

Horse Depictions in *Equus*: Losing Staged Symbolism on Screen

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ABSTRACT

Peter Shaffer's 1973 Tony Award-winning play *Equus* was subsequently turned into an Academy Award-nominated film of the same name in 1977. Both play and film tell the fictional story of psychiatrist Martin Dysart as he works with seventeen-year-old stable boy Alan Strang, who violently mutilated six horses out of self-invented paganism, worshipping the horses as God-like figures and designating one horse as the Godhead 'Equus.' The different physical representations of the horses – the film uses actual horses while the play calls for human actors in symbolic costumes – lead audiences to vastly divergent conclusions regarding Alan's perception of horses as the crux of his fabricated religion. This exploration of *Equus* furthers discussions on how crucial script elements can get lost in translation from stage to screen, which can drastically influence an audience's emotional reaction toward story and character.

Peter Shaffer's 1973 Tony Award-winning play *Equus* was subsequently turned into a 1977 Academy Award-nominated film of the same name. Both play and film tell the fictional story of psychiatrist Martin Dysart as he works with seventeen-year-old stable boy Alan Strang, who violently mutilated six horses out of self-invented paganism, worshipping the horses as God-like figures and designating one horse as the Godhead 'Equus.' Debates over the physical representation of the horses – the film uses literal horses while the play calls for live actors in ceremonial horse masks and abstract costumes – demonstrate how audiences' ability to interpret Alan's perception of horses as idealized mythological-inspired creatures is impacted. These drastic contrasts between on-stage abstract dramatization and on-screen naturalistic realism likely lead to different levels of empathy and emotional responses from audiences toward Alan. Despite the film's critical success, its replacement of symbolic horse portrayals with authentic creatures distances audiences from truly experiencing a first-person perspective of Alan's mythological paganism. While animal authenticity is gained from the film's alignment with external realism, the internal essence of the play's original spirit is lost.

EQUUS NARRATIVE

Equus is set in a present-day psychiatric hospital in southern England. The narrative – in both the play and film – begins with psychiatrist Dr. Martin Dysart reminiscing about his experience with one of his patients, Alan Strang. Seventeen-year-old Alan has blinded six horses from his former workplace using a sharp metal hoof pick and is subsequently facing life imprisonment. The magistrate in charge of the case, Hesther, requests that Dysart treat Alan's mania with the hope that psychiatric treatment will save the troubled teen from life imprisonment.

In Dysart's first session with his new patient, Alan refuses to communicate beyond singing advertisement jingles as his reply to any question. Dysart briefly humors Alan before ending their session and sending the boy to his room at the in-patient facility. Over their next few sessions, Alan begins to divulge more personal information and memories to Dysart, slowly forging a connection between them. Alan reveals his first memory of a horse at age six when a male stranger on a beach offered Alan a ride on his horse named Trojan. Alan describes this first riding experience as feeling powerful and sexy. Later, while he is under hypnosis, Alan reveals that he believed Trojan spoke telepathically to him and declared his true name to be Equus.

Dysart also learns more about Alan's parents through his sessions with the boy and private conversations with Mr. and Mrs. Strang. Alan's mother, Dora, is devotedly religious while his father, Frank, is an admitted atheist. Dora comes from a family of horse riders and imparts her passion for the animal to her son. Alan and his mother were emotionally close during his childhood and bonded over horses. Alan became particularly fond of a book that Dora repeatedly read to him as a young child about a talking horse named Prince who would only allow one special boy to ride him. Dora also allowed Alan to watch Westerns on television at their neighbor's house since her husband banned television from their home. Additionally, Dora taught Alan the term "Equus", the Latin word for horse – a word that deeply fascinated Alan. Moreover, Dora regularly told Alan religious stories, including scriptures and Christian history regarding horses being perceived as strong, majestic creatures. Dora also handled conversations with her son regarding sex with a solely religious perspective, teaching Alan that physical intimacy is extremely spiritual and only approved in the eyes of God once his will forges a path toward life-long love.

Frank confesses to Dysart that he had never been fond of his wife excessively instilling religious doctrine into their son's head and became worried at Alan's fascination with disturbing images of Christ. Out of frustration, Frank tore down a graphic poster of a beaten and chained Christ in Alan's bedroom and offered his son a picture of a horse as a replacement; Alan hung the horse image in the exact same spot at the foot of his bed where his Jesus poster had resided. During a later conversation, Frank confides in Dysart that his concern peaked late one night when he secretly witnessed Alan flagellating himself with a coat hanger while kneeling in front of the horse image and chanting an imagined Biblical-style genealogy of horses that culminated in the name Equus. Subsequently, Frank tells Dysart that he blames Alan's violent criminal act on the disturbing brutality within biblical texts.

As Alan slowly progresses with his communication during his treatment sessions, Dysart seeks to discover why Alan frequently screams "Ek!" during the night.¹ Dysart utilizes hypnosis and a placebo 'truth drug' (which is really an aspirin) to convince Alan to confess his inner thoughts and turmoil. Under these persuasions, Alan describes how he believes Equus to be a Godhead incarnated in all horses who deserves reverence and worship. Additionally, Alan admits to secretly riding Nugget – one of the horses at the stables where he worked – late at night, intimately detailing how he rode nude while passionately praying to Equus until climaxing in orgasm. It becomes apparent to Dysart that the boy's nightly screams of "Ek!" are actually him calling out for Equus (pronouncing the first syllable of the word).

Furthermore, Dysart finally achieves the mission of making Alan reveal what happened the night of his violent crime. Alan was on a date with his female coworker Jill, who got him the job at the stables. Jill convinced Alan to attend a viewing of a pornographic film at a local theater, where they shockingly ran into his father. Frank awkwardly attempted to convince his son and Jill that he was at the cinema for a business meeting with the manager and merely peaked into the theater unknowing it was pornographic in nature. Frank then agreed to let Alan escort Jill home as

a way to diffuse the uncomfortable moment, leading Alan and Jill to walk away while discussing how unconvinced they were at Frank's claim to innocence.

During their nighttime walk, Jill proposed to Alan that they make a detour toward the stables, where she immediately began seducing him upon arrival. While they both undressed and initiated physical intimacy, Alan became deeply disturbed at his perceived observance of the horses watching and judging him – including his deity Equus. Alan angrily forced Jill to abruptly leave and consequently suffered a psychotic breakdown fueled by paranoia of Equus laughing at him and condemning his intimacy with another being. Subsequently, Alan grabbed a metal hoof pick and proceeded to stab out the eyes of all six horses in the stable.

Equus concludes with Dysart monologuing to himself (and to the audience) about feeling tormented upon reflecting on the value and meaning of his psychiatric career. He deliberates on 'curing' Alan, which he feels would deny the boy of something divine and vital – a deep passion that Dysart himself laments over never fully feeling in his own life. Dysart acknowledges that he must treat Alan by removing the boy's pain in a way that allows society to perceive him as functional and non-threatening, but he mourns the death of the boy's passion as a sacrifice to normalcy. Conclusively, Dysart considers both himself and Alan as victims of a world that demands emotionally-sterile conformity over fiery passion-filled individuality. They are two restrained creatures with metaphorical bits in their mouths who are unable to fully gallop freely throughout their lives – like caged horses.

HORSES ON STAGE

Shaffer's *Equus* script directly requests that live actors portray the horses. In the script's introductory pages, Shaffer pens specific visual and physical directions for the 'horse' actors, demanding that their depictions abandon any sense of realism:

Any literalism which could suggest the cosy familiarity of a domestic animal—or worse, a pantomime horse—should be avoided. The actors should never crouch on all fours, or even forward. They must always—except on the one occasion where Nugget is ridden—stand upright, as if the body of the horse extended invisibly behind them. Animal effect must be created entirely mimetically, through the use of legs, knees, neck, face, and the turn of the head which can move the mask above it through all the gestures of equine wariness and pride.²

Shaffer continues with detailed directions of the on-stage sound effects produced from the chorus of 'horse' actors:

References are made in the text to the Equus Noise. I have in mind a choric effect, made by all the actors sitting round upstage, and composed of humming, thumping, and stamping—though never neighing or whinnying. This Noise heralds or illustrates the presence of Equus the God.³

Additionally, Shaffer describes his visual concept of the actors' horse costumes to insinuate physical aspects of the animal in a symbolic stylistic approach:

The actors wear track-suits of chestnut velvet. On their feet are light strutted hooves, about four inches high, set on metal horse-shoes. On their hands are gloves of the same colour. On their heads are tough masks made of alternating bands of silver wire and leather; their eyes are outlined by leather blinkers. The actors' own heads are seen beneath them: no attempt should be made to conceal them.⁴

These instructional demands for visual abstractness suggest the desire to construct an intimate path for audiences to empathize with the story's central troubled teenager, Alan. The horses' physical realism in the eyes of audiences is seemingly unimportant; what is crucial is seeing the animals through Alan's mental perspective. Thus, Alan's mind takes center stage in an intimate dark setting, inviting theatregoers to abandon the reality of the external world.

Employing human actors to depict horses generates complex insights into Alan's mental state, including equine idolatry. Alan's mother, Dora, instilled in her son a heightened attitude toward horses through fictional tales and biblical scriptures. Emphasis on this higher level is seen from the exalted language used to refer to horses in the King James Bible. Mainly, Job 39:19-25 poetically yet emphatically emphasizes the horses' power. Verses quoted fondly by Dora and passionately by Alan include "Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?...The glory of his nostrils is terrible...He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage...He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha."⁵ Additionally, Alan learned to associate horses with the Book of Revelation's depiction of the risen Christ: "And I saw heaven open, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True. His eyes were as flames of fire...and he had a name written that no man knew but himself."⁶ The intensity and superior language inherent in this scriptural imagery deeply attracted Alan, especially in its similarities to his favorite childhood story about a horse named Prince who could only be ridden by one special boy. Both this childhood tale and the Book of Revelation's scripture describe powerful horses who anoint one male worthy to ride them – the chosen boy rides Prince and Christ rides the white horse. Subsequently, in Alan's mind, the horses replaced objects of worship when his father took away the focus on the crucifixion of Jesus by replacing Alan's graphic poster of Christ with a picture of a horse. This focal shift inspires Alan to construct a fixation on horses as reverent spiritualized creatures worthy of ritualistic worship, with Equus serving as the idolized Godhead.

Live actor portrayals of the horses allow for Alan's reality-based moments – such as conversing with Dysart during a treatment session – to smoothly transition into Alan's mental visions of the animals in dramatic fashion. Shaffer's script outlines directions for the 'horse' actors during their ceremonial masking: "Great care must also be taken that the masks are put on before the audience with very precise timing – the actors watching each other, so that the masking has an exact and ceremonial effect."⁷ The audience is meant to see humans on stage symbolically morph into horses in ways that mimic historical pagan rituals centered on movement and facial coverings, and that arguably show a literal transformation that replaces man (Jesus) with creature (Equus).⁸ The visual combination of human bodies with horse-shaped head pieces also evokes a historic philosophical imagery. Dora told Alan that pagans in the New World believed man was in harmony with horses: "Pagans thought horse and rider was one person...they thought it must be a god."⁹ This history lesson, according to his mother, helped lay a foundation in Alan's mind that horses were meant to be exalted as a part of man's existence. Thus, live actors ceremoniously adorning horse masks dramatizes Alan's idolized imagery of man and horse becoming one god-like entity.

Beyond allusions of pagan ritual, components of ancient Greek mythology, best exemplified by the use of non-literal horses, are threaded throughout the narrative. Alan's character perceives real horses as fantastical gods in sexualized and religious ways, in the vein of Greek mythology. The visual balance of human and animal are seen in Greek deities and their sacred animals, such as Poseidon (the sea-god and horse-god), and in mythological creatures, such as centaurs (beings that are part man and part horse).¹⁰ Alan is not the only character whose reality is convoluted with Greek mythology. Throughout the play, Dysart suffers from nightmares of masked ritual slaughter taking place in a Homeric setting. In this dream, Dysart's mask slides from his face revealing his

true identity just as the mask of the actors playing horses hints at unlimited complexity and wisdom lingering just below the surface. Additionally, Dysart's character dreams recurring nightmares that take place in a Homeric setting. Shaffer also structures *Equus* as a modern Greek tragedy with its flawed protagonists discerning moral dilemmas, opening monologues for both Act I and Act II that serve as prologues for the tragedy's topic, and 'horse' actors representing a Greek chorus. Using live actors to portray the horses elevates the animal characters to Greek chorus status by becoming a group of non-individualized entities who are unison in their adornment of facial coverings (horse masks) and their chanting (the *Equus* noise that symbolizes the presence of the Godhead *Equus*).

A further crucial effect of live human actors portraying the horses is the ability to perceive the reflection that Alan sees of himself within the horses that he worships. Alan feels deeply connected to the restrained existence of horses. When humans typically ride horses, they have leads and martingales strapped on the creatures to control their movement. In this way, any move that a horse makes is because the rider has prompted it by communicating with the animal. Alan sees this as a limitation of the horses' capabilities. He feels that the horses are capable of much more without the straps. Having compared himself to the horse, Alan feels that he can do much more than his parents and society are allowing him to accomplish by imposing their regulations on him. Yet, during one of his rides, Alan realizes the necessity of a bit and bridle in riding. He contrives the "Manbit" for himself to share the experience of the horse.¹¹ Alan does not use tack to avoid any separation from *Equus*. He cries during a climactic moment, "Make us one person!"¹² Moreover, both of the play's acts open with imagery of Alan embracing the horse called Nugget. These images symbolize Alan's desire to attain union with the horse, which he seemingly believes would make him be as free as the horse, capable of anything. Alan's captivation began with his first ride as he experienced a possession of power, stating, "All that power going any way you wanted."¹³ Initially, the horse struggled and resisted him. However, Alan eventually mastered the horses and tamed their visibly harsh or unwelcoming "straw law."¹⁴ He harnesses some power from this mastering, which grants him symbolic vengeance against his "foes."¹⁵ Riding makes Alan free from his parents' and society's strict social and ethical code of conduct. When audiences see Alan passionately embrace a live actor on stage in a horse mask, the animal creature becomes humanized in the eyes of theatregoers, highlighting the mental comparison Alan is likely internalizing when physically and emotionally connecting with the animal.

Yet another symbolic element that results from humans playing the horses – especially in more modern staged adaptations – is the sexualization of the animals. The most visible manifestation of this can be seen by contrasting the casting and costuming of the horse actors in the 1973 original production with the 2008 Broadway revival. The original Broadway production of *Equus* closely followed Shaffer's instructions for costuming by opting for modest, turtlenecked, velvet track-suits with thin, sculpted wire shaping the horse-like accoutrement around the svelte actors' heads and feet.¹⁶ However, the casting and costuming direction of the 2008 Broadway revival took a more sexually provocative approach. For this production, the highly-muscular actors were dressed in spandex shirts so form fitting that the actors almost appeared to be half-nude.¹⁷ Additionally, the horse-like accessories were more clearly composed of leather and harness-like structures as if to hint at BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) attire. The obvious nod to homosexual eroticism aligns well with the predominant dramatic themes of Greek culture and mythology throughout the play. The clearest examples can be found in the stories of Zeus and Ganymede and Heracles and Hylas, both of which depict stories of a man and god in a homosexual relationship.¹⁸ The aesthetic choices of the director and costume designer,

which are only available when working with actors portraying the horses, suggest that Alan is not interested in bestiality. Instead, Alan desires sexual relations with a creature made of man, beast, and god.

When considering these multilayered effects, using live actors to depict the on-stage horses gives audiences a manipulated prism with which to view the animals – their existence escapes realism and becomes symbolic reflections and extensions of Alan's psyche. Stripped of equine realism, the story's observers intimately experience the world filtered as Alan's reality. This intimate connection between audience and story helps construct empathy in ways that only exist by humanizing the horses. Harding, an Adolescent Forensic Psychiatrist, served as a consultant on a highly-publicized 2019 production of *Equus* by Theatre Royal Stratford East in East London. During a press interview, Harding described the importance of audiences feeling empathy for Alan, his perception of horses, and his self-justified motivations for his disturbing act of animal cruelty:

It's this event that has happened that's so shocking, but what's driven this young person to do this? And I think that's what the play tries to understand. I think that's really key for this production. It's the sense of compassion one feels for a young person who's done this really terrible thing. That, to me, is key to this working, because then the audience has to be brought along and feel compassion and curiosity, and that's usually the antidote to something that's truly horrific.¹⁹

Utilizing human actors for horses assists in the process of humanizing Alan's perception of the animals, which offers a greater opportunity for audiences to feel the compassion and empathy that Harding finds essential.

HORSES ON SCREEN

Sidney Lumet's 1977 film version of *Equus* chooses realism over abstraction, and in so doing, it offers radically different interpretations of many of the play's key thematic interests. Filmed in dreary, low-key earth tones on location in actual academic offices, stables, and middle-class homes, Lumet's film transforms the play's ritualistic primitivism into the stuff of apparently everyday concerns; it suggests that the anxiety-ridden processes of creating myth and reenacting ancient pagan rhythms in contemporary relationships are not totemic and ceremonial, but perhaps already baked into the lived experience of western modernity. Though Shaffer's screenplay is in most scenes virtually identical to his script for the play, the film's trading of minimalist symbolism for a more recognizably 'normal' setting changes not only the tone of the dialogue (what seems on stage like incantation becomes on the screen more like exposition), but also the story's ultimate message about the relationship between imagination, idolatry, and sacrifice in contemporary society. The most obvious and meaningful representation of this philosophical shift, of course, is the film's aforementioned use of actual horses to replace the costumed actors of the stage play. The presence of these horses represents the film's overall project of turning the strange into the familiar and thereby demystifying the implied interdependence of religious fervor and sexual anxiety.

The film's opening sequence announces its larger stylistic shift away from theatrical abstraction and, in particular, its reliance on actual horses to fulfill the complex network of myth and meaning taken on by actors in the stage play. The first shot is of an ornamental ceremonial dagger or scepter in the shape of a stylized horse's head. Framed by a featureless black background as if hung in empty space, the horse head looks like something from an archeological dig preserved in a museum: distorted, ritualized, and fetishistic. As the camera slowly zooms in on the artifact's

exaggerated eye and metal bridle, the shot fades into a new closeup: the face of Nugget—the real horse—in the same pose with a similar bridle being held by the naked Alan Strang in a foreshadowing of the Ha-Ha scene that closes Act One. Dysart’s voice-over begins: “Afterward, he says, they always embrace.”²⁰

This moment does critical work for an audience familiar with the stage play, since it clears up immediately the central question of just how the horses will be depicted on screen. More importantly, it establishes a crucial relationship between symbol and reality, suggesting not simply that the real horse replaces the totem, but also that there exists a metonymy between the symbolic and the real. The actual horses used in the film, as this opening shot asserts, will carry out a function similar to that of stylized and unrealistic symbolic representations of them, presumably with the added benefit of keeping their meanings accessible and comfortably recognizable as part of the real (rather than abstract) world. As the horse-headed relic is replaced in the opening shot by the visibly real horse, the real horse takes on the symbolic purpose of the relic; the film’s larger insistence on realism in costumes and setting will therefore similarly extend the symbolic work of the play into the real world.

The implications of this transfer of symbolic power from the visibly austere to the realistic become immediately clear when, in his opening monologue, Dysart voices his inability to understand Nugget’s signs of physical affection for Alan. “What desire could this be?” wonders Dysart; “Not to stay a horse any longer? Not to remain reined up forever in those particular genetic strings?”²¹ This line is almost identical to the one spoken at the opening of the stage play, but here the possibility of not “staying a horse” carries a different possibility. In the stage play, the horses are visibly both actor and horse, making the play’s consistent ideal of unity between man and animal both ironic and available. Actual horses, however, are only horses, and so Dysart’s suggestion that Nugget might desire “not to stay a horse any longer” must be dismissed out of hand at the outset, with significant implications for the film’s treatment of the nature of the human, the animal, and the divine.²²

Equus’s real concern is not Alan’s mental and emotional health, but Dysart’s increasingly obsessive use of Alan as a tool to better understand his own disconnect from modernity, and the relationship between Alan and the horses becomes a metaphor for Dysart’s yearning for what he finally calls “passion,” lost now in his marriage, his professional life, and his imagination.²³ In both the opening and closing monologues, Dysart describes himself in the position of the horse, but because the action of the film is a flashback, both of these speeches represent Dysart’s state of mind *after* he has already treated Alan. The least realistic element of the film is, in fact, its use of these monologues, which are spoken directly to the camera by Dysart at his office desk. These orations disrupt the film’s overall emphasis on naturalistic action, as well as forward movement in time, and suggest that the film’s plot happens in Dysart’s memory in one long revelation; the monologues appear to happen in a single time and place within Dysart’s consciousness. Because Dysart describes himself in the opening monologue already sympathetic to the horse’s point of view, the action of the film represents the process by which Alan’s story gives Dysart the ability to see himself *there* rather than merely in the position of the human.²⁴

Dysart’s ability to identify with the horse rather than with Alan in the opening monologue, however, depends upon the unique staging of the play that is absent from the film. After admitting that he does not know how to psychoanalyze a horse, which should not be able to feel more than base natural instinct, Dysart confesses “I’m wearing that horse’s head myself.”²⁵ The animalism that Dysart will eventually reveal himself to be craving, in other words, is not an inner quality but a costume to be worn—that is, it is like the physical actors in their costumes visible on the stage

before Dysart's speech. The film, however, has no such costumes: animal and human are, for the duration of the story, two separate and distinct species, making Dysart's description of himself "wearing" the horse's head entirely and solely metaphoric.²⁶ Later in the opening monologue, Dysart defeatedly notes that "a horse's head is finally unknowable to me," in effect admitting that it is his own nature that remains stubbornly out of reach, regardless of whether or not that head is worn (as in the play) or part of a separate living being.²⁷

This simple distinction between animalism as a costume to be worn and animalism as an unreachable opposition to humanity entirely changes the film's ability to depict the spiritual malaise at the heart of Dysart's psyche. This anxiety—Dysart's belief in a lived ecstasy that is potential but lost in his dry professional existence—is first articulated in his description of a dream that presents ancient history as a spectacle of ritual sacrifice where violence is linked to divination but watered down by self-loathing and role-playing. Despite his horrific task of disemboweling some five hundred children as part of a pagan fertility ritual, Dysart's real concern in this dream is not his role in the slaughter but his recognition that if he succumbs to his own revulsion and reveals the emotions he keeps hidden behind his "wide gold mask, all noble and bearded," he will be recognized as a fraud and will be "next over the stone."²⁸ In the course of the dream, the mask does indeed begin to fall aside and Dysart wakes up just as the other priests discover his secret face and wrench the sacrificial blade from his hands. As Dysart narrates, the story of this dream is not connected to any particular part of the Alan Strang story, but its placement in the narrative structure indicates its meaning as a coded metaphor for Dysart's sense of himself as a psychiatrist—although it performs different functions in the play and film.²⁹

In the play, the monologue sets up a conversation between Dysart and Hesther in which Hesther calls the dream "the most indulgent thing I ever heard" and Dysart uses her rebuke to remind her that he hopes to "spend the next ten years wandering around the *real* Greece."³⁰ The film, however, uses the end of Dysart's dream monologue as a voice-over while he drives to visit Alan's mother Dora, and the next spoken words after he wakes from the dream are Dysart asking, "Mrs. Strang: do you have any idea how this could have occurred?"³¹ The play, then, uses the dream monologue as the basis for a debate about sincerity and good works and about the inadequacy of the dream-Greece when contrasted with reality, while the film juxtaposes Dysart's admission of his fears with an immediate scene of him in fact *doing* his job and being a psychiatrist. The film can jump from dream monologue straight to Dora's questioning, in effect from an image of mythic violence to an analysis of contemporary violence, because the film has a different strategy for addressing the kind of mediation between mimetic reality and representation that the Hesther scene provides.

The horses at the center of the story come to represent the very process of signifying, or perhaps, closing the gap that Dysart perceives in his dream between actuality and the images that imperfectly stand for that actuality. Dysart's distinction between the Greece of his dream and "the real Greece" testifies to this gap, as does his acknowledgment that the mask he wears is not only a false face but a historical approximation based on "the *so-called* Mask of Agamemnon found at Mycenae" (emphasis added).³² Both the play and film suggest a relentless interrogation of this theme, with a wide range of images and narrative situations calling attention to it: the blinding of the horses, the picture of the horse in Alan's room that replaces the graphic depiction of the Crucifixion, Dysart's description of his marriage, and Alan's final violent rampage when Jill attempts to have sex with him—all of these elements represent one character or another attempting to fill a void or compensate for a lack by finding an imperfect substitution for the sign that is seen as not holding appropriate meaning. The stage play depicts this gap in the process of meaning through its unique stylistic schema in which everything is inherently symbolic ("Any literalism

which could suggest . . . cozy familiarity . . . should be avoided”).³³ The realist aesthetic of the film must find a different tool to visually represent this crisis of meaning, and it does so by defamiliarizing the horses in other ways.

The most important part of Dysart’s initial conversation with Dora Strang is her account of telling stories about horses to Alan when he was a child: these stories put into Alan’s head the idea that horses are a link between man and a vengeful divinity. She explains to Dysart, as she once did to Alan, that “when the Christian cavalry first appeared in the New World, the pagans thought that horse and rider was one person...Actually, they thought it must be a god.”³⁴ A few minutes later, after Dysart has inspected Alan’s bedroom, Dora notes that horses are in the Bible. She quotes the aforementioned passage from Job that includes the lines “Hast thou given the horse strength?” and, most tellingly, “He saith among the trumpets, Ha ha!”³⁵ Shaffer’s point, which Dysart will begin to figure out in his conversations with Alan directly, is that Dora’s religious devotion provides a particular lens through which Alan first understood the horse not as a distinct life form but as an extension of humankind that is also divine in both a pagan and a Christian ethos.³⁶ Implied in this merging of imagery is the idea that horse, rider, and god/God somehow complete one another—that the very natures of human, animal, and god are all incomplete without the others to “give strength.”³⁷

This man/horse composite recurs in the next scene, in which Alan describes his first meeting with an actual horse on a beach—the very conversation is about compensating for a lack since Alan initially states that he cannot remember the event at all and then returns to talk through it. In this scene, Alan meets what he calls in the play “a college chap” riding a horse and is given a ride.³⁸ On stage, of course, there is no actual horse: a horseman “carries a riding crop with which he is urging on his invisible horse,” and the memory of Alan himself on the horse is created by Alan sitting on the actor’s shoulders.³⁹ Thus, the narrative image of boy-on-horse is actually represented by the figure of boy-on-man. The film version, however, does feature a horse, and the blurred relationship between boy and man and horse is created by an extension of symbolic color, as the horse’s solid black coat is mirrored by the colorless black outfit worn by the rider. Both texts mention that the horse’s name is Trojan—another mythic image that suggests an assimilation of man *into* animal. At the end of his ride, Alan is pulled from the horse by his frantic parents, a moment that recalls Dora’s earlier statement that only the European riders *falling* from their mounts destroyed the pagan assumption that man and horse were one godlike entity.

The narrative progression of the story makes clear that this initial encounter with a horse and rider represents a primeval ideal that Alan seeks to return to as he grows older. From his mother’s first stories of horse and rider as one person to his meeting with just such a figure (complete with the fall from the horse that Dora’s story offers as part of the mythic pagan encounter with horses), Alan’s emotional development seems permanently tied to the idea that a man and horse need one another to be whole. Dysart’s professional responsibility, of course, is to consider this idea madness—something to be cured—even though his own self-diagnosed failures stem from parallel (if not quite similar) deficiencies and the inability to be complete through partnership with another, in particular, his wife. To Hesther, Dysart describes his disappointing marriage as a union based on the inevitability of distance: “We turned from each other briskly into our separate surgeries. And now there’s a nice brisk nothing...Mentally we are in different parts of the world.”⁴⁰ This description of the most idealized relationship between people reduced now to an image of fruitless separation (in the line before, Dysart admits that he and his wife “did not go in for” children) helps to connect the high-minded philosophical and aesthetic essence of Dysart’s interest in ancient myth to the more tangible and earthly realm of contemporary domestic happiness.⁴¹ Ultimately, the

play's concern is not the inability of humans to join with animals (as for Alan) or of humans to join with gods (as for both Alan and his mother), but of humans to join with one another. Again, the stage play keeps this association clear because its purported animals *are* in fact humans: what the audience hears narrated as human-animal conjugation is seen to be, in fact, human-human. In the film, this alignment—between a mythical man-and-horse union and actual, lived emotional connection between people—remains incomplete. The climactic scene, which attempts to suggest a parallel between human passions and religious ecstasies, must, in the film version, ultimately fail due to its confusion about the true function of the symbolic.

When recounting to Dysart his failed sexual experience with Jill, Alan admits the degree to which the human-horse union in his imagination has replaced the human intercourse he attempted. “When I touched her, I felt him,” Alan explains; “His side, under me, waiting for my hand.”⁴² The language of the reconciliation Alan seeks with Equus after he dismisses Jill suggests a conflation of the language of a religious covenant with that of a marriage: “I am yours and you are mine!”⁴³ It is Dysart, however, in the present time pushing Alan to confront the reality of what he did in that moment, who puts into words for the viewer's benefit what Alan perceives in his relationship with Equus: *failure*—not merely to unite with the horse, but also to exist as a functioning individual man. Moreover, Dysart, speaking as he imagines Equus must in Alan's mind, links that failure not to human actions, but to a perverse, divine judgment: “Forever and ever you will fail. You will see me, and you will fail! The Lord thy God is a jealous God. He sees you, Alan. He sees you forever and ever, Alan. He sees you!”⁴⁴ Alan's subsequent blinding of the horses, of course, is his attempt to prevent this seeing on the part of the Godhead and protect himself from this judgment. He becomes a broken individual due to his refusal to participate in either of the two rituals of joining available to him: to unite sexually with another person or to unite spiritually with his Godhead.

The logic of this act in Alan's mind, and its narrative symbolism in the stage play, depends upon several degrees of displacement. The actors are seen by the audience to represent horses, which are seen by Alan to represent Equus the Godhead, who himself represents the ideal of a primitive union of human agency with ecstatic passion. Shaffer's stage directions in the original play capture the duality at the heart of the scene as well as of the entire text: what one sees as not-horses must represent horse and more-than horse at the same time:

Relentlessly, as this happens, three more horses appear in cones of light: not naturalistic animals like the first three, but dreadful creatures out of nightmare. Their eyes flare--their nostrils flare--their mouths flare. They are archetypal images--judging, punishing, pitiless. They do not halt at the rail, but invade the square. As they trample at him, the boy leaps desperately at them, jumping high and naked in the dark, slashing at their heads with arms upraised.

*The screams increase. The other horses follow into the square. The whole place is filled with cannoning, blinded horses--and the boy dodging among them, avoiding their slashing hooves as best he can. Finally they plunge off into darkness and away out of sight.*⁴⁵

In the first sentences of this passage, it is evident that the “horses” are not only not-real (visibly played by actors) but unreal and, perhaps, surreal. Shaffer's language shifts, however, and at the end describes them as he would describe literal animals; only a nod to the staging (“off into darkness and away out of sight”) admits the illusion that is so crucial to Alan's psychosis.

While the play's audience would not see these stage directions, the language here insists upon the horses' significance (spiritual, psychological) as one achieved through their ability to visually represent “archetypal” judgment and punishment. The real horses in the film, however, cannot represent in this way since they remain mere horses. The scene of their blinding, therefore, is not (as it is in the play) suggestive of ritual sacrifice—except when the camera abruptly leaves the

reality of the scene to focus again on the totemic horse-head ‘scepter’ from the film’s opening scene. Alternating between shots of Alan stabbing at the real horses in the barn and shots of the totem horse’s head dripping blood from its eye sockets, this sequence effectively displaces the meaning of the ritual from the horses themselves. They cannot be, as they are in the play, symbols of the very process of symbolizing—they do not align Alan’s act of savagery with the larger ideals of redemptive sacrifice upon which religion itself claims to be founded. They are instead merely victims, entirely distinct from the man-horse Godhead with which Alan seeks to unite (and which itself replaces the possibility of intimacy with another person in Jill).

The film’s horses are creatures to be seen and, ultimately, pitied for their place in Alan Strang’s tragedy, for they receive his violence while having no role in the imagination that creates it. As Vincent Canby writes in his *New York Times* review of the film, “What once was poetic and mysterious becomes, when seen in this literal detail, banal, anticlimactic.”⁴⁶ This banality is not merely an aesthetic judgment, however: the movie’s depiction of Alan’s desire to unite with *Equus* speaks to a more comprehensive concern for contemporary Western society, one in which Dysart represents a sterile, clinical unwillingness to see as Alan does – but the film leaves the viewer with little to see. Dysart’s final eulogy for his own job – which is to remove Alan’s ecstasy so that he can someday “put the odd 50 pence on the nags, quite forgetting that they ever meant anything more to you than bearers of little profits and little losses” – emphasizes not what horses are but how they appear.⁴⁷ The “voice of *Equus* out of the cave” that he claims “never stops” in his own consciousness is represented on the screen by a brief shot of a white horse staring back at the camera.⁴⁸ This horse, as majestic as it is, remains, like the others in the film, separated from its intended symbolic function; Dysart cries out that he needs “a way of seeing in the dark,” but such actual horses require no privileged way of seeing.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

In summary, it is evident that Peter Shaffer’s seminal play *Equus* requires humans to portray the roles of the horses in order to capture the crucial symbolic themes of the plot. In choosing to forgo any abstraction by using actual horses, Sidney Lumet’s 1977 film adaptation denies audiences the ability to view the animals through Alan’s point of view. For Alan, the horse is an amalgamation of god, man, and beast that embodies the sanctity of Christianity and the sexuality of Greek mythology. His behavior is driven by a desire to commune with the holy, not equine desecration. Casting any actual horses destroys empathy for Alan’s attraction to divine mysticism and categorizes his behavior unwaveringly as wicked. A rejection of the symbolic and fantastical loses the essence of *Equus*.

NOTES

¹ Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (New York: Scribner, 2005), Scene 6.

² Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (New York: Scribner, 2005), “The Horses.”

³ Ibid, “The Chorus.”

⁴ Ibid, “The Horses.”

⁵ Job 39: 19-25 (King James Version).

⁶ Revelation 19: 11-12 (King James Version).

⁷ Shaffer, *Equus*, “The Horses.”

⁸ See, for instance, Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* Volume 9 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 271; Sears A. Eldredge, *Mask Improvisation for Actor Training & Performance: The Compelling Image* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 9-16.

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- ⁹ Shaffer, *Equus*, Scene 7.
- ¹⁰ H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 55 and 128.
- ¹¹ Shaffer, *Equus*, Scene 21.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Shaffer, *Equus*, Scene 13.
- ¹⁴ Shaffer, *Equus*, Scene 19.
- ¹⁵ Shaffer, *Equus*, Scene 21.
- ¹⁶ "Equus: playwright Peter Shaffer interprets its ritual." *Vogue*, February 1975, 136-137 and 192.
- ¹⁷ Michael Kuchwara, "'Equus' Choreography," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 1, 2009.
- ¹⁸ Diana Burton, "IMMORTAL ACHILLES," *Greece and Rome* 63, no. 1 (2016), 1-28.
- ¹⁹ "The Psychiatry Behind Equus I Stratford East," Youtube, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1AJzSLQvRk>.
- ²⁰ *Equus*, directed by Sidney Lumet (1977; Beverly Hills, CA: MGM Home Entertainment Inc., 2003), DVD.
- ²¹ Lumet, *Equus*.
- ²² Lumet, *Equus*; H.S. Versnel notes that in Ancient Greek religious thinking, an emphasis on unity between visions of gods was not absolute: "Both, many and one, maintain a more or less independent position in the conceptual world of the believers." See Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology* (Brill, 2011), 240.
- ²³ Lumet, *Equus*.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Shaffer, *Equus*, Scene 6.
- ³¹ Lumet, *Equus*.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Shaffer, *Equus*, "The Horses."
- ³⁴ Lumet, *Equus*.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Leonhard Schmitz suggested in the 19th century that "Thessalian mountaineers" in ancient times may have inspired tales of centaur-like beings many centuries before the New World scenario that Dora recounts. See Alex Scobie, "The Origins of 'Centaur,'" *Folklore* 89, no 2 (1978): 143.
- ³⁷ That Christian textual history was directly influenced by Pagan sources is a major claim of Mimesis Criticism in contemporary religious studies. See, for instance, Dennis R. MacDonald, "Objections, Reflections, and Anticipation" in *Classical Greek Models of the Gospels and Acts* (Claremont Press, 2018).
- ³⁸ Shaffer, *Equus*, Scene 10.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Lumet, *Equus*.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Shaffer, *Equus*, Scene 34.
- ⁴⁶ Vincent Canby, "'Equus': Film of a Different Color," *The New York Times*, Oct. 17, 1977.
- ⁴⁷ Lumet, *Equus*.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.

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