
BREAKING NEWS

THE EQUUS TRILOGY

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WHY HORSES?

WRITTEN BY DHRITI CHAKRAVARTY

I have chosen the horse as the subject of my project. When I began filming, the most common question I encountered was, “Why horse?” The answer is simple: I have developed a fascination with these heroic yet mysterious creatures. If they possess such a glamorous personality, why should they be relegated to serving humans? This curiosity led me to conceive a series of three interconnected films about horses; each viewed from a different perspective. My goal is to gradually bring together these perspectives into a single, seamless one for my project on time.

Could one imagine an abstract, distant world in which horses and humans converse silently through still images, ultimately hoping to reach an agreement on a shared journey? This journey involves rediscovering themselves and striving to reach a destination, even though they may not be able to, leading to repeated bouts of exhaustion. As creatures, can they ever come together? The underlying quest is about an altogether different mode of communication at the creaturely level.

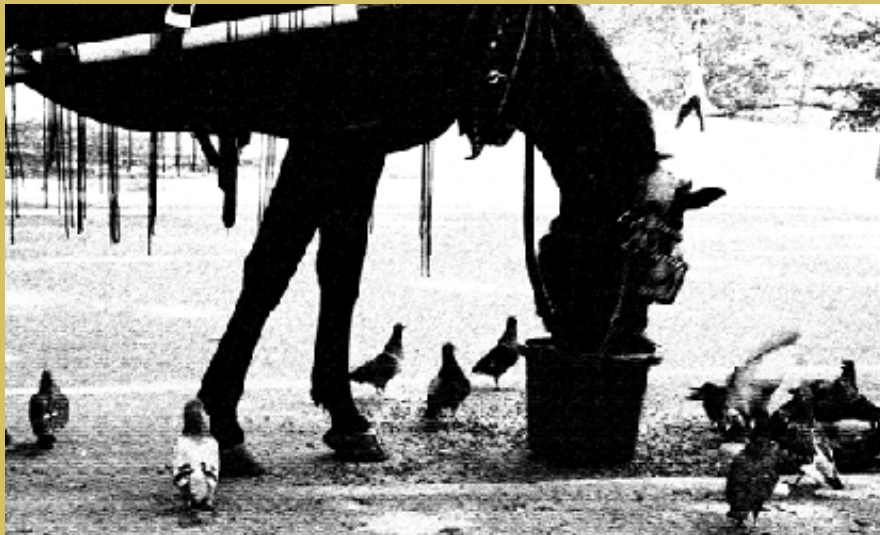
THE SUFFERER
AND
THE SUFFERED

Carriage Era

Horses trudging along in carriages is not a novel idea. It began around the late 17th century and continued until the first decades of the 20th century. This era has often been called the “Carriage Era.” Carriage Rides are still prevalent today as a form of entertainment in cities as well as for transportation in rural regions.

Horses hold a stark form of aestheticism which involves colorful commercial values, equestrian audience, design, and detail. The carriages were considered as an extension of a person, like a form of clothing or appendage. The clothing makes the first impression about the carriage. Meanwhile, the horse is the mere spectator and the sufferer in this man-made contraption. It endures pain and repetitive whiplashes and shares the same fodder as the pigeons. The two species are neighbors as well as best friends. There is a mutual level of understanding between creatures when it comes to survival.

The human beings who have created and evolved the harsh realities of life and own other creatures, perceive this activity as their daily bread and furthermore. Experiencing the harsh realities of life, human beings have become too wise with their behavior and worldly views. The pain endured is the reason that makes them hardened and what I call them, the suffered. Meanwhile, the horse is innocent and yet to experience the pain or is in the process of doing so. The horse is the sufferer, who is too loyal to overpower mankind. The sufferer seeks labour, and labour invites business. The tradition of going on with something so cruel is unbearable, and this piques my interest in specifically questioning the sufferer, “Are you all right?” What does it even mean to be all right? What might we bear in living such a life?



Horses, too, feel affected by their environment that make them the sufferer. While filming, I noticed the moments when the horse and the pigeons shared the same bucket of food, which is not even clean. If human beings are busy having entertainment, where is the promised grass to the horses? Another vignette: one of the horses was galloping as fast as he could to reach the finishing line. He was tired. He was parched, and he had his tongue out. Finally, I tried to revert time to the place which was hitherto unknown to any creature: leisure. Could leisure fix the breach and the unbearable interval that stretches between the suffered and the sufferer?

PERCIEVING
THE
SUFFERER

The first film in the series, *The Ballad of a Horse*, explores my perception of how a horse might feel. This narrative is told from the horse's perspective, highlighting its anguish and exasperation as it offers its labor to humankind.

The horse here is the sufferer who trudges along the carriage and questions its own authority: the human beings. This section is influenced by Robert Bresson's Film *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), as the creator, the camera gaze, and the world perceive the sufferer. It is as if the horse sings a sad folk song for the audience and the passersby. Passersby have daily chores to attend to. Each move in their own world.

Whose Choice is it?

As afflicted slaves to the authorities, do we have a choice? The definition of slavery is known to everyone. It is the practice of forced labor and restricted liberty, which is clearly manifest in the animals in research labs, circuses, and carriage horses. The 13th Amendment addresses the question of human slavery, but what about the slavery of the creatures, all living beings in general?



The horse, as a creature, has its own mind and individuality to which we are oblivious. But he is a being with no choice. The structure against him is ironclad. The die is cast. But is enduring, constant, and perennial? If a creature endures pain, it is bound to revolt someday. But does the slave flinch from revolting since it is bound to a master? The horse's personality or such creaturely personality acknowledges the brutal nature of the very presence of human beings. Endurance continues.

This passive personality of the creatures somewhat disturbs me, for most human beings view them as a form of tool, a commodity. Ready to use. Standing reserve. The creature is typical; taken for granted. So much so that humans keep hurling slang to refer to creatures as dumb beasts of burden. It is perhaps fascinating to realize, especially with humans imagining horses in fairytale legends, as mysterious and loyal beings. The fantasy of the horse has another reality, though—misunderstood, standing aloof and silent.

With the advent of industrialization and technological progress, the gradual shift to engines, cars, and trains began. It is about time creatures go back to where they belong. Can we imagine some closure for the creatures? All creatures have a mind of their own and sheer physical energy, too. Horses are perhaps more intelligent as compared to human beings. Horses are sensitive to the facial expressions or the behavior of a human. It is watchful. The horse with a left eye bias, for it often looks longer at the person, along with such behavioral traits as scratching, sniffing, licking, and chewing.

Should we treat these graceful creatures with another approach, perhaps humans and horses can arrive at some haven, some spot of mutual recognition? Not all the horses were treated like those shown in the film. Some were being fed carrots and were pampered. But we, as human beings, will never understand the internal state of a horse. I imagine them to be someday dreaming of overpowering the human race, and also similarly pampering them. But until that happens, it stays as a dream, and creatures follow a routine of sorts that cannot be escaped from.

Questioning the Authorities

As a film, *The Ballad of a Horse* secretly wonders whether human beings feel threatened by the very “tools” they stand on. The humans can guess that the horse, and any creature for that matter, has a mind of their own. Each can sense the other and each measure the other from a distance. Deep inside, the horse questions his chained existence in contrast to the freedom he had in the open, in wild nature. That is the reason horses secretly dreams of escaping the chains. Someday. Is the hope and dream of escaping a mere transience? Is the sufferer destined to suffer? In the course of making the films, I was given strange and blank stares by the horses. Their eyes were full of melancholy, stating the fact, “This is how it is!”

Why Ballad of a Horse?

Ideally, the title could have been *The Revolt of a Horse*. But the ballad emphasizes on the emotional aspect of the revolt; the melancholia and loss involved in the gap in perception between humans and creatures about their respective states. Horses harbor no anger—as royal and gracious beings, they respect the human race. But there is no reciprocity of such respect from the other side—the human creatures.

The horses’ eyes (gaze) and their behavior tell us that they do not belong here with the carriages. Further conversations with *The Horse’s Companions* tell us the factual details of the horse and their daily experiences with the horse.

The second film in the series: *The Horse's Companion*, explores the experiences of the human and the horse alike. Each confront their primal loneliness and alienated existence. And yet they are buddies. Do they start to apprehend each other through such a sense of prior creaturely equity? Perhaps such an introspection will lead to an agreement or an equilibrium that allows both to thrive in their respective worlds?

This movie is factual and shifts the audience's gaze from the abstract as well from the unknown. Everything is apparent. *The Horse's Companion* feels that the horse is taken care of and it is a normal process of making the horse work in carriages. For the human companion, work for the horse is a necessity.

Gradually, with the passing years, a form of equilibrium or understanding forms between the companion and the horse. Do they truly understand each other or are they living in a myth? Are they intimate strangers to each other?

Having conversations with people change how you perceive other creatures since they live in equally harsh conditions to earn a living along with a horse. The horse revolts against those who find the activity of carriages entertaining. Its revolt is silent.

The Horse's Companion tells me that healthy-looking horses are selected from the stables and farmlands. Afterwards, the hooves are branded and nailed onto the existing hoof by a farrier. Seemingly painful, it is actually a painless process for the horse since the hoof wall is made out of keratin (which is similar to hair and fingernails). It is a process of upkeep. Are humans trying to manicure grace?

He refers to a certain balance between the horse and himself, as the companion. The horse needs to exercise, and trudging along the carriage is a good form of exercise to keep the body fit. In fact, this is the only reasonable way for the horses to be alive when it comes in proximity to the humans. They live at least, unlike those who are taken to the slaughterhouse. What is more brutal—living death or actually being killed?



SCase Study of Horse's Companion

Horse owners like the one I interviewed often try to exaggerate the fact that their horse owes them more, since they love the gracious beings. And rightly so! The horse's name, he said, was Sunny. The companion stroked the horse as he called out his name: "Sunny". Sunny looked back at his owner since he identified with the love and care that was given. To support the above incident further, a study was done by Matt Stone, a researcher of psychology. Stone demonstrated that when presented with a choice, privately-owned horses spent more time on the side of the pen with their owner than with an unfamiliar person. Horses, as such studies suggest, need human interaction to function. It is a give-and-take relationship between the two. I felt after conversing with the owner of the horse, the horse lives in a similar manner like the man himself. The revolt from the horse, a working animal, would be futile if he destroys the "companion" completely. The horse would not be able to live without the man and vice-versa. The complexity come from the fact that each is circumspect. Love and cruelty are intertwined. It is interesting to see the owner being successful in bringing the horse closer to his personal life, even if the horse belongs to a public space, the carriage. How can the owner make something public and convert that back into private? The horse, again, is a mere observer, and he just listens to what his fellow human being wants to tell me, the artist, and to my camera.

ROMANTICISM & THE ESCAPE

The third project in the series is named The Escape. After making an initial reckoning with the respective positions of the human companion and the horse, it becomes evident that neither emerges as the winner. This film illustrates their shared desire to escape their exacting, laborious lives. The narrative unfolds in an abstract setting known as the Jungle, where a young girl searches for someone and waits in anticipation. As the scenes unfold, she eventually meets the horse, and together they ride away, seeking an unknown destination. Ultimately, their escape concludes with both of them feeling exhausted and falling asleep.



Romanticism as a form of Escape

"We have been too harsh on ourselves."

The Romantic idea is the ideal form of escape: from oppressive as well as imperial powers. The horse is often replicated from an imperial standpoint point starting from wars, battles, and now entertainment. We have been too harsh on ourselves. The horse is broken, and we are alienated. He is tired of worldly pleasures, and he is tired of worldly consumption. Romanticism steers both the horse and the guide/ sufferer/ companion towards the search for the sublime, far distanced from these times. The world has been overpowered by another form of escape, which is social media and technology. Such a living is the complete opposite of natural existence, for it is where data is being fed at every second and minute for the public to consume.

Can there be a return to Romantic space and time through technology?

There is a term called technoromatics which delves into the idea of sublime in the context of technology. But the romantic idea and technology have often been at odds with each other. The original notion of techne—to 'reveal' or 'bring forth' is being ignored by modern forms of technological innovations.

Carriage Riding has been one of the primitive experiences that makes it more immersive. It is a slower pace of travel that gives access to natural settings. But whether it is an immersive experience for the horse is something to think about. Does the horse desire such immersion? It is hard, physical labour for him. Therefore, The Escape tries to bring a sense of selfhood back into both protagonists—man and the beast of burden. Renewed and rediscovered after a life-long journey with each other. The Escape breaks free of the past, future and present. It is about re-inspecting the sublime that was long gone. The sublime in nature is what would bring wonder back to the species and make both protagonists experience a familiar bond again. The bond of the vulnerable creatures.

This abundant expanse of nature lets both the suffered and the sufferer know this is freedom. This is their abode. So, in restfulness and perpetual leisure they stay in The Escape. Forever.



Sublimity in relation to time

In simple terms, the sublime is the quality of being awed and overwhelmed by the grand and the majestic. But along with this grandness, there is an element of being lost and terrified. It is, what one would call a delightful horror. This return to nature in The Escape is what brings the idea of wanting to be lost comes into play.

There is an interesting link between what is lost and what is found in this escape. It is evident when you want to search for the sublime in woods, you do not want to leave simply because of the grandeur it entails. This grandeur stops time entirely and the simple man or the individual might stop questioning. It lingers. It simple stays.



Dangers of Sublimation & Critique of The Escape

When an individual is completely taken by the stark and mysterious forms within nature, they take a pause. A strange utopia beckons, away from the world as seen and felt. Imagination shapes an individual, and one can hope that over time the guide/ angel has found peace in this abode? Is reality more demanding? Or is imagination itself the creaturely abode?

And yet, reality must be confronted. In a way, The Escape may seem to be a hypothetical solution that refuses to see ordinary truth. But by giving in to the sublime and loving it, the truth begins to shine brighter, and we return to The Ballad of a Horse. The essence of the sublime lies in considering and reconsidering such a possibility.

Also, The Escape has been conceived to consider the mystery and variations within the sublime. As mentioned before, there are infinite combinations that portray the sublime. But every escape is a tool or even a manipulation to understand the other, because some things cannot be known in obvious reality until imagined. Imagination takes us to a deeper and mysterious reality.

After The Escape

After The Escape, will there be a return? Though the final film takes us to a peaceful and perpetual abode, The Escape was always a mode of denial against society and empirical truth. The three movies of the trilogy are the three perspectives and three different styles to look at the plight of horses, and to directly address the question of the limitation of free will and choice. Each film feeds into the other.

The Ballad of a Horse looks at the predicament from the question from the perspective of the horse and addresses the animal abuse and the freedom of the owner. The situation is placed before the viewers, without any platitudes. The Horse's Companion depicts the condition from the perspective of the companion and emphasize how both the horse and the companion actually share their plight and stand at the same crossroad. There is a primordial equity among creatures. The Escape drives home the truth as to how both the human being who has suffered, and the creature who is currently suffering, wish to live an impossible dream that no one has yet witnessed.

