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Edited by

Corinna Tomrley & Ann Kaloski Naylor

Fat Pets

Don Kulick

Fat Labs and Obese Dachsunds

In March 2006, the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) in Fordham, England, forcibly removed a 10 year old chocolate Labrador dog named Rusty from two brothers who owned him – David Brenton, 52, a crane driver, and his brother Derek, 63, a saddler. The reason for the forced removal was that Rusty was too fat. Rusty weighed 74 kilos (163 lbs) – and the RSPCA claimed that he was twice the weight he should have been. Officials were quoted as saying that Rusty was ‘hugely and grossly overweight’, and a vet who examined the dog described him as looking like ‘a walrus’. They claimed that the brothers had been told to take Rusty to a vet for treatment, but they did not. ‘The dog was not being treated, so we felt that the only option was to take it away and get it treated by our own vets’, the RSPCA inspector Jason Finch told *Sky News* (*Guardian* 12 Jan 2007). The RSPCA took the dog into custody, and they prosecuted the two brothers for cruelty and causing unnecessary suffering to their dog.

The brothers’ response at having their dog taken from them was umbrage. ‘We have never been cruel to an animal in our lives’, David Benton told reporters. ‘The dog is 11 years old and has arthritis. What do they expect?’ (*Yorkshire Post* 13 Jan 2007). When the court case was heard in January 2007, the brothers argued that Rusty was fat because his arthritis made it difficult for him to exercise easily. Food, they said, was Rusty’s only pleasure in life.

The magistrates convicted the Benton brothers of causing unnecessary suffering, and they were given a three-year conditional discharge and ordered to pay court costs of £250 each. But they allowed Rusty to return home, on the provision that the brothers have him regularly checked and that he continue to lose weight. (The RSPCA had put Rusty on a low calorie diet and gave him pain relieving drugs for his arthritis, all at a cost of about £3,000. He lost about 20 kilos while he was in their care).

A few years earlier, in Sweden, a similar case occurred. This one did not make international news as did the case of Rusty the chocolate Labrador, but in many ways it was much more dramatic. In February 2001, the Animal Protection authorities in the city of Uppsala received an anonymous phone call saying that an elderly couple had an obese dachshund. Two days after receiving that call, two officials made an unannounced inspection of the couple’s home. They discovered a 5 year old dachshund that was indeed overweight (he weighed about 26 kilos, or 57 pounds – according to veterinarians a dachshund’s normal weight is 8-12 kilos, or 17-26 lbs.). The inspectors advised the couple to give their dog low calorie dog food and to take him to a vet to get more advice. They informed the couple that they would be contacting them again to check on how the dog was doing¹.

Three months later, one of the health inspectors returned to the couple’s house on an unannounced inspection. She discovered that the dog, whose name was Sacko, was just as fat as he had been three months previously. The inspector told the couple that Sacko was suffering because of his weight and that he needed to lose weight. If they did not see to it that Sacko lost weight, the couple was warned, there would be ‘consequences’ (*ev. åtgärder*). The inspector took photographs of Sacko and left to file a report.

Thus began a dramatic two-year battle between the animal protection agency (*Miljö- och hälsoskyddsmyndigheten*) in Uppsala and the elderly couple. After the second inspection, the protection agency took the couple to court and in September 2001, they obtained a court order obligating the couple to have Sacko weighed in a particular veterinary clinic once a month and to make sure that he lost weight (28

Sept 2001). The couple agreed to this, but subsequently did not comply, later justifying this by writing that Sacko gave no signs of suffering, that their own veterinarian told them that Sacko was overweight because he retained water and had been prescribed medicine that would help, that they owed money to the particular veterinary clinic they had been ordered to visit and were unable to pay, that it's just as hard for dogs to go on a diet as it is for people to and, repeatedly, that they deeply resented the intrusion of inspectors and the neighbors who they had been told had reported them.

A year later, the protection agency made another unannounced inspection. They discovered that Sacko was even fatter than before. They photographed and videotaped him, and shortly afterwards they issued an order for him to be taken away from his human companions (17 Dec 2002). The elderly couple appealed this order to the county, and they were successful. The county authorities ruled that the protection agency had not presented any medical evidence that Sacko actually suffered from any illness or disabilities. Forcibly removing him from his owners was therefore unwarranted (21 Jan 2003). The protection agency appealed and lost (17 March 2003).

They did not give up however. Upon having their appeal denied, the protection agency immediately took the couple to court again, changing its tactics. Instead of charging them with causing suffering (31§ 1 *djurskyddslagen*) to Sacko, they now charged them retroactively for not having complied with the court order to have Sacko regularly weighed (31§ 2 *djurskyddslagen*). They also moved to have the elderly woman who was officially registered as Sacko's owner banned from ever being to own another dog. In an affidavit supporting the intervention, a veterinarian who examined Sacko (and found that he weighed 31,8 kg, or 70 pounds) wrote that 'Sacko has been made vulnerable to suffering, since he can't live the life of a normal dachshund. His quality of life is in my view worsened . . . The kind of significant overweight we see here (3 1/2 times normal weight) implies large health risks, for example in the form of liver and kidney illness, diabetes, circulation and joint difficulties'.

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Although no evidence, again, was presented that the dog actually *did* suffer from any of those disorders (indeed, blood tests taken from the dog in April 2003 came back showing nothing wrong), the animal protection agency this time was successful in pursuing both these charges. The court ordered that Sacko be taken into custody and sold, and that the woman be banned from ever owning another dog. The couple appealed, but this time they lost.

The court's decision explicitly stated that: 'No circumstances have been presented to suggest that the dachshund to be taken into custody should be destroyed, whereupon the court finds it most appropriate that it be sold'. The question of who exactly might be interested in purchasing a 32 kilo dachshund was not considered by the court. On 27 June 2003, police came and took Sacko. They immediately took the dog to a vet, to be examined. What happened there is summarized by the police in a terse report, that last one to appear in Sacko's quite thick legal case file. It reads as follows: 'Sacko was taken to the Veterinary College for a veterinary examination. The veterinarian decided, for the good of the animal (*ur djurskyddssynpunkt*), to put Sacko down immediately'. In the eyes of the veterinarian who made the decision to kill the dog, Sacko was clearly better off dead than fat.

Alarming statistics

What can one say about the general social and cultural climate that makes it possible – and, in the opinion of many, desirable and even morally imperative – for the state to intervene on behalf of overweight animals? The two cases just described are not identical, and it is tempting to read their differences as parables about how two welfare states differentially manage relationships with their citizens. The British case may have involved the heavy hand of the nanny state, but that hand relaxed and was extended in the end, and the outcome was benign and even happy. The Swedish case, on the other hand, appears to have ultimately acquired a dimension of retribution. Since the first thing the authorities did to Sacko once they finally got custody of him was destroy him (in contravention of a court decision, no less), it is hard to conclude that the whole affair did not at some point become less about the welfare of the animal and more about the determination of a state bureaucracy to put an end to the whole case and exact punishment on citizens who had defied it².

Regardless of those differences and how one might want to interpret them, however, the interventions around both Rusty and Sacko are dramatic illustrations of a new phenomenon: fat pets as a social problem. Pet obesity used to be cute and funny and adorable – and for some people fat pets (especially fat cats) still are: the Garfield the cat comics, with titles like *Garfield: Bigger and Better* (which has a cover image of Garfield the cat pulling up a pair of stretch pants that highlight his overflowing belly) and *Garfield Blots Out the Sun* (in which Garfield's immense stomach eclipses the sun) sell well (Davis 1996, 2007). There are websites and books devoted to extolling the beauty and allure of fat cats,³ and children are socialized to associate the pleasure of reading with the cuteness of round pets through phonics readers like *Fat Cat on a Mat* (Cox, Tylor and Cartright 2002). All this, however, is changing. We are currently witnessing the transformation of pet obesity from a trivial phenomenon or an idiosyncratic aesthetic preference into a social problem – one that increasingly mobilizes the mass media, public opinion and a wide variety of experts, and one that is so serious that it impels and justifies the intervention for state apparatuses like the courts and the police.

Obesity as a crisis is, these days, not just a human issue. Obesity has crossed the species boundary. In the mass media, there are increasingly common and increasingly shrill claims that we are in the midst of an 'epidemic' of obesity in pets:

The UK dog population is currently around the 7 million mark, spread over 5 million households. It is estimated that 40% of the population is overweight, 15% of which are obese To put it simply, nearly 1 million dogs in the UK are clinically obese.

Pet Club UK, 2007⁴

It is estimated that 25 to 30 per cent of cats in the UK are obese.

The Feline Advisory Bureau, UK, 2005⁵

At least 25% of dogs and cats in the Western world, including the USA, are obese and need to lose weight, a report out today says.

USA Today, 09 Sept 2003

Pet obesity in the UK, you could say, is at epidemic proportions. Nearly 50% of dogs and cats in this country are overweight, and 15% of these are clinically obese,' says Andrew Wilson, Orchard Veterinary Centre. Pet obesity is a growing problem in the East Midlands, whether it's flabby felines or paunchy pooches. Depending on which statistics you read, between 30-60% of all dogs and cats in the UK are overweight.

BBC One, Inside Out, 2005⁶

Obesity rates for Australians have doubled over the past 20 years, with 62 per cent of men – and 45 per cent of women now deemed overweight or obese.

The same trend applies to household pets, with an increase in the number of overweight cats and dogs being dealt with by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), and even one case of an obese pet mouse.

'It's a big problem, and quite reflective of what's happening in the human situation,' said Mark Lawrie, the RSPCA's chief vet . . .

Lawrie told Reuters surveys had found that between 40 and 44 per cent of dogs and more than one in three household cats were now overweight, due to poor diet and a lack of exercise.

The Age 24 May 2006

Much of this is familiar territory for anyone who pays attention to the way human obesity is presented in the mass media. The alarmist language, the seemingly obligatory use of bug-eyed adjectives like 'astonishing', the exuberant alliterations like 'flabby felines and paunchy pooches' – 'porky pets' is another popular and recurring phrase in this literature, as is 'corpulent cats' (or how about the rhymer 'round

hounds?'). All this is recognizable from other contexts, as is the apparently random use of statistics: e after examining all the reports on the phenomenon of pet obesity, the concerned and careful reader is still left, in the end, wondering what *is* the percentage of overweight and obese pets? Is it 'at least 25% as claimed in *USA Today*? Or is Pet Club UK's figure of 40% more accurate? Or is it 'nearly 50%' as a veterinarian Andrew Wilson asserts? Or perhaps it is 60%, as suggested by BBC One – which would make 3 of every 5 pets fat?

The main reason the statistics on this topic vary so much is because their scientific pedigree is vague. And the reason for *that* is because all the statistics on pet obesity are derived from studies funded and conducted by the pet food industry. Now, the pet food industry is a rather recent invention. It did not exist until the latter half of the 1800s. It originated in England, through the efforts of an American businessman, James Spratt, who had an epiphany when he saw stray dogs eating discarded hardtack in the London docks (Grier 2006: 281). Spratt began producing Dog Meat Biscuits around 1860, and his company began marketing its products in the US ten years later. A challenge that was faced by the new pet food industry was that it had to create a demand for a product that no pet owner felt they needed. Spratt did this through what historian Katherine Grier calls 'relentless' advertising, and through grandiose claims that manufactured pet food was better than the table scraps and other food with which pets had always been fed.

We know in hindsight that the marketing campaigns that entrepreneurs like Spratt developed were a breathtaking success. Now, 100 years later, pet owners no longer need to be convinced that they should buy manufactured pet food. They buy it on reflex. In the UK, the value of the pet food market in 2005 was over £1.6 billion and is growing each year. In the US, where an estimated 63% of households own approximately 75 million dogs and 88 million cats, in 2003, consumers spent \$14 billion on pet food (Barnes 2005, Brady and Palmeri 2007, Humane Society of the United States⁷). Market analysts project that this will have increased to \$17 billion by 2008.

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An important segment of the pet food industry is so-called premium or specialty pet food. These include the so-called life stage foods that are specially formulated for young pets or 'senior' pets, and they are also the diet foods. Life stage and diet foods can cost twice as much as regular pet food, but that does not stop pet owners from buying them – on the contrary, premium pet food is the industry's fastest growing market. From 1999 to 2002, the sales of specialty pet foods rose by 10.2% overall, and the sales of diet pet foods have grown by 25% (Koerner 2003). By 2005, it comprised 38% of pet food sales, and is expected to grow by 9% a year industry wide (Barnes 2005).

Statistics like these mean that diet products for pets is big business and pet food manufacturers have a massive stake in promoting the notion that pets are getting fat. They have much to gain by convincing pet owners that pets, like their human companions, need to go on special diets to help them reach their supposed ideal weight.

And this is exactly what the pet food manufacturers do, 'relentlessly'. On the website of any major pet food company (and 7 of them account for 86% of this market), one will find authoritative claims about research results. Hill's Pet Nutrition, for example, is one of the most aggressive and fastest growing specialty pet food companies. Hill's is owned by Colgate Palmolive, the maker of toothpaste and so on, and it is one of Colgate Palmolive's most profitable companies. Hill's products, which have names like 'Prescription Diet' and 'Science Diet' can only be purchased in veterinary offices and online. They cost approximately twice as much as the kinds of brands one finds in the supermarket. On the Hill's website, interested pet owners can read the following⁸:

European research conducted by Hill's Pet Nutrition reveals both shocking statistics and interesting trends with regard to pet obesity and pet owners' attitudes to their pets' health.

Did you know...

- 76% of pet owners believe their pets' weight to be 'just right', but actually, up to 50% of cats and dogs are overweight
- 67% of European pet owners are aware that they themselves might be overweight

- 60% of European pet owners (including the UK) do not take their pets to the vet to be weighed
- Pet owners in the UK and Germany are particularly unaware of pet obesity but French and Italian owners are more critical of their pet's weight
- 40% of pet owners feed snacks to their pets more than once a day, single female dog owners are the main culprits!
- 90% of owners admit they don't exercise enough
- One in four dog owners do not exercise themselves or their dogs
- Only 30% exercise their dogs enough to maintain a healthy lifestyle

The statistics cited on this website are the ones that frequently circulate in the mass media – they appear, for example, in the BBC One article quoted earlier. Usually these statistics are reported without a source, implying that they are agreed upon scientific facts. I contacted Hill's and asked if I could obtain a copy of the report on which the statistics were gleaned, in order to be able to try to assess their validity (I was especially intrigued by the supposed differences between weight conscious Mediterraneans, and the 'particularly unaware' northern Europeans; I also wanted to know the basis for the accusatory finger wagging at single, female dog owners). After three weeks of run-around with representatives from Hill's, I was finally told, firmly in an email, 'the information regarding the studies is not something that is able to be published to the public'⁹.

How do you know if your pet is fat?

What all this means is that the evidence that there is an epidemic of pet obesity is, at best, questionable. In addition, it isn't entirely clear how one decides that a pet is overweight, let alone obese. Advice to pet owners is that the animal should have a waist and one should be able to feel its ribs – something that can be difficult to do with pets that have thick fur, or with pets that have been neutered. This, by the way, is a striking dimension of the concern with fat pets. When pets are neutered, their metabolism changes and they are more likely to gain weight. Although this is occasionally mentioned in the fine print of reports on pet obesity, it is not taken into account in the various depictions of what is called 'Body Condition Scores' (the pet equivalent of BMI, or Body Mass Index) that pet owners are encouraged to use in order to judge the bodies of their companion animals. This is a rather odd omission, considering that the overwhelming majority of pets are neutered – in the US, for example, the Humane Society estimates that more than 70% of the dogs and 84% of the cats are neutered¹⁰. In other words: we artificially manipulate the bodies of animals to make them fatter, then we turn around and say that it isn't healthy for them to be fatter.

At veterinary offices and on websites, are charts and tables like this for humans to use in assessing the 'body condition' of their companion animals:

There are also behavioral signs that owners are instructed to be aware of. One website¹¹ asks owners 'Does your dog:



BODY CONDITION SYSTEM

ADULT

Feeding to ideal body condition provides real, long-term health benefits, and the chart below should be used to monitor your dog's body condition. Since every dog is different, modify your feeding amounts as needed to help your dog reach ideal body condition.



Underfed Dog

Ribs are highly visible. Increase the amount you are feeding. After 2 or 3 weeks, compare again. Adjust until dog exhibits ideal body condition.



Ideal Body Condition

Can feel and see outline of ribs. Dog has a waist when viewed from above. Belly is tucked up when viewed from the side. Maintain current feeding regimen.



Overfed Dog

Dog has no waist when viewed from above. Belly is rounded when viewed from the side. Decrease amount you are feeding. After 2 or 3 weeks, compare again. Adjust as necessary.

BENEFITS OF MAINTAINING IDEAL BODY CONDITION

- Promotes a leaner, longer, healthier life
- Reduces a dog's percentage of body fat for better health
- Reduces potential for developing weight-related health conditions
- Helps maintain healthy blood sugar levels
- Helps maintain healthy blood pressure and heart rate



The Body Condition System was developed and tested at the Purina Pet Care Center, and has been documented in the following publications: Luffman, DP. Body Condition Scoring and Weight Maintenance. Proc Natl Acad Sci 10: 21, 1995; Orlando, FL, pp. 206-209. Luffman DP, Knoby RD, Schmidt DA. Evaluation of Body Fat by Body Condition Score. J Am Vet Med Assoc 1994; 104: Luffman DP, Kishman S, Lawler DP, Knoby RD, Schmidt DA. Obesity Management in Dogs. J Am Vet Med Assoc 1994; 104: 65.

- Often appear tired and lazy?

- Lag behind on walks?
- Pant constantly?
- Need help getting in the car?
- Resist playing games?
- Bark without getting up?

Pet owners can also always go on the website of any pet food company, where they will invariably find instructional charts such as 'treat translators'. These inform that one small cookie for a 9 kg (20 lb) dog, for example, is equivalent to one hamburger for a human and one ounce of cheddar cheese to a 4.5 kg (10 lb) cat is equivalent to 3 ½ hamburgers for a human¹². The websites of pet food companies also usually have interactive images of cats and dogs that get fatter and thinner as you move a slider to determine which picture most resembles your pet¹³.

Pet obesity and pet health

No matter how pet corpulence is characterized and measured, however, it does seem clear that the number of fat pets is on the rise. As one article published in *The Journal of Nutrition* summarized, 'Most investigators agree that, as in humans, the incidence [of obesity] in the pet population is increasing' (German 2006:1940S). This increase is due partly to the fact that the number of pets is increasing – at no time in history have so many humans owned as many dogs and cats as they do now, and this number continues to grow every year. And as a recent *Business Week* cover story on how Americans spend 41 billion dollars on their pets each year reports, the demographics of pet owners are also changing: from having been acquired as buddies for kids, pets are now popular among single professionals, empty-nesters (i.e. parents whose children have grown up and moved out), and couples who delay having children. These are groups that have both time and resources to spend gratifying what they perceive to be their companion animals desires and needs (Brady and Palmeri 2007).

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Besides the mass media and pet food companies, an important purveyor of the idea that we are currently in the midst of an epidemic of pet obesity are veterinarians. One reason for their prominent role in conveying a sense of urgency about pet obesity is obviously that veterinarians in their medical practice see a large number and a wide range of pets. However, it is not at all irrelevant in this context to learn that the majority of veterinarians receive their training in animal nutrition, to the extent that they have any at all, from day-long courses sponsored by – the pet food industry. In Sweden for example, Hill's runs a series of five-day long nutrition courses each year, and it pays for veterinarians to attend them. It doesn't take a great leap of imagination to guess which brand of pet food the veterinarians who participate in these courses stock in their practices and encourage pet owners to buy. It is also noteworthy that the sale of specialty food like Hill's is an extremely important source of income for veterinary clinics, which keep a percentage of the products they sell.

The reasons why obesity is bad for pets, according to the pet food companies and to veterinarians, is because fat pets are more vulnerable to heart problems, liver disease, musculoskeletal problems, diabetes, and, some say, allergies. A ubiquitous assertion is that obesity shortens the lifespan of pets. The source of this assertion is a 2002 study by the Nestle Purina pet food company that raised 48 Labrador dogs and gave half of them 25% less food than was given the other half, thus keeping them below their ideal weight. The dogs that received less food lived on the average of 1.8 years longer than the control group (Kealy, Lawler, Ballam, et al. 2002). The way this invariably is reported in is that fat pets die prematurely. As far as I have been able to discover, this is the only study to indicate that skinny dogs live longer than fat ones – other studies on this topic have been done on rats, and have indicated that give them only 60% of their daily caloric needs, they live twice as long as rats with free access to food (McCay, Crowell and Maynard 1935; Masoro 1995). In other words, maintaining animals in a constant state of hunger seems to prolong their lives. This, we are led to believe, is a desirable state of affairs. But as an example of how selective and culturally filtered our interpretation of obesity is, consider also that it appears that

the average life span of domestic dogs, like that of humans, has been steadily increasing. According to the Senior Dog Project, a nonprofit group in San Francisco that promotes the adoption of older canines, in the 1930s, dogs lived an average of 7 years; today their average life span is 12-14 years, due to both improved veterinary care and changing conceptions of human responsibility for the health of companion animals (Koerner 2003). This correlation is never mentioned in any of the literature or media coverage of pet obesity. But obviously it could be framed in a positive light: our companion animals are both growing fatter *and* living longer. Just like humans.

People and pets

The phenomenon of pet obesity has received more attention in the UK than in any other country, presumably because the British, in addition to their well-known preoccupation with animals (Ritvo 1987), are also fairly obsessed with human obesity as a source of anxiety and entertainment. One source of the obsession is government-driven concerns to not have overweight citizens burden the National Health System. The entertainment dimension seems related to class and the combination of humiliation and uplift that I will discuss below.

In addition to relatively frequent reports in the mass media and cases such as that of Rusty the Labrador that received national attention in the UK, there have been a number of television shows and documentaries on pet obesity (such as *The World's Fattest Pet and Me* – which featured Rusty the chocolate Labrador¹⁴). In March 2007, the cable television channel BBC3 launched a reality/competition show called *Help! My Dog's As Fat As Me!* The show is described on its website as follows:

Presenter Julian Bennett (*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy UK*) and his adorable miniature dachshund Lulu will be on hand to guide eight overweight owners and their faithful pet on a brand new diet and fitness regime¹⁵.

The human-canine couples compete with one another to lose the most weight, one couple being eliminated at the end of each show. After three months, the remaining three couples went to London and compete with others for the title of Fat Dog Champion 2007.

The fact that a show like this is presented by a gay man known for his fashion advice and his 'adorable miniature dachshund Lulu' may seem a bit odd or incongruous, but it is actually quite logical and predictable. Self-improvement programs like *Help! My Dog's As Fat As Me!* (or like *The Biggest Loser* in the United States) exhibit consternation and disdain towards working class styles, tastes and habits, and the shows are all fundamentally and transparently about class uplift. On a television series like Living TV's *Chubby Children*, for example – a program that begins with a voice intoning ominously: 'Forget guns, forget knives. The biggest threat to your child is what's inside your refrigerator' – the hero is a hair-gelled, blokey, thin metrosexual professor of exercise and obesity from Leeds Metropolitan University named Paul Gately. In the course of an episode, 'professor Paul' doesn't just instruct the families he visits about nutrition, he also presents them with rules they must obey – rules like 'clear the clutter' in their homes, or 'eat dinner together around a table', or try exotic (and, needless to say, expensive) new foods. Producers appear to feel that these ham-fisted attempts at class reform will be less likely to offend and be resisted if they are conveyed by non-threatening figures. And what figure is more non-threatening than someone like a fey gay man with an adorable miniature dachshund called Lulu?

As appallingly patronizing and sensationalistic as shows like *Chubby Children* or *Help! My Dog's As Fat As Me!* – or 'professor Paul's' latest obesity (side)show about pre-school children, charmingly titled *Too Fat To Toddle* – may be, they do reveal some intriguing details about social practices related to obesity. The documentaries about pet obesity are especially enlightening in this regard. By allowing people to talk about why their pets are fat, the documentary films about fat pets reveal quite a bit about the current state of human-animal relationships. The best of the bunch is a film titled *Fat Pets*, produced by Landmark Films for British Channel 4 and first screened in March 2006. *Fat Pets* focuses on four fat pets and their human companions. Even though the film is framed and narrated as a slightly sensationalistic exposé, it

succeeds in highlighting the range of relationships that people today maintain with their pets, and the role that food plays in those relationships.

One of the interviews is with a middle class couple in their fifties, named Trevor and Pam, from the county of Nottinghamshire. They talk about their Rotweiler Max, who, the narrator tells us, weighs 68 kilos, 'which makes him 50% overweight'. 'He's ballooned up', the narrator continues, 'on a diet of love'.

The segment with Max begins in a mid-close up of Trevor and Pam sitting on a sofa in their comfortably furnished home, smiling and caressing a happy Max. An interviewer asks them, 'So how did Max get so big?'. Pam smiles and answers in a pleasant, matronly voice:

'We've spoilt him with the food he's had to be fed. He'd have his dinner he'd have sausage in his dinner. He had toast for his breakfast . . . He loves Gregg's sausage rolls. And he likes Jacob's cream crackers with cheese on'.

Trevor adds, 'If I had a bacon sandwich, Max would have a bacon sandwich'.

Pam continues, 'And he has no end of treats. Markies, Gravy bones, Milky bones, Jumbo bones'.

Trevor then tells the interviewer, with affection in his voice, 'Pam's a feeder. By nature, she's a carer she's good at it. She's fed me. She likes to feed people'. He turns to Pam and says gently, 'You do love you do. You're good at it'.

Pam smiles demurely and averts her eyes. 'Probably', she says.

Trevor continues, 'Yeah, you like doing it. And there's nothing wrong with that. So we eat well. Because she likes to see people eat well. Same with the dog'.

A second segment of the film is about Wallace, who, the narrator tells us, is 'supposed to be a delicate little King Charles spaniel. But he's well on his way to becoming a Saint Bernard. He weighs 18 kilos, three times what he should be'.

Wallace's person, an overweight woman in her thirties named Millie, talks about Wallace's weight by saying:

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'I mean at one time I was nearly 19 stone [120 kg., 266 lbs.] and then I lost a lot of weight and then since having Wallace (laughs) I think I've started to eat more and more and Wallace is eating more and more. I don't know, I just feel like he – this might sound silly – he's a part of me. It's a comfort thing for me, definitely. And because I haven't been very well lately as well [the film's narrator has told us that Millie has been on long term sick leave from work with a series of chest infections], it's like you know: veg out of the sofa with you know a selection of bisquits and crisps. And he'll just lay on the sofa with me and help me eat it. I think all we do is we walk, we eat, we walk, we eat. That's our routine at the moment'.

The most provocative segment of *Fat Pets* concerns another Rotweiler, this one from the northwestern city of Bolton. This dog, Bodell Princess, or Bo for short, is the companion of a working class woman in her late forties, Andrea. Like Millie, Andrea also lives on disability benefits, after having suffered a nervous breakdown 19 years previously. The film's narrator introduces Andrea by saying, 'A lot of fat pet owners pay lip service to at least the idea of slimming their beast down. Not Andrea. She loves Bo just the way she is'.

Andrea is interviewed sitting on a worn sofa in a cramped, cluttered parlor, smoking a cigarette: 'She's well rounded', Andrea tells the interviewer as she pets a panting Bo, who lays at her feet. 'She has women's troubles, like most women over a certain age. We put weight on, around our bellies and our hips'.

Speaking in a heavy working class Lancashire accent, Andrea says: 'She's me daughter, she's me world. She gives me happiness. I wouldn't swap her, she's my pleasure. And [my husband and I] we've not been able to have children. She's my daughter, she takes the place of a child. So what Bo wants Bo gets. Bo has a birthday cake made every year. And I say if Bo doesn't want to go to sleep until 5 in the morning then mum stays up with her until 5 in the morning. If Bo's too warm then mum'll adjust the [inaudible] for her. Or open the windows or put another fan on for her. She's my security at nighttime as well. I'm the one safe in bed. If she's there -- I don't mean if anybody breaks in. She gives me my security. I can sleep and it's like my little family all together.

Andrea's interviewer says, 'But you care for her so much, it's obvious to me – when she does pass on, you're gonna be, what will you be like?'

She pauses and answers. 'Devastated. But she'll be coming back home anyway cause her ashes will be coming back home. And I say at least I'll know that I've given her a good life. I've not starved her to death, she's not been deprived, she's had everything she's wanted, so what more could she ask for really. And yes I will be broken hearted when she goes, but like I say, whatever Bo wants, Bo can have'.

'What advice would you give to other people who say have just got a puppy?'

'Spoil 'em rotten (laugh). Just spoil 'em and love 'em and look after 'em. Treat 'em as one of your own'.

The people featured in *Fat Pets* highlight different dimensions of human-pet relationships. Trevor and Pam describe how they enjoy including their dog Max in their own mealtimes, sharing with him what they themselves eat. Trevor also points out that food is one of the important ways they care for Max. He underscores the gendered dimension of this care as he explicitly links it to Pam's pleasure and skill in caring for him and others. Millie talks about how her dog Wallace gives her comfort and solace to deal with her health problems. She also says, tantalizingly and quite movingly, that she feels that Wallace is a part of her. And Andrea expressing something similar, explains that Bo 'has women's troubles, like most women over a certain age. We put weight on around our bellies and our hips'. Andrea talks unapologetically about how her dog Bo is her daughter, her world, on whom Andrea dotes and whom she spoils rotten.

Even though it is not overtly condescending towards the people it features, a documentary like *Fat Pets* follows the genre conventions of media representations of obesity. It juxtaposes the emotional narratives of the pets' human companions with unchallenged expert commentary from veterinarians in a way that inevitably frames the human companions' stories as excuses, evasions or delusions. Especially because the film highlights the fact that women like Millie and Andrea live on disability benefits and clearly experience social and economic difficulties, it invites viewers to read the behavior of the humans in terms of their unacknowledged projections of their own problems and anxieties onto the bodies of their innocent companion animals. The take-home moral message is that if the pet owners featured in the film could only resolve their own confused and sad issues, then they would stop making their pets fat.

So this documentary about fat pets, like the overwhelming majority of documentaries and media representations about fat *people*, encourages us to see obesity in terms of individual psychology, not in terms of culturally incited and socially stratified desires, and certainly not in terms of economic interests: one can be relatively certain that the fact that all research on pet obesity is financed by the pet food industry is not something we'll likely ever hear passing the lips of Julian Bennett or his adorable miniature dachshund Lulu.

Good to think?

If we were to resist the urge to simply blame someone like Millie for the size of her dog Wallace, or to feel disgusted or affronted at a woman like Andrea for allowing Bodell Princess to grow to 92 kilos, or 203 lbs, what kinds of questions could we ask about fat pets, and how might they help us think about the topic of obesity as a social and cultural phenomenon more generally?

First, there is the issue of class that I have already touched on. All the literature on pet obesity agrees that pet obesity mirrors human obesity, and that fat pets often have fat human companions (recall the quotes from newspapers cited earlier). This is relevant in terms of class because we all know that obesity, in the Western world, at least, is more prevalent among poorer people (and people of color, who of course often are poorer: Braziel and LeBesco 2001, Campos 2004, Gilman 2004, Kulick and Meneley 2005, Lebesco 2004, Nichter 2000). Representations of fat pets in the mass media are frequently routed through the portrayal of their working class human companions – people such as the Benton brothers who had Rusty the chocolate Labrador, like Millie and Andrea in the *Fat Pets* documentary, or like the contestants on *Help! My Dog's As Fat As Me!*, all of whom were working class, in stark contrast to the class manifested by presenter Julian Bennett and his adorable miniature dachshund Lulu. This representational propensity encourages a sense of moral distinction that middle class buyers of expensive products like Hill's Prescription Diet food undoubtedly find reassuring.

But co-existing with human companions like the Brenton brothers and dogs like Rusty or Andrea

and dogs like Bo are humans like Pamela Arconti and her dog Lola. Lola is a 7 kg. (16 lb) Chihuahua featured in the June 2007 issue of *New York* magazine (most Chihuahuas weigh between 2-3 kgs, 4-6 lbs.; Cohen 2007). Pamela Arconti is an executive assistant on Wall Street who had enough money to enroll Lola in three different canine weight loss programs during a ten-week period – the goal being to get Lola in shape for the summer. Arconti spent \$600 for 12 sessions with a physical therapist, who walked Lola on a treadmill submerged in 8 inches of water, \$650 for 10 days in a kennel where she was encouraged to engage in structured play with other dogs (mostly Lola just hid in a corner), and \$150 for an hour-long session with a specialist dog trainer, who tried to get Lola to do ‘puppy push-ups’ (lie down, sit, repeat). After ten weeks and \$1,400, Lola had lost a grand total of – 1 lb.

The existence of services like the ones offered to Lola suggest that fat pets also can symbolize the opposite of working class – they can embody an upper class insouciance indicative of abundance and excess. In the *New York* magazine article about Lola, we learn that she didn’t get fat on Walmart’s Ol’ Roy brand dogfood – her favorite foods are Newman’s Own brand organic dog treats (Newman as in Paul Newman, the late actor) and cups of sliced peaches. There is something arrestingly decadent and even perverse about feeding a dog cups of peaches, or unblinkingly spending \$1,400 on a weight-loss regime for a Chihuahua that involves having it run on a treadmill. When I interviewed the founder of a successful dog bakery in New York, she explained to me that her dog biscuits and snacks contain only ‘premium ingredients’ like ‘wild salmon, tuna, organic chicken, organic cheese and organic kelp’. As she was telling me this, I couldn’t help thinking that the dogs fed on her products eat better than me – and better than the overwhelming majority of people in most places on the planet.

Perhaps indulgence and this element of excess is a key to what we really might want to focus on when thinking about fat pets, not so much because pets like Lola and the increasing number of services that pamper them are good examples of Veblenian conspicuous consumption – although of course they are evidence of that too. Instead, what is perhaps most interesting and relevant for us about a pet like Lola, or one like Bodell Princess, who as Andrea explains, doesn’t ever have to wait for anything she wants, is that these animals so clearly exemplify the way in which pets are increasingly overtaking the species boundary and dissolving it.

In philosophy and the social sciences, there is a rapidly rising tide of interrogation of the species boundary. Before he died, philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote several book-length articles discussing the ethical and political consequences what Peter Singer (1975) labeled ‘speciesism’, but what Derrida, with typical deconstructionist flourish dubbed ‘carnophallogocentrism’ (Derrida 1991, 2002, 2003). The philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari devoted some of their later writing to describing how we might ‘become-animal’ – that is, how we might transform ourselves and our perceptions of the world by engaging in particular ways with animals (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Giorgio Agamben recently published a book subtitled ‘Man and Animal’ (Agamben 2004), philosopher Alphonso Lingis recently weighed in with several essays (Lingis 2003, 1999) – all of which means that it is only a matter of time before Slavoj Žižek publishes 3 polemical books at once, telling us that Lacan already said everything there is to say about this topic decades ago.

In her much-cited work *Companion Species Manifesto* and its recently expanded version titled *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway tells us that her figure of the cyborg has worn out its usefulness. By the end of the last millennium ‘cyborgs could no longer do the work . . . to gather up the threads needed for critical enquiry’ (2003:4). So Haraway (2003, 2008) has now replaced the cyborg with the figure of the dog. This is a move anticipated at least in part by the work of feminist writer Carol Adams in her books on why animal rights are a feminist issue, and by literature professor Marjorie Garber who several years ago published an informative and entertaining book called *Dog Love* (Garber 1996). Add to all this the continuing work on animal rights by philosophers like Peter Singer (2005), Tom Regan (1983, Cohen and Regan 2001) and Martha Nussbaum (2006), recent books on the representation of animals in film and television by media scholars like Cynthia Chris (2006) and Jonathan Burt (2003), work on human-animal relationships by anthropologists like Tim Ingold (1988), Rebecca Cassidy and Molly Mullin (Cassidy 2002, Cassidy and Mullin 2007), on the history of pets by historians like Katherine Grier (2006) and Harriet Ritvo (1987), explorations of animals and law (Sunstein and Nussbaum 2004)

and research by primatologists like Frans de Waal and the linguists who work with the genius bonobo Kanzi (e.g. de Waal and Lansing 1998; Savage-Rumbaugh, Shanker and Taylor 1998), and what we end up with is a substantial and increasingly influential body of work that is reconfiguring fundamental discussions about human-animal relationships.

The funny thing about the current academic fascination with the species divide is that the human companions that appear in documentaries like *Fat Pets*, or television shows like *Help! My Dog's As Fat As Me!* would undoubtedly respond to philosophical gymnastics like Derrida's deconstruction of the human-animal boundary by looking at him as if he were a dumb mutt and saying 'Well, duh'. Why else are 42% of dogs now sleeping in the same bed as their owners, and why else are the top 10 most popular dog names and 6 of the top 10 favorite cat names in the US common to humans¹⁶? Why else do people habitually talk to their pets using many of the linguistic features associated with baby talk (Katcher and Beck 1991, Mitchell 2001, Sanders and Arluke 1996, Tannen 2004, Veevers 1985), and why else did 92% of pet owners in the UK last year buy their pet a Christmas present (62% provided their pet with a Christmas stocking, and 30% sent their pet a Christmas card)¹⁷. The human companions of pets have known for years – as have the marketers of pet products – what academics have only just begun to understand, namely that the divide between pets and people is not at all clear. As philosopher Cary Wolfe has remarked, 'the humanities, are, in my view, now struggling to catch up with a radical reevaluation of the status of nonhuman animals that has taken place in society' (2003: xi).

This radical reevaluation goes beyond just symbolically associating pets and humans. Through a range of practices, human companions and the producers and marketers of pet products regularly transcend the species difference altogether. An ad like the following – which is the banner ad for a company called Pet Shops online – does not show us pets as *like* children; it shows us pets *as* children.



The proverbial Martian anthropologist visiting Earth to study humans could hardly be blamed for concluding from a photo like this that human females give birth to puppies. And the humanness of pets is encouraged, reinforced and confirmed by recent developments in medicine: dogs suffering from 'canine separation anxiety' can now take 'Reconcile', a drug from Eli Lilly & Co. based on the active ingredients in Prozac. Obese dogs can take Pfizer's recently released obesity drug 'Slentrol'. In Los Angeles, plastic surgeons now offer pet rhinoplasty, eye lifts and liposuction (Brady and Palmeri 2007, Robins 2005). The 'Happy Paws Boutique and Spa' in my old neighborhood in New York offers 'VIP themed suites' for dogs, complete with 'a daily turn down service and individual flat panel TV and DVD player'.

As far as food is concerned, in addition to all the diet and specialty foods mentioned above, there is also very rapidly burgeoning industry of *cookbooks* for dogs and cats (Bone appetit!). These cookbooks, which have titles like *Cooking the Three Dog Bakery Way: featuring 60 dreamy, drooly recipes for meals, treats, and salivating celebrations!* (Beckloff and Dye 2005) assure the people who buy them that their purchase demonstrates how much they care about their companion animals. This care is evidenced partly through the amount of time it takes to make the recipes in the books (the preparation time for stuffed braised duck for cats, for example, is over 1.5 hours according to Meredith and Oakley 1999: 111) – and partly through the expense of the ingredients and their associations with indulgence. Just as we humans are continually exhorted to indulge ourselves 'just this once' over and over again, pet cookbooks tell us that we should indulge our pets – often with calorie bombs. The 2001 book *Real Food for Cats*, for example, asks: 'Kitty cheeseburger? Can a cheeseburger possibly be a healthy meal for a cat? You bet it is. Especially when it's made of broiled ground beef and steamed carrots and topped with mozzarella cheese. Sounds good? It is. In fact, you might want to try one yourself' (2001: 47). This is a book that also has a

recipe for 'Kitty Fondue', which contains one cup of grated cheddar cheese and a half a cup of condensed cream of chicken soup. Other pet cookbooks have recipes that range from chicken-liver risotto to lemon mint dog sherbet, to a doggy birthday cake made with molasses, honey, an egg, and 350 grams (12 oz, or almost two large packets) of cream cheese (Gianfrancesco 2007).

Books like these and the myriad and growing number of products and services for pets suggest that pets generally are the increasingly corrosive agents of the species boundary. But fat pets particularly, I suggest, are perhaps the most powerful solvents of all. Not only are fat pets humanized through the practices of consumption and indulgence that typify late capitalist subjects; crucially, they are also humanized by simultaneously increasingly becoming entangled in that great subjectifying assemblage known as the health-beauty-fitness industry, that has all us humans firmly in its grip and in relation to whose disapproving gaze we all unavoidably fashion our selves.

I can conclude by pointing out that there is of course an ugly irony at work here. It is clear from the academic literature and from autobiographical accounts by fat people that the fatter humans get, the more *inhuman* they are generally treated as being (Brazier and LeBesco 2001, Campos 2004, Gilman 2004, Klein 2008, Kulick and Meneley 2005, LeBesco 2004, Manheim 2000, Orbach 1978, Shanker 2005, Wann 1998). Now that smokers are nearly extinct in many Western countries, fat people are perhaps the only social group that it is still perfectly legitimate and acceptable to openly mock, insult and degrade. Fat people are presented daily as being threats to the national economy. They are blamed for the escalating costs of national health care services, and in the United States they are routinely denied health care insurance. They are blatantly discriminated against when they look for jobs and housing, and as we saw in the recent study that was reported as claiming that fat is contagious, fat people are now being figured as a kind of malevolent viral force, whose mere presence in social space makes other people fat ('Obesity can spread from person to person, much like a virus, researchers are reporting today', trumpeted the *New York Times* in 2007¹⁸).

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Consider how dramatically all of this contrasts with what I have discussed here about fat pets. Pet obesity has developed as pets have moved from the backyard into the bedroom, as they've begun to eat better than many humans, as they've evolved from being mere pets to being 'companion animals', as the phrase 'a dog's life' signifies not hardship and deprivation, but pampering, indulgence, eating better than people, and VIP themed suites with individual flat panel TV and DVD players. These days, fat pets, as I discussed at beginning of this article, are even being accorded state protection and welfare (see also Sunstein and Nussbaum 2004). With contrasts like those in mind, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that as humans get fatter, they become less human, but in important ways, as pets get fatter, they become *more* human. That dynamic is a sobering one, and it reminds us that it will not be possible to think intelligently about obesity as a social and cultural phenomenon unless we acknowledge and explore the way it has now transcended – and is helping erode – the species boundary.

Endnotes

- ¹ All material regarding Sacko is taken from the court file (Kammarrätten i Stockholm, Mål nr. 4342-03), and from the case file archived in Uppsala Länsstyrelsen (Gottsunda 45:1, Dnr. 2001-310).
- ² This sinister interpretation is prompted partly by the refusal of the veterinarian who put Sacko down to speak with me, or identify herself (I know from interviewing others involved with the case that the veterinarian in question is a woman). When I contacted the clinic and asked to interview the veterinarian who put Sacko down, I was told that the veterinarian in question would not speak to me about the case. Her identity remains a well-guarded secret. This secrecy is striking given the Swedish *Offentlighetsprincipen* (Principle of Public Access), which guarantees that the gen-

eral public has unimpeded access to activities pursued by the government and local authorities. The quite substantial documentation of the Sacko case contains everything from the name of a neighbor who reported the elderly couple to the authorities, to the letter the couple wrote upon learning that Sacko had been destroyed ('We think it is horrific (*gräsligt*) the way this has been handled... We haven't received any information from Ultuna [the veterinary clinic] about why the dog had to be put down. We think this is terrible (*tråkigt*). We hope you're satisfied now'). The name of the veterinarian who ended Sacko's life, however, does not occur in any of the documentation; nor is there any evidence of the examination that presumably provided the basis for her decision. Because of this, it is difficult not to suspect that there is here – to use the idiomatic Swedish phrase that in this case is uncannily apt – *en hund begravnen* ('a buried dog', i.e. 'something fishy').

³ eg. <http://www.cats-central.com/cat-pictures/fat-cats-pictures.html>; Soares 2000.

⁴ <https://www.petclubuk.com/view/page.do?id=914>

⁵ http://www.fabcats.org/owners/infosheets/general_cat_care/feeding/overweight.html

⁶ http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/eastmidlands/series7/fat_pets.shtml

⁷ http://www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/pet_overpopulation_and_ownership_statistics/us_pet_ownership_statistics.html

⁸ <http://www.hillspetslimmer.co.uk/psoty/press.html>

⁹ email from Josh Uhl, Dietary Management Consultant, Consumer Affairs, Hills_Corporate_Consumer_Affairs@hillspet.com, 13 August 2007

¹⁰ http://www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/pet_overpopulation_and_ownership_statistics/us_pet_ownership_statistics.html

¹¹ <http://www.petfit.com/Petfit/PetfitLevel2.jsp?PetfitFolderName=support/SignsOverweightPet>

¹² Intriguingly and markedly, the human equivalents are calibrated for 'an average woman', http://www.petfit.com/Petfit/pfCommonDisplay.hjsp?FOLDERCEfolder_id=1408474395186465&bmUID=1198122258016&asst=/Assortments/Petfit/USARG/pfTreatTranslator_USA

¹³ http://www.petfit.com/Petfit/PetfitLevel2.jsp?FOLDER%3C%3Efolder_id=1408474395183407&bmUID=1187445566505&bmLocale=sv

¹⁴ <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-worlds-and-me>

¹⁵ <http://endemoluk.com/?q=node/291&tid=7&shownews=1>

¹⁶ The Veterinary Pet Insurance (VPI) is apparently the largest provider of pet health insurance in the US. In 2008, it analyzed database of 466,000 insured pets and announced that the most popular dog and cat names were: Max, Bailey, Bella, Molly, Lucy, Buddy, Maggie, Daisy, Sophie and Chloe for dogs; Max, Chloe, Tigger, Tiger, Lucy, Smokey, Oliver, Bella, Shadow and Charlie for cats.

¹⁷ www.pet-cover.com/British_pets_pampered_over_Christmas_18041900.html

¹⁸ 'Study says obesity can be contagious', *New York Times* 25 July, 2007: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/25/health/25cnd-fat.html>

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