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### **Dressing Down**

Clothing animals, disguising animality ?

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## *Dressing Down* *Clothing animals, disguising animality?*

Samantha HURN

**Abstract:** *This paper is concerned with the practice(s) of dressing nonhuman animals. Indeed, while many anthropological commentators have recognised that certain domesticated animals constitute accessories or markers of cultural or individual identity, the process of accessorising animals themselves has received little attention. This paper seeks to address the void and in the process will argue that the topic is of immense significance for anthropologists and material culturists who seek to understand what it means to be human. The act of clothing animals, in the case of this paper, horses, can be regarded as a way of exerting control over the ‘animality’ of the nonhuman, while the converse, the removal of clothing and material paraphernalia can, in some contexts, be seen as a recognition of animal agency and personhood as human owners seek to cultivate a relationship based on respect of ‘animal nature’ as opposed to domination over it.*

**Keywords:** human-animal relationships, animality, clothing, Wales, horse.

**Résumé :** *Cet article est consacré à l’habillement des animaux non-humains. En effet, alors que bien des anthropologues ont souligné que certaines espèces d’animaux domestiques constituent des accessoires ou des marqueurs d’une identité culturelle ou individuelle, la pratique consistant à doter d’accessoires, vestimentaires ou autres, les animaux eux-mêmes a reçu peu d’attention. Cet article entend combler ce vide, et ce faisant, soutenir que ce sujet est d’une immense importance pour les anthropologues et les chercheurs intéressés par la culture matérielle qui cherchent à comprendre ce que signifie le fait d’être humain. L’acte d’habiller des animaux – des chevaux dans le cas de ce papier – peut être considéré comme une façon d’exercer un contrôle sur l’« animalité » du non-humain, tandis que le contraire, le retrait du vêtement et e l’attirail matériel peut, dans certains contextes, être considéré comme un acte de reconnaissance de l’agencéité et du statut de personne de l’animal, lorsque les propriétaires humains cherchent à entretenir une relation basée sur le respect de la « nature animale », plutôt qu’à dominer celle-ci.*

**Mots-clés :** relations hommes-animaux, animalité, vêtement, pays de Galles, cheval.

## Introduction

Humans have, initially through necessity, had to clothe themselves and this primarily functional act has become deeply symbolic. Indeed, while clothing is one of a myriad of ways in which humans attempt to separate themselves from or align themselves with each other, clothing is something which can also be seen to differentiate humans from other, nonhuman animals.<sup>1</sup> This distinction may appear rather trivial, but in light of the wealth of evidence which has been produced by animal behaviourists in recent years attesting to the fact that other animals may be sentient and self-aware, experience emotions, have complex systems of communication, produce and use tools, and devise and transmit cultural behaviours, then the adoption of clothing is one of the few characteristics which separates humans from other animals.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, without human intervention, animals tend to rely exclusively on their own skins, fur and plumage for protection from the elements or to convey messages about themselves. As a result, the fact that many humans choose to clothe the animals in their care raises interesting questions about how those individuals see the human-animal divide. These questions will be discussed when the symbolism of both clothing and animals has been considered further.

## The symbolism of clothing vis-à-vis animals

According to Dant, “clothes are the material objects that are most consistently part of our individual and our social lives.” (1999: 85). The close proximity of clothing to our skin means that it becomes almost an extension of our bodies, “an outer layer or shell with which we confront the social world” (*ibid*). Clothing has been widely discussed as a form of material culture, as a marker of status or at very least a means by which we convey a sense of social and/or individual identity (Hansen 2004). Indeed although they have functional properties, such as protecting us from the outside world, clothes also carry considerable social and cultural weight in terms of communicating messages and enforcing social expectations with regard to sex, status, power and so on. Clothes also represent powerful means for subversion. Clothes adopted by sub-cultural groups for example can become overt expressions of resistance, such as the appropriation of ‘skinhead’ style by some gay men (*e.g.* Bell *et al.* 1994 and Anderson 2009).

Humans often wear animal skins, fleeces, furs and feathers for protection, warmth and to shield our otherwise naked bodies from prying eyes. Like clothes, animals are consistently part of our individual and social lives and they are frequently objectified by humans and used to communicate messages about their owners, wearers or eaters, and the broader ‘culture’

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1. Henceforth ‘animals’. It should be noted that animals will be treated as active subjects throughout this paper, and as such will be referred to as persons (‘he’ or ‘she’ or ‘they’) as opposed to objectified ‘things’ (‘it’).
  2. Obviously there are various ways of defining ‘culture’ and the suggestion that nonhumans are ‘cultural’ may cause some raised eyebrows. I accept that anthropological definitions of culture differ from those put forward by ethologists, primatologists and other ‘scientists’ (*cf. e.g.* Brumann 1999 with de Waal 2001; Sapolsky 2006), but these differences are more of degree than kind. Indeed, evidence that many nonhumans exhibit ‘rudimentary’ forms of culture which conform to anthropological definitions, along with other traits which have previously been regarded as exclusively human is increasingly forthcoming, to the extent that there are mainstream calls for human rights to be extended to the other higher primates (Cavalieri & Singer 1995) and also dolphins (White 2007).

within which these messages are generated and understood. Aside from often *being* clothing, animals in their many guises feed us, work with and for us, guard our homes and keep us company, and their bodies are utilised in the development of medical treatments which literally keep hundreds of thousands of humans alive. When scrutinised from an anthropological perspective, these extremely varied contemporary relationships between humans and other animals reveal that attitudes towards animals and the natural world are changing, are in a state of flux, and views held by individuals are frequently contradictory or diametrically opposed. As Haraway observes, “we polish an animal mirror to look for ourselves” (Haraway 1991: 21). This quest for self-knowledge has perhaps even more resonance in what Bulliet (2005) refers to as ‘postdomesticity’, where many ‘Westerners’ are divorced from ‘nature’ and bound up in the pursuit of fetishised commodities and ephemeral social relationships (cf. Cassidy 2007: 11). A post-domestic relationship is defined by Bulliet as the removal of most consumers from the reality of intensive livestock production, a close but inherently anthropomorphic relationship with pets, and a suppressed sense of guilt about industrialised farming practices and the widespread exploitation of animals.

In relation to clothing, philosopher Lipovetsky argues that “the materialism of contemporary societies is widely deplored. But why do the critics not stress that consummate fashion also helps detach human beings from objects? Under the régime of use value, we no longer become attached to things.” (1994: 147). In other words contemporary consumers have no qualms about replacing objects as and when they wear out, or become usurped by the latest gadget or trend. Lipovetsky then asks “how can we continue to talk about alienation at a time when, far from being dispossessed by objects, individuals are dispossessing themselves of objects?” (1994: 148). The parallels to be drawn with contemporary pet ownership are striking. This throw-away mentality which Lipovetsky observes in relation to clothing can also be observed in relation to animals, as evidenced by the large numbers of unwanted pets living (and dying) in animal shelters throughout the ‘Western’ world. Their numbers are often made up of certain types of animal at specific times, and as a result of particular media activities. For example the current alarming trend in the UK for buying individual meerkats as pets in the wake of an advertisement in which the protagonist was an animated meerkat, or the large numbers of owls bought as pets by inexperienced owners following the success of the Harry Potter films. Then there are the plethora of Dalmatian puppies who were bought and almost immediately relinquished in the wake of the release of the live-action version of the Disney classic 101 Dalmatians in 1996. Whether or not animals constitute material culture is a matter of some debate, one perhaps best left for another time and place. However, it is useful to at least acknowledge here that there is ample ethnographic data in support of human objectification of animals and the use of animals as markers of status which suggests that certainly in the minds of many contemporary consumers they are seen as material accessories in much the same way as cars, jewellery, mobile ‘phones and clothing.

While anthropologists have often observed the use of other animals as symbols, for example Levi Strauss’ famous remark that they are “good to think” (1963: 89) and Evans-Pritchard’s seminal study of the Nuer’s close relationship with their cattle (1940), there is a growing body of material which discusses the symbolic capital of animals as markers of status and identity for individuals and collectives in the postdomestic world (e.g. Caglar 1997; Cassidy 2002; Hurn 2008a and b). Caglar for example, writes about the use of dogs as lifestyle accessories by German Turks. One specific type of dog – *Kampfhunde* (‘fighting

dogs’) were particularly popular amongst young, single men for defensive and offensive purposes in the 1990s;

*the popularity of these pets among German Turks is closely related to the increasing hostility and violence directed against foreigners and immigrants in Germany since the fall of the Wall... in fact there has been a drastic increase in hostile attacks against German Turks since 1989... these left deep traces in the consciousness of German Turks. The political context laid the ground for German Turks to arm themselves against possible attacks ... with all sorts of weapons, including fighting dogs. (1997: 82)*

Although the historical and political context can explain why *Kampfhunde* were initially chosen by German Turks, what is particularly interesting is that these dogs have now become;

*one of the constituents of a life-style by means of which groups of German Turks are defined... those who own such pets meet at particular places, are young, mostly single, do not live with their families and are identified by other German Turks as forming a group with their own life-style. Dogs are integrated into their self-image. In that respect they constitute sites around which they articulate desire and pleasure. These pets become part of the ‘life spaces’ ... they try to create.*

*Kampfhunde* are given names such as ‘Gangster’ and ‘Rambo’ to further emphasise their characteristics, both real and symbolic. But what is particularly relevant to the current discussion is the comment made by one of Caglar’s informants that; “nowadays everyone wants to wear one [a pet dog] on his hand’. He uses the verb ‘to wear on’ [*eline takmak*] as if dogs were jewelry or part of the owner’s body.” (1997: 82 my emphasis). Caglar also discusses another type of dog favoured by a different segment of German Turkish society – lap dogs. Unlike the *Kampfhunde*, lap dogs are favoured by families, especially those with young children, and are chosen for their ‘cuteness’ and distinct lack of aggression. Indeed, because of the compromised position of German Turks in both Germany and Turkey (they are seen as foreigners in Germany, and Germanophiles in Turkey) they have developed various ‘coping strategies’ to overcome what Bourdieu refers to as a deficit in symbolic capital (1989). One of these is the acquisition and appropriation of pet dogs. However, the way in which Germans perceive German Turks’ interactions with their pets serves to strengthen the divisions between these wider cultural groups (cf. Mandel 1989). Both *Kampfhunde* and lap dogs are, in the eyes of most of Caglar’s Turkish informants, objects of commodified material culture rather than loved members of the family. This is in stark contrast to the way that ‘German society’ at large views dogs, as illustrated in a 1994 decree which recognises dogs as ‘persons’ with public rights and legal protection (Caglar 1997).

Similar mixed or rather contradictory feelings are stirred in relation to toy dogs elsewhere in Europe, especially when these animals are owned by celebrities and therefore viewed by members of the public as lifestyle accessories. However, this process is nothing new. Indeed, in his study of pet-keeping through the centuries, Tuan discusses the emergence of lap dogs in China;

*One breed of dog that seems to have lost all connection to practical use, if it ever had any, is the Pekinese. It is hard to imagine how this hairy and cuddly dog, which could be as small as four and one-half pounds, might have the wolf as a distant ancestor... Unique in the Pekinese is its exceptional retention of such babyish traits as a very short facial region of the skull, large brain case, big eyes, short legs, curly tail and soft fur. (1984: 104-5)*

The physical characteristics of the Pekinese (or ‘Lion dog’) were seen as particularly desirable in China because they were miniature representations of the lion, symbolising passion, which was subdued by Buddha. This defeated lion was visually represented in diminutive proportions following meekly behind Buddha, and so the Pekinese was developed under the rule of emperor Kublai Khan who was a follower of the type of Buddhism which focussed on Buddha’s ability to subdue ‘passion’ represented by the lion. According to Tuan (1984: 106) the breed’s physical characteristics (tiny stature and snub noses) were produced by confining the puppies in cages to restrict their growth, and by breaking their noses at birth, coupled with a process of selective breeding.

So throughout history and across geographical and cultural divides, humans have appropriated and adapted other animals, transforming their physical appearance, accentuating or modifying their behaviours in a bid to transmit messages about themselves through these animal symbols. While it is certainly true that there are many other explanations for why humans have selectively bred domesticates in this manner, such as to fulfil particular roles within human societies, or even because the animals themselves have acted in ways which have shaped their own domestication (see Budiansky 1992), Lévi-Strauss does still have a point in that for many humans animals are markers of status or identity. This symbolic approach to human-animal interactions can be criticised however, as it fails to address or acknowledge the agency of the nonhuman animals as active subjects as opposed to passive objects. The recognition of nonhuman agency, of the need to ‘bring in’ the animal in anthropological discussions has led to accusations of anthropomorphism (Noske 1997). While anthropomorphism has been widely discussed by scholars from the social and natural sciences, it is perhaps best defined for the purpose of the current endeavour as the attribution of what are perceived to be *exclusively human* characteristics to nonhuman things (e.g. Griffin 2001: 27-28; Milton 2005: 259, 265-268). On the surface, anthropomorphism appears to suggest a respect for other animals, treating them as quasi-humans, but therein lies the ‘problem’ – other animals are not human, and to treat them as if they are can lead to all kinds of difficulties, especially for the animals concerned (cf. Kennedy 1992). As a result, anthropomorphic thought can be interpreted as a distancing device which maintains an ideological divide between humans and other animals.

### **Clothing as an anthropomorphic act**

Clothing animals is in many respects an anthropomorphic action – it is the imposition of an exclusively human practice onto animals, which more often than not prompts reactions of amusement or disapproval from human spectators. For example, public responses to a documentary screened on UK TV station Channel 4 entitled ‘My Monkey Baby’ in 2009 which saw childless couples and empty-nesters raise nonhuman primates as children (dressing them in clothes and nappies, feeding them ‘human’ food, putting make-up on their faces, making them sit in prams and behave as if they were human) was one of almost unanimous disgust. As Sorenson demonstrates in his book *Ape*, clothing primates, and the higher primates in particular, is often done for comedic effect (2009) or to emphasise *difference*. While they are our ‘closest’ biological relatives, there is something not quite right about seeing nonhuman primates in clothes – but why is this the case? Perhaps a consideration of European colonial history can shed some light on the matter. I would venture to suggest that in the colonial past, non-Western peoples were also viewed in a similarly anthropomorphic manner.

There is ample evidence to demonstrate that many non-Western peoples were considered animalistic; ‘savage’, ‘base’, ‘primitive’ and ‘uncivilised’ (e.g. Chagnon 1983: 205, Ingold 2000: 62). The alleged ‘animality’ of non-Western peoples was perceived not just in relation to their nakedness, but also in relation to their beliefs and cultural practices more generally. During colonial encounters, physical and/or cultural differences were seized on and distorted; the natives’ sexual promiscuity was ‘evident’ in polygamy, and their untempered aggression, lack of reason and moral fibre ‘demonstrated’ in acts of cannibalism (e.g. Arens 1980, Obeyesekere 2005). One of the first acts of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionaries faced with such ‘savage’ peoples in the colonies was to cover up their naked (and therefore animalistic and sinful) bodies with Western clothing; to *humanise* through concealment (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997, see also Keane 2005 and Thoreau 1971: 21). As Chagnon notes in relation to comparatively recent missionary activity with the Yanomamö of Venezuela; “a sign of progress in the missions is the degree to which the ‘naked savages’ visibly show their enlightenment by covering their private, and essentially sinful, parts” (Chagnon 1983: 212). As a result, the ‘natives’ are “encouraged to adopt some of the mechanical habits of Westerners, such as the use of clothing to cover up thought-provoking sex organs” (*ibid*).

Despite the currency of the enlightenment notion of the ‘noble savage’ during much of the period of European colonial activity, and the success of individuals such as Omai the Tahitian prince who became a society darling in London in the years following Cooke’s return from Polynesia, the tenets of social evolutionism provided a powerful justificatory rationale to colonial activities as the ‘natives’ were considered not quite human, or at very least less socially ‘evolved’ than their ‘civilized benefactors’ or, from a post-colonial perspective, ‘oppressors’ (Pieterse 1995, Hetherington 2001: 4). As a Catholic priest commented to Chagnon “I believe the Yanomamö are subhuman – they act like animals and lack the essential faculties of being human” (1983: 205). So it follows that dressing indigenous peoples in Western clothing was another way of asserting Western dominance and control;

*human outsiders were ruled not to be really human at all. They could thus be placed, along with the animals, outside the species-barrier, at a distance which – it was hoped – would prevent their troubling anybody’s conscience ever again. And in this way unnumbered atrocities have been justified.* (Midgley 1994: 193)

In many cases the same approach has been applied to nonhuman animals – their ‘animality’ is emphasised in an attempt to justify their harsh treatment at human hands. This perspective goes some way towards demonstrating that anthropomorphism is a distancing device, a means of establishing hierarchy between the anthropomorphiser and their subject (human or animal) rather than a way of levelling the playing field, or of expressing empathy with others. However, such distancing devices are only necessary when there is already a recognition that the ‘other’ in question is a ‘person’ but one whose needs and desires must be disregarded because they contradict those of the ‘anthropomorphiser’. As a result, in addition to emphasising animality, the act of clothing as an anthropomorphic act can also be regarded as a means of controlling animal nature in a bid to ‘civilize’ or, in the case of nonhuman animals, ‘domesticate’.

This form of anthropomorphism can be observed in many contemporary interactions between humans and other animals. As Bulliet notes, the majority of humans in the ‘Western’ world now live a ‘postdomestic’ existence (2005) – in other words, most of us are removed from agricultural production processes, living in urban spaces where our knowledge of other

animals tends to be limited to what we learn from our relationships with pets and what we are fed in the form of anthropomorphic representations of wild animals in the media (which in turn leads to the aforementioned desire for inappropriate pet species). Yet there still exist some rural communities in the ‘West’ where people make their livings from the small scale, hands on production of animals for human consumption in every sense of the word (see Hurn 2008a and b, 2009), and in the following sections it will be argued that anthropomorphism is not necessarily a postdomestic phenomenon. Indeed, in certain domestic contexts the potentially exploitative relationship which obtains between humans and the animals in their care necessitates certain distancing devices. In the process of engaging with ‘their’ animals, many farmers who live a domestic existence engage in mixed and often contradictory practices. On the one hand, certain animals are objectified (as ‘livestock’) while others, such as horses who no longer have a function other than to be ridden as a leisure activity, are treated in a seemingly preferential manner. Animals in this latter category are clothed in a bid to bring them further into the inner circle of the *domus*, that is the domestic sphere. In a postdomestic context, the removal of humans from exploitative agricultural relationships with animals has also led to numerous ways of perceiving and interacting with nonhumans. For some, animals have become commodities who are also objectified and must serve particular functions or be cast aside. However for others, a postdomestic worldview has enabled them to engage in a much more empathetic way with their animals. This increase in empathy (de Waal 2010) or ‘egomorphism’ (Milton 2005) whereby other animals are recognised as persons in their own right, as active subjects as opposed to passive objects, results, for some individuals, in two additional recognitions. Firstly, that other animals should be treated with respect, and secondly, but linked to this first recognition, that while they are indeed active subjects, other animals are not human.<sup>3</sup> The animal subjects with which this paper is primarily concerned are horses. The human-horse bond has a long history, and while there are some exceptions in the ethnographic, historical and archaeological record (Argent 2010) horses have tended to be objectified, as modes of transport or sources of power and more recently, as recreational devices.

## Human-horse relationships in west Wales

This paper has developed as a result of nine years of ethnographic fieldwork within a rural farming community in west Wales, UK where traditionally people lived a ‘domestic’ existence, and some still do. However, this way of life is increasingly coming under threat from the influx of postdomestic world views. These conflicting attitudes will be discussed in relation to my domestic and postdomestic informants’ attitudes towards the clothing of the animals, specifically horses, in their care. Horses have received a reasonable amount of anthropological attention because they are, in many respects, liminal beings. They are not quite pets, and not quite livestock, and in most cases are regarded as markers of status

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3. Non-Western peoples on the other hand, are! However, the fact that European colonisers judged non-Western peoples according to a European yardstick has been recognised as ethnocentric because it prioritised one particular way of being over another. This has also been (and indeed remains) a ‘problem’ in relation to human-animal interactions, and the propensity from within the animal rights lobby to over-emphasise human-animal continuity does not necessarily do the animals in question any favours, and also leads to accusations of anthropomorphism. As a result, it is increasingly common now for a relativistic perspective to prevail when considering humans in relation to other animals.



– to own horses requires access to certain resources; land, time, and a reasonable amount of disposable income.

Horses are commonly kept in the area of west Wales where I have conducted the bulk of my fieldwork to date. In addition to the indigenous Welsh cobs, a hardy native breed who are the horses most frequently kept by my farming informants, there are also many members of equine diasporas – animals imported from England (e.g. Shires and Thoroughbreds) in addition to those who traditionally hail from much further afield (e.g. Arabs, Andalusians and Akhal Tekes). It is in relation to horses where many of the disputes between locals and (human) incomers arise, and as will be revealed, the question of controlling horses expressed in the act of clothing and accessorising these animals is a locus of disagreement which can serve as a lens through which conflicting domestic and postdomestic attitudes towards animals more generally come clearly into focus.

The decline of the agricultural industry and the influx of ‘outsider’ or ‘incomer’ residents into areas such as west Wales have, amongst other factors, contributed to changing socio-cultural, political and economic structures within these rural communities (Cloke *et al.* 1997, Cohen 1982, Ireland 1987 and 2004; Jones 1993, Rapport 1993). The upshot of all this is, as Milbourne *et al* demonstrate, that “most rural areas are now dominated by residents who have few direct connections with the productivist countryside, and who may hold a range of viewpoints relating to nature-society relations (some of which have been formulated within urban contexts)” (2000: 16). This view is supported by Ching & Creed who observe that “the countryside holds the promise of natural beauty. Unfortunately, nature lovers effect only a slight variation in the rural idyll since they often valorise an abstract environment at the expense of the productive countryside” (1997: 20).

Indeed, in a generically rural context, Woods observes that the countryside has become “a space in which actors perform the social, cultural, and political practices that support particular constructs of ‘rurality’” (Woods 1998: 1219), leading to tensions, and eventually conflicts between different individuals as they attempt to live according to these constructs. Moreover; “the association of nature with rurality is a fundamental by-product of the construction of nature in opposition to ‘society’, ‘culture’, and ‘civilization’.” (*ibid.*: 1220). As a result, the rural realm is perceived or anticipated by outsiders in pristine terms, a world not yet corrupted or tarnished by the polluting influences of modernity or ‘postdomesticity’ (Washabaugh 2000, Williams 1973). Consequently, incomers have certain expectations of rurality; “the landscape, animals, and *indigenous population* are all expected to perform particular roles according to the pastoral myth of the rural idyll” (Woods 1998: 2121 my emphasis. See also Ireland 2004). These expectations are seldom met in areas such as those in west Wales which are still dominated by traditional hands-on (as opposed to factory, and therefore removed from view) *production*. In the face of such disappointment, conflict is inevitable, and one area where conflict is particularly apparent is in relation to the treatment of animals (Cloke *et al* 1997, Milbourne *et al* 2000: 15).

Many of the English residents who had moved into my fieldwork area had migrated from towns, having made the choice to opt out of the ‘rat race’ in pursuit of a more therapeutic existence centred on an interactive and ‘respectful’ relationship with the natural world. Consequently they and their new farming neighbours often possessed and exhibited starkly disparate attitudes. In both categories however, the humans concerned claimed to possess superior knowledge and methodology vis-à-vis animal husbandry.

As one English lady, ‘Cathy’ who had retired to the area, and who refused to engage with any of the local horse related events or activities, commented to me:

*You know it needs more people like you and me ‘round here. We know how to look after horses, how to treat them with respect. They [local Welsh farmers] need more English people to come and educate them in how to do things properly. They don’t deserve to have horses some of them, the way they keep them.*

This same informant decided to tell the farmer (‘Merv’) whose stables she was renting that he shouldn’t be allowed to keep horses if he was going to use them “as breeding and hunting machines”. He later informed me about Cathy’s hostility in equally vehement terms:

*How dare she? Fuckin’ rude woman. My family’s been keeping cobs for generations. I don’t need some bloody know it all English woman to tell me how to keep cobs. What the fuck does she know?*

This disagreement epitomises the polarised (and often hostile) views which exist between ‘incomers’ (such as Cathy) who tend to hold ‘postdomestic’ world views, and the ‘indigenous Welsh farmers’ (such as Merv) who by and large still live a domestic existence. This may appear to be an over-simplification, but my experience nonetheless suggests that postdomestic incomers who own horses tend to subscribe to the ideologies of what is known as ‘natural horsemanship’ (see Birke 2007 and 2008) while domestic Welsh farmers tend to be ‘traditionalists’ who adopt ‘conventional’ training methods (Birke 2008: 112).<sup>4</sup>

## **From domination back to trust**

‘Natural’ horsemanship as a mainstream approach to interacting with horses in the ‘West’ is a comparatively recent trend which draws on the work of high profile ‘horse whisperers’ such as Monty Roberts and Pat Parelli who came to prominence as a result of their respective success in training (‘breaking’) notoriously difficult and uncooperative horses. Horse owners who identify themselves as proponents of ‘natural’ horsemanship may follow a particular branch such as Roberts’ ‘Join Up’ or Parelli’s ‘Natural Horse Training’, but many others take a more syncretic approach, adopting the general philosophy of natural horsemanship (cooperation rather than domination, trying to think like a horse rather than expecting the horse to think like a human) but adapting methods to suit their own particular needs. For the current purpose, the most important point to note about natural horsemanship is that as a school of thought it advocates only limited use of paraphernalia, and certain branches such as Parelli Natural Horsemanship encourage horse owners to do away with conventional tack (saddles and bridles) altogether.

‘Traditional’ horsemanship is also difficult to quantify, as while the standards advocated by the British Horse Society in the UK could be regarded as the benchmark, here most individual horse owners will also develop their own variations on the theme. Nonetheless, while natural horsemanship eschews equipment aimed at controlling horses in a bid to cultivate a trusting and cooperative partnership, ‘traditional’ horsemanship is almost entirely focussed on forcing horses to comply with the wishes of their human riders and as a result, the tools utilised by all traditionalists (‘tack’ such as saddles, bridles and bits, and ‘artificial

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4. There are, of course, exceptions, but the majority of individuals conform to these stereotypes to justify such a generalisation in this instance.

aids' such as whips and spurs) are ultimately instruments of control (Jones 2003: 296, Ingold 2000: 307) which both deny horses any genuine freedom, choice or agency and are often used to punish unwanted behaviours (Birke 2008 and also Stephens 1995 and James 2002 in relation to the comparable attitudes towards children). While certain items of tack such as whips, bits and spurs can be regarded as 'accessories of control' without too much debate, seeing clothing in the form of rugs (the coats horses wear) in such a light might require a greater leap of faith.

### Clothing, domestication and domination

Etymologically the term domestication comes from the Latin *domus* meaning 'household' and so domestication has been understood as bringing other species (plants and animals) into the domestic sphere. However, academic and popular understandings of domestication have tended to emphasise the changed relationship which accompanied the process – what Ingold has referred to as a shift from 'trust to domination' (2000) and which saw animals become property and as a result objectified by their human owners (Engels 1972, Clutton-Brock 1989: 7).

Recent discussions on animal domestication however have called into question the primacy of human action and have argued instead for the symbiotic, two-way nature of the domestication process which also recognises animals as active agents (Budiansky 1992, Coppinger 2002 cf. Clutton-Brock 1989: 7). In relation to the current paper, the agency of the domesticate comes to the fore when clothing is introduced. For example, a horse who rips or removes clothing which has been imposed by his or her owner or caretaker is regarded as expressing brute animality and while some element of agency may be acknowledged, with comments such as "he does it just to spite me!", there remains a sense that this behaviour is proof of the animal's wilfulness and therefore lack of submission to human authority and control – as per European colonialists, the 'other's' 'animality' is accentuated in a bid to justify the treatment metered out by those in charge.

When observing my 'domestic' human informants interacting with their horses, dressing them in smart new rugs and then berating them when they immediately went out and rolled in the muddiest patch of the field, or came in later with the brand new rug shredded from being rubbed against barbed wire fencing, I was reminded of Napoleon Chagnon's account of Yanomamö 'mutilation' of the clothing provided for them by European missionaries who (like contemporary horse owners) believed they knew what was best for their 'charges', and who were surprised (or embarrassed) when clothed 'others' failed to appreciate their 'well-meaning' intentions;

*I was amused one day as I passed through a mission village and stopped off to greet the priest and nuns who lived there. As we were chatting, a Yanomamö man and his wife strolled from the garden after their afternoon's work, he in a floppy hat and oversized khaki shirt and pants, she in her gingham smock. They came over to say hello, but their presence embarrassed the priest and nuns – he had cut the crotch out of his trousers because he apparently found the zipper cumbersome, and she had cut the bosom out of her smock so she could nurse her baby more conveniently. (Chagnon 1983: 213)*

For horses measures are frequently put into place in a bid to try and prevent animals ‘customising’ their clothing, by, for example chewing rugs or bandages in their stables.<sup>5</sup> There are for example wooden neck cradles which prevent the horse from turning his or her head and thus the rug or other accessories are kept intact.

Horse owning informants from both camps would dress their horses in waterproof rugs in bad weather, but for most naturalists this was only in extreme cases such as blizzard conditions, or for elderly horses who needed extra warmth, because they also regarded this as an unnecessary form of control. As Josie explained; “Horses have evolved over thousands of years to live in this climate – they don’t need us interfering with nature.” Their rationale was that the process of rugging hindered the natural growth of the horses’ coats (fur) and this was certainly the case. Indeed, the primary reason for the practice amongst ‘conventional’ horse owners generally is that it keeps animals warm and dry, and in the process restricts hair growth and keeps the animals clean for riding. When conventional tack (saddles and bridles) are used, horses need to be kept clean or else there is the very real risk of them developing sores in places where tack rubs against muddy hair or skin. As a result, ‘traditionalists’ would rug their horses to save time – i.e. the rugs would mean that they didn’t need to spend hours grooming their animals before riding. Proponents of natural horsemanship who choose not to rug their animals have a very different philosophy. They believe that grooming dirty animals is integral to the bonding process between horse and rider, and is an ‘inconvenience’ which humans should take on if they wish to then inconvenience their animals by riding them. In such a relationship humans accept their animals’ ‘nature’ – that they are hairy and get dirty, either from rolling in mud, or from lying down on their own faeces when confined to stables. The act of clothing on the other hand attempts to sanitise and objectify horses, bringing them further into the domestic realm, and controlling their animality. In relation to the ‘natural horsemanship’ approach there is a reversal of the shift observed by Ingold (2000) amongst some postdomestic horse owners whereby the ‘dominating’ attitude exhibited by ‘traditionalists’ is replaced with a return to the ‘trust’ which for Ingold (amongst others) was characteristic of pre-domestic relationships between humans and animals. In terms of anthropomorphic thought, while according to Bulliet postdomesticity has resulted in an increase in anthropomorphism (2005), in the case of natural horsemanship, the opposite appears to be true, as proponents attempt to empathise with their horses, to engage with them as sentient individuals and as a result recognise that they have needs and behaviours which *differentiate* them from humans.

### **Aesthetics informed by ideology**

Another important aspect of contemporary human-horse relationships in my fieldwork context, and which reveals a great deal about human attitudes to their animals, links clothing horses with aesthetics and status. The functionality of rugging so as to limit hair growth and keep horses clean has already been mentioned in terms of the practicalities of keeping horses

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5. Rugs are just one form of equestrian clothing. Horses owned by traditionalists will also be attired in other items, including leg wraps or bandages, and when being ridden, most owners will coordinate their tack, so, for example, numnahs (saddle cloths which provide a layer of padding between the saddle and the horse’s back) will be the same colour as boots which the horses wear on their legs, and these items will also often match the rider’s ensemble in terms of colour and also brand.

to ride, but horses who are left in their ‘natural’ state (i.e. unrugged, but also untrimmed) are deemed unkempt by ‘traditionalists’ whereas rugged horses with thinner, cleaner coats are much more aesthetically pleasing. In addition to rugging, most ‘traditionalists’ will also clip and trim their horses. This entails shaving all of the horse’s body hair down to the skin. Taking the time to modify the appearance of their animals initially not only leads to savings of time later (in terms of less hours spent grooming, or waiting for a thick sweaty coat to dry after a ride) but is also cited as proof that the horses are well looked after. For example, when explaining her plans for one October weekend an informant commented that she would be bringing her horse in for the winter; “as soon as she comes in she will not have a hair left on her – we’ll clip her and rug her and then she’ll stay in her stable until spring. That way she’ll stay clean and tidy. I can’t stand seeing muddy, hairy horses just looking miserable in a field. It’s like their owners don’t care about them.” As aesthetic ideology never develops in isolation, I found it interesting to observe a similar attitude expressed towards human appearance, housekeeping and so on. Indeed, the word ‘tidy’ was regularly employed as an adjective for almost anything which was seen to embody what was deemed appropriate and acceptable. A person could be ‘tidy’ if they were well presented, a car could be ‘tidy’ if it was economical (and well presented), a horse could be said to be ‘going tidy’ if it was behaving as it should (and was well presented). This was in stark contrast to the referents used to describe many proponents of Natural Horsemanship who, like their horses, were ‘scruffy’ or ‘hippies’.

Yet for many proponents of Natural Horsemanship, their own refusal to rug then requires them to engage in a whole host of other time and energy consuming activities such as grooming which serve not only to increase the human-horse bond, but also acknowledge the needs of horses as individual *nonhuman animals*. Indeed, while rugging can be necessary for some non-native breeds in severe weather conditions, when horses have unrestricted access to shelter and plenty of forage they are able to regulate their body temperatures through the growth of their own coats. Allowing horses to be ‘at liberty’ (to use ‘Natural Horsemanship’ parlance) can also ‘inconvenience’ human owners, as animals are muddy and outside, and therefore not permanently on standby for riding. Indeed, many informants who could be classified as ‘traditionalists’ chose to keep horses stabled 24 hours per day, 7 days per week during the winter months in addition to rugging them and clipping them. While some did not justify their actions in his respect, others argued that this was for the horse’s benefit. For example, “The weather out there’s awful – they’d much rather be stood in here in the warm than out there – *I know what I’d prefer*” (my emphasis). Thinking that horses ‘prefer’ to be rugged and stabled is arguably anthropomorphic projection, as human owners imagine how they themselves would feel spending cold winter nights outside. However, while ‘conventional/traditional’ horsemanship assumes humans will be able to predict horse behaviour, the emphasis is seldom on trying to see the world from the horse’s perspective, and attempts to attribute emotions or feelings to equine charges are typically anthropomorphic. Natural Horsemanship however encourages humans to try and think like a horse, to recognise that horses are herd, flight animals. Thus to be confined to a stable in isolation for long periods of time, and to be clothed is contrary to a horse’s ‘nature’.

It is no coincidence that a local riding centre which taught natural horsemanship, and whose horses lived out in fields all year round without rugs, received numerous complaints from ‘traditionalists’ culminating in a visit from the RSPCA because of the expectation that a well cared for horse would be rugged and stabled during the winter months. These horses

had access to ad-lib hay and a barn, and as the proprietor pointed out during interview, they were “allowed to be horses!” Contrary to being neglected they were “simply being allowed to do what comes naturally to them.” He went on to point out that there are numerous welfare implications for stabled horses, who often develop behavioural abnormalities or stereotypies such as weaving (swaying from side to side), box walking (pacing back and forth continuously around the stable) and crib-biting (whereby the animal will grasp an object in its teeth and gulp air which can lead to life-threatening bouts of colic) not to mention respiratory conditions from dust, and swollen limbs as a result of limited mobility, yet the perception persists that horses *should* be confined to stables.

However, it is perhaps worth noting as a final point the obvious inconsistency that emerges from Natural Horsemanship discourse. For all their willingness to ‘respect’ the ‘animal nature’ of their equine charges, and to try to accommodate the needs of their horses rather than dominate them, Natural Horsemanship enthusiasts and practitioners still ride! Moreover, as Birke notes (2007) while they may have the best of intentions, there is scope for Natural Horsemanship practices to lead to confused and unhappy animals (including humans). However, in relation to riding the issue of clothing comes to the fore once again. Natural Horsemanship as an ideology and practice is often accompanied by the use of certain ‘humane’ pieces of equipment such as bitless bridles and treeless saddles.<sup>6</sup> These items of apparel are signifiers of a particular way of thinking about horses – they are thought to be more comfortable for the horses who have to wear them, and in relation to the use of bitless bridles specifically, enable riders to communicate with their mounts without resorting to the use of pain (Cooke 2003).

## Conclusion

Traditional anthropological and archaeological approaches to domestication have seen it as a form of human domination and control of other animals. Indeed, the process of selective breeding does in fact ‘create’ or manipulate particular characteristics which bring certain animals in line with the needs and/or desires of the humans responsible for their ‘care’. There has also been a tendency within academia and beyond to think about our current state of postdomesticity in terms of continued human exploitation of animals in the form of, for example, industrialized farming practices. However, a marked increase in ‘elective vegetarianism’ is also a characteristic of postdomesticity (Bulliet 2005). This paradox can be explained because the removal of individuals from agricultural production can either alienate them from animals and ‘nature’ or can lead to a desire to ‘reconnect’.

In light of my fieldwork experiences I would suggest that human interactions with domestic animals, in a postdomestic context, are neither exclusively exploitative nor exclusively symbiotic. For some domestic and postdomestic individuals, animals are objects to be used (and abused) for human gain, while for others, and these individuals are almost exclusively removed from farming and therefore postdomestic in their engagements, they are equals who should be engaged with in a trusting and empathetic manner. The act of clothing

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6. Bitless bridles work by putting pressure on the horse’s nose rather than relying on a piece of metal placed inside the mouth which exerts pressure on extremely sensitive tissue and can, in extreme cases, break the horse’s lower jaw. Treeless saddles are believed to be more flexible and therefore more comfortable than conventional saddles which are built around a wooden or fibreglass frame, or tree.

animals, in the case of this paper, horses, in one specific ethnographic context has also raised for discussion and reflection the fact that this is a form of anthropomorphism which can reveal a great deal about human attitudes towards other animals.

In brief, traditional horsemanship (in the UK at least) and its concomitant practice of clothing horses in a bid to control elements of their animality can be regarded as an extension of the domestication process – a way of further modifying animals according to human aesthetic ideals, and in a bid to increase productivity (by saving time and money). But this ‘traditional’ perspective on human-horse relationships nowadays coexists in west Wales with natural horsemanship, a postdomestic trend which seeks to treat horses with respect, recognizing their ‘nature’ and working with it, rather than attempting to control it.

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