



Locarno Film Festival
Official selection



SPACE DOGS

A FILM BY ELSA KREMSER AND LEVIN PETER

WORLD PREMIERE

Concorso Cineasti del presente
72nd Locarno Film Festival

Friday, August 9th
18:30 - PalaCinema Sala1

PRESS SCREENING

Thursday, August 8th
18:00 - Teatro Kursaal

A production of RAUMZEITFILM in coproduction with IT WORKS



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SPACE DOGS

A FILM BY ELSA KREMSEK AND LEVIN PETER

Narrated by ALEXEY SEREBRYAKOV Produced, written & directed by ELSA KREMSEK & LEVIN PETER
Coproducer ANNEKATRIN HENDEL Director of Photography YUNUS ROY IMER
Sound SIMON PETER, JONATHAN SCHORR Editors JAN SOLDAT, STEPHAN BECHINGER
Sound Design JONATHAN SCHORR Original Score PARADOX PARADISE

91 Min - 1:2,39 - Color & B/W - 2K - Dolby 5.1 - Russian with English/French/German subtitles - Austria, Germany - 2019

Photos and PressKit downloadable on
www.spacedogsfilm.com

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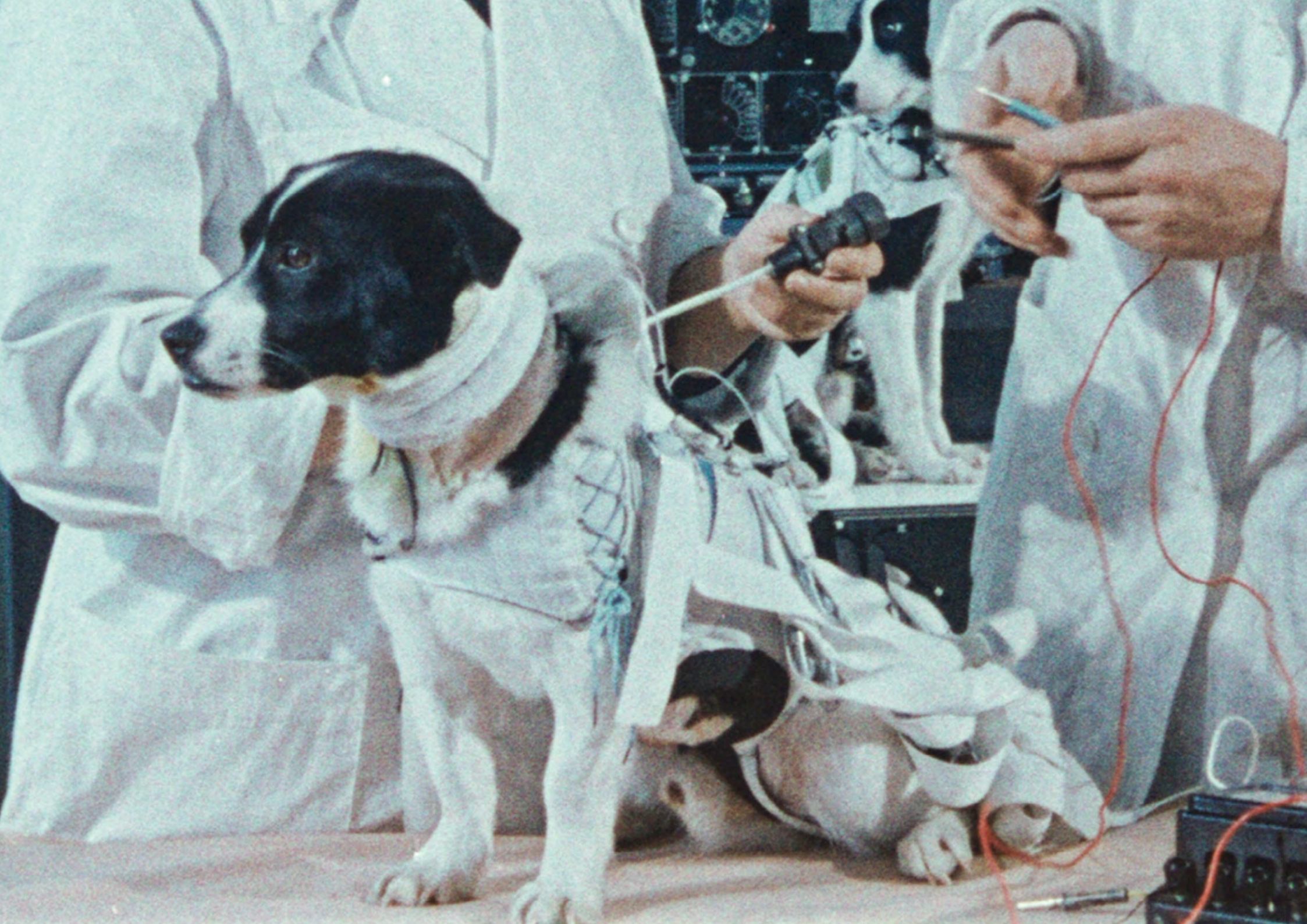
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LOGLINE

How a Moscow street dog was send into space and returned as a ghost.

SYNOPSIS

Laika, a stray dog, was the first living being to be sent into space and thus to a certain death. According to a legend, she returned to Earth as a ghost and has roamed the streets of Moscow ever since. Following her trace, and filmed from a dog's perspective, *SPACE DOGS* accompanies the adventures of her descendants: two street dogs living in today's Moscow. Their story is one of intimate fellowship but also relentless brutality, and is interwoven with unseen archive material from the Soviet cosmic era. A magical tale of voyagers scouting for unknown spaces.

ДИСКИ

развал 3D

Магазин за авто и мото

ДИСКИ

ЦЕНТР ПРОДАЖ И СЕРВИС

СТО КОЛА



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

*Elsa Kremser & Levin Peter
July 2019*

It was a Moscow street dog that was the first living being to orbit the Earth some millions of years after our planet 's creation. And it is this absurd moment in human history that moved us from the very beginning. We knew that this narrative had not yet reached its conclusion. What happened when Laika's dead body burnt up on re-entering the Earth's atmosphere?

As we watched archive footage of a dog in space looking into the camera for minutes, the central question of the film arose: what do dogs see in us humans? This question finally led us to today's Moscow, where we met Laika's possible descendants and continued their story through them. During the six months we spent with the dogs on the streets of Moscow, we often felt observed and scrutinised by them. Little by little we realised that we knew these animals only as part of our world; we didn't know ourselves as part of theirs. That's why we made street dogs the protagonists of our film. They take the place normally reserved in cinema for humans. We wanted to create a cinematic experience in which dogs lead us through the city. Telling their story means revealing the cracks of a city. The dogs dwell where human control fades, where the city decays and new spaces are created. So these

animals on the streets are the ever-questing discoverers of unknown worlds. On their obscure nocturnal prowlings they encounter people who are also strays and outcasts, stranded in the ruins of time.

This film is about the relationship of another species to us humans. A species that has been used in space history in two ways: both as an experimental object and as a symbol of courage and heroism. The dogs had to fulfil mankind's dream by conquering the cosmos for them. Their story became a fable, a nascent legend, of a bitterness that we chose to illustrate.

Space Dogs is dedicated to these fables and legends, to unknown worlds and to their discoverers.

BIOGRAPHY

ELSA KREMSER

Born 1985 in Wolfsberg/Austria, Elsa Kremser studied Film at the University of Vienna and the Filmakademie Ludwigsburg. As an author and producer, she realized several documentaries that were shown worldwide. Her diploma film NEBEL premiered at the Berlinale. In 2016 she founded the Vienna-based production company RAUMZEITFILM with Levin Peter. As a directing duo, they are currently working on their first fiction feature, THE GREEN PARROT, which received the Berlinale Kompagnon Script Award.

FILMOGRAPHY

2019 Space Dogs



BIOGRAPHY

LEVIN PETER

Born 1985 in Jena/Germany, Levin Peter studied at the Filmakademie Ludwigsburg where he realized several documentaries that were shown worldwide. His diploma film BEYOND THE SNOWSTORM won the German Upcoming Film Award and was presented as a Guest at the Berlinale. In 2016 he founded the Vienna-based production company RAUMZEITFILM with Elsa Kremser. As a directing duo, they are currently working on their first fiction feature, THE GREEN PARROT, which received the Berlinale Kompagnon Script Award.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2019 Space Dogs
- 2016 Beyond the Snowstorm
- 2016 For Whom I Might Die (*short*)
- 2012 A Promise
- 2010 Sonor (*short*)
- 2008 Prestes Maia (*short*)







INTERVIEW

by Karin Schiefer
Austrian Film Commission
July 2019

One can read on the website of your production company RAUMZEITFILM: „We are heading for unconventional forms of cinema that deal with the perception of space and time.“ Was it, so to speak, a given that your first film would involve the cosmos and its exploration?

Elsa Kremser: Not necessarily. The special relationship between space and time that our production company is dedicated to investigating doesn't relate only to the cosmos. In SPACE DOGS we assume a dog's perspective. If one spends as much time with them as we have, it alters one's perception of space and time. The same necessary occurs in cinematic space if one spends ninety minutes with dogs.

What was the basis of your initial ideas about this unusual story?

E.K.: Our very first idea was to concentrate on dogs in a pack. There was as yet no talk of Laika, the first dog in space. We wanted to deal with living beings in an intuitive way, one that hadn't yet been featured in cinema narration, and tell a story with them.

Levin Peter: A dog's heart. A dog soul. If you spend a lot of time among street dogs and

observing them, the idea of their soul becomes salient. We had the feeling there hadn't yet been a cinematic encounter with the life of a dog's soul. We associated Laika with the idea that millions of years after the creation of the Earth, the first living creature to circle the planet in a metal capsule was a Moscow street dog who had to create a new form of life between the wilderness and humans. We thought this was a great parable and took it as our approach. We wondered what had happened once she'd circled the planet as a dead body in a metal capsule for a hundred days and the capsule had re-entered the Earth's atmosphere. We saw enormous potential for a story in this.

E.K.: We came upon Laika as we began to get involved with the pack. We wondered how street dogs perceive the city from their eye level. What kind of world is it, this one that goes unnoticed by us? And at the same time we were looking for an abstraction, a metaphor, that reflected this. It was during this phase we first learned that Laika had been a street dog. Hundreds of dogs were taken from the street and trained. Laika had lived on the street for two years. Could it be that her descendants still roam the streets today? What happened to the creature, now beyond animate space, in the moment when its body was burnt up and scattered into nothingness? Scientists explained to us that the particles do indeed sink slowly to Earth. This can take up to sixty or even a hundred years. In this moment the illuminating idea of Laika's spirit on the streets of Moscow came to us.

The Russian off-text seems very poetic in translation. Did you have a literary/textual basis before you started to develop the corresponding images?

L.P.: The text is based on research. We managed to acquire notes, scientific publications and also diaries by the scientists who worked with the dogs back then. This additional level found its way into the film at a relatively late stage and ultimately coloured everything due to the Soviet fashion of formulating scientific thought. Some of the scientists' publications read like fairy tales. We also met five eye witnesses who'd worked on the programme and who knew the dogs, including Laika. Even their manner of speech and register was flowery, almost fairytale-like. So a mixture of what we've experienced and what we drew from archive material came about.

How did you „cast“ your dogs?

E.K.: We spent around two months in Moscow choosing a pack. One really can call it casting, since we wanted dogs who would be real protagonists, that is, strong of character and sufficiently sociable with us, yet also actually wild. We searched from the city centre all the way to the last corners of the outermost periphery, meeting a whole gamut of street dogs while experiencing all manner of things and hearing all manner of stories, some of them presumably exaggerated, which was by no means a bad thing for our script; it was able to grow from that.

How did you approach your animal protagonists?

L.P.: They speak a very clear language, especially within the group, and we followed this lead. Where the city breaks down and disintegrates and new space opens up is where there are dogs. We tried to scan these places. Whenever we came to an unknown place and discovered dogs the procedure was always similar: at first just one dog would approach us, then we'd make out the others behind it. At the first meeting with the „scout“ it was immediately apparent whether we could continue our visit or whether we'd do better to leave.

E.K.: Many packs are at first totally confused if you just stand there, watching and waiting. But this also engendered curiosity and another form of contact. Things took a very long time with our pack. Without a basis that had taken root so slowly, we would never have achieved what we did by the end of the shoot, namely being able to follow them without them always waiting for rewards.

Your narrative is structured in day and night sequences. How did this basic scheme come about and how did you find suitable locations in that vast city?

L.P.: We quickly noticed that the dogs had routines and were predominantly out and about at night and in the early morning. I remember early research-outings where we'd just find a handful of somnolent dogs at noon.

At dawn we suddenly discovered that the streets were full of dogs and that there would be territory-fights. It was in those moments, where humans were absent, that the film took shape.

How did you manage filming always at the dogs eye level?

L.P.: We wouldn't have made this film five years ago for technical reasons: the camera that can capture the beauty we wanted to show in such poor lighting conditions while being light enough for the cameraman to shoot at a dog's eye level over months hasn't been around long enough. After a long search, we found a stabilisation system that allowed our cameraman, Roy Imer, to hold and operate the camera at hip level, and thus at a dog's eye level. In the beginning we were always afraid we'd miss everything. We felt being too slow, we were never there at the right moment. Finally we grasped their itineraries. It was clear that it's at night that the more interesting things occur, and that the people who are out at night are more interesting. It all culminated in the interesting last weeks, where the technology was no longer an obstacle and we could create precisely what we'd been dreaming of all along in terms of cinematic experience. And it was precisely at this point that the dogs were evidently ready for this, too.

There is one very haunting and brutal scene. It's a gift, in dramaturgic terms, but also transgressive. How did you deal with that situation?

L.P.: It just happened. They started out at dawn as usual, turned around, checked where we were - as if waiting for us to tell of their passage through Moscow in the early hours.

E.K.: We filmed their journey continuously. Of course it caught us off-guard, too. We'd decided to follow the dogs without judgement, so we did so there, too. Without compromise. The spectacular, or the lack of spectacle, was not our yardstick. At that moment the dogs seized control and we merely functioned.

L.P.: A total loss of control, as if they were demonstrating to us who they are and showing us something we'd never considered. The scene is not just an absolute turning point in the film, it also upended the whole shoot for us. Suddenly we were facing new questions and made to realise we were working on something that people in cinemas had never seen before. A boundary had been crossed.

E.K.: And it was clear that we were dealing with wild animals. We're used to having dogs as pets, guardians, as space dogs who are trained for the cosmos and under control. In that instant it was evident they have a world of their own without human control.

L.P.: We sat all evening with the crew, each of us having to get over the shock. And we reached an understanding that these dogs owed us nothing. They're not there to be our best friends, we can't impose our morals on them. They're not in this world for the sake of our projections.

The film contains incredibly impressive archive material: How much work was involved in finding and acquiring it?

L.P.: It was an incredible amount of work. The first impulse came from Laika herself: Just by googling or entering the search term „Laika“ in YouTube you get fantastic material. Which raised the question as to what else there might be in archives. We found out that at the still-extant Moscow Institute for Biomedical Problems there were indeed film reels that had never been made public. They're closely guarded because you see how the dogs were operated on, as we indeed finally show in the film. It was a rough road with a lot of ups and downs. We built up a good relationship with the people there, time after time believing that the release of the material was imminent, but, comparable to the play of tensions between Russia and the EU, things vacillated between potential outcomes.

E.K.: We had to get to know each other. It was nice to see that at some point the bureaucracy ended and that we could talk to the people about what we were planning. That's how it worked out. There are people working there who know the contents of the archive inside out and really protect what they consider worth protecting. It was a learning curve for us, too, getting to respect the fact that things aren't always handled the way we think they will be. It's not necessarily a propaganda issue. We sat in the canteen with them on at least ten occasions, then came the day when they said: We have something that might interest you...

Here we owe a lot to Sergei Kachkin, who oversaw all the archive research for us. He bridged our incomprehension of what is known as the Russian soul and he opened up the country to us.

In addition to the dogs, there are other animals in the film: a chimpanzee and two turtles. How did this constellation come about?

L.P.: Those animals arrived late in our story because we were very late to learn that two turtles orbited the moon a year prior to the moon landing. During our research, we were frequently showered with little fairytale elements, and we tried to integrate them in today's Moscow.

E.K.: It was fascinating to learn which other species were also sent into space. We knew about the chimpanzees, but there were also rats, birds, spiders, salamanders, rabbits, cats... And it was supposed to be a fairytale-like film. We were preoccupied by a sort of Noah's Ark idea that we wanted to convey. In our research into chimpanzees in Moscow, we learned that chimpanzees are often attractions at children's birthdays or private parties. We learned of a chimpanzee and his show trainer, and found out that the chimpanzee had also become a city-dwelling species.

L.P.: It's interesting, too, that the Moscow chimpanzee is to be categorised in terms of entertainment. The Space Race of the late fifties and sixties was also a matter of popular enthusiasm and entertainment for the people.

E.K.: Equally interesting is the reason for Laika's selection: her face had a particularly striking black-and-white pattern and was therefore ideally suited for newspaper reproduction. Beauty was an essential factor in the selection of street dogs further to primary physical criteria.

L.P.: The dogs who had survived their journey into space were the first pop stars in the Soviet Union. Children were taught in schools how to handle street dogs because they were now heroes. A creation of legends, the bitterness of which we wanted to relate.

Where on the continuum between fiction and documented reality would you now classify your film?

E.K.: I understand viewers who want to know if what we're showing is for real. Nevertheless, I'd prefer it if you didn't have to make the distinction. It's just a film, finally. A dreamy form with a cosmic narrator whose text is based on facts connected with the story of real street dogs.

L.P.: We'd prefer if it was marked as „film“ or „fairytale“. I also think categorisation does the film a disservice because it can't fulfil expectations in either direction. Anyone who goes to the cinema saying „I'm going to watch a film“ has got the right idea.



SHORT ESSAY

by *Eugenio Renzi*
film critic „Il manifesto“ &
former editor „Cahiers du cinéma“
July 2019

Space Dogs is a venture taking two different directions. The first occurs along the outskirts of contemporary Moscow. The other goes back to Soviet times, to the beginning of the Space Race Era. Both teach us that, prior to involving humans, the space race was between races: dogs on the Communist side, apes for the „free world“. Plus there were some satellite species... In the intro, an authorial narrator recalls how legendary space dog Laika was taken from the streets of Moscow and sent to space. And how the heat, during the journey back to Earth, reduced her body to ashes. A „legend“ – continues the voice – intoning that her ghost is back on the streets. Although the film is a sort of mystic quest for Laika and others space dogs' souls, it is equally a very realistic and documentary work following a pack of actual street dogs in their every day, albeit mostly nocturnal, wanderings.

Having dogs as main characters is for sure a challenging path. Especially when there is no intention of manipulating them in order to fit a narrative of any given kind, but stalking the pack and letting the dogs create their own tales. On the other hand, Space Dogs is indeed a classical film. Exploring new ways of filming locates it at the edge of cinema, in a

no man's land between fiction and documentary. At its very beginning, a place where all great filmmakers gathered to ask themselves some very simple and yet never totally answered questions, like, what is cinematic space?

Surprisingly enough, from the very first images in the Moscow living area, following dogs seems to be the most natural thing to do with a camera. But natural doesn't necessarily mean serene or idyllic. What appears to be a calm morning stroll turns into a brutal hunting scene leaving the spectator in a traumatic state of wondering, similar to the experience of a peeping tom suddenly witnessing a murderer. The camera itself displays some kind of wild behavior. These protagonists force the film to be as unpredictable as a wild animal and to move further on four legs: part documentary and part fiction, part past and part present.

Elsa Kremser and Levin Peter decided to bring some additional erraticness to the long shots with the dogs, adding a sort of scientific diary that is composed of two different layers: the archival (images of Soviet scientific experiments on dogs) and fictional (the above-mentioned voice-over by famous Russian actor Alexey Serebryakov). The effect of these three elements is at once dialectic and harmonic. The two images harmonise as opposites. The streets of Moscow are wild and dirty, dangerous and chaotic. They describe our present as a natural state, but not a romantic one. Again, a dichotomy, this time between society and total war. And thus very similar to an apocalyptic tale. The labs are on the contrary a clean

and mastered space where everything seems to follow some rules both social and aesthetic. So, finally, the film works strangely cerebrally between these interacting topics. In the streets we experience some kind of present, one both scary and beautiful, where things can change at any moment and where there is literally no time for reflection but only for action. The images of the experiments on animals are our past. But this past, although it is behind us in time, is still unknown; we still have to unpack and process it. Over and above this, the voice-over functions like a sort of super-ego that possesses a superior kind of knowledge and awareness but seems detached and dispassionate.

So, the question becomes: what is the most scary place to find oneself? That where animals and humans interact freely, in liberty? Or the one where the animal is tamed and studied? Or, finally, the abstract and final level, where there is no image, no human or animal and just a voice?



FACTS

THE SOVIET COSMONAUT-DOGS

„In order to survive in space, we had to determine where the limits of life lie.“

Dr. Oleg Gazenko (1918-2007)

Former head of Moscow's Institute for Biomedical Problems

The Soviet Union fired at least forty-eight dogs into space between 1951 and 1966 to pave the way for humans. Their exact number is still unclear to this day. Only about thirty dogs survived the flights. The animals had been captured on the streets of Moscow. When the Americans were doing initial experiments with apes, the then-director of the Institute of Aerospace Medicine went in search of a Soviet counterpart. He visited Russia's most famous circus to discuss the secret program with a tamer. The latter was ardently opposed to using primates, saying they would react too emotionally, and advised him to try space travel on street dogs. From circus experience he knew that they were tougher and more stress resistant than pedigree dogs or other animals. The space agency took his advice and began to search the streets of Moscow for suitable strays. Small dogs were chosen as they would fit in the space capsules. A determined and eager facial expression was an important criterion to guarantee media effectiveness.

At the Institute, the dogs were habituated to extreme conditions by intensive tests in a centrifuge, an underwater capsule and aboard a plane. Tests were considered successful if the animals were able to endure twenty days in an equipped isolation chamber. The dogs' carotid artery was externalised by operation in order to measure their pulses during flight. In later missions they were fed artificially by means of a stomach tube.

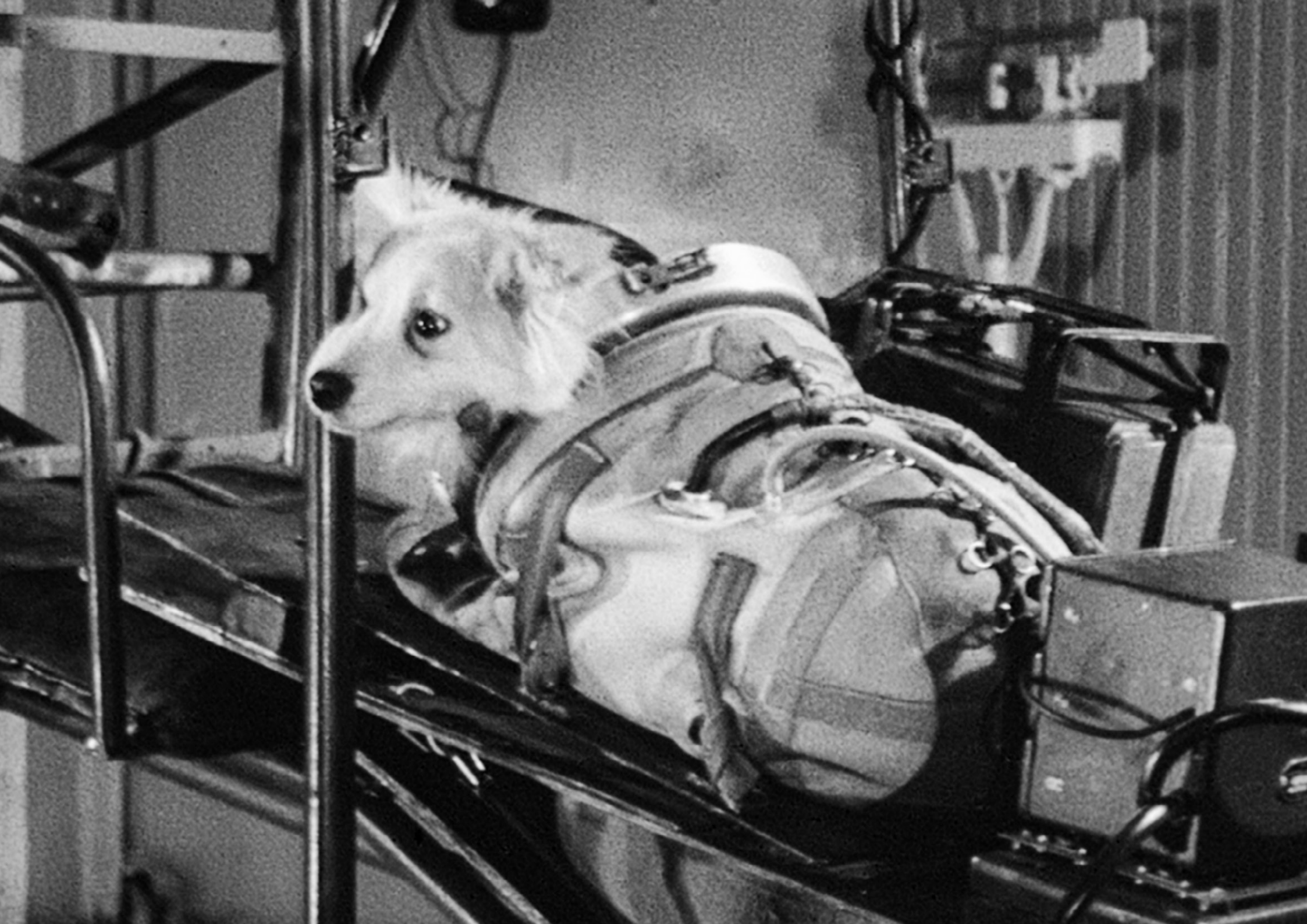
The space program was pursued in secret. After several attempts, Laika was the first dog to reach Earth's orbit in 1957. Preparations for her space flight had lasted a year. A participating scientist wrote of her: „Laika behaves sensibly, she does not waste energy, does not make hasty movements in the isolation chamber, and reacts actively to humans. There is nothing redundant in her behaviour.“ It was not until 2006 that a biologist admitted there wasn't enough time to construct a system for her return and that her death was considered a certainty. Breathlessness, an increased pulse rate and changes in the ECG were noted during the flight, and it is assumed that Laika died of overheating after only five hours in space. The dog's corpse orbited Earth in Sputnik 2 for 162 days before completely burning up on re-entering the atmosphere.

It was finally in 1960 that the dogs Belka and Strelka became the first beings to visit space and returned to Earth alive. They orbited our planet eighteen times. After their return they were celebrated as Soviet heroes. Images of the animals in space and at press conferences

were broadcast worldwide. The dogs became cult figures. They featured on Soviet matchboxes and stamps and became the heroes of numerous comics and children's books. Their story, and even contact with street dogs, became part of the Russian school curriculum. From then on, Belka and Strelka lived with Institute staff. Both dogs had puppies after their space voyage, which was considered proof that they had returned from space in good health. Their puppies also became prestigious objects. In the midst of the Cold War, Soviet President Khrushchev gave First Lady Jackie Kennedy a puppy born to Cosmonaut Strelka.

Canine space flights continued until 1966. The last mission, „Kosmos-110“, with dogs Ugolyok and Veterok lasted twenty-two days - the hitherto-longest space flight. Never before had an Earthly creature been so far from its home planet. They returned alive but had lost fur and suffered from serious muscle atrophy.

Manned space travel succeeded the era. Yuri Gagarin successfully completed his first space flight in 1961. In 1967, Vladimir Komarov was the first human to die during a space mission. After eighteen orbits he was killed on impact when reaching Earth. For this reason he is known as the „human Laika“.



MAIN CREW

Narrated by
ALEXEY SEREBRYAKOV

Produced, written & directed by
ELSA KREMSEK & LEVIN PETER

Coproducer
ANNEKATRIN HENDEL

Director of Photography
YUNUS ROY IMER

Sound
SIMON PETER, JONATHAN SCHORR

Editors
JAN SOLDAT, STEPHAN BECHINGER

Sound Design
JONATHAN SCHORR

Original Score
PARADOX PARADISE

Archive Research
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