

Taming the wild...

Trainers as constructors of interspecies narratives in the horse-human relationship

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This article explores the narrative construction of interspecies relationships through the lens of equine taming practices, focusing on the work of well-known horse trainers. By analyzing the biographies of Shy Boy and Myrnah, the wild horses subjected to taming, the study critically examines how these trainers present their methods within a narrative that portrays a harmonious relationship between humans and horses. The narratives created by horse trainers, which suggest that horses voluntarily submit to taming and willingly form partnerships with their trainers, are ultimately anthropocentric constructs that mask the coercive nature of these interactions.

Through a comparative analysis of horse trainers' methods and the narrative strategies used by killer whale trainers described by Jane Desmond, I explore how these narratives influence perceptions of animal behavior and human-animal relationships. This article contributes to the ongoing scholarly dialogue on human-animal relationships, particularly in the context of taming and horsemanship. It suggests that developing an awareness of animals' needs, respecting their boundaries, and finding new ways to build relationships based on genuine respect is essential. The article ends with a call to continue searching for methods of working with horses that minimize violence and pressure while taking into account the real needs of animals, as well as to spread awareness of real forms of relationships with horses that can be based on mutual understanding and respect.

KEYWORDS: animal studies; horse whisperer; natural horsemanship; horse trainer; performance

Introduction

Myrnah and Shy Boy have never met, which is interesting in light of how much they have in common. They share similar backgrounds, similar looks, and similar life experiences. They also gained notoriety in a similar way. Both are representatives of the *Equus caballus* species. Their coats are of a similar brown color (bay coat); they are individuals captured from the wild who have come into the hands of popular horse trainers. Both have become the main subject of similar experiments-performances and are horses who are presented as having said “yes” to cooperation with humans. Their stories are presented as proof that harmonious human–equine cooperation can be achieved without violence. Shy Boy was trained by Monty Roberts, a trainer known as the “horse whisperer,” and then released to choose either to return to his herd or to stay with Roberts. When he finally approached the whisperer, he was tethered and taken to the stable he had recently left (Roberts 1999). Myrnah was a range horse taken into care by natural horsemanship trainer Elsa Sinclair. The woman wanted to see if a properly treated horse, not forced to do anything on her own, would choose to accept a rider. After months of building a relationship and seeing if the animal was ready to accept a human on her back, Sinclair saddled the mare (Sinclair 2016).

By introducing these brief animal biographies, I set the stage for a comparative analysis of the documented performative experiments of Roberts and Sinclair, who subject wild horses to taming processes and place their practices in a narrative that presents a harmonious vision of interspecies relations. The inspiration for the research I undertook came from my own experience. After practicing horsemanship for several years and experiencing a relationship with horses (including round-pen training from the ground), I experienced a crisis in my activities. I noticed how often, as a result of my actions and lack of time for regular training (including those that enhance my physical abilities), I create a risk of discomfort for the animal that interacts with me. I felt responsible for them and obliged to give up riding. This does not mean that I expect the same from all riders; however, I believe that we should still subject our relationship with horses to reflection and seek new forms of it. Personally, I still have a close relationship with horses, through the care of my injured mare, and I am still looking for new opportunities for our becoming-together-with each other. This study questions such a narrative, serving as a starting point for considering whether these harmonious relations are actually present. I show here that the harmonious interspecies partnership propagated by Roberts and Sinclair is, in fact, a wishful notion that justifies the taming of horses. Both Roberts and Sinclair seek to demonstrate that horses voluntarily submit to their

methods, willingly accepting the process of being tamed and ridden. The paths to this goal differ for each trainer, but both trainers shape an image of a compatible relationship and of a horsemanship defined by collaboration. This image of harmonious horse-rider relations, I argue, is highly curated by the two trainers.

My investigation of the vision of harmonious interspecies relationships draws on the work of anthropologist Jane Desmond (1999), who describes a similar process of forming an idealized image of humans and non-humans. I argue that in addition to creating an image of harmony, the taming process also results in what Vinciane Despret (2004) terms “anthropo-zoo-genesis.” Despret, along with Donna Haraway (2008, 3–5)¹, emphasizes the reciprocal shaping of beings engaged in long-term, shared action. In this dynamic relationship, the human influences the animal, prompting responses that shape the animal’s behavior. Simultaneously, the non-human animal affects the human, leading to mutual influence. This interspecies relationship thus leads to co-constructed interactions and bonds.

My analysis shows that ultimately, creating a vision of harmonious interspecies relationships appeals to humans and serves to confirm that equestrian practices benefit not only humans but also non-human animals. I reveal the motivations behind the practices of horse tamers and conclude that these experiments - performances aim to validate the trainers’ claims that wild horses can be subdued without violence, demonstrating that the animals independently choose to stay with the trainers and submit to them. However, these are primarily anthropocentric visions created to justify their practices. At the same time, people are trying to integrate horses into their community because they cannot imagine a world without horsemanship.

I begin my analysis by introducing the biography of Shy Boy and Myrnah and the methods of horse taming used by Roberts and Sinclair. I then provide a brief history of horse domestication, and, thus, the genesis of human-horse relationships based on horsemanship, and show a number of pre-existing studies on natural horse training methods. The next section is devoted to the creation of visions of interspecies partnership, in which I see parallels between Roberts and Sinclair’s narratives with the narratives created in the Shamu shows at Sea World, as described by Desmond, which shows that horse trainers demonstrate competence not only in training animals but also in creating narratives. The final part of the article is a section on the authentic process of co-constitution between humans and horses, which I consider primarily based on Despret’s concept of anthropo-zoo-genesis. Finally, I show that the narrative of horse taming, despite its anthropocentric underpinnings, contributes to the promotion

1 She calls such a process “becoming-with”.

of building better relationships with horses, which is somewhat paradoxical in the perspective of claims that the vision created by the conjurer is at odds with reality. However, it is necessary to emphasize a certain positive aspect of their work, although much remains to be done – their practices aimed at reducing violence against horses during training can sensitize people to the welfare of horses and encourage the search for new paths of interspecies understanding – relations that eschew violent methods; this is very important in the nurturement of responsible coexistence with these animals. My work is not intended to undermine the reputation of the aforementioned horse trainers. Its aim is to enrich the scientific achievements by analyzing interspecies relationships in the perspective of the activities of horse trainers, who are particularly important people shaping human ideas about these relationships.

To investigate the activities of horse trainers, I selected trainers who advocate for non-violent methods to minimize the risk of endorsing practices harmful to animals. Ultimately, for the analysis presented in this article, I chose to focus on Monty Roberts and Elsa Sinclair. Roberts was selected due to his reputation as one of the pioneers of non-violent training methods, his long family history of working with horses, and his extensive experience. Sinclair was chosen for her contemporary focus on equine welfare and interspecies harmony.

An additional criterion for selecting these trainers was their shared nationality and their similar experiences conducting experiments-performances, where each worked with a wild horse to see if it would independently choose to collaborate with a human. I selected videos as the primary source of analysis, as both Roberts and Sinclair utilize this medium. Video documentation allows for the observation of the horse's behavior and offers insight into the animal's perspective in these interactions. I call the actions presented by Roberts and Sinclair in films made by them an experiment-performance, because their action was a form of experiment – conducting an investigation to see if their assumptions can be confirmed (whether the horse's autonomous decision will be to do what the human wants). The experiment is an interaction exposed to the public through film documentation, and that is why I call it a performance. The event combines these two elements, which is why, to emphasize its nature and to distinguish it from standard horse-training shows and workshops, I call it an experiment-performance.

My study of Roberts' and Sinclair's relationships with wild horses is based on a close reading of films they produced: *Shy Boy: The Horse That Came in From the Wild* and *Taming Wild: A Girl and A Mustang*, which document their relationships with two individual horses and the taming process².

2 According to the authors, the horses featured in the films did not suffer physically.

Close reading is a method of textual analysis rooted in the practice of American New Critics. It entails a detailed and meticulous examination of a text's content, structure, language, and style, grounded in the belief that a work's meaning arises from the interplay of its internal elements (Brooks 1947; Brower 1951; Lentricchia and DuBois 2003; Eagleton 2007; Cieślak-Sokołowski 2017). The primary aim of close reading is to foster a deep understanding of the text by considering its context, subtle nuances of meaning, and the interrelations among its components.

This method can also be adapted for film analysis, where it is often referred to as "close watching." In this framework, the technique involves a focused analysis of selected structural elements of a cinematic work, such as framing, pacing, editing, narrative content, characters, performances, spatial design, thematic focus, or the musical score (Grant and Sloniowski 1998; Harty 2022; Pickowicz 2010).

In my close reading of the film, I focused primarily on narrative. I define narrative as the way a story is presented in a given medium, encompassing both its content (what is told) and its form (how it is told). A story, in contrast, is a sequence of events that unfold chronologically within a specific time frame and involve particular characters. Story also includes events that are not directly told (Bruner 1991; Bal 2009, 75–85; Fludernik 2009, 1–2; McKee 1997, 159–180; Herman et al. 2012, 1–29).

Narrative, therefore, refers to the structured way in which a story is conveyed (Bruner 1991; Fludernik 2009, 1–25; Herman 2009, 1–9, 211–233; Phelan and Rabinowitz 2012; Bal 2009, 75–85). It employs various techniques to guide the viewer through unfolding events. Depending on the medium, these techniques may include the construction of dialogue, cinematic framing, sound design, editing, and the selective presentation or omission of events. In shaping the story, the narrative determines how it is experienced and interpreted.

In the case of *Shy Boy* and *Myrnah*, the stories trace the transformation of these horses from their wild origins to becoming riding animals. The narrative, however, is how these stories are depicted in the films, shaped by the horse trainers who orchestrated their taming. What interests me most is the way the trainers narrate these horses' journeys, presenting their actions and relationships with the animals. This narrative is constructed through their gestures, decisions, and scenes emphasizing the closeness between human and horse, and the language they use to explain the animals' behavior. While traditional close reading typically involves an analysis confined to the work itself, my thesis (that horse trainers construct a misleading vision of interspecies relationships) extends beyond the films. It incorporates an understanding of the trainers' methods and broader professional practices as part of a larger argument. By doing so,

I aim to demonstrate how these narratives create an illusion of harmony and mutual consent, masking the underlying dynamics of control and domination.

I juxtapose my observations on the ways in which the relationship between trainers and horses is portrayed with the ways in which narratives are constructed, as described by Jane Desmond in her analysis of shows involving orcas. This comparison highlights that trainers, not only of horses but also of other animals, are more than individuals interested in animal behavior and techniques for shaping it. They are also skilled narrative constructors, crafting specific visions of interspecies relationships to influence the audience's perceptions.

Further, situating the narrative shaped by horse trainers within the broader context of harmonious visions of interspecies relationships reveals that humans possess a deep-seated desire to connect with beings of other species. In light of such desires, it is unsurprising that the image cultivated by horse trainers is so attractive to the audience.

“I think he will be back”: Taming – oppression or establishing a relationship?

Shy Boy is a prairie-born stallion captured from his herd and taken in by Monty Roberts. Known as a “horse whisperer,” Roberts sought to conduct an experiment: would a horse trained with his methods (which he claims are based on his observations and understanding of wild horses) choose to return to the trainer after being re-released into the wild, or would the animal prefer a life without humans? Simply put, Roberts wanted to see how strong a bond he could develop with a wild stallion.

Roberts called the key element of his training methods the “Join-Up process” (Roberts 2007). This technique aims to establish communication and a proper relationship between a human and a horse. It involves motivating the horse to move in a circular motion (using hand gestures and rope shuffling) until the animal begins to send signals that it respects the human and is ready to “join up.” The process consists of several phases:

1. The chase phase, where the trainer motivates the horse to move by waving their hands or the rope.
2. The run phase, during which the horse maintains a steady pace while the human watches closely and uses gestures only if the horse tries to change pace or direction.
3. The final phase, where the horse follows the human.

According to Roberts, the horse initiates the Join-Up process by signaling its readiness to engage with the human (e.g., tilting an ear toward the trainer, lowering its head, or grinding its muzzle). The human then lowers their arms, turns sideways, and slightly lowers their body, inviting the horse to approach. The horse's approach and subsequent following are, according to Roberts, evidence that it respects and trusts the human and is willing to cooperate. This process is followed by what Roberts calls the "Follow-Up" stage, where the horse willingly follows the trainer step by step. Afterward, the horse can be tamed through human touch and gradually introduced to a saddle and rider – all in less than an hour. The final stage of the "joining" of man and horse is the climax. It is presented as the moment when the horse for the first time allows the man to be close, which is a key element of the act of mutual understanding. A narrative is created about the miraculous understanding between the man and the animal.

Roberts' method is said to stem from his childhood observations of wild horse behavior. The Join-Up process, as he describes it, is meant to mirror the way an adult mare interacts with playful youngsters. For the method to work, Roberts asserts that humans must learn to speak the "language of Equus," a set of signals he observed in wild horses, later documented and formalized. His approach was revolutionary, especially in contrast to the "traditional breaking" methods used by his father, a trainer known for using harsh techniques to saddle horses (Roberts 2007, 100–107).

In the case of Shy Boy, the effects of the Join-Up process were put to a special test. Once Shy Boy exhibited traits of submission (obedience, allowing himself to be saddled and ridden, and following Roberts), he was released back into the wild as part of an experiment. The central question was whether the horse would choose to return to Roberts. The film shows Roberts waiting for Shy Boy's return, and after some time, Shy Boy does indeed appear and approach him. It is revealed that Shy Boy had reunited with his herd, but instead of letting the horse decide his future, Roberts promptly puts him on a lead and takes him to the stable, his new home.

In the film we do not see the process of Roberts and Shy Boy, but an example of the Join-Up process with another horse. During the initial training in the round pen, the horse sprinted and tried to escape. His movements were dynamic and expressive, showing signs of disorientation and discomfort. However, once taken from the prairie to the stable, Shy Boy no longer displayed these behaviors. He tolerated the established boundaries and calmly allowed Roberts to lead him.

Myrnah, like Shy Boy, was caught from the wild and put up for sale. Not much is known about her early life. Elsa Sinclair introduces her for the first time in an enclosure with other wild horses, stating that she felt the mare had "chosen her." Sinclair, like

Roberts, wanted to conduct a similar experiment, though she does not reference his work directly. Her goal was to see if she could form a bond with a wild horse that would allow the horse to submit to being handled and eventually tamed.

Like Roberts, Sinclair wanted to test whether her methods were effective in building such a relationship. However, her approach differs from Roberts' in that she seems less interested in creating a spectacle. While Sinclair is still involved in self-promotion, evidenced by her production of two films and active social media presence, she maintains a calm and understated persona. Her methods reflect a slower, more tranquil style that emphasizes giving horses space and choice. Giving horses time to make decisions is clearly emphasized by both trainers. This suggests that they are aware of how important this element of training is, but also of the narrative being created; in this way they build an impression of calmness, friendliness, and naturalness.

Sinclair's online presence includes her *YouTube* series "Tea Time with Elsa" and videos showing her calmly pacing with horses and donkeys. She speaks softly in her recordings, discussing interspecies harmony and offering horses the freedom to make their own choices. On her website, visitors are greeted by a serene photograph of Sinclair walking through a field alongside a free-roaming horse in gentle sunlight, accompanied by a caption promoting her philosophy.

This all started with a question. A question I found burning inside of me for an answer. What if horses were given a choice? Would they let us ride them? Without force or tools to control, and without bribes to lure them? (Sinclair 2016)

Sinclair's work with Myrnah and other horses, including those already tamed, focuses on exploring mutual boundaries. She emphasizes the importance of respecting the horse's limits: when the horse moves away from her, she doesn't increase the pressure but waits for the animal to take the initiative to interact or, at the very least, stop distancing itself and begin accepting her touch. She encourages the horse to follow her and match her pace, aiming to build harmony in their joint movement (Sinclair 2016). A recurring image in her films shows Sinclair walking shoulder to shoulder with the horse, her hand resting on its back. This gesture serves as both a symbol of connection, similar to Roberts' "Join-Up" process, and as a physical link, allowing Sinclair to either guide the horse or follow its movements by sensing the muscles in its back without disrupting its rhythm.

This focus on a more equal partnership, and Sinclair's reduced pressure on the animal, marks a distinct difference from Roberts' method. Sinclair gives the horse much

more time to acclimate to human interaction and to complete tasks without being rushed. Her goal is to minimize the pressure on the horse and, in many cases, adapt to the horse's behavior and natural rhythm. The core premise of her training is to offer horses a much greater degree of autonomy and agency compared to Roberts' approach, which, while gentle and non-violent, ultimately aims to subdue the horse.

After purchasing Myrnah, Sinclair presents clips from their training sessions. The mare is alone with her handler, and Sinclair allows her plenty of time to adjust to human gestures. Sinclair moves slowly and calmly, making small, gentle movements. She first familiarizes Myrnah with the touch of her hand, applying slight pressure before attempting to mount the horse. Initially, the mare allows Sinclair to mount without issue, but soon shows disapproval by moving away when Sinclair tries again. Regardless of the situation, Sinclair remains by Myrnah's side, patiently waiting. During this period, it becomes clear that the mare is pregnant, and Sinclair is present for the birth and the foal's early upbringing. From the beginning of its life, the foal is accustomed to both its mother and human presence. Eventually, Sinclair rides Myrnah, who tolerates the trainer on her back. In these moments, Myrnah appears mostly calm, even somewhat sluggish and bored. While the horse doesn't seem to share Sinclair's enthusiasm, she also shows no signs of significant stress, fear, or discomfort.

For both Roberts and Sinclair, the key moment in their training is when the horse acts in a way that suggests the animal has made an independent decision. Approaching the human is interpreted as a willingness to comply, and remaining still while being saddled is seen as a gesture of agreement to cooperate. In this case, what the trainer says must correspond with the visual images so that the narrative is coherent. The animal's ability to influence events is assumed – left free to take actions that impact its human counterpart. These actions, in turn, shape the situation. For example, it depends on the human whether the horse will continue to be driven to move, whether pressure will be relieved, or whether it will be touched now or later. The horse's behavior is a reaction to the trainer's actions, and this interaction defines the course of the process.

Both trainers present their methods as minimizing violence. The stories they construct repeat themes of connection, understanding the animal, and respecting its will. *Shy Boy* returned to Roberts, which is portrayed as his desire to remain with humans as an "animal-to-be-ridden" (Harrison 2020, 148). Myrnah, after being given ample time to process Sinclair's actions, eventually accepted them, signifying her agreement to be tamed. The connecting thread between these two stories is the interspecies bodily relationship, although the paths to achieving this connection differ.

Roberts and Sinclair both enter a unique form of interspecies interaction. They come into contact with a wild, untamed animal, who they initiate into the culture of riding. Danger is also present here, as horses subjected to training may display aggression as well as fear, with the consequence being a high risk of injury for both human and animal. The process is characterized by many minor interactions that are a tangle of various forms of communication, getting to know the other being, its signals, reactions, and also the body. An important element is touch, with which each process ends; the horse becomes a riding animal, is ridden, and its body is supposed to undergo physical connection with the rider.

Looking from the horse's perspective, we can also think of the experiment-performance- as unique and somewhat extreme – an event that is not related to its ethogram, not part of its daily existence. The horse is taken away from its usual surroundings and its animal companions and is introduced into a new and unfamiliar situation. It meets a new person or has extended contact with a representative of our species for the first time. The animal may perceive this person as a threat, and there is no way to escape from them; the only escape is to watch the man carefully and submit to his intentions. This fear is something that Sinclair wants to eliminate in her training methods (Sinclair 2016). For this reason, she stretches the training process by giving the animal time to react³. Gradually, the horse undergoes a transformation: it becomes a mount useful for people, and the number of situations in which it will have to cooperate with them will be greater. The trainer's way of life does not change drastically: s/he will still practice taming other horses and working with animals with which their owners struggle to communicate. Horses in this situation may, primarily, resist or incorrectly execute commands. Resistance that is met with the failure of human action can undermine the competence of the trainer. Allowing the animal to rebel is a procedure that diminishes its agency. If resistance is written into the process, then it becomes a predictable part of the trainer's work scenario, which, however, does not affect the final outcome of the process (because it was planned and is in accordance with the human's assumption about what horse-rider relations should look like).

In short, Roberts' and Sinclair's narratives create similar constructs despite their significant differences. In both cases, the horses are in pens, but the trainer tries to build (mainly through verbal narration) the impression that the horse is completely free

3 It is necessary to point out that the fight against fear and discomfort also guided Roberts, who developed his methods in opposition to the techniques used by his father, which were based on inflicting physical pain and abuse on animals (Roberts 2007).

and makes autonomous decisions to cooperate with the human. The horses have time to decide and join the human, but their physical space is limited.

In Roberts and Sinclair's film, horses are depicted as "misunderstood" creatures that long to trust humans but require the right approach to do so. The trainers' demonstrations prominently feature symbolic actions, such as gestures of touch or "conversations" with the horses, intended to showcase their care for the animals and their unique ability to understand them – positioning themselves as those who can truly connect with the horses. This narrative frames taming as an act of empathy and care rather than domination. Trainers speak of "listening to the horse's needs" and fostering "relationships," transforming the perception of taming from an exercise in subjugation to one of collaboration. As a result, viewers are encouraged to see taming as a natural and harmonious process, rather than as an imposition of obedience. Moreover, the narrative conveys the impression that taming is both necessary and mutually beneficial by depicting the transformation of an anxious, frightened horse into a calm, obedient companion. Trainers describe their mission as helping the animal "overcome fear" or "regain trust," thereby framing taming as a noble act of altruism. In their statements, they emphasize that they want to create a situation in which the horse will want to work with the human on its own, and will not be forced to do so. There are statements that say that "the horse has made a decision"; "has chosen" the human; "has accepted the saddle and the rider"; is "an intelligent and willing student" and is "loved" by the human; the trainer also gives it "trust." Giving the horse time and space while waiting for a decision to be made seems to confirm that this decision comes from the horse itself, and trust and giving freedom are key elements in the training process, for which the trainer is rewarded with the horse's long-awaited decision to submit to the human. This perspective casts taming as a process that brings peace and security to the animal, subtly emphasizing the benefits of human intervention. The overarching narrative construction fosters the illusion of a profound bond between the "enchanter" and the animal. Trainers, as individuals experienced in working with animals, possess a nuanced understanding of the behaviors that can emerge during the taming process. This allows them to present these behaviors in a carefully curated light, reinforcing their image as skilled and competent narrative constructors.

Visions of interspecies harmony

The documented experiments-performances of trainers like Roberts and Sinclair exemplify the construction of an idealized vision of interspecies harmony. These train-

ers frame their interactions with horses within a narrative that presents their methods as fostering partnerships based on mutual understanding. Roberts and Sinclair portray themselves as individuals who possess a unique, deep knowledge of horses, appreciating their nature and secrets. However, the analysis provided by researchers, as well as the potential risks of mishandling horses, reveals cracks in this carefully crafted narrative.

The behavior of horses and the challenges involved in their training indicate that the narrative of an extraordinary, natural harmony between horse and rider may, in some cases, be nothing more than a wishful vision. In her analysis of the show *Shamu and His Keeper*, featuring orca whales, Desmond highlights the façade constructed by the show's creators and how this illusion can be deceptive – even if the audience doesn't perceive it as such (Desmond 1999, 222–223). The *Shamu* show presents a narrative about an extraordinary interspecies relationship, one that is harmonious and desired by both human and non-human participants. The narrative is so captivating that the audience often overlooks or forgets the reality of the environment in which they and *Shamu* find themselves, as well as the fact that the animal is performing orchestrated actions she was trained to execute, simply to fit the narrative of a unique bond (Desmond 1999, 242–243). In truth, *Shamu* is not acting completely on her own initiative.

Shy Boy and *Myrnah*, like *Shamu*, become stars – public figures embodying distinct personalities (Desmond 1999, 22). However, while *Shamu* is a fictional character represented by various whales, *Shy Boy* and *Myrnah* are authentic individuals, symbolizing the broader equine population. Their subjugation serves as a testament to the readiness of horses to become mount animals. This process moves them from the realm of nature into culture, fostering a sense of “inclusion in the family.” Desmond terms this phenomenon the “culturalization” of nature (Desmond 1999, 218). Taming is equivalent to culturalization when horses acquire skills recognized as typical of saddle horses, but while viewers of *Shamu* witness a fully cultured animal, those watching Roberts and Sinclair see horses in the midst of this transformation.

Desmond (1999, 219) elaborates on culturalization: “The culturalization of nature is complete. The product is a controllable sublime, best marketed through the figure of a giant, smiling, dangerous yet cuddly killer whale – *Shamu*.” Trainers working with wild horses can similarly be seen as figures connected to the “sublime.” Wild, untamed horses – considered beautiful and majestic – embody sublimity. The performances suggest a “sublimity that can be controlled,” enhancing the allure of the trainers' narratives.

In the case of horse shows, the situation is less about façade, as the animals do not play scripted roles and instead undergo public training. This narrative centers on

introducing a nonhuman being into a specific human community and the physical partnership between horse and rider. However, only one of these beings is fully aware of the process. The trainer can frame it within a narrative they wish to believe, while the horse navigates its new circumstances using instinctive strategies.

Desmond also discusses the notions of freedom and wildness preserved within the Sea World narrative, which obscures the reality of confinement. This is primarily achieved by focusing on the human-animal relationship in the performance (Desmond 1999, 241). A similar dynamic characterizes Roberts' and Sinclair's performances, where the stories revolve around interactions between humans and animals rather than the animals themselves. The horse's wildness – an essential aspect of its original identity – is tamed. Moreover, the taming process seems to imply that horses desire to relinquish their wildness and embrace riding, yet lack the means to do so without human guidance.

The second important concept related to wildness is freedom. Does the horse's renunciation of wildness equate to a loss of freedom? Roberts' narrative suggests it does; Shy Boy's abandonment of his wild life signifies a forfeiture of freedom. In contrast, Sinclair posits that Myrnah remains free – her choice to relinquish her wildness is voluntary, not enforced by the trainer. Here, freedom of decision-making is framed as a preservation of autonomy, even in the absence of a return to the wild.

Desmond (1999, 229) points out that audiences often overlook the commands given to the orcas, and the remarkable displays of interspecies duets create an illusion of intuitive understanding. Trainers of horses seek a similar effect, believing that intuitive understanding emerges during training. There are no concealed gestures to disrupt the illusion constructed by the narrative; any ambiguities are masked with suitable explanations. Roberts believes the horse comprehends her gestures as a form of communication in *Equus*, while Sinclair assumes the horse recognizes her intention to give the animal time and to wait for signs of cooperation. Desmond describes an acrobatic display by an orca and her trainer, highlighting not only the uniqueness and difficulty of the performance but also the seamless communication between human and animal (Desmond 1999, 231). A similar effect is desired in horse training shows – not just to showcase “how this trainer achieved it,” but also to demonstrate “how wonderfully they get along.” Desmond's description of the Shamu shows ends as follows:

The whole structure of the choreography and the theatrical aspects of its staging in terms of timing, visual focus and sound score underline the concept of loving, equal partners that frames the traditional ballet duet (Desmond 1999, 228).

In Roberts' shows, the ending features two respectful partners, while in Sinclair's case, it culminates in a portrayal of two loving and devoted companions – an idyllic vision of harmonious interspecies relationships. This vision, crafted by the trainers, may not reflect reality, as indicated by the aforementioned scientific studies on equine ethology and horse welfare.

Of particular interest is the fact that, even if these visions may not be entirely accurate, they remain captivating to the audience. A comparison between the actions of horse trainers and those of orca trainers, as described by Desmond, reveals that some individuals working with animals possess not only extensive knowledge about their charges but also the ability to craft compelling narratives. These narratives allow them to present the story of the relationship in a carefully curated manner.

In such scenarios, trainers are positioned as authorities. By portraying animals as “misunderstood” by the public but uniquely understood by the trainers, they justify the taming process as both necessary and natural. Through gestures that signal sympathy and care, as well as explanations of animal behaviors as expressions of devotion to humans, trainers enable audiences to align their perceptions with the narrative being presented.

The techniques employed by trainers are universal across species and resonate regardless of whether the audience has daily interactions with the animal in question. This desire to connect with beings beyond the human species extends not only to horses but also to a wide variety of animals, as evidenced by diverse examples ranging from relationships with orcas to numerous biographies and reportages exploring human connections with elephants, lions, wolves, birds, and other species (Richardson 2009; Sheldrick 2013; Lawrence and Spence 2009; Woolfson 2009; Mee 2009; Ellis and Junor 2009). Viewers of such demonstrations often harbor a deep desire to experience a unique bond with an animal. This yearning to connect on a profound level makes the narratives crafted by trainers especially appealing and emotionally engaging.

The process of becoming-with

Horses can develop certain competencies during the taming process, though these may not align with the trainer's claims. Despret emphasizes that beings engaged in joint interactions influence each other; she focuses on how the bodies of the entities involved in the relationship are both created and creating, responding to one another's bodies and emotional states (Despret 2004, 122; Ziarkowska 2024, 7). This dynamic falls under what Despret terms *anthropo-zoo-genesis*, while Haraway describes it as

sympoiesis: “creation with.” As Haraway notes, “Nothing is created by itself” (2016, 58). Becoming-ness emerges from the relationships based on interaction and co-construction, creating a new common quality from the union of two entities. Such a relationship is an ongoing process requiring openness and sensitivity to the other party.

Despret examines the power relations implicated in the expectations people have of animals (Despret 2004, 114). She cites the example of the famous Clever Hans – a horse whose caretaker Wilhelm von Osten claimed possessed mathematical abilities unique for an animal, including answering calculus questions just like a human, which the horse communicated by tapping out numbers with his hoof. Von Osten’s version of events was questioned by many researchers and people working with animals, but each time the animal confirmed the mathematical ability. Eventually, the animal’s possession of special abilities was disproved by Oskar Pfungst, noting that the number of times Hans tapped his hoof was dictated by the animal’s observation of the person asking the question. Hans observed the unconscious signals sent by the questioner: body tension, small movements, understanding that he was expected to tap his hoof. Because of this, the animal always gave the correct result when the questioner knew the answer and was wrong when the questioner did not. Hans was not an outstanding mathematical animal, but he proved something much more important: how attuned animals are to our behavior and the signals we send, and how we can interact with animals (and they with us) and thus create each other (Despret 2004, 111–114). The people “talking” to Hans were so eager to believe that the horse could count that their bodies sent signals to the animal independently of their will. Thus, they unconsciously shaped the animal’s behavior. They interpreted the animal’s reactions, which were responses to their signals, as their desired behavior, i.e. the counting ability possessed by the horse. Roberts and Sinclair are also very keen to interpret the horses’ behavior in terms of a liberal human subjectivity: an agreement to cooperate, showing a desire for partnership. In reality, horses simply try to conform to the rules of functioning imposed on them by humans and present a whole range of behaviors; eventually, they hit on one that ends up reducing pressure from humans. When the trainer sees the expected behavior, he frames it within a narrative that speaks of agreement and the animal’s display of willingness to create a partnership and connect with the human.

Taming represents a transitional process in which the horse learns to understand human gestures and postures. During this process, the wild horse responds to human actions. Research into Roberts’ narrative suggests that while a horse may not respond to humans using the language of Equus, its movements – such as diverging from the trainer’s hand signals, speeding up, slowing down, or turning its ear – are

genuine reactions to human stimuli. Similarly, with Myrnah and Sinclair, even if we cannot confirm her readiness to be saddled, her tolerance for a human on her back results from her experience alongside a person. However, the result creates a beautiful picture – an illustration of the relationship between humans and horses.

Justyna Włodarczyk, in her analysis of harmonious interspecies relationships, refers to the *Peaceable Kingdom* paintings by Edward Hicks, which portray animals living in harmony alongside a child, reflecting a sanitized vision of American settlement (Włodarczyk 2024, 7). She connects Hicks' aesthetics with Burke's vision of the sublime, noting that the *Peaceable Kingdom* series provokes contemplation on divine power rather than glorifying harmony (Włodarczyk 2024, 4).

A similar idyllic vision appears in the narratives of horse trainers. If one cannot envision a world without horsemanship while prioritizing horse welfare, the only ethical way to sustain these practices is to create an idealized image of harmonious interspecies relationships, akin to the *Peaceable Kingdom*. In this light, horse taming can be seen as a benevolent culturalization process (Desmond 1999), transitioning non-human animals into our realm.

Roberts and Sinclair strive to reshape interspecies relations, seeking new methods of taming horses and fostering partnerships. However, escaping the dominant status of humans in this relationship is challenging. Despret highlights ancient spectacles involving animals, emphasizing the “antagonistic construction of the human and natural worlds” (Despret 1999, 218). This perspective captures the vision Roberts and Sinclair wish to move away from. Yet, as Harrison suggests, horses lack the ability to resist the identity of ‘animals-to-be-riden’ when riders are not open to other possibilities that might emerge through horse-human anthropo-zoo-genesis (Harrison 2020, 148). Indeed, the vision of harmonious riding realized by mutual consent is largely imaginary. When considering “why do people do it,” one might also ask “why would they think they should not do it?” The discourse on horses being used for riding often shifts the focus from the question of “why tame horses?” to “how to tame horses in the gentlest manner?”

The former consideration is particularly important with regard to the possibility of anthropo-zoo-genesis between horses and their human guardians, which would aim for a genuine openness towards being transformed. If horses are to be shaped under the influence of our practices, we must be vigilant and strive to discern how horses might more fully shape us.

Conclusion

Despret views domestication as a form of anthropo-zoo-genesis (Despret 2004, 130), and I consider the taming process in the context of horse riding similarly. This process is more individualized than domestication as a whole, focusing on specific individuals rather than entire populations. Roberts approaches this process more systematically, while Sinclair takes a less structured approach. Nevertheless, both trainers subject horses to a transition aimed at transforming an unmanageable, disobedient horse into an “animal-to-be-riden” (Harrison 2020, 148) – a riding animal that has undergone a significant identity change during training. This taming process demonstrates a human desire to engage in an equestrian-based relationship, making it difficult to envision a world without horseback riding.

This article argues that the taming process is where anthropo-zoo-genesis can occur, when horses and humans influence each other through their physical interactions. This is primarily possible when there is openness on the part of humans to various forms of interaction, but it also occurs with processes determined by humans (as in the case of Roberts and Sinclair’s practices). The stories of Shy Boy and Myrnah, considered in the perspective of Despret’s concept, however, show that we do not need to determine these processes in order to co-constitute with animals.

Despite the limitations in the visions currently being created by trainers, their methods can improve interspecies relationships if aligned with the project of anthropo-zoo-genesis, and this may be of value for further research on the topic of narrative in horse experiments-performances. This research may benefit trainers who are actively working to renegotiate the horse-human relationship within the equestrian paradigm.

The primary benefits of such approaches lie in minimizing suffering and reducing physical violence against animals. However, it is crucial to remain mindful of the risks associated with perpetuating and developing narratives that frame human use of animals in ways that seem voluntary on the part of the animals. Presenting these practices as freely chosen by animals fosters a false belief that they willingly accept their roles in interspecies relationships, thereby justifying human exploitation and the abuses that accompany not only work with animals but also everyday coexistence (e.g., restrictions on freedom, bodily interference, and more).

Such narratives risk invalidating the suffering of animals – often unnoticed by laypeople – and perpetuating their exploitation while reinforcing the dominant role of humans. They enable people to maintain the illusion that all is well in human-animal interactions. In contrast, it is vital to cultivate and enhance awareness of animals’ needs

and behaviors, respect their boundaries, and seek new, ethical ways to build relationships based on genuine respect and understanding. This often requires humans to relinquish certain practices (e.g., riding, training, or various forms of control).

Therefore, animal trainers should be aware of the impact of the narratives they construct on their audiences. They must act with a heightened sense of responsibility, ensuring that their actions promote awareness and encourage practices that prioritize animal welfare and autonomy over human convenience or tradition.

Interactions and relationships between horses and humans raise challenging questions for trainers and riders alike. The human community's ongoing search for less violent ways to engage with horses testifies to the ever-present need for more responsible interspecies ties. Demonstrations of natural horsemanship often reveal more about human desires than about the horses themselves. The efforts of Monty Roberts, Elsa Sinclair, and other modern trainers, along with their audiences, indicate a strong human need to connect with horses and cultivate partnerships.

The desire to establish bonds with non-human beings extends beyond horses to various other animal species, and the narrative techniques employed by trainers can be effectively applied to many of them. This yearning drives a continuous search for new training methods that facilitate communication with animals while minimizing violence and human pressure. Such strategies sustain the perception of taming and exercising control over animals as friendly, natural, necessary, and ethically acceptable.

Hicks' vision appears to resonate strongly with people, many of whom are drawn to the idea of experiencing a harmonious interspecies relationship. This image is often so appealing that recipients willingly accept and believe in the created vision, ignoring the true nature of these relationships. Not seeing what form this relationship actually takes, and that it has an anthropocentric character that carries the risk of abuse and exploitation of animals.

My analysis of two documented experiments-performances by well-known horse trainers shows that these trainers are more interested in answering the question "how to create equestrian-based relationships with horses well" than "why create equestrian-based relationships with horses." Trainers show sensitivity to horse welfare and dedicate their professional lives to creating practices that will make taming a gentler process for horses. Their practices are framed within a narrative that justifies what they are doing, which includes describing how they minimize suffering and increase the agency of the horses by communicating in ways (that the trainers believe are) understandable as well as allowing attempts at rebellion and waiting out rebellious behavior. The final image created by the trainers is of human and horse united in understanding,

respect, and affection. This is meant to be an image that evokes positive associations and resembles the vision of interspecies harmony. In the narratives analyzed, there is a lack of questioning as to why horses should be tamed, why a wild stallion released into the wild should return, and why a wild mare should be saddled. The trainers in no way question that the horses will want to cooperate – the challenge is just to properly prepare them for it. This kind of relationship is still burdened by a considerable degree of anthropocentrism; horses eventually succumb to human pressure and become obedient.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that our actions affect other creatures, no matter what narrative we wrap them in. Horses during the taming process learned to interact with “their” humans in greater peace and symbiosis. Although they do not do exactly what the trainers claim and remain under the domination of the trainer, they still want to negotiate the kind of conditions that lead to a peaceful relationship. It is this process that Despret describes as anthropo-zoo-genesis and that Haraway calls a becoming-with. Horses also want a harmonious relationship with us, and we should continue to explore what this relationship might look like.

The contribution to knowledge of this article lies in its critical examination of the narratives surrounding the taming of wild horses, particularly those crafted by trainers like Monty Roberts and Elsa Sinclair. The study highlights the dual role of animal trainers, including horse whisperers: they not only train animals but also construct narratives that shape a desired image of interspecies relationships. This presents a new perspective on the study of human-animal relations, suggesting that trainers are active agents in shaping the social conception of harmony between species. The article also suggests that the appeal of animal trainer narratives arises from the human need to establish connections with other species, a desire deeply embedded in human nature. Understanding this phenomenon provides insight into why such narratives resonate so strongly with audiences. It analyzes the process by which a vision of interspecies harmony justifies human actions towards horses. Human desire, rather than the need or initiative of horses, underlies many narratives woven around taming and establishing relationships with these animals. Conversely, taming, training and riding remain a form imposed on non-human animals, no matter how positive the process described by Roberts and Sinclair may seem to us humans. Nevertheless, this study also shows that, despite the inconsistency of this vision with reality, there is still room for processes of becoming-with in the context of equine experiments-performances. Finally, and perhaps most importantly: animals also desire harmonious relationships with us, but our created visions prevent us from seeing how they do it. We should continue to attune ourselves to our equine kin.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under the grant “Figurations of Interspecies Harmony in Literature, Film and Other Cultural Texts of the English-Speaking Sphere, from the mid-19th to the 21st Centuries” [UMO-2020/38/E/HS2/00130].

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