

Horsing around: Animals, humans, sports, and platforms

International Review for the
Sociology of Sport
2025, Vol. 60(8) 1446–1462
© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/10126902251341361
journals.sagepub.com/home/irs



Adalberto Fernandes 
Universidade do Algarve, Portugal

Abstract

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics Pentathlon incident, where German athlete Annika Schleu lost control of the horse Saint Boy, led to the termination of the show-jumping event and exposed the unstable relationships and definitions established between human and more-than-human actors. Analyzing comments on the three most-viewed YouTube videos on this case through Actor-Network Theory, we examine how responsibility is distributed between the two actors involved. Our findings indicate that riding is inherently relational and cannot be entirely dominated by a single agent. No ideal interaction point guarantees control, challenging human sovereignty over the more-than-human. Commentators place Schleu in an ambiguous position: she failed to control the more-than-human and, consequently, can no longer be treated humanely. This case reveals that distinctions between the human and the more-than-human are locally negotiated. Disruptions in these distinctions expose an enduring anthropocentric perspective, where failure to control the more-than-human disqualifies humans as fully human. The more-than-human thus emerges as a meta-normative guarantor, determining whether those who succeed or fail in control are granted human treatment.

Keywords

Anthropocene, more-than-human, sports, actor-network theory, platforms

Introduction

The relationship between sport and the Anthropocene is a relatively recent and still under-explored area (Moura and Scott, 2024; O'Connor et al., 2023). Despite the numerous studies on sustainability and sport, these often neglect to question the human hegemony in defining what constitutes sustainability, nature, and even sport itself, due to strongly anthropocentric perspectives. Approaches aligned with the theme of the Anthropocene

Corresponding author:

Adalberto Fernandes, Research Centre for Tourism, Sustainability and Well-Being (CinTurs), Universidade do Algarve, Faculty of Economics, Building 8, Campus of Gambelas, 8005-139 Faro, Portugal.

Emails: adalberto.castro.fernandes@gmail.com; aacfernandes@ualg.pt

seek precisely to challenge the notion of humans not only as the solution to climate change but also to consider them as active agents in its creation. This notion arises from an environment approached mainly from a human-centered perspective and its needs, which do not always align with those of the more-than-human environment (Latour, 2014). Besides the fact that few studies address the relationship between the Anthropocene and sport, an even smaller number examine the role of animals in this context. The Anthropocene cannot be conceptualized without considering how the environment and animals co-constitute each other rather than being separate entities (Odling-Smee et al., 1996), nor without assessing the impact of the division between humans and the more-than-human on the relationship with the environment, nature, and animals—defined as the “other” of the human, negatively framed in relation to it (Riquelme Arriagada, 2023; Zakula, 2024)—then the relationship between sport and the Anthropocene must necessarily take into account the role of animals. It is thus important to trace, through the perspective of Anthropocene theory, the “zoogeomorphic impacts” of humans—not only through extinctions caused by hunting and climate change, which have influenced hydric phenomena and the removal of surface sediment but also through the domestication and introduction of exotic species, as well as the spread of feral species—resulting in new geomorphic landscapes devoid of controls on population expansion (Butler, 2018). By researching the presence of animals in sports, we are focusing on the transformations imposed upon biological life and terrestrial resources.

Equestrian sports, as old as the Olympic Games themselves in Ancient Greece, illustrate the persistent presence of animals in sports. Since the horse is no longer the dominant means of transportation, having been replaced by the automobile (McShane and Tarr, 2003), it remains in the realm of sport as one of the phenomena constituting the relationship between the human and the more-than-human. This demonstrates that the use of the horse is not confined to an obsolete mode of transport—whose obsolescence is tied to the intensified human impact on the Earth’s resources through a petroleum-based transport economy—but endures as evidence that the use of animals in Olympic events constitutes a historical continuum that survives the technological discontinuities of transportation. To investigate equestrian sport is, therefore, to investigate a form of relation between life and the Earth that renders the horse valuable in a context of animal reproduction and training for competition, tied to performance, contest, and challenge. Equestrian sport is thus one of the elements in the transformation of the Earth to build stadiums, domesticate animals, and transport people and animals by airplane and car, in order to create and witness precisely this sporting relation of performance between animals and humans. This challenges simple linearities in the history of transport technology, revealing a performative and aesthetic use of animal life in sports that unsettles a purely utilitarian view of the animal. It also challenges a characterization of humans as progressively more benevolent and technologically advanced in their use of transportation throughout history. In an era in which the car is more efficient than the horse, and in which the car has taken the lead in the destruction of the Earth, horseback riding for sport has become an ambiguous form of relation to the Earth. It is a life that rides another life, and a life that carries another life, making equestrian sport one of the most significant continuities in the history of the Olympics in transforming the tripartite relation between humans, animals, and Earth.

Criticism highlighting that this use of animals causes them pain, injuries, and fear, not only during competition but also in their domestication (Lubelska-Sazanow, 2024), further underscores the enduring questioning of human sovereignty over animals in the context of sports. This suggests that in the relationship between humans and animals in sporting contexts, something crucial to the Anthropocene is at stake: a challenge to the human order over the more-than-human order of nature, environment, and animals. This issue extends beyond concerns about pollution or landscape destruction associated with large sporting events. It directly involves the use of animal nature to perform an Olympic event. The horse's enduring presence in the history of Olympic competitions raises not only ethical but also ontological questions. Can an animal be an athlete? Or is sport exclusively a human domain? What constitutes an athlete? Instead of addressing these questions philosophically—by seeking the most general and abstract conditions of possibility for concrete realities, allowing us to distinguish, independent of circumstantial experience, whether we are dealing with an athlete, an animal, or an animal-athlete—we will conduct an analysis based on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005) to examine how horse and rider co-constitute each other in an inter-relational manner within this sport, focusing on a concrete case. This focus on the concrete thus constitutes a critique of a logic of control that arises from the totalizing gesture of abstraction, whether metaphysical, ontological, transcendental, or theoretical, which seems to be anchored in nothing while claiming to ground everything. Through its various grammatical transformations in substantives (e.g. the human, the animal, the nature, the being, the Anthropocene), abstraction reduces the concrete multiplicity from which it is itself formed:

mankind set up in language a separate world beside the other world, a place it took to be so firmly set that, standing upon it, it could lift the rest of the world off its hinges and make itself master of it. To the extent that man has for long ages believed in the concepts and names of things as in *aeternae veritates* he has appropriated to himself that pride by which he raised himself above the animal. (Nietzsche, 1996: 16)

Abstraction emerges as a response to the concrete and is crucial insofar as it prevents the fixation of the latter as a mere empiricist datum. Yet at times, abstraction negates the concrete in the very act of responding to it. This is not, therefore, an anti-theoretical proposal, but rather a concrete way of doing theory attentive to the processual constitution of humanization, animalization, naturalization, becoming, or “Anthropocening”—an “ontology of the present” that asks: “What is present reality? What is the present field of our experiences? What is the present field of possible experiences?” (Foucault, 2010: 20–21).

Although existing studies consider horseback riding to be inherently relational (Blokhuis, 2023; Hogg and Hodgins, 2021), these studies still grant humans a position of precedence, without questioning whether the very definition of the human is constituted and modified in relation to the horse, just as the reverse may also occur. The minimal philosophical premise, following the ANT approach, is that the human and the more-than-human are established in relation to each other. This premise is useful because it rejects a rigid definition of what constitutes the human and the more-than-human, instead allowing an understanding of how their properties emerge

over time through their interactions, rather than assuming them to be eternally fixed and thus inexplicable in their transformations. This perspective enables a more specific inquiry: How do the human and animal co-emerge in relation? How do their properties become established through the differences produced in this encounter? Such questions suspend rigid or predefined notions of what an athlete is (e.g. human, rational, domesticator) and what a non-athlete is (e.g. animal, irrational, domesticated), enabling an exploration of how both are defined interrelationally. This, in turn, challenges both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric precedents in the definition of the human and the more-than-human within sport (Kerr et al., 2022; van Vuuren and Cooren, 2010).

Case study

Despite the long-standing equestrian tradition in sports, a recent incident became pivotal, not only because it exposed the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying horse-rider relations (Garfinkel, 1967), but also because it led to the historic removal of show jumping from the modern pentathlon. On 6 August 2021, during the women's equestrian event in the modern pentathlon at the postponed 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the horse Saint Boy refused to jump. Assigned by random draw to German pentathlete Annika Schleu, who was leading the competition at the time, Saint Boy was repeatedly whipped and spurred at the insistence of her coach, Kim Raisner, who also struck the horse with her fist. Though the horse initially entered the course, it later collided with an obstacle and refused to continue. Footage of Schleu in tears atop Saint Boy rapidly circulated worldwide, sparking widespread debate. The following day, Kim Raisner was disqualified from the remainder of the Olympics for her actions. Animal welfare organizations responded by advocating for the removal of equestrian events from the modern pentathlon—and even from the Olympics entirely. As a consequence, the Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne (UIPM) announced that equestrian events would be permanently excluded from the modern pentathlon after the 2024 Summer Olympics. In early 2022, both Annika Schleu and Kim Raisner were acquitted of animal cruelty charges.

Theoretical background

Our study employs Bruno Latour's ANT as its analytical foundation, embracing an approach that resists two major forms of social and natural reductionism: (1) sociologism, which explains nature exclusively through social constructs (Latour, 2005); (2) naturalism, which interprets social phenomena as mere extensions of natural processes (Latour, 2009: 20–22). By positioning the agency as emergent from relations rather than inherent to predefined categories, ANT offers a powerful lens for examining the interwoven dynamics of sport and environment, particularly in interactions between rider and horse. This approach prevents ascribing in advance any essential properties to them; this approach allows for a decentering of the privileges typically afforded to naturalist, sociological, and anthropocentric accounts of the object of study, constituting an important moment of “suspension” of received categories within the scholarly tradition. ANT expands the scope of social inquiry by integrating traditionally marginalized agents, such as horses, bacteria, wind, and other more-than-human forces, into the analysis of

social-natural relations (Latour, 1996: 369). Central to this framework is the notion of the actor, defined relationally rather than by fixed attributes. Latour (1996: 373) conceptualizes an actor as “something that acts or to which activity is granted by others,” emphasizing the fluid, contingent nature of agency. For instance, if the horse prompts the human to act, then the horse is an actor constitutive of human agency. ANT does not reduce agency to the human, and it enables the recognition that entities made by humans—and that constitute humans as humans—can, in fact, be shaped by more-than-human agents. This challenges reductive approaches to rider–horse relations and opens new pathways for thinking about sport and the Anthropocene, in which the human is no longer the primordial focus of analysis, nor something that can be understood or constituted as a detached sovereign over the Earth and its animals. Rather than assigning natural or social status to actors in advance, ANT insists that their human or more-than-human roles emerge through relational processes, as actors co-constitute one another within complex networks (Latour, 1996: 374). ANT thus makes an important contribution to Anthropocene theory by shedding light on agents that have been “subjected” as passive “objects”—such as animals or plants—by a particular conception of the human as the exclusive realm of subjectivity understood as agency:

To be a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy. It is because we are now confronted with those subjects—or rather quasi-subjects—that we have to shift away from dreams of mastery as well as from the threat of being fully naturalized. (Latour, 2014: 5)

These “quasi-subjects”—neither fully human nor definitively more-than-human, but always emerging in between—are nothing other than “actors,” acting and being acted upon. The task in the Anthropocene, then, is to “distribute agency as far and in as differentiated a way as possible”:

The point of living in the epoch of the Anthropocene is that all agents share the same shape-changing destiny, a destiny that cannot be followed, documented, told, and represented by using any of the older traits associated with subjectivity or objectivity. Far from trying to “reconcile” or “combine” nature and society, the task, the crucial political task, is on the contrary to distribute agency as far and in as differentiated a way as possible—until, that is, we have thoroughly lost any relation between those two concepts of object and subject. (Latour, 2014: 15)

It is this concept of agency—understood as the capacity to act upon and be acted upon by other actors, independent of any received notions of humanity or animality—and the relational aspect of this co-agency, that constitute the two core analytical tools adopted from ANT, employed here for the sake of theoretical simplification. This approach necessarily entails the limitation of setting aside more specific conceptual instruments developed within ANT. However, the analytical use of the concepts of “actor” and its relationality will be further specified in the “Methods and materials” section, where the linguistic analytical tools employed will be presented.

Methods and materials

Our methodological approach employs discourse analysis using AntConc software (Anthony, 2018), a tool designed for identifying quantitative relationships between words in large corpora. This analysis is grounded in ANT as applied to language, drawing on its foundational roots in linguistic methodologies. Specifically, we adopt the “co-word” analysis method (Callon et al., 1986), which examines how texts function as networks of meaning, understood as composed of linguistic actors (e.g. verbs act on subjects, letters on words). This approach explores the formation of meaning through interconnected linguistic actors—letters composing words, words forming sentences, sentences structuring paragraphs, and paragraphs constructing broader textual units. In this framework, the density of word connections within a network signals the concentration of power around a limited set of terms. However, this does not imply that dominant words dictate meaning by themselves. Instead, meaning emerges from the mobilization of various linguistic actors clustering around specific terms. This convergence is not the result of a pre-established, central meaning imposed on the network; rather, it enables peripheral linguistic actors to shape meaning dynamically (Latour, 1990). This expansion fosters linguistic mobility, reducing monosemy and allowing diverse words (or linguistic actors) to contribute to a dominant yet fluid semantic structure. From the perspective of Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) mathematical theory of communication, the greatest informational power does not stem from repetition, which leads to redundancy, but from low-frequency words introducing novelty—i.e., information. These less frequent terms provide semantic depth to dominant words, which, though prominent due to their massive presence, derive their significance from the novelty contributed by peripheral elements. This principle aligns with ANT’s conceptualization of networked power: rather than being imposed unilaterally, power emerges from the capacity to mobilize heterogeneous actors within a network (Latour, 1990). A network’s strength does not lie in enforcing hierarchical control but in its ability to incorporate and activate diverse actors, making power a relational rather than a coercive force.

The materials under analysis are, due to space constraints, the three most-watched and commented videos on the YouTube platform about this case. This selection serves as an example of what Latour (1993) calls the “parliament of things,” where more-than-human entities (e.g. animals or the environment) are granted a form of political representation. The comments thus constitute an informal political network that emerges around a case in which human and more-than-human agencies are debated, assigned, and distributed within the context of the equestrian event in the modern pentathlon. This parliament results from a failed interaction between horse and rider from a sporting perspective, demonstrating that the online human “representatives” (who only exist alongside the more-than-human technologies of online platforms) do not entirely define the agency of either the horse or the rider. Instead, they integrate the network of what has become possible to articulate precisely as a result of this controversial sporting event, which was produced through the interaction of both human and more-than-human actors. This parliament, being itself a network composed, for

instance, of users, words, images, or the Internet, is thus merely a node within a complex network of actors that includes the media, Olympic commissions, or animal welfare organizations—constituting an open-ended and infinite composition. The videos, with view and comment counts obtained on February 19, are as follows: “*Horse Gets Punched By German Coach At The Tokyo Olympics In Modern Pentathlon*” (2021), with 1,572,508 views and 2277 comments; “*Annika Schleu pentathlon*” (2021), with 553,992 views and 1470 comments; and “*Modern pentathlon SHOULDN'T be in the Olympics*” (2021), with 257,136 views and 1628 comments. The comments were analyzed collectively ($n = 5375$), thereby forming a single *parliament of things*, as they discussed the same case and were produced within the same temporal framework. Only the comments themselves were analyzed, excluding the replies each comment may have received. Replies are not included in the number of comments reported above. These comments thus constitute a sample of the informal *parliament of things*—a parliament that takes place in the online sphere, mobilized by an event in which the human, more-than-human relationship became problematic.

Results and discussion

Using the *AntConc* tool to analyze the most frequently occurring words in our sample of online comments related to the horse and the rider, we identified “horse” ($n = 2654$) and “she” ($n = 1287$) as the most common terms. This suggests a discourse in which the horse is positioned as the principal agent. The ANT analysis focuses exclusively on the relationships established between the two most linguistically frequent actors, “horse” and “she.” This focus is necessary due to space constraints in the analysis, allowing qualitative nuances to emerge and addressing our research question concerning how both agents are constituted in relation to one another. Since our research question seeks to understand, through the ANT method, how the horse and the rider interdefine each other in relation, we employ a quantitative approach to identify the sentences in which both actors most frequently appear together in the comments. With a one-word distance to the left and right within a sentence, no direct relationship between the two actors was found, as linguistic mediators such as verbs were necessary to link them. However, at a two-word distance, the most frequent word, “horse,” connects with the second most frequent word, “she,” 74 times (Cf Annex, Supplemental material). This specific point in the network of meanings is therefore the focus of our analysis. Out of the 2654 occurrences of “horse” and the 1287 occurrences of “she,” these words co-occur in direct relation only 74 times. This rarity indicates that this specific area in the network of meanings between human and more-than-human entities holds informational value, is not redundant, and thus warrants detailed analysis (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). This approach also helps reduce subjectivity in identifying and selecting points in the network for examination. Some proximities in the network of meanings between these two words are primarily spatial rather than grammatical, as they appear in separate sentences, divided by a period. Additionally, a small number of comments were unintelligible, though the majority were considered in the analysis.

The unstable co-action

In the sentences where “she” and “horse” share a relationship, it is possible to observe how the two actors are co-constituted. The actor rider fails in her relationship with the horse because she was abusing the horse. There is an optimal form of relationship that allows both horse and rider to act together. Here, the actor undermines herself by failing to relate to the other actor, i.e. she cannot be the rider actor if she abuses the horse actor, which means that the horse has a mode of interaction that is intrinsic to it and cannot be acted upon or co-acted in any way, under penalty of the rider actor not even being a rider actor:

she couldn't get on with the horse because she was just abusing the horse;

don't whip the horse she is making it whorse (sic);

Poor horse, she was just hitting whipping and kicking him consistently;

She was not listening to the horse, she was getting the horse wound up;

she was hurting the horse, she was pulling too hard on the bridle too hard;

that's so unfair to the horse. She was whipping and yanking at the reins;

he is refusing because she is being horrible to the horse she is yanking on his mouth hurting him he won't jump;

but she keeps insisting then instead of calming the horse she beats her so sad she definitely needs to be disqualified;

OR... It could have been a very hot horse and she could have been telling him to go and preventing him to go at the same time which would have caused that effect;

When a stranger that can't ride sits on a horse she even can't ride on bc she's trash HAN WHAT DO YOU THINK THE HORSE DOES!!!;

She should've just stayed calm, not yank on the reins and just composed herself and the horse, then she would've been able to get going a lot quicker;

taking out her frustration due to her lack of ability, on the poor horse! She yanked on his mouth constantly, even when she was asking him to move forward???

The equestrian event with a horse is not merely a case in which the human uses a more-or-less predictable, more-than-human tool, like sneakers, bow, and arrow, or a hammer, but is an unpredictable part of the performance that does not depend solely on the athlete and the use of the non-human resources at their disposal, but rather on a relationship that the more-than-human may or may not establish with the athlete. More

decisively, while sneakers can be identified as athletic even in a state of rest and without use, the rider and horse only exist in relation. There is no rider without a horse, nor an equestrian event without a rider, especially because it is this relationship that is at stake in the event. It is the way they respond to one another that can make the event. A horse that could jump a set course within a specific time frame on its own, or a rider who could completely control the horse without failure or deviation by their own will, would not constitute a challenge. There would be no risk of failure, nor anything to overcome. The horse, then, in its co-action with the rider, is not just a mere means of the event, but the very event itself, its challenge. More than being an athlete or co-athlete, it is the horse that constitutes the human athlete as one who faces something to overcome, with the paradoxical assistance of that very something.

The inability to establish the relationship with the horse constitutes the horse as a victim rather than a co-actor in the act of riding and performing the Olympic event. By turning the horse into a victim, the very act of riding is called into question: "No matter how upset you are, she hit the horse many times already, and she knew what she was doing. That's not professional. And the coach hit the horse? She should know better." It is the distinction between "hit" the horse to ride it and "real hit" to take control over it that reveals how the difference between riding and abusing the horse can become suddenly tenuous and reversible: "I hate animal abuse. She didn't punch the horse; she barely bumped it. I really think everyone is overreacting"; "The trainer who punched a horse and encouraged the rider to "really hit" the horse she was on has been banned from the Olympics." Here, the trainer who encourages the "really hit" and the Olympic institutions are other co-actors in a dispute over how the relationship between rider and horse should be established to be successful. The co-action that allows the act of riding to happen is not simply about letting the horse do what it wants, without the co-action of the rider: "She panicked badly and, by trying to calm the horse, she was actually making it worse." The horse's action serves as proof of what the rider says. The relationship between the horse and rider is not merely discursive; it is proven in performance, and if the performance fails, there is no possibility of imagining that it fails despite the rider's good performance. There is no unilateral action that succeeds between the horse and the rider: "She blamed it on the horse. So she just lied and told us she is a good rider." This illustrates how the relationship between the horse and the rider is unstable, that controlled riding ceases to occur when the relationship leans too heavily toward one of the actors, and that there seems to be an ideal point where everything always works well in the relationship: "the commentator talking about her needing to show the horse she's the boss and she's in charge is disgusting commentary. This isn't about being a boss, it's about being a TEAM"; "She should have established a connection with the horse." In light of the visual testimony of the event and its sports commentary, the YouTube commentators reinforce the idea that the rider's control over the horse is not the solution for managing the horse: "I hate the commentators 'show she's the one on top, just get the horse moving, just show her dominance' the FIRST TIME SHE HIT THE HORSE SHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN OUT." This ideal point in the relationship between rider and horse, a co-agency that allows for riding, is supposed to exist, but its fixation seems to always slip, as in any relationship of co-agency. It is neither in the horse nor in the rider, but in something "between" them:

I got a horse that I had some issues with (she just had a foal so she was dragging any rider to the barn) and then my bff got the same horse, and she actually loved her and was in great sync with her, so she ended up winning. Actually even though I used to be a much better rider than her and I had a lot more experience.

The impossible relationship

This ideal point seems not only to oscillate, thus not existing as an ideality protected from the reality of the actors and their concrete relationships, but it may not even exist at all. However, this non-existence only emerges at the moment when both actors meet, co-producing this impossibility, not being predetermined in the rider or the horse individually:

She should of not been allowed to ride him in that state as it would of been making the horse more upset;

She came so far and now she got a horse she can't handle. The horse is pretty upset too;

this horse which she had only met for about ten minutes before this event, the horse balked at this jump and became uncontrollable;

she is smacking really hard on her horse like she shouldn't even be able to ride/own a horse; "she got a horse she couldn't handle;

When she started riding the parcours, the horse was mentally not able to do that

This means that the relationship between horse and rider may not even be possible, refuting the idea of a nature that is always unconditionally tameable, which would override the vicissitudes of the random human assignment of horses to riders by the Olympic organization. The human relationship with the more-than-human is not unconditional. It is not established randomly. It must co-act in particular, specific, or singular ways with "this" horse and "this" rider in concrete terms, whose particularities may make riding either possible or impossible. Therefore, the relationship between rider and riding cannot always be made randomly or immediately. It must exist as a history of relationship, unfolding over time, for rider and horse to co-create the event of riding:

but this horse is not her horse and she shouldn't be riding it;

that's a horse she doesn't know and she had to ride wasn't listening to her bc she didn't know the horse and they haven't been able to bond;

it isn't fair because she is on a horse she doesn't know and so it's not her fault;

how she isn't allowed to use her own horse. She has to rely on a totally different random horse.

The relationship between human and more-than-human reveals the limits of the human, and how nature and the animal that enters into relation with the human also creates this impossibility, and cannot be fully obtained in a sovereign and unilateral manner by the human. Here, the human is defined as one who is limited by nature, by the animal. It is the rules of the pentathlon, assigning a random horse and placing the human before the, supposedly, controllable vicissitudes of the unexpected animal, that force a relationship which will reveal the limits of the underlying principle of human controllability of animal randomness of these rules:

she was assigned a horse that she was not compatible with;

Why didnt she change the horse?;

She didn't get the chance of getting another horse she asked a few times if she could have another; she didn't have any chance to choose another horse;

German rider had a chance to use another horse after she saw what happened with the Russian rider; she had to start with that poor horse;

She wanted to switch but the vet said the horse is fine; annika did, in fact, try to get another horse but she wasnt allowed to.

This fiction of a nature entirely tamable in its randomness is contested, but another fiction persists: that the rider can dismount from the unruly horse whenever she wants, that the interaction that allows for riding is performed only by one of the actors. It is the fiction of being able to abandon nature when it becomes inhospitable, as if it were an external object, to which one can access and reject unilaterally, as if the horse did not also condition the possibility of the end of the relationship, and not just the rider's will: "watch this it is just too sad for that horse she should have gotten off and walked him around instead"; "poor horse. She would have had to get off and lead the horse out of the arena."

Other commentators mention that the horse was injured and that this would prevent a smooth relationship between the horse and the rider: "The horse she was riding has since been diagnosed with a ligament injury." The horse is then also an almost-athletic actor, having some of the conditions of existence of the athlete, because its physical composition must be taken into account, and failing to account for its physical state increases the probability of losing the Olympic event. There is something in riding that is not just a co-action between horse and rider, and that is the horse's vulnerable body. The fact that the horse does not show its pain as a human would, demonstrates that the horse is always secretly the danger of failure in the execution of riding if its injury does not make itself overtly known. Unlike the athlete, when they know an injury makes the event impossible, the horse enters the event by the human's hand even when injured, and, in the event, the injury can remain unknown, showing apparently as a failed horse-rider relationship, when it is also, secretly, a failed relationship of the horse with its own body.

The relationship is also impossible because the encounter takes place within the context of Olympic sport. The interaction between the horse and the rider in competition is a goal that cannot produce good interaction processes: "I really don't think this girl should be labeled as a horse abuser. She's just the victim of a really dumb sport." The impossibility of the relationship does not become catastrophic because the human sets limits on the crisis, showing that the impossible is not the worst thing that can happen in a relationship. It could be the destruction of one of the actors. This control is exercised at the expense of the other more-than-human actor: "That horse only has patience because that's probably the horse that she's trained on for years. The horse is obviously used to it (considering he didn't throw her off) and that makes me nauseous to even say, but it's true." Even the controlled disobedience of the horse results from a relationship. The horse is not a naturally cooperative or uncooperative actor, even its disobedience is within a framework of patient obedience: "I'm amazed she didn't get thrown off that poor horse." Even in the randomness of the animal, there are degrees of danger, which can range from the failure of an event to more serious physical consequences for the rider.

Exchanging properties

The inability to co-act in a proportional way with the horse renders the rider irrational. It is no longer the horse that is simply the uncontrolled, emotional, or irrational agent, but the failure to control the animal pushes the human into the inhuman, the subhuman, and in this case, into mental illness: "Then when Germany got the horse, yes she was hysterical and seriously not riding well at all." A poorly governed horse automatically makes the rider a bad rider, thus removing the horse's agency. The horse can only be well-controlled, and a poorly controlled horse is entirely the responsibility of a bad rider. Even when the rider fails, there is something "almost intentional" about it, culpability in the loss of control, which allows for the rider to be sanctioned for failing to live up to the ideal human: "The horse is freaking out, calm rider calm horse, bad rider bad horse. She's giving her horse so many signals she's using the crop and smacking him"; "not even the horse's fault, she kept hitting him, he was confused, she was giving him mixed commands." Nature cannot be blamed. It is not subject to normativity that would make it responsible for failing the test, but nature, in the form of the horse, serves as proof of the normativity of the human, of when it fails or does not fail, being meta-normative guarantor through a moral naturalism. By meta-normative guarantor, it is meant that nature, in this case the horse, acts as a kind of "judge" or "arbiter" of the ethicality of human actions, without itself being subjected to the same normative sanctions. This is why the horse is not directly blamed in the comments but instead serves to attest to the rider's moral failure. The horse thus functions as an example of moral naturalism—that which conforms to nature is moral. However, to conform to this naturality is not simply to adhere to something given, for nature does not straightforwardly tell humans what is good or bad. The meta-normativity at play involves control: if the human fails to control nature, nature is used to sanction the human as a "bad" human, whereas the "good" human is one who successfully controls nature, which still presupposes a relation of human sovereignty over nature. The reason is that the nature of the horse, in the comments, always reacts to human control if it is monosemantic, rather

than emitting many confusing signals. If the human cannot communicate with the more-than-human, they become a bad human, a bad rider of the more-than-human. Human cannot be the place of confusion, of incomprehensibility, for this does not make them human. This place is that of the more-than-human way of dealing with the loss of control over nature, the animal: "like she's never had to troubleshoot on a horse. She literally does not know how to take a breath." In this exchange of properties between humans and more-than-humans, the horse is not the uncontrolled or ungovernable one, but the one who governs itself, who "knows" what it is doing: "The horse knows she's basically a beginner intermediate rider," refusing to co-act when one of the agents is incompetent, with the horse having the "knowledge" of what constitutes an appropriate co-actor. The horse, in this exchange of properties, is not the one who simply loses control, but the one who has created its own sport, having revealed itself as an agent without which riding is not possible, and this revelation is its victory: "She thinks that she is the only one to pursue something? What about this horse she is riding? He is the real star that deserves a gold medal refusing this abusive woman."

Crying is not an acceptable behavior for a human when the relationship with the horse does not produce the desired outcome by the rider, as the rider must be able to handle the vicissitudes of the horse. The rider, not the horse, is the one who should leave the Olympic competition, as the horse is more of an athlete than the human actor: "If she's crying from a horse high stepping and refusing to do what she wants, she should never have gotten near the Olympics." The crying throws the human into the realm of emotion and loss of control in the face of the horse's refusal, positioning her outside the Olympics, which is a space of control, of non-crying. Humans are assigned responsibilities, elevated normative standards, and failure to meet these standards pushes them into the irrational: "No excuse at all, she's whipping her horse because she's upset." The accusations directed at the human simultaneously remove agency from the horse, as if its behavior existed in a vacuum, as though the difficulty in riding wasn't also a product of the animal: "She certainly shouldn't have been acting like that when the horse clearly trying to communicate that he was very unhappy. It's the rider's fault, not the horse's." The human is expected to be non-emotional, reacting calmly and rationally in the face of the uncontrolled animal, and failing to do so means the human fails what defines them—being exposed to losing their characteristics in the face of the uncontrollable agency of the more-than-human: "How tf is she an Olympics-level rider if she has not yet learned that if she loses her shit, comes unglued emotionally, and frantically whips her already-upset horse, she is going nowhere, fast? That was pathetic and distressing."

The horse's "moods" have repercussions on the rider's mood and vice versa, meaning that it is not merely a relationship of one actor in control and the other controlled: "She was preparing for the Olympics her entire life, and now it's ruined by the moody horse. Yeah, she's crying because she's panicking and the horse is panicking too." When the relationship between the two actors fails, it stops being a relationship of a human as the controller and a more-than-human as the controlled, becoming a purely emotional relationship, a shared panic between them, entering an undifferentiated world in which both actors reinforce each other in a spiral of loss of control: "The horse should be crying and not her. She should never abuse the horse because she can't realize and

take notes on what's actually going wrong." In a failed relationship, it becomes hard to distinguish what makes a human a human, and an animal an animal. One doesn't know what to do or, consequently, what to be: "Stressed-out rider = stressed-out horse. She should never have climbed on that horse's back." Neither knows what to do: "She obviously has no patience if she's crying and hitting him. And it's not even her horse. She's pulling at the bit, smacking him. He doesn't understand what he's supposed to do." Online commentators also place the rider in the position of the horse when she fails the relationship with it: "If that was my horse she abused, she would've been dragged off and whipped"; "She should never own or ride a horse again. She also should be in jail for abuse." It is not the horse that is out of control and should be imprisoned. It is the rider's uncontrolled response that should lead to her imprisonment. Here, the human is equivalent to horror, the possibility of doing something terrible, breaking the separation that placed violence and loss of control in nature, and peace and control in the human. Precisely when the human fails to control the horse, the more-than-human, the relationship of co-action reveals how the status of being human is performative: "She should not be allowed to go near another horse again! She does that in front of everyone, can only imagine what she does behind closed doors." The rider also finds herself in a relationship with other humans, one of control, in order to control the horse, showing how the act of controlling and being controlled is transversal to the constitution of both the human and the more-than-human: "The rider was being told to whip the horse and she didn't want to but did because the coach was yelling at her too."

Conclusion

The horse becomes a relevant agent that calls forth an informal parliament in the world of online comments when it alters what is expected in human terms of a well-executed Olympic event. With this alteration, the agents in the parliament seek to show that riding is an unstable relationship between the rider and the horse, where the precedence of one over the other leads to a failure in performance. This instability questions any attempt to define what constitutes the ideal interaction, meaning that every successful interaction contains particularities that are not easily transferable to different horses and riders, as shown by the failure of the random assignment of horses in competitions. The human and the more-than-human cannot relate in just any way, at any time and in any space. There are agency singularities that, because they are local, multiple, and fragmented, cannot be sovereignly controlled by the human or the more-than-human. The relationship between the rider and the horse is just that—a relationship. It is not guaranteed from the outset. The rider and the horse may fail to constitute the act of riding, and the informal digital parliament also indicates that this relationship was impossible. The human cannot tame all of nature, nor can all of nature coexist with the human. This event then breaks the fiction of human dominion over nature, defining the human as one who must give up, one who faces nature, the animal, and the more-than-human as if it were an impossibility. In its place, it introduces the fiction that one can abandon this nature at will, that one can change or leave an out-of-control horse as if the successful interaction of riding and its simple abandonment were solely the responsibility of the rider when it is not possible. The

analyzed informal digital parliament shows that, while identifying the need for a delicate interaction between the horse and the rider, they continue to attribute the main role of control to the rider, with the failure of this control leading to a disfiguration of the rider as human. In the inability to control the animal, the human enters the realm of the more-than-human, the uncontrollable, the irrational, the emotional, that which must be punished because it failed in its role of sovereignty. At the same time, while it shows that the human is a fragile condition that can be lost in its relationship with more-than-humans, this parliament also shows that there is an expectation for the human to maintain the totalizing capacity to remain human and ensure the division between the human and the more-than-human, that is, to control the difference between control and loss of control.

The human is confronted with their limits, with the possibility of falling into the realm of the more-than-human, in the face of nature's loss of control. The fact that the human is primarily condemned by the online parliament, which does not primarily condemn the horse, makes the horse a sort of meta-ethical natural guarantor that allows for the sanctioning of those humans who fail to be human in terms of control over the uncontrollable nature of animals. Nature does not adhere to human laws or imputability. It is the online parliament, with human representatives, that fights for the unaccountability of nature, for its moral blindness. However, a more-than-human "thought" cannot be located within the realm of imputability or unaccountability. It must be possible to think that, for the horse, it is irrelevant whether it failed a test or not, whether it is an athlete or just a means for the human athlete. What matters is that the horse has created a more-than-human norm, a "law" that the rider cannot control, and this "law" brings the rider closer to losing control of themselves, with tears, and to the inhuman, with threats to the physical integrity of the rider in the discourse of the online comments. A law that does not break human laws because it does not necessarily have to consider them, but one that human laws always have to take into account, because falling into the domain of nature's law is to lose human nature, understood as control over the more-than-human and the distinction between the two. The horse thus functions as a meta-normative guarantor of good humanity, understood as the capacity to control nature. This seemingly points to an important stance regarding the Anthropocene, questioning human sovereignty over nature, with the animal acting as the "legislator" of good or bad human behavior. However, even though this online parliament challenges human sovereignty by attributing blame to the human for the mistreatment of the horse based on the animal's behavior, had the horse-rider interaction proceeded smoothly, the horse likely would not appear in the parliament as a meta-normative guarantor. It was the failed interaction that revealed that a "bad" human is one who fails to control wild nature, thereby presupposing an anthropocentric relationship with nature as domination. This is a crucial insight for the study of the Anthropocene: post-anthropocentric normative positions may still harbor meta-normative commitments that only grant moral precedence to nature if it is a tamable actor under human control. A wild horse reveals the promises and dangers of an online parliament ready to place the human in the position of the uncontrollable animal—tearful, panicked—while maintaining the animal under the jurisdiction of what must and can be controlled—whipped, imprisoned.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This paper is financed by National Funds provided by FCT—Foundation for Science and Technology through project UIDB/04020/2020 with DOI 10.54499/UIDB/04020/2020 (<https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/04020/2020>).

ORCID iD

Adalberto Fernandes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9713-2186>

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

- Annika Schleu pentathlon (2021) Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYUFR4r4pUs> (accessed 19 February 2025).
- Anthony L (2018) *AntConc (Version 3.4.4) [Computer Software]*. Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University.
- Blokhuis MZ (2023) Teaching horse riding: Is the role of the horse recognized? *Society & Animals* 31(5–6): Leiden: Brill: 797–813.
- Butler DR (2018) Zoogeomorphology in the Anthropocene. *Geomorphology* 303: 146–154.
- Callon M, Law J and Rip A (1986) Qualitative scientometrics. In: Callon M, Law J and Rip A (eds) *Mapping the Dynamics of Science and Technology: Sociology of Science in the Real World*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 103–123.
- Foucault M (2010) *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983* (ed. F Gros; tran. G Burchell). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garfinkel H (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Hogg RC and Hodgins GA (2021) Symbiosis or sporting tool? Competition and the horse-rider relationship in elite equestrian sports. *Animals* 11(5): Basel: MDPI: 1352.
- Horse Gets Punched By German Coach At The Tokyo Olympics In Modern Pentathlon (2021) Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQuReCQjxs0> (accessed 19 February 2025).
- Kerr R, Edwards S and Konoval T (2022) The athlete-as-network and the athlete multiple: Potential contributions of actor-network theory to sports coaching research. *Sports Coaching Review* 11(1): Abingdon: Routledge Journals, Taylor & Francis Ltd: 5–22.
- Latour B (1990) Technology is society made durable. *The Sociological Review* 38(S1): 103–131.
- Latour B (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern* (tran. C Porter). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Latour B (1996) On actor-network theory: A few clarifications. *Soziale Welt* 47(4): Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH: 369–381.
- Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Clarendon lectures in management studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Latour B (2009) *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (tran. C Porter). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Latour B (2014) Agency at the time of the Anthropocene. *New Literary History* 45(1): Johns Hopkins University Press: 1–18.
- Lubelska-Sazanow M (2024) Ethics in sports industry: when does sports autonomy become an excuse for animal abuse? *International Journal of Law in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press. Epub ahead of print 25 September 2024. DOI: 10.1017/S1744552324000193.
- McShane C and Tarr J (2003) The decline of the urban horse in American cities. *The Journal of Transport History* 24(2): SAGE Publications Ltd: 177–198.
- Modern pentathlon SHOULDN'T be in the olympics (2021) Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_k6K3LtPOQ (accessed 19 February 2025).
- Moura ES and Scott D (2024) Glocalizing action in the Anthropocene: Understanding the potential roles of sport for development and peace. *Leisure Sciences* 46(8): Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis Inc: 1170–1190.
- Nietzsche FW (1996) *Human, All Too Human* (tran. RJ Hollingdale). *Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Connor P, Evers C, Glenney B, et al. (2023) Skateboarding in the Anthropocene: Grey spaces of polluted leisure. *Leisure Studies* 42(6): Routledge: 897–907.
- Odling-Smee FJ, Laland KN and Feldman MW (1996) Niche construction. *The American Naturalist* 147(4): The University of Chicago Press: 641–648.
- Riquelme Arriagada A (2023) Dignity of (non-human) animals in the Anthropocene. *Revista Internacional de Pensamiento Politico* 18: 471–486. doi:10.46661/revintpensampolit.8442.
- Shannon CE and Weaver W (1949) *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- van Vuuren M and Cooren F (2010) 'My attitude made me do it': Considering the agency of attitudes. *Human Studies* 33(1): Dordrecht: Springer: 85–101.
- Zakula S (2024) Human exceptionalism and the lot of animals: Telling stories about 'human nature' in the Anthropocene. *Philosophy And Society-Filozofija I Društvo* 35(1): 35–51.