial

expressions hint at repulsion. This concealment is itself strategic; by suppressing any sign of aversion, she preserves the illusion of affection, ensuring uninterrupted access to the Queen's favour. The tactics of both women reveal Anne's body as a contested territory. For Sarah, it is an arena for open dominance; for Abigail, a space to infiltrate and claim power through sustained proximity. Here, desire is inseparable from calculated agendas, as each woman, like a predator in a contested habitat, manoeuvres to claim exclusive access to the Queen's body as both a personal and political resource.

However, in this same sexualised private space, Anne keeps her rabbits. The rabbits' quiet presence acts in stark contrast to the grotesque human competition unfolding around them. Where the rabbits embody a consistent, non-violent form of interaction, the animalhumans convert intimacy into a weapon and a game of extravagant "oneup(wo)manship". Anne explicitly clarifies the significance of the rabbits when she says: *"I lost some seventeen children. Some born as blood, some without breath, and some just briefly with me. "Each one is for one of my children… the ones that died"*. The rabbits are a quiet, consistent presence, at times they are directly visible, at others they remain off-screen. Nonetheless, their constant presence is conveyed through faint sounds that emanate from their cages that sustains a sense of the importance of their presence. Queen Anne herself ascribes such delicate meaning and significance to the rabbits, yet her recognition of the rabbits as children is only apparent when they serve her emotional needs and suspended when this support is no longer required. However, as symbols of fertility, loss, and grief, the rabbits inhabit a different register of non-human animality that is marked by constancy and vulnerability. They act in stark contrast to the strategic, selfish and malignant behaviours of the court personified by Anne, Sarah and Abigail's skirmishings. Nevertheless, it is the rabbits that act as the deciding factor as to who will remain, or become, the Queen's favourite. Sarah dismisses the identification of the rabbits as children as "macabre," while Abigail performs feigned care as she gently strokes a rabbit, and softly asks, "May I hold one?" This calculated intimacy enables Abigail to displace Sarah, as she later fully mimics Anne when she says "We should take the children for a walk in the garden". Seifert observes that the symbolic negotiation of the human-animal boundary functions to shape human identity (2011: 244). In *The Favourite* this negotiation is what differentiates Sarah's rationalised authority from Abigail's strategic performance of care, while exposing both figures as never fully human (2011: 244). Sarah defines her humanity through direct opposition to the rabbits, insisting

on clear boundaries between human and non-human animal thus denying the rabbits' status as children. Abigail, by contrast, constructs her identity through performed care, adopting the language and gestures of nurture to secure power. In both cases, agency is mediated through identities shaped by instinct, territoriality, rather than by reason or morals. While the rabbits might initially appear anthropomorphised, I consider that they ultimately resist this reduction. Instead, they function as reflective surfaces through which the performance of human desire, ambition, and authority are exposed as false and brutish. As Seifert's indicates, animals "no matter how anthropomorphic always pose an existential problem for humans", so the rabbits become a potently destabilising presence precisely because their apparent innocence and docility resists resolution (2011: 244).

However, the rabbits also function as an ironic counterpoint to Anne's infertile body as they are culturally associated with excessive fertility which is present in the colloquial expression "fucking like rabbits". They embody reproductive abundance, while Anne's body is marked by repeated miscarriage, sterility, and physical decay. The rabbits with their soft, clean fur and ability to bear young appear in stark contrast to the impure sores and putrescence of Anne's body which is one of abject limit, decay and death (Kristeva 1982: 54). Here, the abject stems not from the processes of birth and decay, but from the absence of life as symbolically possible but, in Anne's case, perpetually withheld. Anne's body thus disrupts boundaries not through seduction, but by combining sovereign authority with physical incapacity, maternal identity with reproductive failure, and symbolic fertility with corporeal decline. Subversive, unruly and leaky, her grotesque body is improper and can be seen as a danger to the social system of the court (Grosz 1994: 192, 203). For Anne, the leakage of her body symbolically signals her inability to contain her court's excesses and her lack of rule, rendering her porous to both physical and political incursion. This porosity is central to the animalhuman dynamic where Anne's failing body becomes a grotesque territory that is fought over to gain political ascendancy. The rabbits, tethered to the Queen's maternal grief, remain untouched by such exploitation and are silent witnesses to the divergence between uncorrupted non-human animality and the manipulative drives of the animalhuman that are premised on venality, greed and dissoluteness. By placing these quiet creatures into this space, Lanthimos underscores that the most corrupt, transgressive, and monstrous behaviours belong not to the non-human animals, but to the humans who act like brutes and whose superiority is more

than questionable. Lanthimos has upended anthropocentricism in favour of the non-human animal's gentle social interaction and innocence.

Following the quiet constancy of the rabbits who nibble their food but remain clean and sleek, the Queen's own consumption exposes a grotesque counterpoint. Her gluttony is not a celebration of life but a site of gross spectacle, particularly in scenes where she consumes to excess and later purges. This is not the joyful, communal feasting associated with renewal, but its inversion; a solitary, compulsive act that signals decay and dissolution and greed. Whereas the rabbits eat simply to live, the Queen's appetite is driven by uncontrolled excess, divorced from survival and steeped in self-indulgence so that her "act of eating… reveals the body's open, unfinished nature, its interaction with the world" as it "swallows, devours, rends the world apart" (Bakhtin 1984: 281-283). Anne's consumption does not enrich and grow from the world but instead swells at the world's expense mirroring the parasitic nature of her court. Anne hoards food and this greed becomes an animalhuman predatory claim upon resources, motivated by dominance rather than necessity (Bakhtin 1984: 223). It is a commentary on the economic and food shortages of her people that as sovereign she should address. This becomes a commentary on the weakening collapse of her rule and the corruption, decadent and dissolute nature of her court. Without the commons, the function of the crown is represented as diseased as Anne's body. The grotesqueness of Anne's body shades into the abject and Kristeva writes of "the spasms and vomiting that protect me" when confronted with filth or waste, a visceral act of rejection that preserves the self (Kristeva 1982: 2-3). In Anne's case, the purging that follows overindulgence embodies this physical expulsion, yet it fails to restore order; instead, it stages her body as a site where boundaries between sovereign refinement and base appetite collapse. The spectacle of her consumption and regurgitation forces the viewer to confront what Kristeva calls "the violence of sobs, of vomit", and it is her body's revolt against its own excess (1982: 3). Anne's gluttony reveals her as a monstrous figure, one who "breaks boundaries" and "threatens to destroy distinctions such as self and other, inside and outside" (Cohen 1996: 3). Her unrestrained appetite blurs the line between ruler and beast, mirroring the destabilising potential that is inseparable from her animalhuman nature. Her consumption is not an act of instinctive hunger, but a calculated indulgence in bodily pleasure that reinforces her political dominance, even as it accelerates her physical deterioration. Thus, in contrast to the rabbits' measured, need-based feeding, the Queen's grotesque excess renders her body as "unfinished" and

“transgressing its own limits” (Bakhtin 1984: 26). It no longer functions as the idealised vessel of sovereign power but as a porous, voracious presence whose appetites both sustain and erode her authority.

By the end of the film, Abigail has secured her place as Maid of the Bedchamber and effectively displaced Sarah and without her presence to moderate Anne’s authority, the Queen’s court descends into an unrestrained spectacle of heightened excess, theatrical performativity, and moral incoherence. The scene in which Abigail hosts a lavish dinner party stages the court’s full transformation into a grotesque carnivalesque spectacle, a “boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed to the official and serious tone” (Bakhtin 1984: 4). Abigail’s appearance becomes one of ridicule. Her heavily painted, clownish face becomes a parody of elegance and a site of caricature exposing the artificiality of her new role (Bakhtin 1984: 303, 308). This grotesque aesthetic mirrors the scene itself, which enters the “second life” of the carnival, a “world turned inside out” governed by its own laws of freedom (Bakhtin 1984: 7, 11). Debauchery abounds as people’s mouths gape open with laughter and as jesters and clowns perform for the elite. There is an abundance of food and wine flowing freely. Abigail is not merely the host of this revelry she almost takes centre stage as a clown herself. In full view of her newlywed husband, Abigail straddles another man’s lap. An acrobat suddenly shoots a big flame of fire from his mouth, and Abigail shrieks “Do it again!” in shameless delight. This marks the moment Abigail’s authority collapses fully into grotesque spectacle, stripping her of dignity and reducing her to farce. Here the carnival’s “merry relativity of prevailing truths and authorities” becomes ever present (Bakhtin 1984: 101). At this stage Abgail’s moral rot is clearly exposed and what was once a certain courtly politesse has now imploded into animalistic debased chaos. For Abigail who is now at the apex of her power in the court, her debauch is indeed one of hedonistic degradation. However, it lacks the distinctive regenerative qualities of Bakhtin’s degradation that is paradoxically positive, and in this way Abigail’s degradation is turned on its head and pointed right back onto her (Bakhtin 1984: 19).

Queen Anne calls for Abigail during the dinner. While chaos ensues in the castle, Abigail is without a doubt still subject to the queen. Sarah’s earlier remark to Abigail “By God, you actually think you have won”, acquires force in the subsequent scenes, which reveal the instability underlying Abigail’s apparent triumph. As she stumbles into the room, she attempts to talk to Anne but vomits

into a vase, further eroding at her veneer of refinement. Anne slumps drunkenly in her chair as one of her rabbits wanders beneath it. Without thought or compassion, Abigail presses her heel down onto the unsuspecting rabbit and idly, with a bored, display of dominance kills it. There is no real change in facial expression but a malignant glee in her eyes that reveals her iniquity and detestation of the rabbits. This is reminiscent of the killing of Bob the dog and the donkey in *The Lobster*, a casual act of murder, simply because the non-human animal is a meaningless being and can therefore be killed at will as a form of indifferent revenge. The rabbit, like Bob, does not fight back or make a sound when Abigail crushes it. Abigail's behaviour mirrors her earlier calculated touching of the rabbit, but now stripped of any pretence of actual interest or caring. Through this act, Abigail completes her transformation into the animalhuman as she masks strategic violence within seemingly innocuous conduct, slipping between nurture and malignant cruelty as the situation demands and what she feels she can get away with. The rabbits themselves act as foils to her heinous and callous actions, as they remain consistent in their innocence. They are markers of Anne's vulnerability, and emblems of a non-human animality that does not corrupt, manipulate, or betray. As Petkova notes, "the metaphorical position of the rabbit extends further, for it cannot know its own end" but in its dying the rabbit becomes equated with the "deceased child" and will reconfigure the relationship between Anne and Abigail (2022: 159). The rabbit's role as both literal creature and symbolic vessel and its lack of awareness of its death reinforces its position as innocent. The symbolic link between the rabbit and Anne's deceased children deepens the emotional resonance of the scene, collapsing boundaries between non-human animal, child, and sovereign. Simultaneously, it implicates Abigail in a disturbing tableau where care and violence merge. Where the rabbits embody a form of life untouched by deceit, the human characters (Abigail most of all) reveal the grotesque nature of cunning, evil and machinations for power and control that highlight and enforce the animalhuman traits of those who inhabit the court. In this juxtaposition, Lanthimos dismantles the romantic myth that human exceptionalist elevates the human above the non-human animal. Rather, Lanthimos portrays the non-human animals as dignified, where the humans are exposed as the true site of moral degradation and thus become animalhumans.

In the final scene of *The Favourite*, the viewer witnesses a bizarre visual sequence in which images blend into one another as Queen Anne's face dissolves into a swarm of rabbits. These elements are reshaped into hybrid, unsettlingly and unfamiliar forms as they traverse the threshold between the human and the non-human. Lanthimos's films employ grotesque elements that Ruth Perlmutter describes as a "distinct cinematic language," characterised by visual distortion and the "fusion of the human and the inhuman" (Perlmutter 1978: 168-170). The image is at once intimate and disturbing as the Queen's features are superimposed onto the soft bodies of the rabbits, producing a composite form that is simultaneously human and non-human, regal and inhuman. This grotesque filmic image is simultaneously occupying multiple states of being, while belonging fully to neither and thus "neither one" (Cassuto 1997: 6). The result is a collapsing of the monarch and her symbolic stand-ins for dead children into a single abject organism The rabbits' proximity to Anne transforms them from tokens of loss into visceral extensions of her body, as they act to highlight her corporeal and emotional decay. Sylvie Debevec Henning's observation that in the grotesque boundaries give way to "overlays and imbrications" which becomes literal in Lanthimos's layered composition as fur and flesh, grief and possession, life and death are conceptually interwoven (Henning 1981: 4). The Queen is neither entirely human nor entirely animal, neither sovereign nor subject, but suspended in a liminal state of animalhuman hybridity. In this way, I argue that the closing vision of Lanthimos is grotesque in its violation of categories, abject in its collapse of bodily and symbolic boundaries, and monstrous in its persistence as an image that resists being fully seen, named, or contained. Anne's figuration is articulated through her grotesque corporeality with her swollen legs, ulcerated skin and voracious appetite. She is the ultimate grotesque body, one that is no longer proper, clean or contained by the integument of her outer skin. The closing images represents a collapse of the boundaries s between life and death, human and animal, monarch and subject. In both cases, Lanthimos uses animalhuman hybridity to dismantle the myth of human exceptionalism.

In this chapter, I have traced how *The Favourite's* three central women, Queen Anne, Lady Sarah, and Abigail undergo grotesque, abject, and monstrous transformations into animalhumans. Through Bakhtin's grotesque realism, Kristeva's abjection, and Cohen's monster theory, I have revealed how each woman's body and behaviour become liminal, thereby destabilising the boundaries between the concept of the animal and the human, decorum and brutality, sovereignty and subjugation. For Sarah, her disfiguring eye injury marks a break from symmetry and the proper

body, because it makes her appear as residing in “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (1982: 4). Her facial deformation and asymmetry become a form of monstrous transformation that challenges the socially accepted body (Bakhtin1984: 316). Cast out from the court and returning with her previous beauty damaged, she becomes an entity of otherness that reflects back to the courtiers their own inner animalhuman monstrousness, thereby disrupting the fragile veneer of courtly order. Anne’s corporeal excess and ultimate merging with her rabbits, Sarah’s scarred face and feral dignity, and Abigail’s oscillation between care and calculated harm each enact an animalhuman inversion, where “animal” precedes “human” to foreground traits falsely ascribed to animality but revealed as fundamentally human. Against this, Lanthimos’s non-human animals remain uncorrupted, retaining their distinctiveness while functioning as mirrors that reflect the cruelty, moral decay, and predatory instincts of the human characters. The rabbits, ducks, and other court animals expose the hollowness of human propriety, inverting the traditional hierarchy so that dignity resides with the non-human. By juxtaposing the humans’ grotesque hybridity with the animals’ unchanging innocence, I have argued that Lanthimos’s film dismantles the myth of human exceptionalism and reconfigures Anne’s court as a carnivalesque menagerie, where survival demands the shedding of noble ideals and the embrace of hybrid and boundary-dissolving forms.

CHAPTER 4- CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined some key scenes of Yorgos Lanthimos' films *The Lobster* and *The Favourite* and how these transgress the human/non-human animal boundary. In my critical reading of Lanthimos's narrative use of hybridity, I have attempted to reveal that the alienation and alterity of the human characters is in their disruptive depiction or what Annie Potts has referred to as the 'humananimal' (2007: 150). Potts's argument that animals have always been crucial in defining the experiencing of human existence, even though this relationship has often been characterised by negation, remains reliant on human acceptance that they "are always already animal too" (Potts 2007: 152). Laurence Simmons and Philip Armstrong, offered another possible term, namely that of the "humanimal" which they argued acts as a reminder of the intricate connections between humans and animals and the importance of the relationships between humans and other non-human animal species (Simmons and Armstrong 2007: 15). In considering the current terminology human-animal, or Potts's use of the non-hyphenated "humananimal" or, the hyphenated human-animal or in the use of the slash as human/animal, the constructions still appeared guilty of privileging the human over the non-human animal. I instead settled on altering the human/non-human animal binary to the animalhuman without the separating hyphen or slash. I consider that this conflation provides a more fluid term with which to explore the figuring of the human as animal in my chosen films. Whilst I acknowledge that this structure might be considered as having subtly adverse connotations and be somewhat awkward, I regard it as better suited to my examination of Lanthimos's depiction of the brutish nature of the human characters in my chosen films. This behaviour I indicated existed in stark contrast to the way in which Lanthimos's non-human animal are depicted. In other words, my argument upended the idea of the human as civilised, enlightened and moral. Instead, it argued that Lanthimos's portrayal of his human characters reveals them as grotesque monsters who are cruel, depraved and brutal in contrast to the innocuous and non-threatening behaviour of the non-human animals. Furthermore, I examined how Lanthimos's conceptualisation of the monstrous nature of hybridity in the films resulted in the dissolution of the boundaries between what it is to be human and how this is premised on the projection, through language, of perceived unwelcome traits onto the non-human animal.

Lanthimos's human characters as animalhumans can be seen to become grotesque and hybrid creatures which I have briefly shown as related to the classical hybrids associated with ancient Greece and the Middles Ages. These were often depicted with grotesque features, indicating a cultural dialogue about the natural and the unnatural, serving as a powerful medium for exploring and challenging established norms and boundaries (Hughes 2010: 104-105). Most of Lanthimos's films subtly engage with Greek mythology, and this idea of classical hybridity as informing his portrayal of his human and non-human animals, is one that I have attempted to incorporated into my analysis of *The Lobster* and *The Favourite*. Therefore, in my examination of Lanthimos's employment of the lack of division between non-human animal and human, I focused on how demarcation of boundaries is made fluid so that they act to "disturb human identity" and the system of societal order and societal norms (Kristeva 1982: 4). Furthermore, I have demonstrated that Lanthimos's juxtapositioning of the animalhuman and the non-human animals ensures that hierarchies are destabilised, and what hides beneath the societal ideas of human superiority are revealed as grotesque, abject and depraved. In Lanthimos's film the menace of the transitional being and the obvious confusion that exists in the animalhuman acts to challenge the body of the "legitimate cultural order" (Cavallaro 2002: 200-201). I have suggested that Lanthimos relishes exposing such confusion and the transgression of legitimate forms of civilised behaviour, or those of "legitimate cultural order", whether it is in the opening scene of *The Lobster* with the bizarre shooting of donkeys on the side of the road or the scene in *The Favourite* when aristocratic young men are found pelting one of their own with fruit and other items. This behaviour I considered is transgressive and oddly abnormal and resides at the heart of an "otherness within sameness" central to his portrayal of his human characters. Across both films I have examined how the non-human animals remain comparatively restrained, mute, and ethically opaque, while the human characters descend into excess, cruelty, and moral incoherence. This inversion dismantles the long-standing humanist assumption that violence, domination, and irrationality originate in non-human animality. Instead, Lanthimos can be seen to locate monstrosity firmly within the human sphere, revealing brutality, manipulation, and ethical failure as distinctly human reactions.

Lanthimos's films can be productively read through a mythic and folkloric lens that resembles the pre-modern traditions of fable, beast literature, and monstrous hybridity. Importantly, this does not mean that the films "moralise" in the manner of traditional fable. On the contrary, the presence of the non-human animals does not guide the human toward reform but instead exposes the impossibility of such a reform within the human social order. The animalhuman figures in *The Lobster* and *The Favourite* recall the grotesque beasts of medieval satire and beast epics, not as speaking animals but as figures that reveal human behaviour to be strange, excessive, and monstrous. This aspect of fable is much the same as the therianthropes or hybrid beings that Lanthimos appears to revive a bestial mode of invention in which meaning is generated through juxtaposition and inversion rather than through narrative closure. These aspects offered the possibility of a reading of Lanthimos's film from a mythic or fable-based perspective. As with beast literature, identity in Lanthimos's worlds is unstable, contingent, and performative and his human figures drift toward monstrosity not because they fail to control their animal instincts, but because they embody the aspects that mythic beasts were historically used to critique. The animalhuman thus occupies the same conceptual terrain as the grotesque beast. In my argument it is a hybrid figure whose purpose is to make visible the contradictions that sustain human authority. In my analysis of the two films, I have shown how such hybrid figures from myth operate not at the level of plot, but at the level of grotesque and monstrous human behaviour. By situating Lanthimos's animalhumans as what are termed therianthropes, this study demonstrated that his critique of human exceptionalism is neither exclusively contemporary nor purely absurdist, but grounded in an older, more unsettling narrative tradition, one in which the beast does not teach humans how to be better, but reveals why they cannot be.

While *The Lobster* and *The Favourite* differ markedly in tone, setting, and visual excess, they operate according to the same grotesque logic of carnivalesque inversion. *The Lobster* establishes this logic structurally through ritualised stillness, bureaucratic cruelty, and the anticipation of transformation, producing a world in which humans willingly police themselves into ethical vacancy. *The Favourite*, by contrast, intensifies the same critique through intimacy, spectacle, and bodily excess, embedding grotesque hybridity within historical performance and sovereign power. In both films, I have suggested that the non-human animals occupy an uneasy proximity to the human and are alternately cherished or destroyed, yet are never themselves grotesque. It is the

human characters who increasingly exhibit the behaviours conventionally projected onto animals, thereby collapsing the presumed hierarchy between civility and instinct. Importantly, this study has resisted readings that attribute human violence to animal instinct, a move that risks reinscribing the very hierarchies Lanthimos interrogates. Against Hobbesian accounts of innate brutality and contemporary interpretations that frame animality as the source of human savagery, the films can instead be seen to locate empathy, restraint, and social regulation firmly within non-human animal worlds. The non-human animals in Lanthimos's films do not "bite back" because they are not the source of the harm. They function, rather, as silent witnesses whose presence overtly and unmistakable exposes human cruelty reflecting this back at the viewer. The originality of this dissertation lies in its reorientation of critical attention away from animals as isolated metaphors and toward the relational configurations through which human monstrosity is produced. By foregrounding the animalhuman as a grotesque figure emerging through juxtaposition, proximity, and ethical contrast, the study demonstrates that Lanthimos's critique of human exceptionalism does not depend on imagining animals as moral exemplars or victims alone. Instead, it exposes the human as grotesque precisely insofar as it insists on its separation from, and superiority over, the non-human.

Evaluating the scenes of animal harm across both films I have suggested reveals human socialised monstrosity. In *The Lobster*, the hunted animals of the forest, the shooting of the donkey, and the killing of Bob the dog operate along a spectrum of distance and intimacy. While the forest hunts and the donkey's execution are brutal, they occur in a space that is abstract and acts to distance the viewer from the violence that occurs. By contrast, Bob's death unfolds within an enclosed domestic interior and targets an animal culturally configured as a companion rather than as game or livestock. A comparable logic structures *The Favourite* where the pigeon shooting staged as amusement, the horse's fall, and the racing of ducks register cruelty as casual or recreational, yet they retain a degree of narrative and spatial remove. The rabbit's killing, however, occurs in a confined, private setting and involves an animal explicitly framed as not only a pet, but as a child. Across both films, the most potent moments of animal harm are thus those enacted in intimate spaces and against animals most readily assimilated into human domestic and affective spaces. This exposes the inconsistency of human moral reasoning, where the non-human animal's killing is somehow less important if it does not resemble, serve, or comfort the human subject. What I have tried to address

briefly is how Lanthimos exploits the murder of pets to indict human exceptionalism. It is not the cruelty that disturbs the viewer but the intrusion of this into spaces and relationships presumed to be safe, private, and humane. Further scholarship could be done to consider this interplay of the killing of wild animal versus that of domestic and its ramifications for the viewer as well as how humans assign value and normalise harm within a certain conceptual framework.

The concept of the animalhuman as developed in this dissertation need not be confined to a reading of *The Lobster* and *The Favourite* but is well-suited to the analysis of Lanthimos' more recent film *Poor Things* (2023). In this film hybridity becomes explicit in the film's overt engagement with the Frankenstein theme. The character Bella Baxter's reanimation situates her within a lineage of fabricated bodies whose animation collapses distinctions between birth and construction. The monstrous in this film is not an external threat but an embodied condition that exposes the instability of the category of the "human". This hybridity is further literalised through the film's proliferation of composite animals, most conspicuously dogs with chicken heads and other visibly stitched organisms. As in *The Lobster* and *The Favourite*, further scholarship could examine how the non-human animals and animalised bodies in *Poor Things* destabilise human authority. Moreover, *Poor Things* renders explicit what remains abstract in the earlier films that the grotesque body can be considered a site of invention. Bella's excessive appetites, exaggerated curiosity, and refusal of behavioural containment reveal a grotesque body that is "unfinished" and perpetually transgressive. Her treatment by surrounding figures reproduces the same pattern of domination identified throughout this current study's examination of *The Lobster* and The *Favourite*. *Poor Things* does not mark a thematic departure from Lanthimos's previous films but a culmination bringing into overt visibility the mythic, bestial, and grotesque structures that this dissertation has shown to underpin Lanthimos's *The Lobster* and *The Favourite* but which can be seen as applying to his oeuvre as a whole. The originality of this dissertation on Lanthimos's films resides in its shifting critical attention away from the non-human animal as a symbolic or allegorical figure and resides in the exposing of Lanthimos's human characters as unstable, grotesques and therianthropic forms. This alterity of the human characters that is situated in the conjunction and juxtaposition to the non-human animal foregrounded the monstrous and grotesque animality of the human characters in his films *The Lobster* and *The Favourite*. Lanthimos's films demand that the viewer recognise the disparity between human behaviour, bodily excess, and moral disintegration and that

of the dignified and harmless behaviour of non-human animals within the filmic narrative. This approach offers a critical gap in the study of Lanthimos's films and potentially opens up a fruitful avenue for further scholarly research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

Lanthimos, Y. (2015) *The Lobster*. Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, France, Netherlands: Element Pictures; Film4; Haut et Court; Lemming Film.

Lanthimos, Y. (2019) *The Favourite*. United Kingdom, Ireland, United States: Element Pictures; Film4 Productions; Waypoint Entertainment.

Secondary Sources:

Abrams, M.H. and Harpham, G.G. (2013) *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10th edn. Boston: Cengage Learning.

Armstrong, P. and Simmons, L. (2007) 'Knowing Animals Bestiary: An Introduction', in *Knowing Animals*. Leiden: Brill, pp.1-24.

Baker, S. (2008) *Postmodern Animal*. London: Reaktion Books.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by M. Holquist. Translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1984) *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by H. Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Barker, J. M. (2018). A Horse Is a Horse, Of Course, Of Course: Animality, Transitivity, and the Double Take. *Somatechnics*, 8(1), 1-16. Edinburgh University Press Journals.

Beal, T. (2022) *Religion and Its Monsters*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781003007302.

Bhabha, H.K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Biscaia, M.S.P. (2011) *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

Burt, J. (2002) *Animals in Film*. London: Reaktion Books.

Canguilhem, G. (2022) *Monstrosity and the Monstrous*. In Canguilhem, Georges, Knowledge of Life, pp. 134-148: Fordham University Press.

Carroll, N. (1990) *The Philosophy of Horror*: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart. New York and London: Routledge.

Cassuto, L. (1997) *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Cavallaro, D. (1999) *Kristeva for Beginners*. New York; London: Writers and Readers.

Clark, J.R. (1991) *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and its Traditions*. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky.

Cohen, J.J. (1996) *Monster Culture* (Seven Theses), in Cohen, J.J. (ed.) Monster Theory: Reading Culture. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Connelly, F. S. (2012) *The grotesque in Western Art and Culture: the Image at Play*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Connell, K. (2019) ‘The Precarious Politics of Yorgos Lanthimos’s The Favourite’, Another Gaze, Available at: https://www.anothergaze.com/precarious-politics-yorgos-lanthimoss-favourite-feminist-queer-lesbian/

Cooper, S. (2016) 'Narcissus and The Lobster (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015)', *Studies in European Cinema*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 163-176. https://doi.org/10.1080/17411548.2016.1216373

Corich, I. and Sedgwick, L. (2017) *Gothic Dissections in Film and Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Creed, B. (1993) *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.

Danta, C. (2018) *Animal Fables after Darwin: Literature, Speciesism, and Metaphor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Derrida, J. (2008) *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Dorrian, M. (2000) ‘On the Monstrous and the Grotesque’, *Architectural Design*, 70(1), pp. 312–315.

Duncan, I. (2019) *Human Forms: The Novel in the Age of Evolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctvc77g24.

Eagleton, Terry (1981). *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. London: Verso.

Edwards, J.D. and Graulund, R. (2013) *Grotesque*. London: Routledge.

Falvey, E. (ed.) (2022) *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos*: Films, Form, Philosophy. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Foucault, M. (2003) *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France*, 1974–1975. New York: Picador.

Fudge, E. (2002) *Animal*. London: Reaktion Books.

Galt, R. (2017) 'The Animal Logic of Contemporary Greek Cinema', Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, 58(1–2), pp. 7–27.

Gloyn, L. (2019) *Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Griffith, M. (2013) *Animal Subjects: Literature, Zoology, and British Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grosz, E. (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Gutman, P.S. (2020) 'Blurring the Lines between Victim and Perpetrator: Yorgos Lanthimos and the Legacy of Stanley Kubrick', in *After Kubrick: A Filmmaker's Legacy*. (ed) Jeremi Szaniawski. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 87–104.

Harpham, G.G. (1976) 'The Grotesque: First Principles', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34(4), pp. 461–468.

Harpham, G.G. (1982) *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Henning, S.D. (1981) 'Forme In-Formante: A Reconsideration of the Grotesque'*, Mosaic*, 14(4), pp. 107–121.

Hobbes, T. (1982) *Leviathan*. Edited by C.B. Macpherson. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Hughes, J. (2010) *Dissecting the Classical Hybrid*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hughes, K. (2012) *Equestrian Cultures: Horses, Human Society, and the Disruption of Nature*. London: Routledge.

Johnson, M. (2014) 'The Other Who Precedes and Possesses Me: Confronting the Maternal/Animal Divide Through the Art of Botched Taxidermy'. *Feral Fem*, 6, pp.68-81.

Karkani, I. (2022) 'Bodies Out of Place: Ontological Adriftness in The Lobster', in Falvey, E. (ed.) *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 67–80.

Koutsourakis, A. (2022) 'Kafkaesque Themes in The Lobster', in Falvey, E. (ed.) T*he Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 103-116.

Kristeva, J. (1980) *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lanthimos, Y. (2009) *Dogtooth*. Greece: Boo Productions.

Lanthimos, Y. (2017) *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*. Ireland, United Kingdom: Element Pictures; Film4 Productions.

Lanthimos, Y. (2023) *Poor Things*. United States, United Kingdom, Ireland: Element Pictures; Searchlight Pictures.

Lawrence, M. and McMahon, L. (2015) *Animal Life and the Moving Image*. London: Bloomsbury.

Lefkowitz, J. B. (2014). 'Aesop and Animal Fable'. In G. L. Campbell (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life* (pp. 1-23). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leszkiewicz, A. (2019) '"Ugly, gouty, fat": the problem of Queen Anne's body', New Statesman, 18 January. Available at: https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2019/01/ugly-gouty-fat-queen-anne-body

Lippit, A.M. (2000) *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lipiner, M. and Abrams, N. (2022) 'Animal Instincts: Fear, Power, and Obedience in the Films of Yorgos Lanthimos and Stanley Kubrick', in E. Falvey (ed.) *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 117–132.

Lykidis, A. (2022) 'Rethinking the Heritage Film: Gothic Critique in The Favourite', in Falvey, E. (ed.) *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 199–218.

Metzidakis, S. (2014) 'No Bones to Pick with Lanthimos's Film Dogtooth'*, Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 32(2), pp. 367–392.

Mitchell, F. (2021) *Monsters in Greek Literature: Aberrant Bodies in Ancient Greek Cosmogony, Ethnography, and Biology*. 1st edn. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781003094494.

Oliver, K. (2009) *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Oxford English Dictionary (1993) 2nd edn. Vol. VI. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Potts, A (2007) 'The Mark of the Beast: Inscribing 'animality' through extreme body modification'. In: L. Simmons and P. Armstrong (eds), *Knowing Animals*. 1st ed. Leiden: Brill, pp. 34.

Perlmutter, R. (1978) 'Cinema of the Grotesque', *Film Quarterly*, 32(1), pp. 168–170.

Petkova, S. (2022) ‘Dog, Lobster, Deer, Rabbit: Yorgos Lanthimos’s Animal Metaphors’, in Falvey, E. (ed.) *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 149–164.

Psaras, M. (2022) ‘The Queer Posthumanism of The Lobster’, in Falvey, E. (ed.) *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 259–276.

Robertson, V.L.D. (2013). ‘The Beast Within: Anthrozoomorphic Identity and Alternative Spirituality in the Online Therianthrophy Movement.’ *Nova Religio*, 16(3), pp.7–30. https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2013.16.3.7.

Romo, S. (2019) ‘Review of The Favourite,’ *History in the Making*: 12(23) doi: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol12/iss1/23

Seifert, L.C. (2011) ‘Animal-Human Hybridity in d’Aulnoy’s Babiole and Prince Wild Boar’, *Marvels and Tales*, 25(2), pp. 244–260.

Siddique, S. and Raphael, R. (eds.) (2016) *Transnational Horror Cinema: Bodies of Excess and the Global Grotesque*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shaw, B. (2010) *The Animal Fable in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Shildrick, M. (2002) *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. SAGE publications.

Sobchack, V. (2004) *Carnal Thoughts*: *Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Stallybrass, P. and White, A. (1986) *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Steig, M. (1970) ‘Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 29(2), pp. 253–260. doi:10.1111/1540-6245.jaac29.2.0261.

Stevens, B.E. (2023) ‘A Necropolitics of Posthuman Bodies? Yorgos Lanthimos’s The Lobster’, in Stevens, B.E. (ed.) *Ancient Necropolitics*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 209–233. doi:10.1163/9789004718432_011.

Thomson, R.G. (1997) *Extraordinary bodies: figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Thomson, P. (2017) *The Grotesque*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Warner, M. (1996) *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Vintage.

Webb, C. and Hopcroft, H. (2017) ‘Animals, Transformation, and Rationality in The Tiger’s Bride’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), pp. 317–329.

Wolfe, C. (2003) *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wolfe, C. and Elmer, J. (1995) ‘Subject to Sacrifice: Ideology, Psychoanalysis, and the Discourse of Species in The Silence of the Lambs’*, boundary 2*, 22(1), pp. 117–141.

Wright, A. (2013) *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Wright, T. (2018) *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*. London: Forgotten Books.

Zettl, N. (2022) ‘Consider the Absurd: Uneasy Proximity in Dogtooth, The Lobster, and The Killing of a Sacred Deer’, in Falvey, E. (ed.) T*he Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 133–148.