

On Dog Shows
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I watch dog shows on the USA channel, I guess it is, or maybe it's Animal Planet, or both. Well, and this past weekend I saw one on CBS. A lot of dog shows on television these days. If you haven't seen one, they are a contest to pick the best-looking dogs. Doing tricks isn't part of it. The dogs don't have to sit up and beg or roll over or play dead or catch a Frisbee, anything like that.

The dogs look happy and couldn't be cuter in these dog shows and the trainers appear to be having a good time trotting alongside them as they transverse a big circle while the judges that pick the winners and the audience look them over. Part of the contest is that, one at a time, each dog stands still alongside its trainer, who keeps it occupied with small bits of chicken or something--the small dogs on a pedestal to prop them up higher--while the judge gives it a closer inspection. It looks cursory to me. It's really quick, ten or fifteen seconds: the judge runs his hands lightly over the dog's back and bottom and pats it a few times and then looks at its teeth. The television commentators on these shows aren't big on explaining things, so I'm not sure what the judges are looking for, moles or curvature of the spine or signs of arthritis perhaps, and with the teeth, an overbite or missing bicuspid or fillings or partials, I can only guess. None of the dogs when I've been watching have taken a snip at a judge's fingers while he or she was probing around in its mouth, although I find myself thinking about that possibility, and truth be told, kind of rooting for it.

With each breed category, or group as they call it--working dogs is one of them--the judge of that group picks a winner. Interlaced with a ton of commercials, they do this seven times; seven groups of dogs, seven winners. Then, the big finish of the dog show, the best-in-breed winners, as they are called--I think anyway, I should pay more attention I guess, although then again, why--are brought out and on comes a judge we haven't seen before to pick the best of those seven as the winner of best-in-show, the top dog in the whole dog show, the winner of the World Series, the Super Bowl victor, the Heavyweight Champion of the World, or at least of this particular dog show.

Often, or at least when I've been watching, this big judge we haven't seen before, and I've never heard the commentators say a thing about this person that's been back behind the curtain, waiting in the wings, even who it is going to be, is a woman in the later stages of life, late seventies, even into her eighties. She is dressed to the nines in a floor-length evening dress in a bright color. The dress jumps out at you because there is a lot of it. It seems that for whatever reason these big-finale judges have a yen for all-you-can-eat salad bars; anyway, these ladies take up a good deal of space. Yard and yards of fabric went into that dress. You can't miss the dress. It upstages the dogs in fact.

The judge strides grandly about the arena floor giving off the image of a mobile bright-red pup tent. She's in no hurry. Several rounds of commercials can be inserted while she goes about making her call of the big winner of the dog show. The dogs and their trainers, or owners, whichever it is, we aren't told, stand in a row--the Pomeranian next to the Great Dane next to the Chihuahua next to the Beagle next to the Springer Spaniel, or something like that, I could mixing up groups here--all of them, it seems, humbled and awed to be in the presence of greatness, this judge; she could be the Pope. She points at some of them to run around in a little circle in front of her and they scurry to accede to her dictate. What she says goes; anything she wants. Mussolini didn't get this kind of deference.

Then she walks over to a table with some trophies and signs in the winners' names. I think she is picking the top three, but the only one that ever gets any attention is the big winner, so maybe she only picks the one. That's worth a commercial.

Now we are back. Suddenly, with a flick of her wrist, almost offhandedly, she points to the two runners-up (I think) and the big winner, the best-in-show. And then all hell breaks loose. Everybody starts in motion. The winning trainer is beside him- or herself with joy and somehow the winning dog knows to jump up and down on his pants leg in the thrill of victory. Some of the other trainers shake the winner's hand in what appears to be genuine pleasure in his/her triumph. The winning trainer is interviewed on television ("How does it feel to win?" "Great!"). The judge is interviewed ("A fine dog."). And that's the end of the show. Pretty good TV if you have time on your hands.

It's hit me, and it's the point of this thought, that everybody involved in these dog shows agrees to suspend reality in order to make the whole thing work. As far as I can see--and to be sure, this is from a long way back, the easy chair I have set up in my bedroom in front of a TV, and I do read during these dog shows, they get a little slow for me--they all--entrants, judges, television commentators, the press, the people that attend these dog shows--go along with the very likely fiction that this best-in-show judge, or any judge, is capable of deciding definitively that this Pomeranian is better than that Beagle and all the other dogs in the final seven. Without that article of faith, the whole thing would fall apart; there'd be no dog show. Everybody tacitly accepts the idea that there is something in this judge's background, some blessing from nature, she's graced by God, some remarkable capability, something, they never tell us exactly what it is, that enables this elderly woman in the example we are using here to do little more than glance at seven dogs that don't look anything alike to me, and who didn't know ahead of time which seven breeds it would be from the scores that entered the contest, so she couldn't have studied up on these particular ones, knows with a certainty that the Pomeranian is the best one. That's it, case closed. You never hear anybody complain about the choice--"What do you mean the Pomeranian?--the Chihuahua had it beat up, down, and around!"

The judge doesn't even have to justify her choice. Why exactly did she decide the Pomeranian was better than the Great Dane, which looked really good to me. That's part of the agreement that keeps everything going: judges don't have to explain their decisions beyond a vague "That dog just jumps out at you" platitude. If they were pressed to get into that, it would open their infallibility up to question ("Nicer tail?" Are you kidding me?") And nobody questions her credentials: "She raises Shih Tzus, if you'll pardon the expression--what does she know about hunting dogs?" Or bring up bias: "A Boxer bit her granddaughter; no way is she going with a boxer. " Or question whether she is on the up-and-up: "This old biddy is on the take! The owner of the Pomeranian gave her a season's pass at Ben's Bingo Parlor." And certainly you never hear anybody challenge the basic premise of the show: "This is apples and oranges; the whole thing doesn't make sense!"

You get the idea: everybody plays along and keeps their mouths shut. If they didn't they'd run the risk of losing all they get

out of participating in dog shows: the fun and excitement, they are on TV and written up in the newspaper, and all the social goings on, the get-togethers and parties, and if they are in the retail dog business there's good money to be had selling the puppies of the winners.

The ideal for these people is to get themselves really to believe in what goes on, so that it's not that they are just going along with what they know amounts to a con. If they can get themselves into a personal place of sincere irrationality it keeps them from having to live with cognitive dissonance, as it is called. Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable feeling you get when what you say you believe something and act accordingly when you don't really believe it. That's no fun. You are a fraud of sorts. Ouch. Since it is in your perceived interest to keep participating in dog shows, it makes sense to set aside your connection with objective reality and really, truly, in all sincerity, buy in, with your total being, to the judge-infallibility article of faith. Best of all, don't even think about it; just believe.

My bet is that a good number, if not most, or nearly all, of the people involved with these dog shows pull this off. They are, in the words of philosopher Eric Hoffer, True Believers--they really, no kidding, believe the fiction. They might have a sliver of a doubt buried deep down, but for all practical purposes, they have successfully suspended external reality. Their personal, inner, subjective, reality, the one they go by, is that the winner of best-in-show really is the best dog in the whole context. They are at peace with themselves and the world. On to the next dog show.

When you think about it, dog shows aren't the only dog shows. As far as I'm concerned, religion, egalitarianism, World War II/Greatest Generation nostalgia, being a Cubs fan--dog shows. I sit in university faculty meetings thinking, This is a dog show. But then again, they all have each other and they feel good about themselves and they are having a good time while I'm there alone and brooding and looking to bolt out the door. I maybe should re-assess the idea I've had that it's best to live life grounded in reality. It could be that the character Tyler Durden in the movie "Fight Club" was onto it when he said, "Hey, whatever works for you, go with it."

