

TOGETHER TO KNOW: IN SEARCH FOR EQUUS SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Com Scire (2020) is a collaborative art project with horses. The project searches for interspecies spiritual experience and knowledge-production through interspecies spiritual technology represented by a horse-size mirror. This paper compiles observations and learnings from the process of creating *Com Scire* with horses on Toiska farm, Ilmajoki, Finland. The research question evolves from asking what a horse sees in the mirror and can this be a spiritual experience for the horse? *Com Scire* is a part of a broader artistic research process that studies and develops interspecies, empathic, and performative rituals.

KEYWORDS

interspecies, spiritual
experience, mirror test for
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INTRODUCTION

I worked with the Com Scire art project at the Toiska farm in Ilmajoki, Finland, in 2020. Toiska provides social services for families and is a greencare farm. Com Scire involved building a horse-sized mirror, which was a setup for filming a video installation on the grounds of the farm. The project was initiated by an exhibition called *Millaista on olla eläin?* (What is it like to be an animal?) organized by Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2020. The exhibition was based on the ideas presented in Helena Telkänranta's book (2019), carrying the same name as the exhibition. Eight artists were given a chapter in the book to work with and to create an art project inspired by the chapter. The chapter I focused on, explored the consciousness of other-than-human animals. I became particularly interested in the self-awareness of other-than-human, which can be researched with Gordon Gallup's test for Mirror Self-Recognition (MSR) (Gallup, 1970). Self-awareness is one of the definitions for consciousness, implying that an individual has consciousness and knowledge of their character and feelings (Telkänranta, 2019). The test for MSR examines if one can see themselves in the mirror. If it is evident they do, they are considered to have self-awareness.

When looking at planet Earth, most likely, the largest reflecting surface is water. For instance, it was believed in the cultures of the Baltic Sea region that there was a gateway to other worlds on the edge of the mirroring image of a rock and its reflection on the water's surface. For this reason, the shaman could slip through this portal to another transcendent, upside-down world. In Finnish language, this space or place is called *lovi* and the shaman fell into *lovi* in the shape of another animal or was safeguarded by them (Willamo & Miettinen, 2008). Also, in the Greek myth of Narcissus, the mirror appears to be a surface of water, and the Mongolian shamans carry glass mirrors as these represent the visual aid between life and after-life (Humphrey, 2007). Thus, reflections and mirrors carry deeper meanings than just checking on one's appearance. During the artistic and research process initiated in 2019, I was led to contemplate if a mirror could be a symbol of a gate or an opening to travel in between the worlds as well as a device for facilitating a spiritual experience.

In this paper, I research the possibility of spiritual experiences with horses through artistic processes carried out by the mirror. The term spirituality

can be described in multiple ways, and it is often associated with religious practices or institutions. However, there is a growing discourse of spirituality studies, which can be defined by a broader umbrella of approaches by humans searching for meaning or looking for the sacred in their lives (Puchalski & Ferrell, 2022). According to Puchalski and Ferrel, spirituality without religion can be defined as a relationship to transcendence, which can be "different kinds of concepts of how humans see themselves in the world and in relation to something outside of themselves" (p. 21). Another example by Eric Yang (2018) is that spiritual experiences can also involve unity with the cosmos or a perspectival shift.



Figure 1. Still image from Com Scire video. Photo by Elina Teitti/Kunsthalle Seinäjoki.

It is not possible to objectively know how the horses see themselves in this world or perceive themselves in a mirror, nor is it perhaps feasible to compare these experiences to the ones humans experience. However, according to Marc Bekoff (2008), other animals have emotions, morals, and empathy like human animals. As early as 1872, Charles Darwin wrote the *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. In this book, Darwin compared facial expressions of humans and other-than-human animals, studying what kind of emotions these expressions represent. Based on these examples and the research of various other scholars, it is defined that most species have emotions and consciousness. It could be further argued that they might have spiritual experiences, too, even if they were not the same as humans.

Conservation enthusiast and scientist Jane Goodall has observed chimpanzees in the Gombe National

Park in Tanzania. In a video made by the Jane Goodall Institute, a chimpanzee climbs on top of a waterfall with aroused hair, then throws rocks and sticks into the flow of water while stepping from side to side rhythmically, as if dancing. Goodall (JGI Web Shorts, 2011) explains that this kind of dance happens when the chimpanzees are at the waterfall. Apparently, heavy rainstorms can also cause this behavior. Goodall (2005) translates that this could be the chimpanzees experiencing awe of nature and engaging in a ritual to express it. After ten to fifteen-minute of movements that can be interpreted as a dance, the chimpanzee sits by the water, silently looking at it.

Another example of a spiritual experience would be elephants grieving their deceased family members. Arguably, processing the death of another and longing for them can be defined as a spiritual experience where the physical or biological existence of another has observably changed. There are observations where an elephant herd covers their dead herd member, or an elephant mother carries their deceased baby for distances before abandoning the body (Safina, 2015). There is also evidence that African elephants recognize elephant remains, such as skulls and ivory, and are interested in studying them. They do not express similar interest in the remains of other large terrestrial mammals and also do not seem to recognize the bones even if these are from their close relative species, which indicates that they are generally only interested in the remains of their own species (McComb et al., 2006).

Although it is not possible to know if horses have spiritual experiences, and if so, what kinds of environmental or other incidents would trigger these, they have been considered important from the human spiritual perspective in many cultures. For instance, horses have been fortune tellers in special ceremonies and cared for by the priests in the temples of Early Medieval Pomerania. This practice is called hippomancy (Makowiecki et al., 2022). Another example is, according to the *Poetic Edda* in Norse mythology, a shape-shifting god Loki, in the form of a mare, gave birth to an eight-legged horse Sleipnir. Sleipnir was the best horse and would carry Odin. Apparently, Sleipnir could also move in between different worlds (Larrington 1999). In contemporary Western culture, horses are a part of meditation practices with humans. Several stables offer meditation with horses, Toiska farm being one of them with their mindfulness program with

horses. Meditation has been studied through the range of physiological and cognitive effects as a secular practice. However, these effects are secondary in the Eastern and Buddhist traditions from which the meditation is drawn. The primary aim of meditation in these traditions is spiritual transformation, thus spiritual experience (Buttle, 2020).

BACKGROUND FOR USING THE MIRROR AS A DEVICE TO STUDY A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

In the Mirror Self-Recognition (MSR) experiment, the tested individual is placed in front of a mirror. For the experiment, colored markings are placed in parts of the body that can only be seen from the mirror, not otherwise. For some species, these markings can also be scent markings, depending on the senses most important to the species. If the individual recognizes the marking when looking at their reflection in the mirror, and they express this recognition in some way, for example, by touching the mark, they are speculated to have self-awareness (Gallup, 1970). Some primates, including humans, and dolphins, elephants, orcas, magpies, and some fish, are considered to have passed the mirror test and, thus arguably have self-awareness (Telkänranta, 2019).

I shared my idea of building a horse-sized mirror and working with the concept of a possible spiritual experience with the horses with Helena Telkänranta (H. Telkänranta, personal communication, March 16, 2021). Telkänranta's comment was straightforward: She explained that horses are not considered to pass the mirror self-recognition test. According to her, species having high cognitive skills and intelligence would notice themselves in the mirror. Horses, on the other hand, are prey animals and require less intelligence than predators, who need to plan and strategize more to feed themselves. According to Telkänranta, horses do not need to be intelligent to eat grass because the grass does not escape. She also emphasized that this is the contemporary scientific knowledge about the issue, and it might change as knowledge evolves and develops.

Regardless of Telkänranta's hesitation, I decided to continue with my artistic proposal for testing for mirror self-recognition and especially ponder a mirror as an interspecies spiritual, technological device. In retrospect, it should be noted that by the time *Com Scire* was exhibited in 2020, research was conducted to establish that horses actually do

see themselves in a mirror and, thus, are considered to have self-awareness (Baragli et al., 2021).

THE PROCESS OF COM SCIRE

It was unknown if Toiska farm horses had seen mirrors or mirroring surfaces before. The horse herd at Toiska farm consists of more than ten horses with different backgrounds. They are friends and therapy partners for the children living on the farm. However, according to the mirror test protocol, the horses should not have seen mirrors before, though it is recognized that most horses might have seen their reflection in the water when drinking. There is a pond in the paddock at the Toiska farm. Another important difference between the mirror test and *Com Scire* was that I did not paint any marks on the horses that they were expected to notice with the help of a mirror. Albeit the marking is an important measure in the MSR test, it was not needed in *Com Scire* because the premise was that horses likely experience something by the mirror. For this reason, self-awareness did not need to be justified and evidenced.

A large mirror was built on the side of the paddock where the horses were able to approach and touch it. It was impossible to know beforehand how the horses would react to it, for instance some of them could consider the reflection to be another individual, possibly a hostile horse, and therefore, attack the mirror. Thus, it was important to make the mirror as safe as possible and not use glass in the construction, which could break into sharp, dangerous pieces. The safer acrylic mirror did not have as clear reflection, but I also knew that the Mongolian shamans used cloudier mirrors to avoid too-powerful reflections (Humphrey, 2007). According to the personnel working on the Toiska farm, it was not very likely that any of the horses would attack the mirror as they were all rather calm and aware of their position in the herd, which consequently makes them feel safe.

I placed my video camera recording the encounters in a position that captured the horses' reactions with the mirror. The reflective surface was covered with clothes during the *setup* of the mirrors to prevent the horses from seeing themselves before the start of the experiment. Still, they were able to approach the installation and get acquainted with its structure, materials, smell, and size.

BY THE MIRROR

The horses were drinking from the pond next to the mirror when it was revealed to them. The whole herd immediately focused their attention on it, even though they continued sipping the water. Leo, the herd leader, decided to walk away from the mirror, but the other herd members wanted to come close to it. Some of the activities the horses performed in front of the mirror were similar to what Baragli and their colleagues (Baragli et al., 2021) observed in their mirror self-recognition test for horses. These actions are called contingency behavior, which means that the horses see their reflection and check from behind the mirror if there is another horse, perform peek-a-boos while also making friendly greeting sounds to their reflections. They also chewed and stuck their tongue out, licked the mirror, and scratched themselves or the other members of the herd (Figure 2). One of the horses, Jussi, also stepped rhythmically in front of the mirror, as if he was experimenting whether it was possible to play with it. According to Baragli and their colleagues, these kinds of contingency behaviors lead to self-recognition.



Figure 2. Horse mirror set-up in Toiska, summer 2020. Leo and Luna are in the front. Photo by Mari Keski-Korsu.

The length of time the horses were by the mirror was significantly longer compared to the usual thirty minutes in the MSR test. After the first reactions regarding the mirror, the horses stopped doing anything particular with it, and stood and looked at their reflection, appearing to be calm. They stood sideways towards the mirror. I assume this was because horses see better to their sides than straightforward in front of them. As I was filming, I would stand close by, but in the end, even more I was standing with them in front of the mirror, observing myself and the horses. The mirror

became part of the herd's routine: They would look at it on their way to the further parts of the large paddock, then they would come closer to drink from the pond, and when they went back to the stables to be fed or to spend time with the children, they would again peek at the mirror. Through the observation it became clear that the herd leader Leo started to dominate the time by the mirror; he pushed the other horses away from the mirror and spent a lot of time in front of it observing himself. There was a strong sense of meditative calmness and peace with this whole process. The peacefulness of the interaction with the mirror was cut occasionally by a car sound from the road, but otherwise only the deep breathing sound of the horses and the swish of their tails to hush away flies were present as they were looking at their reflections. Most of the meditation practices of humans include focusing on breathing, emotions of compassion or loving-kindness. Common to all these techniques is that they emphasize awareness of the present moment (Behan, 2020). It seemed that the horses had a sense of awareness of the present moment observing their mirror image calmly, sometimes almost sleeping as well.

INSTALLATIONS

Com Scire was exhibited as a video installation that captured the moments in front of the mirror described in this paper (Figure 3). The video was projected on a wall-sized mirror, and another mirror of the same size was placed opposing it in the space. These mirrors were the same ones used for filming the artwork. The installation invited the viewers to stand in between the mirrors in a position that allowed them to see themselves in the



Figure 3. *Com Scire*, installation in Kunsthalle Seinäjoki. Photo by Jenni Latva / Kunsthalle Seinäjoki

mirrors with the horses. The horses in the video appeared large in the space because the space was rather small compared to the projected large-sized horses. After the exhibition, the mirrors were transported back to the Toiska farm, and stayed in the horse paddock as a permanent installation.

FINDINGS

Mirror as a device for this project has its basis in the reflection in water. This reflection of oneself could be an experience that most animal species living on land share, and arguably, both humans and horses can see their reflection in the water. As presented in this paper, there are spiritual experiences related to mirrors and reflecting surfaces among humans, but it is impossible to know what kind of perspective the horses have and whether they experience something in front of the mirror comparable to humans. However, the question that perplexes me as an artist and a researcher remains: Why did the horses want to keep looking at the reflection of themselves and the surrounding environment, and why was this interaction so intensive, lasting for a long time? The horses appeared to choose to focus on their reflection and to explore their self-awareness, as previously explained in the MSR test through the mirror medium. I find it reasonable to contemplate that perhaps they were pondering how they see themselves in the environment and how they appear in relation to other members of their herd as they were scratching each other.

Comparing humans and horses and their potential spiritual experiences, as well as searching for similarities between them, might open new explorations for interspecies collaboration. Even when humans can not objectively understand the horses' perspective and their experience of the world, I argue it is possible to develop empathy and imagine sensibly with them. I also propose that this could happen through meditation, as the experience with the horses in *Com Scire* was seemingly meditative, with the help of the mirror. There is research conducted that suggests mice can experience a similar reduction of anxiety as humans when meditating. In the study, the mice were treated with pulses of light that triggered similar brain activity as meditation in humans (Weible et al., 2017). The research has its limitations considering that the other-than-humans do not necessarily make an intentional choice to meditate or do not generally have the concept of meditation. However, meditation can be considered a secular or spiritual experience, and it is rare for a human spiritual practitioner to have

meditation as the only element of focus, but the practice involves *an* ethical and philosophical system (Buttle, 2020). Thus, I would find it intriguing to speculate on what kind of ethical or philosophical system through meditation with horses as inter-species collaboration and co-breathing could be imagined in the future.

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