

The Spontaneous Horse

Understanding How to Look at the Horse without Expectations

Francesco De Giorgio - Jose Schoorl

Learning Horse, Institute for Zooanthropology

doi: 10.7358/rela-2014-001-degi

thelearninghorse@gmail.com

sparta.formazione@gmail.com

As horses are often seen as anxious, unpredictable animals, the fear to let them express themselves, convinced that this might be dangerous and hurt themselves, or human involved, in unknown situations, actually makes them anxious and unpredictable animals. Which is a strange vicious circle. For example, the fear off being bitten by a horse makes us push away their head every time they try to understand us by smelling us from close by or exploring us with their lips. The pushing or even harsher actions transform that same intention for understanding into a more tensed situation of misunderstanding from the horse's point of view. For the same reason we often deny them their social behaviour.

In our society horses live too often in social isolation, so they can't express themselves through social behaviour and this is something that by now we all know (even if most horses continue to live that way). They learn to live a life in which they wait for human commands, forgetting that they have their own true intention and unique interests. But even when they live with other horses, the groups are often not permanent, not familiar or familiar-like. With a lot of changing dynamics in the group, their interaction is often focused on defensive behaviour and not exactly social, instead of finding trust in their herd companions to express themselves in their natural cognitive way, for example by showing affiliative behaviour, moving as a herd, taking each other into account in a proactive way. What humans often see are the reactive behaviours as for example dominance/leadership dynamics, which in family or family-like groups actually happen only in rare cases, not in random daily routine. Social behaviours are subtle, small gestures and often not much visible behaviours that have an important cohesive function for a herd. It is much more than mutual grooming, which

is an expressing that can also be part of an attempt to reduce tension. It is, for example, observing each other and the herd dynamics, looking from a distance while eating grass, pre-conflict behaviour to avoid tension, smelling each other to better understand a certain situation. Another very important group of spontaneous behaviours is investigative/explorative behaviour.

Fundamental for the correct development of cognitive functions. In fact, people often use techniques, methods and tools that deprive the horse of the opportunity to explore his reference context, other horses, the human and himself. For example when we ask the horse to pay attention to us, while we are actually distracting the horse from the situation the horse self was focussed on. Also some grooming approaches as clipping the horse's vibrissae (whiskers), depriving the horse to explore in appropriate way, as they are important for the sensory receptors, using his spontaneous behaviours and so inducing stress factors, in the same time reducing welfare. Spontaneous behaviours are important for the horse in order to develop a cognitive dialogue. Horses that are used to reactive/defensive behaviour (often to suppression of spontaneous behaviours) show tension in their behaviour, even in very small gestures, give us, human, a tensed feeling. A feeling we are not always aware of in a conscious way. The reduction of the spontaneous behaviour often happens already during the initial training of young horses. In these moments the horses lives a strong reduction of their natural spontaneous behaviours to improve behaviour functional for human anthropocentric desires. Operant conditioning applied during these moments (with negative or positive reinforcement) drastically reduce spontaneous behaviours and with that reduce equine welfare. The reactive behaviours that are trained instead are too often mistaken for free choice behaviour in the human interaction. For example, running towards a person in a paddock with food-expectations is not a free choice. Following a human being in a join up, and other command based behaviours, are not free choices. The horse displays macro behaviours that please us from an anthropocentric point of view, but at the same time show micro signals of internal conflict.

In the work as facilitator, working on and being aware of an authentic relationship is very important to further develop relationship and facilitator skills, so people can life a pure and sound interaction. In the zooanthropologic approach, especially when working as a facilitator in the horse-human interaction, it is fundamental to give the horse the possibility to express his own world and spontaneous behaviour. When we, as human, pay attention to the horse and create room for his expressiveness we start an inter-species relationship. Learning to be curious and open towards the expression of the



other, without losing yourself, but understanding how to become agile in connecting to the world and connecting with yourself is fundamental for sound social-emotional experiences in a society where focus is more on performance than on relationships. Both human and horse should have to room to understand their internal motivation, rather than responding to desired behaviour from the context we are living in. In a different

way, the zooanthropologic approach gives the opportunity to a horse to create their own mental map as social map, learning map, the human-horse relationship map, using their own mental and physical capacities, without being conditioned, as behaviour is an expression of a state of mind and not the result of direct automatic external or internal stimuli. Attention, awareness, relaxation, contact and social interaction are keywords in a spontaneous interaction.