

Horseplay: Equine Performance and Creaturely Acts in Cinema

Béla Tarr's latest and reputedly final film, *The Turin Horse* (2011), takes its prompt from the story about an encounter that Nietzsche claims to have experienced with a maltreated horse on Via Carlo Alberto, Turin.¹ Tarr's film opens with an image of a large horse pulling a cart through the bleak, inhospitable Hungarian landscape. Seen in close-up, and from a low angle, the mare (Ricsi), walks towards the camera. Blinkered and with a sweat-matted coat, she progresses forwards, seeming to struggle with the extreme weight of her cargo. As she continues on her journey, the camera reveals her driver; he is Ohlsdorfer (János Derzsi), a stern, unkempt bearded man whose face remains expressionless throughout the film. The wind stirs up a dust on the unmade road and blows the man's hair and the horse's mane; at this point, with her ears set back, and her eyes showing white, the animal's demeanour signals unease and discomfort. Tarr continues his focus on the horse, the camera roving over her powerful, straining body, thus displaying the arduous work involved in this daily toil. At one point, she lowers her head and gathers her strength to pull harder against the wind and, surrounded by dust, she opens and closes her mouth, quickening her pace in the process. Towards the end of the sequence the man alights and leads the animal for the remainder of their journey home. Standing at her head, he pulls her by a rope up a grassy track which leads to an isolated farmhouse. As man and horse round the corner, the two are greeted by Ohlsdorfer's daughter (played by Erika Bók although, throughout the film, unlike Derzsi she is not given a character name). Moving agitatedly, and bracing herself against the wind, the animal appears uneasy as the man unshackles the cart. She throws her head from side to side and shies away in fear as the girl attempts to steady her by placing her hand on her neck. Eventually, the man leads the tired animal away and his daughter drags the cart into another outbuilding. Father and daughter provide fodder for the horse, who now stands tethered in her draughty stable, before they move outside to continue their daily tasks. Rather than following Ohlsdorfer and his daughter, however, the camera adopts the interior perspective of the stable, the door of which provides a framework to view the human activities, albeit this angle does not adopt the horse's point of view. Filmed in black and white throughout, the cinematographer, Fred Kelemen, creates the necessary bleak effect that Tarr desired and, as the director himself suggests, 'the film looks like a bible "but without God."'²

Throughout this sequence, Tarr retains focus on the horse, and as the title of the film indicates, the spectator is left in no doubt that she is an important, if not the most important, individual within the narrative. However, unlike most films which feature animals as central protagonists, at no juncture is the horse provided an anthropomorphic treatment, or her behaviour articulated in human driven semantics.³ Furthermore, she is never presented with, what Emmanuel Gouabault, Annik Dubied and Claudine Burton-Jeangros⁴ describe as, a superindividual status. This stated, neither does the director, devalue the role of the animal. Instead, Ricsi's performance can be analysed in, what Brenda Austin-Smith argues is, 'memorable film characterization', whereby animal performance is valid and 'counts for something'.⁵ While it cannot be argued that Ricsi deliberately acts as a character, her performance is equally valuable for analysis both within and outside the context of the narrative. Applying performance theory and film theory to a study of the role and performance of the horses in two films, *The Turin Horse*, and *Of Horses and Men* (Erlingsson 2013), this essay proposes an alternative and more fitting approach to the study of animals in film. The contention here is that neither film humanises or starifies the horses, yet all of the equine presentations are significant, and are examples of what Michael Kirby⁶ terms 'simple acting'. This is a concept explored by

theatre scholar, Michael Peterson who pursues this notion in his discussion on the ethics of animal acts on stage. He purports that an anthropomorphic interpretation⁷ of the theatre animal relates to the construction of the performance as a whole, and for this reason, we see animals as entities rather than individual beings. For him, the ‘analysis of animals as objects of performance necessitates investigating how actual animals perform.’⁸ This essay begins by examining the ways in which animal performance has predominantly been analysed and discussed in media and film before proposing Kirby’s notion of simple acting to suggest, in Peterson’s words, a pertinent method for investigating ‘how actual animals perform.’⁹

As noted above, animals in film have been primarily discussed as nonhuman agents, a concept which invites the allegation of anthropomorphism.¹⁰ Indeed, they are frequently awarded human attributes and this often culminates in their attainment of star status.¹¹ In 2011, Gouabault, Dubied and Burton-Jeangros undertook an analysis of animals in the media and, subsequently, published their findings. They argued that, in the past few decades, animals have been humanised, provided names and emotions, their personal thoughts and feelings expressed in detail. Their research is based on an empirical analysis of Swiss press articles on Knut the polar bear cub who was born at Berlin Zoo, and received a substantial amount of media interest because he was abandoned by his mother and reared by a keeper. This attention raised the animal’s status and Gouabault et al. began their research by first examining the concept of person in anthropological discourse, and then proceeded to identify three attributes of personification in animals commencing with the singular animal and culminating in, what they term, the ‘superindividual’.¹² The research suggests that to attain this status the following must be achieved: the notion of speaking for the animal, the attribution of an individual name (often human), an individual history, a national or territorial identity, interiority and a starification.

Whereas Gouabault et al.’s work is primarily related to media coverage of animals, their research can also apply to other visual platforms, including the representation of animals in film. Appearing in a variety of ways in this format, the cinematic animal often operates as the central protagonist, and is provided human-like qualities, the spectator enabled an understanding of what they think and feel through the use of film language. This also applies the concept of star theory and, whereas this has been extensively discussed and deliberated in Film Studies in relation to humans,¹³ only more recently has it been used comparatively with animals.¹⁴ Sometimes the filmic animal speaks human language, for example Arthur (Cosmo), the dog in Francis Lawrence’s film, *Beginners* (2010); in a similar way to the mediated superindividual, they are frequently awarded star quality by the press and publicity, for example Uggie in *The Artist* (Hazanavicius 2011) who is given a history, national and territorial identity and a personality. More significantly for this essay, the star animal onscreen is also heroised through their performance capabilities, often staging daring feats to rescue their master/mistress and redeem a situation.

At the other end of the spectrum, Gouabault et al. argue, is the reportage of animal threat such as ‘dangerous dogs, mad cows, birds or pigs spreading the flu [which] seem more common than before, and these incidences, contrary to the trend of personification, reinforce human-animal alterity.’¹⁵ Both of the above categories consider the animal semiotically which Peterson believes is also a common approach in theatre, thus rendering the performance void. As he suggests, the argument tends to be that if the animal becomes ‘[r]educ[ed] to a sign, [it] contributes nothing to performance but expense and inconvenience.’¹⁶

Tarr does not present the horse in *The Turin Horse* anthropomorphically. In the film, she is not given a name, neither is she heroised or mythologised in any way, or presented with a history or personality. However, she is not simply a presence without value, and neither is her performance entirely dictated by the film language. Indeed, there exists a middle ground in which to analyse her presentation which is a much neglected area in Film Studies. This is a situation whereby animals appear in film as neither personified, as superindividual, or threat; this type of performance is rarely discussed yet is an animal accomplishment which, as Austin-Smith argues, ‘counts for something.’¹⁷

In her seminal article, Austin-Smith discusses three films, one of which includes the performance of the donkey in Robert Bresson’s 1966 film, *Au Hasard Balthazar*. Adopting Kirby’s system for the analysis of different types of acting, she proposes that animals in film are capable of ‘simple acting,’ and that, ‘[i]n order to be valued, performance must be noticed and identified *as* [original italics] performance, rather than as star exhibition, an artefact of editing or the traces of someone merely living in front of the camera.’¹⁸ In her analysis of the donkey she draws upon Kirby’s continuum of acting and non acting. First outlined in 1972, Kirby devised a template suggesting that at one end of the scale was a non matrixed performance, whereby there is no intention to portray a character. Further along the scale ‘referential elements are applied to the performer’,¹⁹ and audiences are presented with a person with features such as costume and props. The next step is received acting whereby a person accrues meaning from context ‘because it takes place within an already defined theatrical event.’²⁰ This might be the work of extras which operate as background to foreground events, through which the actors respond to their surroundings and other actors. The deeds in received acting may be compound, but do not fully constitute acting in Kirby’s gamut. In fact, according to Kirby, all of the above are examples of non acting. At the other end of the spectrum is complex acting which is multidimensional, and the actor portrays a number of specific emotions to create the pretence. Sandwiched between non acting and complex acting, simple acting occurs whereby the performer does something to replicate or impersonate a character, or ‘engages in a process of selection and projection to present his or her beliefs or emotions to an audience.’²¹ On these occasions there is ‘an intention to act on the part of the performer, “but no emotion needs to be involved”.’²² Simple acting can involve an emotion that fits an existing situation, but, as Austin-Smith suggests, the main concern is that the performance in film is significant and even animal performance makes a difference, and “counts for something,” in that they add complication and distinctiveness to the portrayal of character. Each role [that of] an abused animal – functions as a site for predictable viewer affects.²³

To clarify the position of anthropomorphism and Critical Animal Studies it is important to explain briefly the current scholarship in the field. Notwithstanding attempts to omit anthropomorphism from the discussion of animals in film, assessing their intentionality and emotion is a complex area and often attributing human qualities to animals occurs through implication. These problems are not only applicable to animal behaviour, but also to human behaviour and, as Hugh Lehman states, ‘[c]alling a characteristic “human” does not imply that only humans have this characteristic.’²⁴ Recent developments in Animal Studies have made some inroad into discussion of this thorny issue, and, as animal behaviourist, Chris Barnard, suggests ‘[r]egardless of how inclusively we choose to define cognition, the main problem with goals, intentions and awareness is that they belong to the private experience of the individual ... even our own species.’²⁵ Bernard Rollin suggests

that a certain ‘plausibility’,²⁶ should be permitted, a point also mooted by Barnard who proposes that ‘much of the argument for consciousness in other species rests simply on giving “the benefit of the doubt”, a belief that evolutionary continuity with ourselves makes consciousness more, rather than less, parsimonious as an assumption.’²⁷ For Marc Bekoff, animals and humans share traits including emotion and ‘[b]eing anthropomorphic is a linguistic tool to make the thoughts and feelings of other animals accessible to humans.’²⁸ Kari Weil adopts a similar argument, and she suggests that studies have ‘worked to prove that many animal species possess the basic capabilities deemed necessary for subjectivity: self-consciousness, rational agency, the capacity to learn and transmit language.’²⁹

To return to Austin-Smith and her analysis of Balthazar, she argues that, on the surface, the animal’s performance is not an example of acting - ‘the donkey and the character are minimally distinguished’,³⁰ furthermore, the creature does not feign, simulate or impersonate. However, the animal’s freedom to ‘make meaningful choices’ awards it the status of simple actor on Kirby’s matrix. For her, although the spectator cannot know what the donkey in Bresson’s film thinks or feels, it is bestowed with inwardness. It is ‘what Stanley Cavell calls “privacy,” defined as “personal freedom,” the “right to idiosyncrasy” and the “wish for perfect personal expressiveness”.’³¹ Cavell is discussing Bette Davies’s performance in Rapper’s 1942 film, *Now Voyager*; drawing on Breuer and Freud in their *Studies on Hysteria*,³² he suggests that the human mind is unconscious of itself yet produces an affect of the body, ‘seeing the body as a field of incessant significance, but of significance demanding deciphering.’³³ Translated into the study of animal performance, this suggests that the animal mind also unwittingly produces a theatricality of body which requires interpreting ‘as’ performance.³⁴ If, as Austin-Smith argues, the consequences of actors’ choices are ‘visible performance signs’,³⁵ then these indicate key traits which also aid in the construction of the characters. The selections that the actor makes, however, create individuals who have a choice only in a fictional capacity. According to Austin-Smith, ‘[m]ovies give us fictional beings we figure out by watching them respond to a world arranged by someone else.’³⁶ Nevertheless, even if it is accepted that animals cannot feign or impersonate, then the choices that they make create individuality not necessarily in a world arranged by someone else, and this is presented outwardly, even though, as Austin-Smith argues, this individualism is often necessarily constrained by the film language.

For Austin-Smith, despite the film’s construction, the donkey in *Au Hasard Balthazar* brings into play his own idiosyncrasies which also inform his character’s role: in the film he is ‘an abused animal [and] functions as a site for predictable viewer affect of, respectively, sympathy, judgement and pity.’³⁷ Additionally, to deploy Austin-Smith’s arguments, he also produces observable actions, and, what theatre and performance scholar, David Williams, terms a ‘thinking with body’³⁸ through the options he chooses,³⁹ which also combine to create a performance. Indeed, as Bekoff acknowledges, unlike humans, animals cannot filter their emotions. As he purports, ‘[w]hat they feel is clearly written on their faces, made public by tails, ears, and odors, and displayed by their actions.’⁴⁰ Balthazar’s purposive behaviour ultimately might only serve to fashion his filmic character, which is a being only in an illusory sense, and indeed his character’s freedom is hampered by the narrative’s diegesis. Yes, as Austin-Smith notes,

we believe in the freedom of the character to have done otherwise and to have decided on this rather than that course of action, even if the character’s decision is

finally the refusal of his or her freedom to choose ... the donkey's performance makes possible worthwhile reflections on the role of self-consciousness in acting. It also makes worthwhile reflections on the part that expressiveness plays in reassuring us of the onscreen presence of a depicted character who is capable of making meaningful choices, at least in filmic worlds in which choice itself has meaning.⁴¹

Austin-Smith also relates to Dyer's work who notes the necessity of understanding screen performances through attendance of facial expressions, voice, gestures and body movements. While Dyer is referring to human performance signs, these can, as Austin-Smith notes, relate to animal performance. As she purports, 'although the deliberations that actors make are indeed invisible to us, the results of those decisions are not.'⁴² This is an argument that Lorraine Daston and Greg Mitman also adhere to: they believe in 'thinking with animals', and argue that this process is partly a means of fulfilling human desires and partly as a response to their own inner self that casts them as performers. As they purport,

[t]hey [animals] are privileged, and they are performative. They do not just stand for something ... they do something ... They are symbols with a life of their own. We use them to perform our thoughts, feelings, and fantasies because, alone of all our myriad symbols, they can perform; they can do what is to be done. We may orchestrate their performance, but complete mastery is illusion.⁴³

While Austin-Smith's donkey in Bresson's film, and the horse in Tarr's *The Turin Horse* cannot be said to simulate or impersonate, their performance mobilises idiosyncrasy and personal expression, and 'thinking with body' to achieve simple acting.⁴⁴

The Turin Horse follows the life of peasant farmer Ohlsdorfer and his adult daughter, who together live a meagre existence in their isolated farmstead in rural Hungary. Their poverty entraps them, a point made by the film's cinematographer, who has worked with Tarr for many years on other projects and notes the director's predisposition towards a 'yearning for the beauty, for the clarity, symmetry and compositional equilibrium of the images [which] is possibly the counterpart and expression of a wound torn open by a decrepit and disintegrated world.'⁴⁵ The horse plays a central part in the narrative and is the focus of the film because she is crucial to the family's survival. The story takes place over six days and Tarr divides the film up accordingly. Following the family's daily struggle for existence, the narrative disequilibrium occurs when the horse falls ill. As noted at the outset, on day one Ohlsdorfer drives his mare home in appalling weather conditions, the animal struggling against the wind and snow to haul a wood laden cart back to the homestead. By day two, and following the horse's struggle in the storm, she appears to have been taken ill, and after being harnessed and prepared for work, she refuses to move. Realising that the animal is sick, Ohlsdorfer's daughter is forced to return her to the stable. On day three of the story the mare stops eating, and on day four Ohlsdorfer and his daughter discover that the well has run dry. The horse continues to refuse sustenance, further declining in health and, by day five, father and daughter are unable to light the lamps to cook food as they have no fuel. Day six witnesses a desperate situation: the two sit huddled around the table forced to eat raw potatoes, the mare still incapacitated – presumably doomed to die.

At this point it is worth mentioning the horse's history. She was purchased by Tarr in a small Hungarian village market. As the director himself states, 'I said immediately, "This is the horse we need"'.⁴⁶ According to Tarr, the horse was being beaten and he intervened and purchased her with the film in mind. As he suggests, '[t]his is a horse who has history, who has background, who is definitely somebody ... She has a *name* [original italics]. "She" – because we have a female horse ... You could see this horse was humiliated. She's not that old, just around seven. She was a very sad horse ... The owner wanted to make her work and she refused.'⁴⁷ While Tarr attributes human emotions to Ricsi, undeniably she has her own personal history, and this therefore suggests that she is sensitised to ill treatment, particularly when in harness.

In keeping with Ricsi's background, and presumably the reason for this choice of animal, Tarr arranges her world to depict misery and dejection. Her stable is no more than a mere wooden shed full of gaps, thus permitting strong winds and driving rain through its apertures. As seen at the outset of the film, she pulls heavy weights in adverse conditions and her master raises his voice and whip if she doesn't respond. Her life is not only arduous, but her only meagre pleasures seem to revolve around the end of the day, as indicated on day one when she is unharnessed, bedded down and fed. In a similar vein to Austin-Smith's initial reflections on Bresson's donkey, a superficial analysis suggests that Ricsi's presentation is not an example of acting in the same way as that of Derzsi and Bók in the film. Her character is never fully developed and, although within the context of the narrative she appears ill, clearly she is not deliberately impersonating a sick horse - it is only the film language that produces such an illusion, and we see an animal not an actor. As Austin-Smith might suggest, none of this is premeditated by the horse, who acts like a horse and whose performance choices are made for her by the filmmaker.⁴⁸ In terms of audience perception of the situation one must assume that she is unwilling or unable to move because she is unwell, and as Ohlsdorfer, seen in the background behind the shafts of the cart, becomes angry, the mare visibly reacts, appearing to become more frantic and stressed.⁴⁹ Eventually, Ohlsdorfer's daughter intervenes in the situation and moves to the animal's head to dismantle her harness, before the old man leads her back into the stable.

This sequence is pertinent for a number of reasons. Clearly, within the film's diegesis the animal is supposedly ailing, and the narrative impact of this on father and daughter is disastrous. Ricsi's behaviour corresponds with the narrative situation that Tarr creates, and the spectator, through the film language, understands from the animal's demeanour and refusal to move that she is unable to work. This is reinforced through Ohlsdorfer and his daughter's deportment, facial expressions and deeds undertaken as a result of her supposed illness, along with the framing and editing devices that Tarr deploys: all factors which further mobilise spectator understanding of the family's terrible predicament. In a similar vein to Bresson's donkey, while Ricsi is not masquerading, and her character is barely differentiated from the horse that she is, she exists in, what Kirby terms, 'a symbolised matrix' in which 'the referential elements are applied to but not acted by the performer.'⁵⁰ Indeed, the mare cannot intentionally appear sick – yet her actions are also appropriate for the narrative trajectory. Furthermore, neither does she perform for the camera; instead her movements are purposefully framed by Tarr and his cinematographer. Thus, Ricsi's body movement and expression also fit the situation/film narrative.

Additionally, and knowing something about the mare's background, one must assume that Ohlsdorfer's behaviour clearly disturbs Ricsi. Indeed, further images of the horse do provide traces of, what Cavell terms, expressive freedom and animal idiosyncrasy. For

example, on day two, when the horse supposedly falls ill, Ohlsdorfer and his daughter fetch the mare from the stable and harness her to the cart; at this juncture, the camera focuses on her face in close-up from a front view angle. She champs at her bit and shifts uneasily from side to side, clearly affected by the relentless winds that continue to rage. Ears laid back, which is a sign of unease in horses, Ricsi seems apprehensive, yet accepting of her situation. At this point, however, Ohlsdorfer mounts the cart, raises his whip and shouts at the animal to move forwards. She refuses and weaves uneasily from side to side, neighing and shaking her head as she completes the manoeuvres. The camera withdraws slightly to encompass the horse in near full view, and the spectator witnesses her agitation and unease. Thus, the mare engages in a process of selection and presents this through outward body signs and expressions which, Cavell might argue, displays her 'inwardness and right to privacy' communicating, as a result, troubled bodily expression.⁵¹

Accordingly, as noted, the above information concerning Ricsi's purchase is relevant in terms of her previous ill treatment and dejection and, although her uneasiness and anxiety inform her character as sick animal in the plot, this outward display is also offered as part of her gamut of behaviour and is an expression of her own individuality. Here, Ricsi is afforded withdrawal into her private world, while the actions and expressions she exhibits are framed to eliminate any evidence of such retreat. Just as 'Balthazar's twitching ears and wide eyes as he looks at the circus animals likewise credit him with curiosity and wonder, making him more than a walking symbol of suffering',⁵² so the mare's agitated behaviour credit her with fear and bewilderment making her more than a symbol of deprivation and sickness - we see her entitlement to be an animal, and to know herself even if she remains unknown to us.⁵³ As Bekoff concurs, 'it's possible to mistakenly classify an animal's behaviour, but it's wrong to imply we can never figure it out. Careful and detailed behavioural studies have shown time and again that we can indeed differentiate and understand animal behaviour, and how it differs in various social contexts.'⁵⁴

If the horse in *The Turin Horse* plays a central role in Tarr's film, then Benedikt Erlingsson's Icelandic comedy, *Of Horses and Men* (*Hross I Oss* [2013]), also focuses entirely on the Icelandic horse for its narrative structure. Kolbeinn (Ingvar E. Sigurdsson), one of the central protagonists, is introduced to the spectator in the opening sequence of the film. He is a vain man who breeds and shows horses, takes great pride in his animals, and treats them with love and affection. When he takes his horse, a grey mare named Grána, out for the first time, he displays her paces to the envy and awe of the neighbours who perceive and comment upon her beauty and prowess as they watch the pair pass by. The object of the man's affection is the widow Solveig (Charlotte Bøving), and Kolbeinn is keen to impress. However, Grána subsequently mates with Solveig's stallion while Kolbeinn is himself riding the mare; this shames him to the point that he perceives no other option than to shoot her dead. The remainder of the narrative is structured around a series of episodes of horse encounters whereby each mini narrative, although not discreet, is mobilised through the animals.

Of Horses and Men in line with Tarr's film, does not remove what is animal and creaturely about the horses.⁵⁵ At the onset of the film, as noted above, Kolbeinn prepares his horse for her first outing and to display her gaits. The tactility of the relationship between man and horse is not lost on the spectator when, at the beginning of the sequence, an extreme close-up reveals Grána's thick fur and the camera pans upwards to the mare's ear and then a close-up of her eye, Kolbeinn mirrored within. Approaching her with the intention of

catching her and riding her for the first time, he explains his purpose to her, and she gazes towards him before veering to the left then right to evade capture. Eventually he manages to place a bridle over her head, but the mare rears upwards before cantering away from him. It is unclear whether Grána has already been broken in for riding or not, although her behaviour suggests the negative, and also that she is uneasy about the process. Despite the horse's lack of verbal language, she cannot be denied subjectivity here. As Weil argues, '[e]ach and every animal constructs "its" own subjective universe ... in which objects are perceived and responded to according to the functional or perceptual signs or tones they emit for each individual subject.'⁵⁶ Eventually Kolbeinn manages to bridle her, but she is anxious and shakes her head away from her owner. Subsequently he places a saddle on her back and the next sequence, through a series of edits, shows a number of onlookers awaiting his arrival.

Kolbeinn is a proud man and this aspect of his personality is demonstrated through his careful preparation as, seen in medium shot, he dons his coat and looks in the mirror before setting off to parade the paces of his new mare. Eventually Kolbeinn stops for coffee with Solveig's family and passes the reins to Solveig's son who tethers the mare within view of Brunn, Solveig's stallion. Erlingsson focuses entirely on the horse as Grána, seen in medium shot, stands quietly, her ears moving backwards and forwards listening. The director now introduces Brunn who is agitated at the mare's presence, and images of Grána are intercut with a medium shot of the stallion cantering up and down a perimeter fence. Stopping suddenly, he stands, head held high, ears pricked and gazes across at Grána, whereby Erlingsson intercuts with an image of the mare. The sound of Brunn's whinnying alerts her, and she turns her head towards him and begins to attempt to break away from her tether. Here, the stallion's behaviour is recognisable and compliant with that of a mating horse. As Bekoff argues, and as noted earlier, animals 'do not filter their emotions.'⁵⁷

Kolbeinn finishes his coffee and, watched by Solveig, unties Grána and rides away from the house. A subsequent edit reveals Brunn as he breaks out of his enclosure galloping parallel to Grána and Kolbeinn. As the rider proceeds on his way, the camera cuts to a long shot of Solveig's family as they raise their hands in horror and run towards the stallion, already anticipating the ensuing course of events. Kolbeinn's mare, aware of Brunn's attentions, stops in her tracks to Kolbeinn's cries of 'what's wrong?' and 'move it mare!'. At this point, Grána reveals the whites of her eyes, a sign of unease in horses, and lays her ears back. Whinnying, Brunn canters up to the rear end of the mare, Kolbeinn still seated astride, and sniffs her rump. Grána braces herself, the camera framing her face as she arches her neck in anticipation of the mating. An extraordinary situation follows: 'what the hell is going on?' shouts Kolbeinn, as the camera frames the stallion moving his head around the mare's rear quarters, before he mounts her and proceeds to mate. This is shown from a distance through the perspective of a neighbour and his wife to invoke humour, the scene shot through the optic of a pair of binoculars. An ensuing medium close-up shot reveals Kolbeinn's anguished expression as the animals copulate; the stallion now spent, remains slumped over the mare's back before dismounting and standing quietly raising his upper lip in pleasure. Grána starts and shies slightly, her head raised, mouth open straining against her bit, the whites of her eyes still showing. Kolbeinn hurriedly and with much embarrassment rides away from the scene leaving Brunn sniffing the ground where the mating took place. While Erlingsson intends the scene to be comical, and for the pompous Kolbeinn to be ridiculed, Brunn and Grána are behaving as their socio-biological

patterning indicates they should, and their outward display is worthy of consideration as simple acting.

Brunn and Grána's behaviour cannot be repressed by the shaping of the film, and they elect their own responses. This is a point reinforced by the director who describes the mating scene thus:

It turned out easy but we worried about it a lot. The essence is that the mare had to be ready and there are one or two days in her cycle when she gives off the hormones that makes the stallion crazy. And when she is ready, nothing will stop her and nothing can stop the stallion, if you have the right stallion that's not very tame and is a little bit without respect for humans. So it was all about the timing. To be with the right mare at the right time.⁵⁸

This startlingly explicit sequence offers a number of insights into animal performance. In one sense the horses are received actors whereby they accrue meaning from context. Kolbeinn is proud and trying to impress and further, he has great affection for the animal who narratively has betrayed him. Also, the man has been derided in front of his neighbours and friends. Conversely, Grána and Brunn do not remain impassive, their actions produce visible and easily detectable performance signs. Additionally, they do not impersonate or operate as anything other than the creatures that they are, their performance choices are visible and external to the preoccupations of the filmmaker; their conduct exercises freedom and choice which can be construed as simple acting.

This essay considers the phenomenon of animal acting in cinema. As noted, generally animals central to the filmic narrative are anthropomorphised and their role determined by the film language. As noted, it is difficult to apply any analysis of animals from a human perspective without some anthropomorphic implications, yet neither *The Turin Horse* or *Of Horses and Men* operate in this vein, and the equine performances are not insignificant or negligible. Indeed, just as human gestures and expressions acquire dramatic significance in films over and above narrative considerations, so the animal actions can also be deemed important and count as simple acting. As Daston and Mitman suggest, 'the subjective experience of being [animal] could only be inferred through a glass darkly, by observing its outward behaviour',⁵⁹ and close scrutiny of this mobilises further meanings and pleasures for the spectator. Whereas all of the animals studied above are fictionally framed, and none can be said to impersonate, animal performance is mobilised through bodily actions which occur through independence of thought and inner subjectivity. Interiority for Ricsi, Grána and Brunn is, in part, based on their specific life experiences, breeding and being animal, yet is visible, and to an extent discernible through external signs. As Peterson proposes,

[i]f live animal performance can never fully dehumanize the nonhuman animal, then semiotics can never account for it either. In short, semiotics can address much of what is "human" in performance – the intended, the "nonanimal human". But meaning cannot tame what is wild about the signifier.⁶⁰

This essay argues that those horses studied here are invested with distinctive traits which can be examined as part of their performance over and above the confines of the film narrative. It has considered animal performance, and within that remit the possibility of animals as simple actors. In doing so, it presents the notion that Ricsi, Grána and Brunn

are not inconsequential and all 'count for something' and their 'knowing unknowness' enables further modes of analysis.⁶¹

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- ¹ See Lemercier 2008.
- ² Tarr in Romney 2012, p. 39.
- ³ Donna Haraway (2003) discusses the notion of ‘significant otherness’ as an ethical standpoint. See also Daston and Mitman 2004.
- ⁴ Gouabault, Dubied & Burton-Jeangros 2011.
- ⁵ Austin-Smith 2012, pp. 20-21.
- ⁶ Kirby 1995.
- ⁷ Albeit, more recently, Animal Studies has witnessed a greater acceptance of anthropomorphism, not as a misattribution of human qualities to animals, but as a heuristic device. See Mitchell, Thompson and Miles (eds) 1997.
- ⁸ Peterson 2007, p. 34.
- ⁹ Peterson 2007, p. 34.
- ¹⁰ See Armstrong 2008; Baker 2001; Philo & Wilbert (eds) 2001; Daston & Mitman 2004.
- ¹¹ Marc Bekoff argues that at times it is acceptable to attribute emotions to animals and anthropomorphise them. See Bekoff 2007, p. 10 and also Butterfield, Hill and Lord 2012.
- ¹² Gouabault et al. 2011.
- ¹³ See Morin 2005; Dyer 1979; Shingler 2012.
- ¹⁴ See Hockenhull 2013; Hockenhull in Yu and Smith (eds) 2015; Giles 2013.
- ¹⁵ Gouabault et al. 2011.
- ¹⁶ Peterson 2007, p. 43.
- ¹⁷ Austin-Smith 2012, p. 20.
- ¹⁸ Austin-Smith 2012, p. 19. See also Richard Schechner (2002) for his identification of “as” performance.
- ¹⁹ Kirby 1995, p. 42.
- ²⁰ Baron & Carnicke discuss Kirby’s work. Baron & Carnicke 2008, p. 80.
- ²¹ Kirby in Baron & Carnicke 2008, p. 80.
- ²² Kirby in Baron & Carnicke 2008, p. 80.
- ²³ Austin-Smith 2012, p. 21.
- ²⁴ Lehman 1997, p. 105.
- ²⁵ Barnard 2004, p. 196.
- ²⁶ Rollin 1997, p. 130.
- ²⁷ Barnard 2004, p. 197.
- ²⁸ Bekoff 2007, p. 123; Weil 2012, p. 4.
- ²⁹ Weil 2012, p. 4.
- ³⁰ Austin-Smith 2012, p. 28.
- ³¹ Austin-Smith quotes from Stanley Cavell 1996, pp. 128-29.
- ³² Breuer & Freud 1937.
- ³³ Cavell 1996, p. 126. See also Bekoff 2007, p. 12.
- ³⁴ David Williams (2000) pursues this in his work on the French equine performer, Bartabas, and his troupe Théâtre Zingaro.
- ³⁵ Austin-Smith 2012, p. 21.
- ³⁶ Austin-Smith 2012, p. 21.
- ³⁷ Austin-Smith 2012, p. 21.
- ³⁸ Williams 2000, p. 36.
- ³⁹ Ruth Millikan (1997) argues that the attribution of choice here is not necessarily a human type of cognition and, there are intermediate possibilities.
- ⁴⁰ Bekoff 2007, pp. 44-45.
- ⁴¹ Austin-Smith 2012, pp. 21-22.
- ⁴² Austin-Smith 2012, p. 20.
- ⁴³ Daston & Mitman 2004, pp. 12-13.
- ⁴⁴ Karen Lury (2010) discusses the perception that children and animals are understood only as received actors in relation to adults and creates a convincing argument to the contrary.
- ⁴⁵ Kelemen 2012, p. 39.
- ⁴⁶ Tarr in Romney 2012, p. 36.
- ⁴⁷ Tarr in Romney 2012, p. 36.
- ⁴⁸ Peterson suggests that anthropocentrism relates to the construction of the performance, which in film is the framing and shaping apparatus, and what is required is an investigation into ‘how actual animals perform’.
- Peterson 2007, p. 34.
- ⁴⁹ Ricsi, in part, conforms to signs of equine fear. See Budiansky 1997.

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- ⁵⁰ Kirby in Austin-Smith 2012, p. 29.
- ⁵¹ Cavell 1996, p. 126.
- ⁵² Austin-Smith 2012, p. 31.
- ⁵³ Austin-Smith 2012, p. 30.
- ⁵⁴ Bekoff 2007, p. 127.
- ⁵⁵ See Philo and Wilbert (2001) for a discussion of nonhuman agency.
- ⁵⁶ Weil 2012, p. 31.
- ⁵⁷ Bekoff 2007, p. 44-45.
- ⁵⁸ in Wilkinson 2014.
- ⁵⁹ Daston and Mitman 2004, p. 39.
- ⁶⁰ Peterson 2007, p. 35.
- ⁶¹ Austin-Smith 2012, p. 31.