CHAPTER NINE

THEORISING RIDER-HORSE RELATIONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION OF THE CENTAUR METAPHOR IN THE SPANISH BULLFIGHT

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When it comes into the plaza, the horse has to be in a state of mind where it thinks for the two of us, the same ideas for both of us. If one of us doubts, we both fail. (rejoneador to author)

Introduction

Only a few animals are regularly ridden by humans. Despite the rarity of the riding relationship, the fact that humans ride horses remains arguably the most taken for granted aspect of the human-horse relationship. The riding relationship presents a valuable area of research into the embodied dimensions of human-animal communication because it requires and encourages the harmonisation of human and animal bodies in space and time. The archetypal metaphor for the achievement of harmony between horse and rider is the mythical centaur with the upper body of a human and the lower body of a horse. In this paper, I demonstrate the ways in which the centaur metaphor conveys the transformative and generative nature of the rider-horse relationship. In so doing, I suggest that there is an inherent centaurability in the rider-horse relationship.

The centaur metaphor has been used by Victor Turner (1974, 253) as a ‘classical prototype’ of liminal duality, not quite human yet not quite horse. However, liminality in Turner’s sense refers to an ambiguous and dangerous state between two human states. In this context of ritual, the centaur metaphor is essentially transitional and anthropocentric. That is, a human half-way house. However, in this paper I suggest that the centaur metaphor can be used more substantively to refer to a desired or achieved state of something more than human-plus-horse. To discuss these generative and transformative
dimensions of the human-horse relationship and the centaur metaphor, I engage with a broad literature spanning human-automobile relations, performativity, phenomenology and actor-network theory.

Following a theoretical contextualization, I illustrate the centaur metaphor ethnographically by discussing the centaur-in-action in the Spanish bullfight (corrida). I compare the picador who appears in the first phase (tercio) of the bullfight from foot (corrida de toros) with the lesser-known rejoneador\(^1\) of the bullfight from horseback (corrida de rejones) to illustrate that although the centaur is the archetypal and somewhat romantic metaphor for a transcendent rider-horse relationship, such as achievement is not a fait accompli of that relationship.\(^2\) To some extent, this is because the human-horse is part of a broader dynamic network of humans, animals and technology. Thus, I consider not only the human-horse-bull relationships in the Spanish bullfight, but also the ways in which they are mediated by technology. I therefore also discuss the ways in which saddlery, protective wear, blades and barbs affect the rider-horse relationship in the bullfight from horseback. By comparing two specific human-horse relations in the Spanish bullfight according to their ‘centaurability’, I denaturalize the romantic centaur metaphor and the taken-for-granted riding relationship.

Overall, I explore the ways in which the centaur metaphor can be used to convey the transformative and generative potential of human-horse riding relationships in general as well as to examine specific rider-horse relations. Whilst I demonstrate that the centaur is not a fait accompli of the riding relationship, I argue that the riding relationship is imbued with an inherent centaurability.

The empirical material presented in this paper was generated through 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Andalusia beginning in 2000, ongoing research into human-horse relations and the bullfight from horseback, and my own experience as an equestrian over approximately 20 years.

Elsewhere, I have used the centaur metaphor to discuss the development of the human-horse relationship through key moments in the history of the bullfight from horseback (Thompson 2007). I have

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\(^1\) Female bullfighters from horseback are referred to as rejoneadoras. A female picador would be referred to as a picadora, although picadores are almost exclusively male.

\(^2\) There is another mounted figure involved in the corrida. This is the alguacil who is a mounted official. The alguacil does not face the bull from horseback.