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## Herding Community: Entanglement in *Of Horses and Men*

Cinema produces an equalizing vision of the world in which human beings do not have preferential status over beasts or forests. -- Andre Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon."



"Grána's Eye" [Still from *Of Horses and Men*]

**Introduction.** Benedikt Erlingsson's film *Of Horses and Men* was released in 2013, was nominated for Best Foreign Film for the 86th Academy Awards, and won the 2014 Nordic Film Award. It is structured around a series of episodes reflecting Scandinavian sagas, or traditional oral stories that Simon Halink calls "sagascesapes." Halink argues that sagascesapes are stories that are historically entangled with the landscapes of Iceland and, in the case of this film, include the Icelandic horses that are entangled with human animals and landscape forming community.<sup>1</sup> The film does not have a conventional plot; rather, the episodes or sagas are linked together by each character's connection to their horses and, in what follows, because there is not a plot per se that describes the action of the film, I will consider each scene in the order that it appears in the timeline of the film to illustrate my claims. Each new scene is introduced with a shot of the horse's body or eye, and usually ends in a death or accident of either a horse or human. The action is inaugurated by the farmer Kolbeinn (Ingvar Eggert Sigurðsson) and the widow Solveig (Charlotte Bøving), whose courtship is the principal thread that takes us to the end of the film. The other important through line is of a Spanish tourist, Juan, who meets each of the villagers and their horses on his bicycle and horse tours of

Iceland. The characters and horses meet death, blindness, love, and friendship along the way, and the film culminates in a final scene where both human and horse are co-constituted as one in a herd.

The Icelandic title of the film is *Horses in Us* (*Hross í oss*) which makes me wonder: how is becoming-animal — the horse in us — a risky experiment? Astridis Neimanis asks: “What are the risks and consequences of becoming animal? Not only for the human who becomes, but also for the animal that is pulled into this becoming alongside of her” (280)? Horses in this film are shot, gelded or castrated, and nearly drowned. But “men” also die and are blinded/castrated. The director of this film has an equalizing vision and seemingly makes no distinction between humans, non-human animals, landscapes, and other signs. This astonishing film offers the student of both film and animal studies a text that operates at the intersection of two ontologies, or what Jonathan Burt calls a “rupture in the field of representation” (11). Burt argues that the animal image in film points beyond itself to ethical questions regarding how animals are treated, not just in the making of the film but in society. I consider *Of Horses and Men* as a means of understanding the Icelandic horse in its landscape and the co-created human communities and landscapes — the sagascapes of places and spaces — they share, both on and off the screen to create a distinctly embodied, ethical community.

However, this is a film, and so it is also about looking. In order to read the representations of the non-human and human animal entanglements, the director makes clear that the controlling visual metaphor of the film is the eye — the gaze of the animal — and the coats of the horses, an affectual image. In some instances, the spectator sees in the horse’s eye the figure of a human and, as such, the horse’s eye can be said to be merely a series of mirrors in which “man” sees his own image, “always already deformed in the features of an eye” (Agamben 26). Or, sometimes the image of the horse’s eye is opaque, without reflection, its sight unseen. And yet other times we see in the eye the objects viewed by the horse, such as fence-line and landscape. The gaze here is not one frozen in time and does not represent a colonizing metaphysics geared to the static, nature-based tourism images that prop up romantic wilderness ideologies. Instead, we see the horse as an agent — a theatrical actor -- in their own right for “what they feel is clearly written on their faces, made public — by tails, ears, and odors and displayed by their actions” (Bekoff 44-5). The horse in this film is an actor and individual understood on the basis of what it does, a biosocial becoming in a specific geography and society, an agent of “intra-action” and “agential realism” as defined by Karen Barad. “Crucially, agency is a matter of inter-acting; it is an

enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency is doing/being in its intra activity" (*Meeting* 235). As Barad explains:

All bodies, not merely human bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity — its performativity. This is true not only of the surface or contours of the body, but also the body in the fulness of its physicality, including the very "atoms" of its being. (153)

Barad goes on to state that human bodies are not different than non-human bodies and that this intra-activity has material effects/affects in the world. We are not separate, but entangled:

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. (x)

Barad argues that ethics is not simply about "responsible actions in relation to human experiences in the world" (160). Ethics are embodied in relational ontologies of entanglement: there is no outside of matter but rather a "multitude of entangled performances of the world's worlding itself" ("Nature's" 133). Boundaries are co-constituted, including in "situations where there are no humans around" (*Meeting* 160).

This doing/being of inter-action is shown in this particular film through the visual repetition of the gaze of the horse, a visual metaphor for cinema itself, which is always the subject of its own vision as well as an object for our vision (Sobchack 148). The horse's eye in this film is a kind of animal camera that directs the audience's gaze. Because the film dispenses with narration and with little talking amongst characters, the world of this film is not explained to the audience, it is not about a particular human understanding of the world. Rather, the film offers a version of the nature of reality. In addition to the horse's eyes, the images of the coats of the horse invites the viewer into what Laura Marks calls "haptic visuality," or a world of affect that opens up the visual boundaries that sight alone engenders (*Skin 2*). This material and tactile and creaturely gaze draws on a range of senses, especially touch, which is the most intimate of connections that we can have with horses. Through the tactile images of the equine body, *Of Horses and Men* articulates a sense of shared embodiment and represents what Anat Pick calls "creaturely cinema" in that when viewing, our desire to reach out to

touch the horse destabilizes the visual division between the human subject and its objective world, human and non-human life (193).<sup>2</sup>

In *Of Horses and Men* there is much more to the question of where the horse's body begins and ends than meets the eye. What we see when we look back to the eye of the horse in this film is a questioning entity looking upon human community. While vision abstracts the human subject from the objective world, arguably in this film the non-human animal eye reflects the very possibility of reciprocal understanding between the horse and human community, and we are entangled in our viewing with non-human animals via the reoccurring image of the horse's eye. The human, like the horse, is a most social animal and it can be said that we both live in herds. And communities are knitted together by a shared ethics, which in this case are embodied in the "worlding of the world" via the horse. It is not a question of other animals being elevated to human status as creatures with "higher" human faculties but rather, as Steven Thierman argues, the human community could benefit by being brought "down," as it were, to the level of other animals (185). We need not consider how to get animals into our moral community, but perhaps instead consider how we may be inserted into theirs by recognizing that all boundaries are always already co-constituted. In the case of this film, the animal gaze offers us ethical insights through the horses who look back. We cannot know explicitly what the horses think; however, we can follow the direction of the film that clearly moves us to see what the horses see, which is "us" of course. The tactile world of affect that the horses open up for us is sensual, sentient and sensible, making sense to us and also making sense of us, for us, in us, herded together.



"Brunn mounting Grana" [still from *Of Horses and Men*]

**The Animal Gaze.** With obvious cinematic attention to seeing and being seen, the non-human animals in this film are not merely the bearers of the look in a predatory human gaze. John Berger, in his exploration of the gaze in “Why Look at Animals,” argues that the “look between the animal and the man, which may have played a crucial role in the development of human society, and which, in any case, all men had always lived with until less than a century ago, has been extinguished” (Berger 28). Jonathan Burt offers a corrective to Berger’s assessment. We see animals in cinema as suspended between technological artifice and corporeal reality, and so the very technology of filmmaking attempts to depict a becoming with the assemblages of these non-human creatures and cultures that surround and inhabit us, and thus we in turn inhabit them. The director of *Horses* underscores that reciprocal looking in this film is anything but extinguished, and instead offers what Pick and Burt would designate a “transformative cultural presence” in a cinematic “zoomorphic stage that transforms all living things into creatures” (Pick 107). Creatures in this instance means an entanglement of human and non-human animals, making them equal in their possession of the gaze. However, film has a powerful fetishizing effect:

Film fetishizes the animal look to such a degree that it could be suggested that it is around the idea of visual communication that the animal figure comes closest to resembling the technology that produces it. (Burt 64)

The gaze of the animal in cinema marks the point of contact across the species, for when the animal look merges with the camera lens, the animal eye is turned into a camera or a non-human recording mechanism (53).

In the first frames of the film we see close up shots of the coat, ears, and eye of the farmer Kolbeinn’s (Ingvar Eggert Sigurdsson) prized grey mare, Grána. Next, we see light glinting off the binoculars of the villagers who spy on the farmer Kolbeinn as he is on his way to court the widow Solveig (Charlotte Bøving). He takes careful attention with his clothing and the turnout of his mare, for he knows the villagers and the widow are watching, and he wants to show off the mare’s spectacular skeið, or “flying pace.” The villagers are waiting to see his inaugural ride on the beautiful mare, but they are sexual voyeurs as well, and they want to see him greet the widow Solveig whom he is keen to impress. It is impossible to determine which performance they want to see more. After a short visit, Kolbeinn mounts his mare to return home, but Solveig’s stallion Brunn mounts Grána while Kolbeinn is still astride. This scene resonates with one of the most defamatory remarks in medieval Icelandic sagas, which is *gera meri ór einum* or to “make a mare of someone,” symbolizing femininity, rape and bestiality



(Sayers 32). The farmer is humiliated and the event shames the man to the point that he perceives no other option than to shoot his beloved mare, and the widow Solveig, angry because her stallion has driven the only eligible bachelor away, gelds him.<sup>3</sup>

Kolbeinn projects a misogynistic view of human sexuality onto the mare. Like a raped woman it is her transgression, she dishonored him, and so must be killed. These opening scenes of both the materiality of bodies, animal sex, and the horse's eye are an insertion of the sensuous real in animal form which, as Pick and Burt assert, is always a question of violence (Pick 110). The violent killing of the mare is off screen, but the technologies of sight seen in cinema — in this case the binoculars of the villagers, via classic cinema's shot-reverse shot format — signify unconscious desire, fantasies, and the ego-shattering enjoyment that both drives and resists film representation. The Gaze undoes us and reduces us to animal shame (Lacan 84). Arguably, no discipline has worked harder to separate human beings from their animality than psychoanalysis. Our rejection of our animality creates human consciousness; our civilizing of animal urges creates normative sexuality. The gelding of the stallion is simultaneous with the symbolic castration of the farmer, who is humiliated and degraded and, in turn, the cinematic gaze offers us the uncanny sense that the object of our eye looks or glances back, and so reduces we the audience to feel shame. The horse who looks reminds the farmer of his lack and reminds the viewer that the materiality of existence always exceeds our grasp of meaning. And so, the mare must die.

The opposite of anthropomorphism in the film is, arguably, bestiality. We project nobility onto humans and bestiality on to beasts. Usually, the screen confirms human superiority for viewers are directed by the cinematographer to see one form of sex as vulgar and repulsive, and the other as erotic and titillating. In human communities the disavowal of the animal's gaze is marked by hatred for the animal within, a hatred for human animality (Sliwinski 75). Anne Frieberg uses the term "petishism" to illustrate how the screen is not a merely a mirror, but a space where viewers can look at an image that does not reflect back themselves, but rather an animal as other that confirms one's existence as human: "The primal scene of petishism is the terror of finding out that we are not, after all, so different from animals" (qtd in Marks, *Touch* 26). The purpose of a fetish — or a "petish" — is to distract us from the fear of difference and protect us from the truth of our animality.

The farmer's masculinity was already threatened by the widow, and so when her stallion mounts his mare, his fears of castration or humiliation are realized because of the villagers who watch. Instead of having an empathetic understanding of all animal

life and death in solidarity, the farmer and those who watch are disgusted by this “bare life” as an animal — by his sexual desires for the widow — and by killing the horse, he kills off the remainder of the animality that causes him such un-worlding shame. But that is not the full story. The coupling between Grána the mare and Brunn at the beginning of the film is mapped onto Kolbeinn and Solveig near the end of the film, for they finally consummate their relationship during the annual roundup of the horses. Solveig takes the initiative with the farmer and they have sex in a meadow while the horses watch, with a close up on the widow’s now castrated horse, Brunn. Before the couple has sex, Solveig instructs Kolbein to make sure he doesn’t let go of Brunn’s reins, for he is recently gelded and “excitable” and may run away. How we see horses has elements of voyeurism, desire, ownership and violence. But how do we see the horses who watch? As Jonathan Burt writes regarding perverse looking and animals in cinema:

The issue here is not whether similar desires might be aroused in audiences from seeing animal and human bodies in similar contexts, but what it means to map the one onto the other. At one level, the invocation of taboo imagery points to comparable ethical questions relate to issues of exploitation — particularly where scenes of animal violence are contrived for the camera — or to the ambivalence of the interplay between extreme objectification and the thrills of identification. (44)

The widow Solveig is not killed and the farmer Kolbeinn is not gelded after their sex act, so the camera’s concentration on the look of the horse that was gelded because of his “transgression” is notable. While Kolbeinn’s mare was killed because of her sexual transgression as a female animal, the human characters in this scene nevertheless in the end become animal alongside the horses. In fact, in this image they remain physically tethered to their animality, for Kolbeinn holds Brunn’s reins while they have sex in the meadow. Monica Mattfeld reminds us that horse/human relationships also require technologies, specifically bits, the very material that “shaped the lives of horses and humans who “intra-acted” with them in complex apparatuses of “mattering”” creating a third, cyborg, identity (11). In this manner, the image of the animal is in a position of equality with the human subject, in that human and animal bodies are mapped onto each other via both sex and death. The human characters watch the horses have sex, and the horses watch the humans, and in this latter scene the horse’s gaze dissolves the boundaries between the animal and human bodies.

There is no species on earth that is not entangled or in “symbiosis” with another species (Lingus 166). We feel and move with other species: “Our bodies are coral reefs teeming

with polyps, sponges, gorgonians” and we move “stirred by the coursing of blood, the pulse of the wind” (167). Further, as Alphonso Lingis says about sex,

our sense of ourselves, our self-respect shaped in fulfilling a function in the machinic and social environment, our dignity maintained in multiple confrontations, collaborations, and demands, dissolve: the ego loses its focus as a centre of evaluations, decisions, and initiatives. Our impulses, our passions, are returned to animal irresponsibility. (172)

The horses who watch seem to animate the relationship between the farmer and the widow, for the farmer and the widow finally find love in their animal irresponsibility, in a meadow, surrounded by horses, tethered to nature as represented by the gelding.



Jarpur and Vernhardur [still from *Of Horses and Men*]

Vernhardur, desperate to meet a Russian ship in order to purchase vodka, grabs one of the free roaming horses, Jarpur. The ship is far off shore and, in one of the most spectacular scenes in the film, he makes Jarpur swim in the frigid water to the Russian ship to procure the alcohol. The horse not only readily swims to the ship, but also very compliantly steps on a lift up out of the water, and later dives back into the sea with Vernhardur aboard to swim back to shore. Unfortunately, Vernhardur doesn't realize that the alcohol is pure, and after guzzling, he falls off his horse and dies with the reins looped around his elbow. Poor Jarpur the horse is stuck with Vernhardur. Tethered, all he can do is look and sniff at the dead man.

Each character in the film has a different relationship to the horse and the more unstable the boundaries between the human characters and non-human animals, the more brutally they are enforced. Each human connection in the film means that one or more



horses have to give a pound of flesh, as it were, so that the human and non-human animal community can be sustained. Significantly, while we see two men die in *Of Horses and Men*, the moment of animal death — when Kolbeinn shoots his mare Grána and when the tourist Juan kills Old Piebald, a scene discussed later in this writing — is off camera. We see Kolbeinn bury his mare, complete with her tack, and then in the following scene, we watch the funeral for Vernhardur (Steinn Ármann Magnússon). Vernhardur's death is juxtaposed with the scene of Kolbeinn's burial of his mare, but the difference between the two deaths is that the camera closes in on the horse's eye, and in this moment of entanglement between the cinematic gaze and the horse's eye, the real asserts itself in the violent death of the horse who sees itself being seen.

Vernhardur's death is more like an animal death in cinema, for the director does not give us a close or medium shot of Vernhardur, and we are not offered a narrative of his interior life and so may not identify with him; in fact, we merely see a man die. The death of the mare is much more shocking. As early as the film theorist Andre Bazin, the notion that we displace our fear of death and dying onto animals represented in film has become the starting point of theorizing about the status of the animal in cinema. Animals, as Laura U. Marks succinctly put it, are either mirrors or meat (*Touch* 27). Vivian Sobchack on death in documentary cinema points out that:

(...) we do not ever "see" death on the screen nor understand its visible stasis or contours. Instead, we see the activity and remains of the event of dying. Whereas being can be visibly represented in its inscription of intentional behavior (the "having of being" animated concretely in action that is articulated in a visible world), nonbeing is not visible. It lies over the threshold of visibility and representation. (233)

While interspecies communication is often marked by killing and sex and death, this nevertheless creates an ethical space giving rise to a creaturely gaze with the potential to affirm empathetic communication between human and non-human animals.<sup>4</sup> Hilda Kean argues that the passage to modernity was partly defined by how people reacted to the sight of the death or abuse of animals in city streets and then later in images.<sup>5</sup> These urban sights gave rise to animal ethics and animal welfare, and the current proliferation of animal imagery online has only increased calls for their rights and welfare. Cora Diamond famously noted that what we need is not a morality based on biological similarities or differences, but rather a notion of fellow creatures with whom we have fellow feeling, and so our response to animals should be based on our fellowship in mortality (212). We share the biological fact that we die, but our ethics are what we

make of that fact. Animal death is a recognition of our own vulnerability. In *Of Horses and Men*, it is the look of the soon to be dead animal that we see — Grána, Kolbeinn's mare — not the eyes of the dying man, Vernhardur.

Derrida writes: "An animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there" (29). Characters speak very little in the film, and as Sharon Silwinski notes, talking may merely be a means of getting rid of thoughts, instead of thinking. In Silwinski's reading, Derrida asserts that it is emotional experience that is at the "heart of the labour of thinking" (76). In fact, we do not need to know exactly what the horses are thinking when we see them watch Solveig and Kolbein have sex or the alcoholic Vernhardur die. Jonathan Burt adds:

The image of the animal's eye reflects the possibility of animal understanding by emphasizing animal sight. This does not mean that the eye gives any access to what is understood but it does signal the significant participation of the animal in the visual field. (71)

This awareness of not-having/knowing is the very condition of an ethical response, one that takes us away from solipsistic discussions about animal speech. Justice is not necessarily about knowing or calculability, and ethics depends on a position of "being-seen and of not-knowing." According to Cary Wolfe, for Derrida this question is "passive" for it "bears witness, manifesting already, as a question, the response that testifies to sufferance, a passion, a not being able" and this marks the beginning of thinking otherwise (Wolfe, *Animal* 24).



"Blind Grimur" [Still from *Of Horses and Men*]

**Human Blindness.** Animals in cinema have affective power through human observation, and in this film, we look that animal subject in the eye. As Laura U. Marks insists, here the film itself becomes skin or “embodied perception” (*Skin* 145). The look between the animal and the man is alive, and we shuttle between the process of anthropomorphism — all of those mirrored eyes — and the animal that looks back. But humans are blind in comparison. In the next scene, Egil (Helgi Björnsson,) sees his neighbor Grímur (Kjartan Ragnarsson), riding one horse and leading another, dismount to cut an opening in a wire fence. Grímur wants to make sure that the ancient national horse paths remain open, but Egil considers them to be on his property and wants them fenced. Grímur cuts the wire and it bounces up and blinds him while his two horses watch. Egil comes after him in his tractor, but he does not know that Grímur has been blinded by the barbed wire, and shocked by the Oedipal nightmare of the bleeding and blind Grímur, Egil takes his hands off the wheel, and rolls over the cliff to his death. And the horses watch.

Arguably horses, more than most non-human animals, have been key to the formation of the bio-political state. Kelly Oliver reminds us that the corralling of livestock led to land disputes which inaugurated private property and property rights, and therefore rights language begins with the domestication and owning of animals (37). In our political philosophies non-human animals are not citizens, but rather the constitutive outside that tells us what it means to be human.<sup>6</sup> But unlike most domesticated horses worldwide, Icelandic horses have never lived exclusively on private property. Horses that are in training are sometimes in a farm environment, but only for a part of the year, normally shod in the late winter and released back into the wild in the late fall. The International Federation of Icelandic Horse Associations notes: “To ensure that the Icelandic horse is kept in conditions as close as possible to its habitat, this means: enough light, fresh air, and freedom of movement” (Helgadóttir 538). Iceland’s remoteness from the rest of the world ensures that Icelandic horse culture stays close to the traditions and values of Scandinavia, and so the horses help to anchor the islanders and their values in this place. Icelanders say that the horses get their “personality from living in a herd” or their spirit (which is keenly linked to the spirituality of the place) and yet “become calm” and manageable in human society (Harlan). In this manner, the Icelandic horse occupies a liminal space in that it belongs to its own category, neither wild nor domestic.

The tracing of the boundaries of private property in the film reflect the early dividing practices between human and non-human animals. Egil’s desire to fence the property is to keep the horses off his land, but the ancient national horse trails are integral to

Icelandic horse culture, especially given that they are turned out in the wild for a part of every year and used in horse tourism. Blind Grímur's interest in the horse trails is ranged against Eglín's demand for a civilization marked by fences, but this problem also stands in for one of the most difficult problems we currently face: how to reconcile these two worlds in the face of environmental degradation, extinction of both non-human animals and their landscapes. So, it is hard not to consider Grímur's blindness in light of the psychoanalytic notion that blindness is tied to insight, and that castration from nature is the cost of having human consciousness. Cinema presents an object to be viewed and the activity of vision, and therefore cinematic space can be said to be an ethical space for it makes vision visible, and sight is read not only as vision but as moral insight (Sobchack 243). However, we must keep in view that animal studies emerged from post-structuralism and its attendant critiques of such subject-formation, ushering in an interest in the "other" animal and ethics as something beyond the merely human. In *Of Horses and Men*, the camera caresses horse bodies covered in hair and the landscapes of rock and snow, inviting the viewer to respond to the images in an intimate and embodied way. The sensual image of the horse's coat on the screen rebounds back on the viewer's own body in the "shared flesh of the material world" (Sobchack 76-77). It is this very tactility of these images that connects us to the material world, rather than a psychoanalytic severing offering insight. Instead, this tactile affectual imagery gives rise to a shared, embodied and vulnerable ethical community of horses and humans.



Johanna and Herd. [Still from *Of Horses and Men*.]

**Roundup.** Against the protestations of the men, a young Swedish horsewoman Johanna (Sigríður María Egilsdóttir) offers to round up some horses that have cut away from the herd, specifically her favorite blue-eyed mare, Raudka. She is a dominant mare that many of the men want to purchase for they wrongly assume that Johanna cannot handle her because like Johanna Raudka clearly has her own ideas. An experienced rider, Johanna not only rides out and finds the horses and manages to catch Raudka, but also finds blind Grímur and takes them all back, seven horses and two riders linked together by one rope. As mentioned, each character in the film has a different relationship to the horses, and while the other characters merely use the horses, Johanna is as one with them.

How we manage inequality is essential to ethical relations and obligations towards those animals we live with and, in the case of horses, train. Paul Patton claims that the training of horses draws our attention to specific modes of communication involved in building and sustaining relationships with each other in community. The trainer both listens to the horse and gives the horse a vocabulary, and the greater the vocabulary of the animal, the more trust there is between non-human and human animals. Good training closes the gap in interspecies communication of word, touch and sight. Patton invokes trainers such as Vicki Hearne and the “horse-whisperer” Monty Roberts to claim that:

...in training dogs and horses we create forms of society that establish domestic animals not only as our interlocuters in certain contexts, but as moral beings capable of being endowed with certain rights and duties.  
(Patton 95)

Johanna is one with the horses, and regardless of how wild, they trust her to bring them back into the herd. Tied together, she returns to the men triumphant. They are impressed by her ability to train and ride and, even though she is not from the island, they accept her as one of them and offer her a celebratory drink as a community, happily encircled by the reunited herd.





Death of Old Piebald [Still from *Of Horses and Men*.]

**Sagas**scapes. Filmed in Skagafjörður, the action takes place in the cradle of Icelandic horsemanship, the best-known destination for horse tourism in Iceland. Here the history of the relationship between man and horse and landscape is from time immemorial, and many key ancestors of the Icelandic breed and renowned horse breeders make Skagafjörður their home. Guðrún Helgadóttir has noted in her study of horse-based tourism that the idea of the “purity” of the breed is a key marketing principle in marketing Iceland to the world with slogans such as “Pure Iceland” and “Reykjavik: Pure Energy.”<sup>7</sup> In addition, the film appears at a specific moment in Iceland’s history, post the financial collapse of 2008-2009 and subsequent recovery, which was partly attributable to tourism — and especially horse tourism — and the marketing of “pure” Icelandic culture to the world.<sup>8</sup> There is a spatial dimension to nation building, and in the sagas, the figure of the horse is said to be etched into the volcanic ground of Iceland. For example, Ásbyrgi is a canyon in the north, and the formation of its towering cliffs is said to be made by Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse of Odinn the Norse god, for when his hooves touched the ground he carved out the horseshoe shaped cliffs. Adrian Ivakhiv names cinematic space a “geomorphy of the visible” a territorial ontology that grounds any image (26). Relationships in these spaces — including the spaces of film — with others co-constitute who we are *as we are*, entangled in complex co-relationships is what Barad calls “ethico-onto-epistem-ology” (*Meeting* 206). The “hereness” of the cinematic space is reflected in the rugged landscape where Icelandic identity is etched into the very ground by the hooves of the folkloric horses, iterated through centuries of storytelling.

The “geomorphy” of this landscape in *Horses* is a kind of “sensuous geography” that links the Icelandic community. Laura U. Marks argues that commodification and

globalization will not wipe out cultural differences at the level of sensuous experience. While non-places (malls, airports) proliferate all over the world, there remain rich environments of ambient and sensuous life, and *Of Horses and Men* captures such an environment (*Skin* 243-44). The film exemplifies a kind of interspecies intercultural cinema — an embodied cross-species sociality — for horse and people are inextricably bound up or entangled with this landscape that is like no other on earth. Marks defines intercultural cinema as “experimental cinema styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge” (1). The Icelandic horse is much more than merely a vestige of a romanticized Nordic past, trotted out for tourists. There is not quite the same historical break in the face of encroaching modernity in Icelandic horse culture as there is in domesticated horse culture worldwide. While volcanic Iceland in the tourist’s gaze is the land of “fire and ice” with the ubiquitous images of Icelandic horses grazing freely in the background, these visual clichés known to us from tourism brochures are not the images of this film.

Icelandic horse-based tourism is an investment in a very specific form of nature — with its own rhythms and gaits, where the horses do not so much represent nature, but rather a desire to connect with something other, to feel something different, in the consumer tourism experience. Juan (Juan Camillo Roman Estrada) is a Spanish tourist in the film and a key representation of this moment in history. At the beginning of the film Juan is riding his bike, and he is astonished by Kolbeinn’s spectacular ride on his mare; he almost gets run off the road by drunken Verdhaur who is meeting the Russian Ship; and he is first impressed and then later infatuated by Johanna, for he sees her come back with the seven horses and, inspired, decides he wants to ditch his bicycle and ride a horse.

*Of Horses and Men* represents the specific “here-ness” of Iceland, but the self-evident here-ness is disrupted by Juan, the foreign tourist, who goes on the quintessential Icelandic experience of a guided ride on a horse. In Icelandic horse tours, the riders are often accompanied by a herd of free running horses. The guides maintain the pace in the front and drivers stay in the back to look out for horses that stray from the herd. Inexperienced riders stay with the drivers in the back. Juan is inexperienced indeed, causing him not to notice that his horse, Old Piebald, has a rock in his shoe, and the limping horse is slowed down. A snowstorm comes in and, unable to see, they fall dangerously behind the ride. Juan panics. He believes that he is going to die in the unfamiliar frozen landscape, and so he cuts open the horse’s jugular, slices the belly and empties out the viscera, and climbs into the horse to stay warm.

Juan's overreaction to the unfamiliar weather, and the thoughtless panic that brings about his meaningless killing of the horse, makes him a gruesome example of the worst sort of tourist, one that is completely unable to understand another culture outside of observation, play and consumption. For Juan, it would appear that the Icelandic horse is an object that merely has instrumental purpose: to serve international tourism and, more urgently, to save his life. While Juan keeps warm inside, the dead horse is covered in snow. A god's eye shot from above offers the audience an omniscient view of the character and surroundings, and we see the dead horse as if reified in a snow sculpture reminiscent of funerary art, echoing an earlier image of the farmer Kolbein who lays out his mare Grana in her tack for burial.<sup>9</sup>

Juan's murder of the horse in the film brings us back to a time before animal welfare and rights discourses that challenge the sacrificial killing of animals. Or, more accurately, the murder of Old Piebald offers a version of the archaic myths and figures and sacrifices that are integral to the construction of modernity. Cary Wolfe notes how the discourse of speciesism, the symbolic system that rigidly separates human and animal, enables and indeed requires sacrifice:

The institution of speciesism is fundamental to the formation of Western subjectivity and sociality as such, an institution that relies on the tacit agreement that the full transcendence of the "human" requires the sacrifice of the "animal" and the animalistic, which in turn makes possible a symbolic economy in which we can engage in what Derrida will call a "noncriminal putting to death" of other humans as well by marking them as animal. (Wolfe, *Animal* 6)

Burt points out that what appear to be archaic myths and practices such as animal sacrifice are in effect integral to the construction of modernity, for they show us the limits and vulnerabilities of human existence (66). A horse appears to observe each human death, and the director chooses to shoot the bodies of the two horses in the film that die — Grána the farmer's mare and The Old Piebald — in what can be described as elegiac poses. In each case the film cuts from the image of the dead horse to the funeral of the dead men, therefore giving equal importance to both human and non-human animal burials in the narrative.

In Kristin Armstrong Oma's study of the ontological status of Scandinavian horses throughout the Iron Age, she argues that horses held "a symbolic role as transporters from one realm to another, from the world of humans (Middle-earth) to the different

abodes of the gods, and from the realm of life to the worlds of the dead” (26). When Juan is rescued and wrenched out of the horse, he arises from the body — his snowy crypt in the shape of his horse — and cries like one newly born. Juan’s journey is an epic one: he encounters strangers, struggles with adversity and a near death experience, and goes into the underworld (or belly) of a horse, and is resurrected back into society. He lives another day, he falls in love with Johanna, and is symbolically reconstituted as Icelandic. Juan’s story operates as a through line or a vector along which the world unfolds generating new stories, new identities, and new bodies, connecting each saga. He enters Iceland with different values and practices, and is confronted with a terrifying wilderness of snow and ice. Almost dying in the snow and, cruelly through the death of a horse, he emerges as an intra-active figure, who “becomes” an intercultural hybrid in the final scene of the film: he is Spanish/Icelandic, born of an Icelandic horse.



“The Herd” [Still from *Of Horses and Men*]

**Herding Community: Entanglements.** The film culminates in an annual roundup, where horses and humans commune in cinematic time as it passes via the very rhythm of the distinct gaits of the Icelandic horses. In co-creation, the horses in the film do not represent any mere encounter between species, but rather are a profound example of entangled co-shaping. Bound by ropes and reins, humans and horses become a hybrid or cyborg technology that creates new ontologies in community. At the end of the film, the cinematographer, Bergsteinn Björgúlfsson, does not shoot the action from the perspective of the horse or the human; rather, he inserts the camera in the middle of the herd in deep focus — a cinematic trope that is thought to encourage recognition and empathy in viewers — and presents a version of entanglement as herd. When faced

with the difficulty of thinking the animal in film, vision can strand the viewer in an ontological outside where we loop back into human preoccupations with human embodiment and the resulting othering of the animal. In this film, the entanglement of the cinematic gaze/horse's eye, affectual bodies united in touch, bodies grounded in a territorial ontology form a community that includes the sentient landscape features of water, weather, and ground. This creaturely gaze emphasizes the relations between human and animal, undoes the conventional anthropocentric bias of the gaze in cinema, and informs an ethics that relies on the materiality and vulnerability of all living bodies, where nature is not the outside of the human condition (Pick 193).

This film's "embodied cross-species sociality" challenges the Freudian axiom that only the repression of our animality creates consciousness, culture and civilization (*Species 4*). Instead, as Jodey Berlant insists: "We look at the animals and the animals look back. They are not speaking, but they are not silent, either" (62). Each saga offers important affectual and embodied entanglements between human and nonhuman animals. Oppositions are not clear-cut, and in the case of *Horses and Men*, the image of the horse is not merely metaphorical but points beyond, to an entangled herd of common interests.

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### Notes

1. Jón Árnason's (1819-1888) collection of folktales, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Icelandic Folktales and Legends), comprises over 1300 pages of forty or more tales or sagas. In 1954–61 it was reissued in Reykjavík in six volumes. His collection and other eddas form a central part of the romantic nationalist project of the 19th and 20th centuries. An Icelandic counterpart to the Brother's Grimm, Árnason's collection is filled with tales of ghosts, trolls, elves, witchcraft, and magic. Simon Halink traces how these tales are the backdrop of the entanglement of landscape and national identity, or "sagascesapes."

2. See Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*: "A creaturely ethics does not depend on fulfilling any preliminary criteria of subjectivity and personhood. Its source lies in the recognition of the materiality and vulnerability of all living bodies, whether human or not, and in the absolute primacy of obligations over rights" (193).



3. Killing horses to restore masculine honor is a key feature of Icelandic sagas. *Hrafinkel's Saga* is about Freyfaxi, the treasured stallion of Hrafinkel who all are warned never to ride. Named after the Norse god Frey, Freyfaxi has religious value symbolizing the fecundity of Hrafinkel's land and, of course, his virility. In this saga, Einar disobeys and rides the stallion and therefore has to be killed. But a kinsman seeks compensation for his death, and Hrafinkel is sentenced as an outlaw. They take over Hrafinkel's farm and keep the mares, but decide that because the stallion has been the cause of all the trouble, they push him over a cliff. Thus ends Hrafinkel's masculine authority.

4. See Barbara Creed's "Animal Deaths on Screen" where she summarizes the connection between Laura U. Marks' "skin of the film" and Anat Pick's "creaturely gaze" (24).

5. See *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain since 1800*. Hilda Kean argues that not only does the sight of suffering usher forth a new era of animal welfare, but also that animals helped to define the social improvement movement more generally and hence informed modernity (26-27).

6. Hannah Arendt argues that we are not born equal but rather become equal as members of a group. Human rights can be said to be first animal rights, in that they are the pre-condition of citizenship or membership in a community and so exist before the law. See Alastair Hunt, "Rightlessness. The Perplexities of Human Rights." *The New Centennial Review* 11.2 (2011): 120.

7. Online tourism sites often include such language as: "But this land of boiling mud pools, spurting geysers, volcanoes, glaciers and waterfalls is also an adventure playground...Iceland is the least densely populated country in Europe, with a pure, unpolluted and truly magical landscape." "The Embassy of Iceland in Ottawa, Visit Iceland" (accessed June 22 2020). In addition, this is a riding experience free of European and other influences: you do not need to get on and off on one side (the near or left side) of the horse. There is no history of the ménage, or dressage. The gaits of the horse are distinct and must be maintained: in addition to walk, trot, canter, and gallop, the horse has two extra gaits. One is a four-beat lateral ambling gait called tölt. Another is a pace or skeið, or the "flying pace" used in races.

8. The banks had foreign liabilities amounting to more than 10 times the size of Iceland's GDP. The collapse of 85% of the banking sector made the country "the world's largest hedge fund" (Elliot). Part of that recovery is also attributable to the strengths of

two sectors, tourism and green energy. In 2013, tourism rose to 15.9% of the economy, or 5.9% of the GDP.

9. Horses figure largely in the burial practices of the old Norse and Icelandic society. Both men and women were often buried with their horses, sometimes complete with their tack, designating relative status in the community. See Loumand, 130-134.

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