

Below the surface of *Louis Theroux's LA Stories: City of Dogs*

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Louis Theroux's LA Stories: City of Dogs (Season 1, Episode 1) reveals the merits but also the limitations of British documentarian Theroux's particular approach to the *cinema verité* style of television.

The first of a three-part series, *City of Dogs*, on the face of things, is a documentary about stray dogs in South Los Angeles. Almost inevitably, however, it touches upon the social crisis in the area, its impoverishment and violence, and the scars this crisis inflicts on its working-class residents, as well as on the brutalized and abandoned dogs that end up in the city's animal shelter.

Theroux provides numerous hints about this underlying crisis, but he raises questions, in the end, he is unable to answer. Television critics often remark now that Theroux (born 1970) has moved away from his earlier fixation on the merely "weird" toward a more serious engagement with difficult subject matter. But it must be said that in doing so he is also exposing the inadequacy of his studied neutrality, and his flat, ahistorical approach to documenting social life.

What Theroux exposes, although this is not an earthshaking discovery, is that Los Angeles is two different cities: impoverished areas like Compton and Watts, where he shows dogs being "weaponized" for protection, as well as strays being rescued off the streets, and affluent neighborhoods whose inhabitants are shown adopting these same dogs, only to be dismayed by the disruption the traumatized animals cause in their lives.

The documentary's central figure is Cornelius Austin, known as "Dog Man." He devotes his life to rescuing the strays in and around Watts, and providing free training sessions outside the Los Angeles Coliseum to help adoptive owners handle the often terrified and aggressive animals. We are also introduced to Brandon

Fouche, a dog trainer with a remarkable ability to gain the trust of dogs that have been written off as untrainable and needing to be euthanized.

Meanwhile, in one of the city's more affluent areas, we meet a self-proclaimed "zen dog trainer," brought in as a last resort by Max, an artist, and Nancy, a fashion designer, who are at a loss as to how to domesticate the extremely aggressive animal they obtained from the city pound.

A wealthy woman whose Jaguar's interior has been chewed to bits by her adopted dog reacts with surprise to the notion she would have it repaired: "Do you think I fixed the car? I bought a new car... That's life." Caring for these animals disrupts the self-consciously ordered and socially segregated lives of wealthy Angelenos. They have inadvertently brought into their homes the parts of the city they generally avoid, stigmatize and repress.

The documentary cuts from the efforts of the affluent dog adopters to domesticate their animals to Compton, where Theroux visits a site run by Malcolm, a former gang member, who promises to "give your dog game," training the animal to be a self-defense weapon. Carrying a weapon can get you into trouble with the law, Malcolm explains, but "I can be riding around with my dog all day long and he's just like my pistol on my side."

Malcolm and his colleagues celebrate the success of their weaponized dogs when one attacks at the prompt of someone opening a screen door. In the background, we hear the theme from *Twin Peaks*, suggesting an inversion of normal reality or an underworld. This presentation of South Los Angeles as an ultimately "mysterious underworld," reveals the inadequacy of Theroux's approach.

His self-imposed ban on moral or critical judgment

leaves Theroux in the ironic mode of his earlier work such as *Weird Weekends* (1998-2000). Disregarding the city's massive social inequality, this juxtaposition leaves an impression of the "oddness" of the threat and fear of violence of South Los Angeles in contrast with the "ordinary," apparently nonviolent lives of the city's rich and upper middle class. South LA is introduced by Theroux as a "high-crime area," "the American Nightmare." "Welcome to terror!" he says as he cruises around with Dog Man, looking for strays.

Theroux is perhaps parodying the sensationalist style of American television, but his focus on violent crime as the feature of life that defines South LA comes very close to replicating the usual media stereotypes about the inner city.

Explaining the large population of homeless animals, Dog Man outlined the grim economic realities that have worsened since the financial crisis, "Foreclosures are on the rise, a lot of people losing homes and a lot of dogs get left behind." "Here's what the street's got to offer you here," he says, as the camera pans across a desolate scene. "This is South Central. The city doesn't even come to pick up their junk. Look, it's all around you."

Out of America's 50 largest cities, Los Angeles ranks ninth for its level of income inequality. The Public Policy Institute of California and the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality found that 2.6 million, or 27 percent, of Los Angeles County residents officially live in poverty. South Los Angeles is even harder hit, where poverty rates range from 40-55 percent, according to the 2013 Census.

Deindustrialization has played the largest role in the growth of poverty. Los Angeles was once the second largest auto-manufacturing center in the US, after Detroit. Auto and tire plants began closing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, followed by the loss of the majority of the aerospace industry in the 1990s.

The problem of homeless animals is just one symptom of a broader social crisis. The dogs languishing in animal shelters, often euthanized because they are judged too aggressive to adopt, provide an obvious allegory for the millions of Americans caught up in its punitive gulag system. After showing two newly arrived puppies cowering amidst the din of barking dogs, a lingering shot of the pound's grey institutional interior corridor reminds the viewer

of the architecture of a prison.

Witnessing dogs who are supposedly "beyond help," rehabilitated through empathy and understanding, implicitly raises a question about the human beings who have been defined as "super-predators" and the "worst of the worst" in order to justify America's archipelago of high-security prisons.

The director of the South LA pound explains to Theroux that the shelters are underfunded and that she must perform 17 nonmedical euthanasias that day just to make space. The cruelty of euthanizing perfectly healthy animals to create space also takes a heavy toll on the staff. "We all have been on Xanax and antidepressants," she says, "because it's not an easy job."

While in many ways insightful and moving, the documentary's limitation is its failure to probe deeper than the "high crime" label. Theroux's nonjudgmental realism comes close to the voyeurism of "reality TV" programs like Fox's *Cops* or MSNBC's *Lockup*. Instead of challenging the prejudices of the viewer, this kind of entertainment reinforces them.

To get away from stereotypical preconceptions about the "chaos" and "disorder" of the inner city, Theroux would need to move from his surface *cinema verité* to a more critical and explicitly judgmental analysis of the roots of America's social crisis.



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