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# **Performing expertise in human–animal relationships: performative instability and the role of counter-performance**

Nora Schuurman and Alex Franklin

## ***Abstract***

*This paper explores how the human–animal relationship is used to inform the construction of expertise about how best to manage relationships with animals. It pays particular attention to how the material practices of horse training can be understood as performative of human–animal relationships, animality and the boundary between humans and animals. Drawing on an analysis of commercial videos of Natural Horsemanship, the paper shows how acts of animal counter-performance are actively used by some trainers to strengthen a performance and in so doing, enhance the construction of expertise. Setting counter-performance in the context of space, though, the paper also highlights the on-going ‘risky’ and unstable nature of human–animal relationships, and the potential this creates for the performance of expertise in human–animal relations to be challenged.*

## **Introduction**

In recent work on the roles of animals in society, the focus has increasingly turned to the actual practices involving humans and animals instead of looking at the animals themselves as essentially separate from the social and cultural worlds in which their lives are inevitably embedded (e.g. Birke, Bryld et al, 2004; Haraway, 2008). This shift of focus is a sign of an ambition to challenge the rigid human–animal boundary by contextualizing it in empirical research, and to reveal how it is worked within an everyday context (Philo, 1995). Focusing on the practice itself is particularly useful when considering the various factors involved in producing animal welfare, a topic that is gaining increasing importance in Western consumption societies (Greenhough and Roe, 2010; Miele and Evans, 2010). A central aspect here, which also forms the focus of this article, is the construction of expertise around how animals should be treated and handled (Schuurman, 2012).

In this paper we explore how the human–animal relationship is used to inform the construction of expertise about how best to manage relationships with animals - in this case, horses. A central aspect analysed is the performance of expertise; specifically, how the expertise of a horse trainer is made to appear convincing to the public – especially when engaging with an untrained or ‘problem’ horse. By reviewing the manner in which the performance is co-produced (Futrell, 1999) by the interactions of the horse and the trainer, this gives an opportunity to investigate the affective and performative in the human–animal relationship.

Using commercial demonstrations of Natural Horsemanship as a case in point, we look in particular at the variable roles of resistance on the part of the animal in creating incidences of

‘counter-performance’, and the ways in which this either supports or detracts from the overall performance of human expertise. In doing so, we are guided by asking: are incidences of animal counter-performance necessarily detrimental to an overall performance? Specifically, we consider whether on occasion, incidences of animal counter-performance can actually serve to strengthen the performance and in so doing enhance the construction of expertise in human–animal relations. Accordingly, we pay particular attention to how the material practices of horse training can be understood as performative of human–animal relationships and animality. Furthermore, we look at the ways in which the performance is affected by the space in which it is situated. We conclude by reflecting on the need for further academic attention to be given to counter-performance in the context of dealing with the performative instability (Gregson and Rose, 2000; Simmons, 2003) of human–animal relationships and the ‘risky’ nature of performance (Howe, 2000), as well as the role of expertise in reproducing the human–animal boundary.

### **Expertise and the human–animal relationship**

In this paper we understand expertise as socially constructed. According to Anthony Giddens (1994, page 84), “[a]n expert is any individual who can successfully lay claim to either specific skills or types of knowledge which the layperson does not possess”. As such, expertise is always constructed in interaction with a specific audience or a community (human or animal) which recognizes the skills or knowledge of the expert. Thus, expertise cannot only be defined as a profession based on formal qualifications, but as a social status, with the line between an expert and a layperson drawn contextually in each situation (Arnoldi, 2007; Waage and Benediktsson, 2010). A person aiming to achieve the status of an expert has to be able to prove the superiority of his or her expertise compared to other expertise and to construct others as laypersons.

When exploring human expertise and its construction in the context of animal-related activities, however, it is essential that the actions of the animal are also accounted for; animals have an effect on the construction of human expertise. In the case of a horse trainer, for example, his/her expertise is based on interaction with horses in actual, material contexts and in response to the horses’ previous experiences and level of training, life histories, temperamental characteristics, and the actions and methods used by the people who have previously encountered and trained the horse. Accordingly, the role of the horse – how it behaves and performs – becomes important in the construction of equestrian expertise. As such, expertise is more usefully understood in human–animal studies as situated rather than universal (Enticott 2012). This refers not only to the spatiality of the training process but also to the relationality of the interaction between the human and the horse, and ultimately, to the animal, the focus of these practices. From the trainer’s perspective, the actions of the animal and the ways it perceives the training and reacts to it are contingent; any incidents taking place during the interaction may affect the performance of the trainer and the construction of his/her role as an expert.

It is also precisely because of its situated nature, though, that equestrian (and other forms of human–animal) expertise can simultaneously be considered risky. Any universal knowledge is prone to be challenged in a specific encounter between a horse and a trainer in space. To be able to succeed, expertise has to be, to some extent, based on situated knowledge produced in interaction with the animal (cf. Barad 2003). As we will show, the formation and type of this knowledge ultimately derives from an understanding of animality and the human–animal boundary, and has further consequences on the construction of these two.

### **Performativity and the performative animal**

According to Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose (2000, pages 436–438), the main difference between the concepts of ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’, which can be attributed to Erving Goffman and Judith Butler respectively, lies in the subjectivity of the performer. For Goffman, giving an impression of oneself may be either unintentional or intentional, depending on whether the performer believes that the impression is real or is aware of the staged nature of the performance (Goffman, 1959, page 28). Butler, instead, sees performers and performance as inseparable. For Butler, the subjects enacting the performance are produced by cited discourse within the performance; she thus rejects theatrical notions of performance (Butler, 1988).

The practices constituting animals and their relationships to humans can usefully be understood as performances. That the concepts of performance and performativity entered the discussion of human–animal studies in the 2000’s, reflects the various developments in the scholarly discussions on the subject (see especially Birke, Bryld et al, 2004; also Marvin, 2003; Szarycz, 2011; Thompson, 2011). Because the animal does not participate in linguistic representation the way humans do, animal performances are defined as embodied encounters with other bodies, technologies and material places (Szarycz, 2011, page 159), or material-discursive processes that are jointly emerging from material and discursive factors (Barad 2003). Birke, Bryld et al. (2004, page 177) use this as a starting point for discussing how the processes of producing animality and human–animal relations are both material and discursive, thereby contributing to their performativity. They suggest that “the notion of performativity can serve a useful purpose in clarifying how human/animal relationships are constructed by discursive practices” (page 171).

Performativity also turns attention to the “non-human otherness as a *doing* or *becoming*, produced and reproduced in specific contexts of human/non-human interaction” (Birke, Bryld et al., 2004, page 169, emphasis original), instead of an animal essence (cf. Thompson, 2011, page 232). Accordingly, Birke, Bryld et al. (2004, page 175) argue that the ‘animal’ is comparable to gender, which is produced through “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1990, page 191) through time. What are repeated then, are socially approved acts, constructing a belief of a ‘natural’ animal. These acts can also be considered as constitutive of the training of horses, in which both ‘horseness’ and human–horse relations are repeatedly produced in material-discursive practices, in the interaction between the human and the horse. The hegemonic performances of horse training are then enabled and constrained by discourses of

‘horseness’ and of human–horse relations (Barad, 2003, page 819); although subverting this hegemony is always possible (Butler, 1990, page xii). For Birke, Bryld et al. (2004, page 168), an integral part of the process of doing the relationship is animal agency, which makes the process different in each case. Understanding performativity as a material-discursive process means that by their own actions animals participate in constituting their animality in discursive practices.

The training of horses can be understood as ‘doing horseness’, a performance by which the trained horse is produced both materially and discursively. It is also a performance of a human–animal relationship in the sense that the horse and the trainer participate in a mutual process, the outcome of which is dependent on the actions of both parties. This kind of relationship can also be understood as ‘becoming with’ nonhumans (as discussed by Donna Haraway, 2008). The idea is further supported by Kirrilly Thompson, who notes that horse-training blurs the human–animal boundary (2011, page 233), which makes the very relationship the object of research. Thompson’s emphasis is on the process, in her definition of horse-riding and training horses, as “a form of mutual becoming which occurs over time. Long-term human–horse partnerships involve rehearsal, practice and training” (page 232). As such, training involves becoming available to each other, becoming attuned to each other, as well as becoming open to surprises (Haraway, 2008, page 207). Understood in this way, horse training can be defined as an ‘anthropo-zoo-genetic practice’, one that results from the actions of both human and horse and is able to transform both, thus not only producing animality but also humanity (Despret, 2004, page 122). The manner in which this is done may either strengthen the discursive boundary between humans and animals or render it unstable.

### **Counter-activity as counter-performance**

As Haraway (2008, page 26) points out, embodied communication between humans and animals is not always easy or harmonious. This leaves open the potential for expertise to be endangered if a performance is challenged in some way. It also opens up an opportunity for the animal to either act according to the hegemonic discourse or, by its own intentional or unintentional actions, to increase the risk of instability in the performance (cf. Gregson and Rose, 2000). As Gregson and Rose explain:

‘when we start to examine the intricacies of particular grounded performances, they manifest themselves as citations infused simultaneously with multiple subject positions, rather than as an individual subject located within, or in response to, a single subject position’ (page 446)

These multiple subject positions, as Gregson and Rose go on to illustrate, can affect the performance in crucial ways, resulting in unpredictable “slippage, subversion, disruption, and critical reworking of power through practice” (page 446). Part of this unpredictability could be termed as *counter-performance*, a concept not touched by Gregson and Rose, but for us

emerging from the usage of counter-activity by Goffman and developed by Simmons (2003). In this section, we consider the possibility of animal counter-performance.

In theorizing performance, Erving Goffman puts forward the idea that “a particular definition is *in charge of the situation*” (1961, page 133, emphasis original, cited in Simmons, 2003, page 79) and that this definition is not created by those engaging in that situation but by pre-existing social practices and norms (Goffman, 1986 [1974], page 1). The task of the participants is reduced to enacting the performances, i.e. the applicable roles, norms and behaviours according to the definition. Although Goffman (1961) also discusses ‘counter-activity’ as a possibility for individual agency to challenge the definition, for him the mere fact that a challenge occurs is not necessarily enough to disrupt the order of the situation. In such a case, as Simmons (2003) explains, the hegemonic definition naturalizes the situation and “inscribes itself though reiteration and routinization” (page 87). Simmons (2003, pages 78–93) combines Goffman’s concept of counter-activity with the work on performative instability by Gregson and Rose. For him, the discourses and practices supposedly enhancing the definition of the situation may be challenged by the participants of the performance, leading to semantic instability and counter-activity.

The work of both Simmons and Gregson and Rose, whilst very enlightening, can usefully be taken further. By looking at performances touching the issue of human–animal boundary we feel the need to differentiate between acts of resistance which are inconsequential to the overall performance and those which are capable of destabilising the performance. In highlighting this difference we therefore develop counter-activity into the concept of *counter-performance*. That is, we define intentional resistance that challenges the hegemonic definition of any situation as *counter-performance*. Essentially then, counter-performance does not equate to resistance as such. Instead, it refers to resistance in a situation where it has the potential to disturb the performance or transform it. At the same time, however, there is no presumption that an occurrence – or even a series of occurrences – of counter-performance will necessarily result in an overall performance being perceived as a ‘failed performance’ (Simmons 2003). In illustrating and further substantiating the possibilities of such a conceptual development we return to the case of individual animal agency within human–animal practice.

Within human–horse relationships, the hegemonic definition can be understood to naturalize the relationship, to define what is considered proper handling or training. In horse training demonstrations, whether videoed or not, there are key personnel present to regulate what is appropriate, the order of action, and who should participate – in other words, they maintain key scripts (Szarycz, 2011, pages 153–154). As pointed out earlier, the success of a horse training performance and its interpretation by the audience(s) depend on the situated actions of the animal in the performance. The extent to which any counter-performance by the animal is able to challenge the hegemonic definition of animal performances or subvert it, depends on the actual performance. Szarycz (2011, pages 160–162), for example, recounts an event where a very experienced performing tiger refuses to perform and finally attacks the man controlling him, dragging him off stage. Although not necessarily this dramatic, the counter-

performance of a horse may be a challenge to the hegemonic definition of a situation in a staged training performance and lead to controlling measures on the part of the human.

Controlling counter-performance in such a case is essential for the performance to succeed and reinforce the expertise of the trainer. Control, as an integral part of the human–horse relationship, is however a widely disputed and controversial issue (Birke 2008). As Thompson (2011) points out, despite constructing the relationship as a partnership, the human is always in control of the horse and retains the power in the relationship, while the role of the horse is one of submission and obedience. Therefore, subjective actions on the part of the horse, even when cooperative, carry the potential of resistance. In a training performance, this resistance can become counter-performance, endangering the expertise of the trainer.

Yet, are incidences of counter-performance necessarily detrimental to overall performances, or if effectively managed, can they actually strengthen the performances and thereby enhance the construction of expertise? The concept of situated expertise will be a useful tool for assessing this, as illustrated in the following sections through analysis of two different Natural Horsemanship training videos. By acting against the hegemonic position in the performance, the horse will be either challenging the expertise of the trainer or reinforcing it, depending on the situation, the form and extent of resistance on the part of the horse, and the reactions of the trainer. Drawing on the case of Natural Horsemanship we will also explore if, in a situation where expertise is dependent on an encounter between human and animal, the consequences of counter-performance will make visible the process of conceptualizing animality within the actual performance. We will look at whether, by rendering the horse as the object of knowledge, this form of equestrian expertise reinforces the human–animal boundary and objectifies the animal, or attempts to diminish this boundary and allow space for the horse as an individual subject capable of participating in knowledge production.

### **The case of Natural Horsemanship**

In modern society expertise has entered the private sphere of personal life in the form of a wide gamut of marriage counselors, family therapists and guide books to good life and success, thereby constructing lay people as ignorant and in need of expert help in their daily life (Furedi, 2009; Giddens, 1990, page 144). A similar phenomenon has emerged in the field of horse keeping. As the popularity of keeping leisure horses has increased significantly in many Western societies, the need for knowledge concerning handling and training horses has expanded. Notably, the equine industry is largely unregulated with easy entry for new actors. Whilst riding schools have long served as the source of knowledge for ‘beginners’, the variety of commercial advice available to both beginner and more experienced horse enthusiasts has widened considerably in the past few decades. It is also characteristic of the industry that new commercial actors have acquired their knowledge and skills through personal experience instead of purely formal education, thus blurring the line between expert and lay knowledge (Waage and Benediktsson, 2010). Consequently, with an abundance of service providers aiming at the status of expert, horse owners in need of support are faced with a situation of contested expertise.

The services provided by experts are not limited to technical knowledge alone; there is an abundance of expert help available for working the human–horse relationship (Birke, 2008). One notable example of this is Natural Horsemanship (NH). Although market driven and thus part of the consumer culture of contemporary equestrianism, NH can be understood as an established sub-culture of human–horse relationships within western society. It is actively bounded by its advocates as being fundamentally different from ‘traditional horsemanship’ in both theory and practice. Using methods which promise ‘kindness’ and an understanding of horses’ ‘true nature’ (Birke, 2007; 2008), NH claims to represent a unique equality between humans and horses and ethics in training technologies. In the boundary which is actively worked through NH, it is traditional horsemanship methods which are delegitimized and constituted as *other* (Latimer and Birke, 2009).

The NH approach understands human–horse relationships as based on a ‘language of horses’ and the horse’s willingness to co-operate with humans. This contrasts with ‘traditional’ equestrianism (Latimer and Birke, 2009) (which can also be referred to as mainstream equestrianism) and animal behaviour science, the basic idea of which (though differently framed) is of the horse being able to learn signs introduced by humans (Waran and Casey, 2005). Although much has been published on NH by its practitioners and enthusiasts (see, for example Barrett, 2007; Marks, 2002; Miller, 2007; Rashid, 2004), in the social sciences and philosophy the study of NH has been limited<sup>(1)</sup> (for ethology see, for example, Waran and Casey, 2005). As yet largely unexplored is the manner in which NH expertise is constructed and performed by NH professionals; that is, by those individuals who commercially demonstrate and provide training in the practice of NH. It is the performance of NH expertise and the use of performativity as a framework for studying human–animal relationships which forms the focus of the remainder of this paper. Drawing on analysis of NH video data we look at how the human–horse relationship is performed in commercial NH videos and whether counter-performance, if effectively managed, can actually serve to strengthen an overall performance of expertise.

The material is sourced from video demonstrations of NH methods by two NH professionals. For this study, we initially chose six different horse training videos. From a preliminary round of analysis, two videos were deemed to be particularly insightful considering the research focus of the study, and were chosen for further analysis. They are *Join-Up* by Monty Roberts (2004) and *Thinking Equus Approach to Clipping* by Michael Peace (2004). Both videos are commercially available, aimed at horse owners learning to cope with the problems they face in handling, training or riding horses. The videos were selected on the basis that the

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<sup>(1)</sup> While Paul Patton understands it as an ethical way of training horses and talks about ‘more enlightened’ trainers (2003, page 88), Lynda Birke (2007, 2008) critiques the validity of the presuppositions about the social life of horses on which NH is based. Perhaps more notable in the context of this paper, though, are the contributions made by Birke (see also Latimer and Birke, 2009) in analyzing the affective-rewards experienced by lay (human) practitioners of NH.



trainers featured are both professionals of NH. Both have established successful careers for themselves around their practice and performance of NH, with Monty Roberts having become internationally synonymous with NH. In contrast to Monty Roberts, however, Michael Peace does not actively construct his methods as opposite to traditional horsemanship; he instead adopts ideas from modern ethology to inform his training principles.

For the analysis, the videos were partly transcribed, leaving out sections that were not relevant for this paper. In the transcription process, the action displayed on the screen was written down in detail in between the speech, which includes both the actual speech by the persons seen on the screen and the voiceover. This method allows for following the actions of the horse as they appear in response to, leading to, or despite human actions and speech.

We chose to focus on video analysis rather than written documents because we wanted to concentrate on the process of constructing expertise in an actual performance demonstrating human–animal interaction in practice, including the actions of the animal. The video analysis is reinforced by the publication of written accounts, but it remains reliant on actual practical demonstration. Furthermore, the advantage of using videos as data instead of observing live performances is that video material gives the possibility of repetition in the analysis, as the researcher can stop and replay the video any number of times. This way, the observation of gestures and interactions becomes easier, which is especially important while studying the actions of animals (Konecki, 2008).

We understand the videos analysed as social constructs. In making the videos, some scenes and small details are included and some left out, with the resulting video being one interpretation of the performance shown in the video. Again, seeing images is contextual (Rose, 2001). Sampling the videos during the research process results in the researcher constructing the scenes in a new way, depending on the experiences, views and expectations of the researcher as well as the purpose of the research and the situation in which the video is seen. In this study, we address the videos from a perspective of mainstream equestrian culture, informed by our own personal experiences in equestrianism.

The discussion is organized into two sections. In the first section, we begin by looking at the role of counter-performance in how the NH promise of achieving a meaningful relationship between horse and human is introduced and demonstrated. We then examine in more detail the use of practical demonstrations to support the promise of a meaningful relationship, including the ways in which the human–animal boundary is challenged and shifted and moments of counter-performance are enrolled to create a strong performance. Data analysis during this part of the discussion concentrates around extracts from the video by Monty Roberts. In the second section, the underlying instability in the performance of a meaningful horse–human relationship is further explored through a discussion of the role of space in the performance. Data analysis in this section draws principally upon material from the video by Michael Peace.

## **Performing Natural Horsemanship – expertise, counter-performance and the human–animal boundary**

As is common for many NH videos, *Join-up* by Monty Roberts (MR) begins with footage of a group of horses running loose in a large area; the horses appear to the onlooker as wild, reflecting a shared discourse on wildness. The significance of nature and wildness in these pictures lies with the construction and legitimization of the expertise of the trainer by emphasizing the difference between humans and animals, i.e. the human–animal boundary as evidence of this expertise. The important point of starting a training video like this is to give the trainer an opportunity to offer a method for taming these ‘wild’ animals in a manner which celebrates, but also packages their wildness into an easily accessible and spatially restricted format available for consumers. In the case of the MR video, the opening scene of wild horses is subsequently built upon when an individual young racehorse (pre-selected prior to filming) is first introduced to the viewers as the subject for the training demonstration. Initially loose in a small paddock, this horse is seen pacing up and down the fence line looking anxious:

0:05:02 (*horse in paddock, trotting and cantering back and forth*) “she is right out of the fields and that is why we see her pacing so nervous about all this. And what I’d like to do, John, (*Monty by the gate, talking to John, the on-screen ‘interviewer’*) is cause her this morning to accept her first saddle, bridle and rider. And I’d like to do that in a round pen, which you’ll see, and without any interruptions, just go straight through, and hopefully do it in less than thirty minutes.” 0:05:23 MR

During this scene, the horse is constructed as ‘wild’ by MR, and later on referred to as ‘traumatized’. These expressions set up the expertise of the handler (MR), whose task is not only to control the ‘wildness’ of the horse, but also, we are told, achieve this within an extremely short time period. For those viewers familiar with ‘untamed’ or hard to handle horses, but not yet familiar with the techniques of NH, the idea of getting such a horse to ‘accept her first saddle, bridle and rider’ in ‘less than thirty minutes’ would be hard to believe; doing so without any force, seemingly impossible. Initial training of horses is known to take weeks or even months, in conformity with the need for prolonged rehearsal (Thompson 2011).

As Lourdes Orozco (2010) points out, working with animals involves a risk to the performance, as the (re-)actions of the animal can never be fully controlled. In NH training videos there are incidents where the horse acts in a way that seemingly does not support the performance. The horse may resist handling, riding or clipping in either mild or more severe ways, basically trying to free itself from the trainer or the situation as a whole. At first glance, in line with Orozco’s observation, this seems to endanger the construction of the trainer’s expertise in the performance in question. However, a closer look reveals a more nuanced process taking place whereby the expertise of the trainer can actually be enhanced. For the viewer watching MR, it is precisely the expectation of counter-performance on the part of the horse, which makes the proposal of getting it to accept a saddle, bridle and rider within thirty minutes, all the more remarkable. By explaining and subsequently re-emphasizing the

challenge, the audience is prepared for something potentially ‘dramatic’ to happen right from the outset of the training session:

(0:06:59) (*Monty in round pen, pacing a little and looking at camera*) “Accepting saddle, bridle and rider, is said by many to be the most critical thing that happens with a young horse. Certainly, it’s probably the most dramatic thing that he’ll go through.”  
(0:07:14) MR

Following Goffman, Simmons writes that some “counter-activity is possible without challenging the definition of the situation” (2003, page 90). Accordingly, introducing the potential for counter-performance can be understood as a deliberative part of the performance, in order to then show the expertise of the trainer in maintaining control. By setting up ‘saddle, bridle and rider’ as ‘dramatic’, though, MR is not only making visible his own skill; he is also normalizing a certain degree of resistance by the horse as ‘to be expected’. Significantly, such behaviour is to be understood by the audience as a normal reaction to the drama associated with ‘saddle, bridle and rider’, not a counter-performance against the technique of NH itself. The importance of this distinction becomes clear, but is also essentially validated by what comes next in the training demonstration: the act of ‘join-up’.

The process of ‘join-up’, an encounter between the horse and the handler, is the basis of MR’s work as a horse trainer. By ‘join-up’ MR means a ‘voluntary’ joining with the handler on the part of the horse, which he interprets as the desire of the horse to look up to the human as its leader, not as the human using power over the animal. In the MR video, to achieve join-up – in this instance with the same young horse that was first introduced to the viewer in a paddock, before being led into the round-pen – MR initially works with the horse by sending it away with a long, rope-like lunge line. The horse is made to run around the pen, until it eventually ‘chooses’ to have a ‘conversation’ with him in ‘the language Equus’<sup>1(2)</sup>. During this conversation, the focus is on specific bodily movements conducted by both the horse and the handler:

(0:14:19) “Now we’ve done both directions, and we’ll take the pressure off, (*Monty takes lunge line in his hand*) and we’ll start thinking Equus. We’ll watch for this conversation, and it’s coming fast. This ear, closest to me, is locked on. She’s already brought her head off that wall twice now, wanting to come in closer. My eyes, her eyes, shoulders square, pushing away. There’s licking and chewing, very nice, very nice (*horse turns head briefly inwards*). [...] there’s the licking and chewing again, quite good, very good conversation. Next round, I will go passive. Good licking and chewing. I will go passive the next round, take my left shoulder by and then drop my

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<sup>(2)</sup> Interpreting what actually happens in the round pen has been a subject of controversy. Ethologists Natalie K. Waran and Rachel Casey (2005, 192) suggest that the reason why the horse turns to the handler is that it seeks an opportunity to avoid continuously running away from the handler, tiring in the deep sand of the round pen.

eyes away from her eyes, and reverse the whole procedure (*horse stops and then starts to approach Monty*). There we go, I'll get myself on the forty-five, (*Monty turns sideways to the horse*) forty-five now (*overlaid music starts*), and invite her in, very nice, super good girl (*horse touches Monty with her muzzle, then steps back*), there's the moment of join-up (*horse lifts head up and looks past Monty*) you are a good girl. (*Monty strokes the horse's head*)" (0:16:12) MR

In direct contrast to introduction of saddle, bridle and rider being 'dramatic' for the horse and therefore something which it is likely to react against, the act of join-up is presented to the audience as entirely positive, and entirely voluntary.

In the lead up to join-up, any display of bucking, kicking or 'flight' is to be expected. Such behaviour is normal for an untamed horse that has yet to accept human partnership; as such it cannot be understood as counter-performance. Rather, the skill of the trainer is made visible to the audience on this occasion through the horse 'wanting to come in closer'. In accepting MR's 'invitation' to join-up when it is offered, the untamed horse is demonstrating, in conformity with its 'wild' state, a closer association with this trainer and his command of 'animal language' as something positive. The horse by its actions thus co-constructs the performance of MR as being about overcoming the human-animal boundary at the moment of join-up. In the context of the training demonstration, however, it is also from this moment onwards that any subsequent reoccurrence of 'wild' behaviour by the horse is much more likely to be understood by the audience as counter-performance. The skill of the trainer lies in managing its presence.

The reoccurrence of counter-performance is used by MR during the next stage of the NH training, to demonstrate that the horse is actively choosing to remain in a state of 'join up', despite the 'dramatic' challenge of its first saddle and bridle. An illustration of this comes when, only five minutes on from 'the moment of join-up', the horse is saddled:

(0:21:33) "And there she is (*Monty reaches to take the girth from under the horse's belly*), standing with no restraint (*Monty attaches the girth, horse backs up, Monty talks to her, the horse turns to poke him twice with her head, ears slightly back, and then tries to run away, Monty holds her with the line, horse bucks once and rears several times, finally stops*). Easy now, (*Monty goes to her side, holding on the line*) good girl, you're alright, you're okay (*takes the line off the headcollar*). I'm just gonna take that line off now, and you noticed that my pulse rate is not up a tick (*Monty tightens the girth*). I don't care if she wants to buck, that's to be expected. It's alright (*text '10 Min' on screen*), I just wanna make sure this saddle will ride her, and if it's the first saddle of her life (*Monty backs off a few feet*), and it is, (*Monty pulls the line quickly from under the horse's front feet, horse spooks*) she ought to buck with it. (*Monty clicks his tongue and swings the line, the horse goes bucking along the wall*) Okay." (0:22:37) MR

Being saddled for the first time results in clear attempts at resistance on the part of the horse – backing up, trying to run away, bucking, and rearing. These examples of flight behavior could be interpreted as lack of trust in the training methods of MR. Instead, the observer is immediately reassured by MR that this behaviour is "to be expected" (further attested to by

the fact that MR's "pulse rate is not up a tick"). Thus MR turns the meaning of the horse's actions around, from obvious counter-performing behaviour into part of the performance itself, in turn strengthening his own expertise. Later, the spooking and bucking of the horse are similarly incorporated into the performance ("she ought to buck with it"). As well as the incident being used by MR to reinforce the integrity of the performance (ie. that this really is the first time the horse has encountered a saddle), it also serves to set up the third and final stage of the performance: the acceptance of rider. This is initially apparent when MR claims that with his method of training, '95 percent' of the horses trained 'do not buck with their first rider', as opposed to '95 percent' bucking in 'the real world of conventional horse-breaking'. In making this claim MR is setting himself a challenge against which to prove his expertise.

As Thompson, following Foucault (1977), notes, "it is through resistance that power relations become most visible, manifesting in the body (2011, page 230). Here lies the key point of managing the resistance of the horse in order to be able to define and control counter-performance. One of the ways of controlling it is by deciding what does and does not count as counter-performance. Where a trainer is in a position of being able to convince an audience that a counter-performance did not actually occur, what this demonstrates is not necessarily their ability to control the behaviour, but rather their ability to control the audience's interpretation of the behaviour. Accordingly, the expert performer is one who is able to momentarily lose control of the behaviour without losing control of the performance. An example is found in the MR video immediately after the horse is introduced to her first rider. Giving voice to the horse, MR negates the resistance that the horse displays:

(0:33:02) (*Horse with rider on back, being led by Monty, leaps forward twice*) "We won't call that bucking yet, that's fair enough, she just said 'are you sure you are meant to be up there'... we can live with that one" (0:33:27) MR

As the performance in this video is mainly aimed at non-experienced horse enthusiasts, MR is free to interpret the counter-performative actions of the horse. As a consequence, MR controls the overall performance of the human-horse relationship, as well as the performance of the horse's animality, by defining the subjective actions and intentions of the horse. The previous performance of wildness is replaced by one of submission. A part of this is the way MR gives voice to the horse. Such an act performs their animality in ways similar to how animals in wildlife films are created in the voiceover (Szarycz, 2011, page 171). In the context of the MR video, however, it serves to give the trainer the power to define the subjectivity of the horse, and to control its animality in a hierarchical way, placing the human above the animal. It becomes clear that the performance of human-animal relationship is intricately connected into the performance of animality and the human-animal boundary.

In accordance with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, horses under training can be understood as 'docile bodies' that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 1977, page 136; see also Thompson 2011). Although Foucault did not write about animals, his analysis is easily applied to human-animal relations, where power relations between humans and animals are shaped by different understandings of animality and,

consequently, the human–animal boundary (see Haraway, 2008, 60). Accordingly, the discourses involved in any horse training situation are embedded in the trainer’s conception of the horse as an animal, therefore the choice of trainer and training technique has consequences for how the horse and its actions are interpreted and understood (Schuurman 2012). As a focus on counter-performance demonstrates however, these discourses do not determine the outcome of the training process; the outcome is instead to a large extent constructed in the embodied encounter between the trainer and the horse and the actions taken by the horse.

### **Performing Natural Horsemanship – space and human–animal communication**

The MR performance takes place in an alien space of an indoor round pen that the horse has no previous knowledge of and cannot read. Thus the horse is stranded in a sterile space. The round-pen is an enclosed circular area surrounded by high walls, not only preventing escape, but also blocking view to and from outside except for the spectators. The space ensures the effect of a panopticon, enabling control through “conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977, page 210). In contrast to the MR performance, the performance of Michael Peace (MP) is based on him interacting with the horse in an everyday setting of an outdoor training arena, considerably bigger than the round-pen used by MR, and in a territory familiar to the horse. MP uses his tacit knowledge of horse handling and his skill of reading the horse and to reduce its fear towards clipping, thus making the training effective. MP communicates this process to the audience:

(0:36:46) “He’s working at it, you can see the expression on his face, he doesn’t like it at this stage, he’s still a bit sceptical of it (*Michael takes his hand off the horse*). Switch them off to reward it (*switches clippers off*). Still a bit sceptical about it (*Michael starts to walk and lead the horse on a small circle*), but dealing with it, because (*Michael stops, horse stops*) I am politely giving him no other option to deal with it, I’m approaching him in a way that doesn’t cause him to fear so much that he has to fight me.” (0:37:16) MP

In direct contrast to the timed spectacle of ‘join up’, the emphasis on the continuous process of embodied and experiential learning found in the video of MP results in successful NH being presented to the viewer by this expert, as being all about an event-free performance. In keeping with this approach, instead of performing a confrontation with and subsequent actions to control the horse, MP argues for not confronting the animal in the first place. Essentially then, his is a performance of expertise that is not based on the use of counter-performance. His choice of method for constructing expertise is a more rhetorical one and linked to ethical questions concerning horse handling methods. By not ‘pursuing’ the horse he recognizes the subjectivity of the horse in the performance, with its behavioural needs and experiences, in accordance with lay understanding of equine behaviour in ethology. In this video, there is no need to perform wildness to first reinforce the human–animal boundary, in order to then create an illusion of overcoming it by way of ‘animal language’. Therefore it is framed rather technically:

(0:21:53) “Obviously, in a flight animal like a horse, if you start pursuing them, and they move and you move a bit quicker to catch them, and then they move a bit quicker to get away, and so on, they’re gonna get quicker and quicker, because they think their life depends on it, and they’ve evolved to get quicker from something that’s pursuing them. So (*Michael stops and turns to face the horse, who stops*) it’s important to just allow a horse to draw you with them, and not, not get into a pursuit situation.” (0:22:20) MP

MP’s emphasis on not pursuing the horse also returns us to the spatial arrangement of the performance. In the MR video, the round pen is framed as ‘safe’ for the horse, but it also helps the trainer to keep the full attention of the horse directed towards himself. At the same time, the focus of the performance is shifted from the horse to the trainer. In contrast to the round pen of the MR demonstration, the MP video is both spatially and temporally much more open. As the video shows how MP is able to slowly approach and finally touch the horse with the clippers, the process has no set time limit. “Opening up a space for a horse...” is explained to the viewer by MP from early on as “important”: “... you know, they feel a bit more freedom, they don’t feel so enclosed, so that’s why I’ve done that.” [0:02:00] (MP). This emphasis on openness remains evident throughout the MP video, including in how MP explains what he is doing and why:

(0:33:05) (*clippers on, Michael stands by the horse and rubs its shoulder as if clipping, the horse stands still though alert*) “So I’m not creeping it up to him, I’m being quite business-like and saying, no, this is gonna happen, and I’m gonna help you achieve it. I’m not trying to con him with food (*Michael switches clippers off*) or creep it up to him (*Michael backs up to the front of the horse*) without him seeing it (*pulls the horse a step forward*), ‘cause he’ll always see it (*comes back to the horse and strokes his shoulder*). I’m getting him to make the decision (*looks at the camera*), to deal with it on his terms, but with my help.” (0:33:32) MP

The logic of openness in the MP video, epitomized in the open space, is likely to be accepted as welfare friendly for the horse. At the same time, expressions such as being ‘business-like’, and dealing with him ‘on his terms’, illustrate how the trainer does not require the full attention of the horse. Despite the commercial arm of video extending to both the expertise of MP and the brand of clippers in use, the horse remains the centre of focus. There is a point in the video, for example, where the horse obstructs the view of the audience to MP touching him with the clippers. MP, however, refuses to move the horse in order to permit the audience a better view:

0:45:27 (*clippers on, MP is positioned behind the horse, rubbing it's back, with the horse standing sideways to the camera*) “I can’t move in to show you on the camera, because he settled here, and (*Michael switches the clippers off*) you have to work where a horse chooses to stop.” 0:45:36

An open space means more openness in the communication with the horse and respect of its subjectivity. In the case of MR however, the round pen also works for the audience, letting them benefit from the visibility and seeing for themselves that there is no magic or trickery in

handling and controlling the horse. Therefore, the round pen is accepted as being for the good of the horse.

In MP's way of constructing expertise, the relationship to the horse is clearly different from MR. Here, the trainer builds an image of himself not so much as a mediator between two worlds trying to overcome the human–animal boundary, as in the case of MR, but as a human at the animal's disposal; someone whose job it is to help the horse to cope in its everyday interaction with humans. In interaction with horses, the tacit skill of reading horses enables the human counterpart to try to understand the intentions, emotions and wellbeing of the horse. This takes us back to the idea of an encounter between two beings capable of communicating with each other, although different from each other (Fox, 2006). The success of this tacit communication, illustrated by the horse gradually understanding and supporting what the trainer attempts to achieve, serves to strengthen the construction of the trainer's expertise. The central concept here is trust, constructed in the performance as emerging between horse and trainer, encouraging the onlookers then to trust the trainer as an expert (cf. Wynne, 1996). By giving feedback on humans' actions the animal thereby participates subjectively in the construction of expertise. In the video of MP, the trainer's expertise is primarily constructed on the feedback given by the horse, instead of by using counter-performance.

## **Conclusions**

By way of conclusion, we return to the original core question used to frame this paper: are incidences of animal counter-performance necessarily detrimental to overall performances, or if effectively managed, can they actually strengthen the performances and thereby enhance the construction of human expertise in human–animal relations? In engaging with this question we have shown that affording attention to animal counter-performances, including whether or not they can be controlled or used productively, matters. It brings to the fore the potential role of the animal to affect the overall performance and in so doing disrupt the construction of human expertise. The presence of instability through occurrences of counter-performance on the part of the horse does not, however, automatically result in a weakened performance of the human expertise. Rather, counter-performance on the part of the animal has equal potential to strengthen the overall performance as it does to undermine it. A resistance on the part of the animal only holds the potential to be a counter-performance. Whether a resistance becomes counter-performance depends on the interpretation of the resistance, and on how the counter-performance is controlled.

As shown in this study, a resistance can have three possible consequences in relation to the performance. First, there is resistance that is not counter-performance if the interpretation of the resistance is accurately controlled. Second, there is counter-performance that does not succeed to disrupt the overall performance. If the human response to the animal counter-performance is sufficiently accurate such that the animal counter-performance is managed, it will serve to reinforce the performance of expertise. Third, there is counter-performance that does disrupt the performance. For all three, it is the relational encounter between human and



animal which determines whether a counter-performance has occurred, and whether the potential to disrupt the overall performance is realized. Very often it is the point at which counter-performance occurs, which proves pivotal to its overall effect on the performance. In addition, persistent counter-performance holds increased potential to negatively subvert the overall performance – too many incidents of counter-performance result in leakages in the performance, and control is no longer possible.

The study of NH in this paper serves as an illustration of the relationship between human expertise, animal counter-performance and space. The use of the round-pen in MR demonstrations places the horse in an alien environment. In contrast, the arena used by MP is part of the familiar environment for the horse. The choice of spatial setting, as well as the relationship between performative spaces and temporality of counter-performance, influence the extent to which counter-performance can be controlled during performance. The use of spatial openness and a familiar environment reduces the ability of the trainer to subvertly enforce control over the actions of the horse. Instead, it is the accuracy of the human-animal communication which is essential for managing acts of resistance before they become counter-performance. Active control by use of a closed space, on the other hand, gives the trainer more freedom to operate with counter-performance, as the space itself functions as a controlling element.

In this paper we have drawn on theories of performance and performativity to further develop understandings of expertise as both relational and in-the-becoming. Drawing on analysis of NH demonstrations as a case in point we have shown the productivity of giving greater attention to the role of animal counter-performance during the process of constructing expertise in human–animal relations. Focusing in particular on how acts of counter-performance bring to the fore the relational nature of expertise, we have also made visible the active role of the animal in expertise construction. Expertise in human–animal relations is not solely about controlling the animal and managing its resistance. It is also about giving meaning to the animal’s actions and responding to them accordingly, thereby supporting a consistent interpretation of animality and the human–animal boundary. However, studying other incidences amongst the multitude of human–animal relational practices would help develop a more nuanced understanding of the roles of counter-performance in strengthening or undermining displays of human–animal expertise. Further study could also shed light on the significance of affect in the context of such expertise, drawing on the recent research on emotional attitudes to and relationships with animals (e.g. Macnaghten 2004; Irvine 2004; Charles & Davies 2011).

Finally, our study highlights the on-going instability of human–animal relationships and therefore, the ‘risk’ inherent in human–animal performances of challenging, shifting, transforming or redefining the human–animal boundary. The contrasting ways in which the boundary is constructed in the two NH training performances analysed here, epitomises the extent to which it is ultimately not fixed but always situated. Similarity and difference, as our study of animal counter-performance has shown, are embedded in the performance of human-animal relationships in ways which are difficult to control.

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