

# Popular Horse Stories and the Invention of the Contemporary Human-Horse Relationship through an Alter Ego Paradigm

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**Abstract:** From the end of the 19th to the dawn of the 20th century, technological development rendered the use of horse as source of energy and power progressively obsolete, promoting the displacement of its age-old utilitarian functions (transportation, work and war) as well as its social functions as a marker of distinction. Nonetheless, the advent of leisure society encouraged a redefinition of the horse and its social representations, a process spearheaded by the popular arts, especially those meant for child and youth audiences. The purpose of this article is two-fold. The first is to promote an understanding of the historical role of popular arts (literature, movies) in the evolution of the conceptualization of human-horse relationship and the concomitant entrance of horse riding into leisure society, marked by dual processes turning it into an ever-more female and youth-oriented practice. The second is to examine the actual influence of the popular equine arts and the alter ego horse paradigm that they have created on riders' current practices. The latter are examined in relation to diverse criteria such as age, gender, type of riding, length of experience, social status and nationality.

**Key words:** Human-horse relations, alter ego, popular arts, children and youth, feminization.

The horse made its mark on Western civilization, from Antiquity to the end of the Ancien Régime, through its ancestral utilitarian functions—transportation, work and war—and the symbolic functions of social distinction [1-3]. Nonetheless, the social revolution that engulfed France and Europe at the end of the 18th century and was intensified by the 19th century industrial revolution also unsettled ancestral mythology and functions linked to the horse. As technological development rendered the use of the horse power progressively obsolete, the birth of leisure society awarded the equine a new place among humans. Indeed, it allowed a reinvention of the symbols of horse through popular forms of art and culture, more particularly the emerging juvenile ones.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the historic transformation of the horse in the West, in order to understand the patterns that underpin this process, their origins and their influence on contemporary practice. Thus, the objectives of this study are twofold. First, we seek an understanding of how popular art and media (literature, movies) contribute to the symbolic evolution of the human-horse relationship as it accompanies the entrance of horses and riding into leisure society, a process beginning in the late 19th century. Second, we look at the current influence of the arts and popular culture on today's riders<sup>1</sup>. This includes an examination of their representations and practices, as linked to diverse criteria such as age, gender, type of riding, length of practice, professional activity, social status and nationality.

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<sup>1</sup> I have opted here for the term “popular culture” rather than “mass culture”, given the ambiguity of the term of “mass” and its possibly pejorative connotation as a concept that dehumanizes people, reducing them to an indistinct “mass”.

My methodology is based on analysis of secondary and primary data. First, I studied the revolution in the way the horse is conceptualized, through its representations. This was achieved through a pluri-discipline literature review and the study of 162 works of popular art and literature, from Europe (France, UK, Ireland, Norway, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Hollande), North America (USA, Canada), Australia and South Africa, which included 60 books, 92 films, and 10 TV series. These works all share the trait that I have identified as *equine stories*, that is, their plot involves one or several horses, raised to the rank of main characters. They were selected through the crossing of systematic research carried out via several internet search engines. Although this procedure allowed us to identify an important number of works, and especially the most famous, it cannot claim to be exhaustive, given the existing volume of production. Furthermore, my research focuses largely on works in French, since France is my major site of research, and works in English (produced in English or translated into English), given their international spread. In this context, movies made for the television have been omitted as the comics, since contrary to books, cinema or TV series, they are rarely translated and thus often lack of international influence. Yet without being exhaustive, this research does nonetheless allow us to understand the invention of a new paradigm of the horse, and one that positions itself within global patterns of societal evolution.

Therefore, in order to analyze the influence of this new conceptualization of the horse, I began by looking at the evolution of contemporary riding, using France for a case study put together through the analysis of official French statistical data. I then went on to study the influence of equine stories and the alter ego horse paradigm that they have created on contemporary human-horse relations, through an international inquiry that I supervised, carried out between January 2013 and December 2016, which included 274 riders from 18 to 70 years old, coming from 20 countries: France, the

United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Austria, Estonia, Croatia, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, New Caledonia, Colombia, Brazil.

This international survey was carried out through several equestrian networks, using the criteria that respondents must love horses enough to devote some or all of their work (or future work, in the case of students) to the equine sector. The networks I mobilized here include a *student network* (Saumur—University of Angers, the equine studies campus, which is home to four programs specializing in the equine sectors at Bachelor and Master's Levels); *academic networks* (EqRn—the Equine Research Network-; EAAP—the European Association for Animal Sciences; IFCE—The French Institute for Horse and Horse Riding and the Nordic Sport Sciences Forum) as well as *professionals networks* (managers of riding schools, breeders, professionals of equestrian tourism, professional of equestrian medias). My inquiry consisted of a questionnaire with a set of 39 questions focusing on riders' knowledge of equine works and the influence that they believe the latter have had on their riding and relation to horses. The present study extends analyses that I published in 2015 and 2017 on the influence of art on contemporary human-horse relation and representation.

## **1. Looking at How Modes of Feeling Change, through the Prism of Literature for Children and Youth**

### *1.1 The Horse in the Western Imagination and the Advent of Leisure Society*

The horse has been a fundamental element in the evolution of Western civilization [4, 5], and this includes the changing ways in which it has been imagined [6]. Historically, the equine was associated with the dominant classes and linked to symbols of the masculine and the virile, as an extension of the armed and elegant body of the nobility [1-3]. During the 19th century, the dawn of the contemporary era, the horse

came to be represented in more comforting ways; the Romantics were fascinated by horses, which they saw as a fragile link suspended between the wild and the civilized [7]. If we look at them again through the prism of the *Sublime*, we will see how, through the brushstrokes of such masters as Géricault, Delacroix, Crane (theme of the wild horse struggling against beasts of prey or the elements) but also De Dreux, Degas, Carles Vernet and Meissonnier (portraying equines in hunting, race course and battle scenes) horses were perceived as an “*ideogram of energy*” [8]. At the heart of an epoch shaken by political and social revolutions, these artists celebrated the horse as an allegory of *liberated power*, successor to one of *domesticated power*, product of the preceding century<sup>2</sup> [7].

The turn of the century, however, inaugurated a new era. As the wars and revolts associated with the entrenchment of the Republic began to subside—quite notably so in France—a more peaceful period set in, as bourgeois and industrial society established their hegemony [9, 10]. New economic rhythms took over, as well as innovating relations of time and space that opened the doors to tourism and leisure among the more privileged [11-16]. Relationships with the Other, and with children in particular, were also transformed. From the 18th century onward, the latter were most definitely benefitted by newly emergent interests, particularly in terms of their education which was posed as “*geared toward their free physical and psychological development*” [17] as so notably encouraged through Rousseau’s work, *Emile ou de l’Education* (1762). Nonetheless, it was over the course of the 19th century, with the establishment of better birth control in privileged families, that a new degree of emotional connection to the desired and even pampered child emerged. Thus, the contemporary era

broke with the *Ancien Regime* tradition in which “*the specificities of childhood and adolescence were largely ignored*” [17].

This twofold context which valorized leisure and looked at childhood in a new light favored the emergence of an innovating literary genre destined to youth. In France, the first book to be considered as written for a young audience was published in 1818 under the title, *Le Robinson de douze ans*; its author, Madame Mallès de Beaulieu, related the fictitious adventures of a 13 year old boy who is shipwrecked on a deserted island, until he again finds his mother [18]. However, it was not until midcentury that a veritable genre of children’s literature came into being, most notably with Louis Hachette’s 1853 creation of the series *Livres Illustrés pour les Enfants*, published by his Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer, and made easy to recognize by a characteristic pink cover [19]. In Great Britain, the birth of illustrated children’s literature was similarly marked, with the appearance of the famous *Tom Brown’s School Days* (Thomas Hughes, 1857), *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Lewis Carroll, 1865), *The Princess and the Goblin* (George MacDonald, 1872); *Treasure Island* (Robert Louis Stevenson, 1883), *The Jungle Book* (Rudyard Kipling, 1894); and *Peter Pan and Wendy* (J. M. Barrie, 1911). Other equally celebrated early works of children’s literature were *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Mark Twain, 1876, USA); *Heidi* (Johanna Spyri, 1880, Switzerland) and *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (Carlo Collodi, 1883, Italy).

This emergent children’s literature [20] became an essential vector for the expression and dissemination of the new emotional attributes attached to the horse. This was of course part of larger process of awarding greater status to animals, to which Rousseau again had contributed a century earlier through the paradigm of our “*lesser brothers*” that led to the notion of the “*pet*” or companion animal, first applied to cats and dogs [16, 21]. Then horses were removed from a utilitarian logic and put into a new position that was defined through emotional relations. This subversion of older forms of

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<sup>2</sup> The theme of “*domesticated power*” persists on the canvases of certain painters, immortalizing the role of draft horses (Rosa Bonheur, Achille Giroux, John Constable...), but this type of representation becomes less frequent in the XIXth century (Pickel-Chevalier and Grefe, 2015).

representation found its landmark in Anna Sewell's 1877 novel "*Black Beauty, the Autobiography of a Horse*" [7]. A book meant primarily for children, it addressed the adult world not only through its denunciation of the mistreatment of horses, but also of the working classes in the Victorian England. The book, a success from the moment it came out, began to unsettle traditional representations of the horse. Indeed, *Black Beauty* redefined the horse, no longer as a signifier of nobility or the wild Sublime, but rather as the understanding, faithful and courageous companion of man, and most particularly, of children. Through the initiation journey of an animal who was passed from one family to another—and running the full course of situations that were for better or for worse—Sewell invented a love story between boy and horse. Furthermore, it was to this boy (Joe), now an adult man that the horse returned, at the book's end. It is important to note that this book sowed the seeds of a highly idealized rapport between animal—simultaneously strong, courageous and vulnerable (becoming ill and requiring care and protection)—and child, who must face his own difficulties and the trials and tribulations of coming of age.

At the same time that this English literary innovation was taking place, horses were also assuming a new position in American popular culture. Although the frontier disappeared from the United States' geographical space around 1890, it quickly became an important mythical space [22, 23]. The notion of the American nation-state was more usefully bolstered by identities linked to the Wild West than through appeals to the values of the North or the South in a country marked by the still-open wounds of the Civil War [24, 25]. Thus, the "winning of the West" came to symbolize the taming of the wild and its integration into the ecumene, inducing forms of memory selection [26-28] conducive to the "invention of tradition" [3, 29-33]. Within this context, horses took on an important role. From the end of the 19th century, horses became an essential element in way the winning

of the West was performed and represented in popular culture, portrayed as the faithful companion of the lonely cowboy who was, in turn, an allegory of the self-made man [34]. Spectacles such as *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (1882-1912), children's literature including Stanley Wood's comic strips and the emerging film industry all celebrated the horse, invoking the image of the centaur. Nonetheless, this omnipresence of the horse within American history as it was invented was also paradoxical, insofar as it relegated the horse to a subaltern position as an extension of the cowboy's body.

It was not until 49 years after Anna Sewell's novel established a model for equine representation that the horse finally attained the position of "subject" through the work of an American author. In 1926, Will James published "*Smokey the Cow Horse*" which on the one hand could be considered a novel of the Old West, yet on the other, set a new record as "written from the point of view of a horse" born into the freedom of the country's wide open spaces. Smokey's story is also the tale of his encounter with men: he learns to trust through his first master, and encounters later violence and rebellion through those who have stolen him; finally, he finds renewed affection and loyalty through his first master who comes back to save him. The book, in allegedly telling a story from an animal's point of view, picked up on a twofold heritage: *Black Beauty*, written into an American context—the initiation journey—and Jack London's American tale, *White Fang* (1906). The latter text purported a new philosophy, according to which wild animals were not to be tamed through violence but through love and respect for their integrity<sup>3</sup>. Thus, at the dawn of 20th century, American literature began to imagine wild or untamed animals (wolves, mustangs) as not to be submitted to the will of man by force, but to be won over patiently, without breaking their spirit. Although Will James' work did not become as famous as Jack

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<sup>3</sup> This revolutionary approach initially became the object of virulent criticism. U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt attacked it for an anthropomorphism producing a false notion of nature.

London's<sup>4</sup>, it was greeted with enthusiasm and success, winning the prestigious Newberry Medal Children's Literature Prize in 1927. It underwent three adaptations for the movie screen, in 1933, 1946 and 1966<sup>5</sup>. Thus, this is how the mold for our emotional relationship to horses was cast, a model to be refined over the decades that followed, and soon to begin to focus on children as well, as protagonists in literature and film.

### 1.2 Codifying Child-Horse Relations: Subject of Love/Object of Transgression

The aforementioned process of "redefining the horse" was carried out over the course of the 20th century, awarding an essential space to the child. As the Swedish philosopher Ellen Key noticed as early as 1900 in her book "Barnets århundrade", which was translated into English ("The Century of the Child") in 1909 and into French in 1910 [35], children were gradually moved to the center of societal concern, increasingly perceived as complex beings engaged in processes of "becoming" [36], yet also identified as consumers with specific needs and desires. Linked to the goal of responding to the aspirations and dreams of these young people, came a singular form of literature that was meant to address them. This was the context which gave birth to John Steinbeck's novel, *The Red Pony*, published in 1937 and adapted for film in 1949. The novel places considerable emphasis on the role of the child, continuing the legacy sketched out by Sewall a century earlier. This time, the young boy, Jodi, is protagonist; his story is intimately tied to that of the troublesome pony that he is to care for. It is a narrative in which we can clearly see the twofold paradigm coming into being: the equine is at once the subject of his love (the young boy is emotionally invested in him) and the object, the vector of his transgression (training the pony is at the center of his coming-of-age process,

allowing him to overcome the problems of a troubled childhood). Within the turbulent context of the 1930s that Steinbeck depicted, the passage to maturity induces the youth to accept the death of his beloved animal.

The pessimism of the type appearing in Steinbeck's work gradually faded at the heart of a genre of children's literature that was ever more sharply differentiated from adult formats. New authors such as Enid Bagnold, Maria O'Hara and Walter Farley contributed to the emerging codes on children and horses by turning the latter into the heroes of tales of adventure. In 1935, the English author Enid Bagnold published the novel *National Velvet*, which was made famous in 1944 through a screen adaptation starring a 10 year old Elizabeth Taylor. In a similar gesture, the novels *My Friend Flicka* (1941), its sequel *Thunderhead Son of Flicka* (1943) and finally *The Green Grass of Wyoming* (1946)<sup>6</sup>, were also quickly adapted for the movies, coming to the big screen in 1943, 1945 and 1948. This trilogy took up on the theme of the child in difficulty: a boy who faces the distrust of a father who favors his elder son and who overcomes failure through his ability to tame wild horses, first Flicka<sup>7</sup> and then later her son, the white stallion Thunderhead. Maria O'Hara was certainly inspired by her own adult experience raising horses in Wyoming, but also by the internalized desire she had from the time she was a little girl to have a filly or colt of her own, a desire that remained unfulfilled until adulthood. These new tendencies become an even more marked characteristic in the works of author Walter Farley<sup>8</sup>,

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<sup>6</sup> The fourth volume, *Wyoming Summer*, is highly autobiographical and more geared toward an adult public.

<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, O'Hara repeats also Steinbeck scheme by associating maturity with the acceptance of the death of the beloved horse, whereas the sick Ken believes and accepted, at the end of the book, that his fully is dead. It is only after being cured, that he realized that she survives, thanks to his previous love and care.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Farley was born in New York and studied literature. Although he had dreamed of horses since childhood, he did not have one of his own until he reached adulthood, when he, his wife and children were able to move to a Pennsylvania farm that they purchased with the earnings from his highly successful Black Stallion and Flame series. The books have been translated into 14 different languages.

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<sup>4</sup> *White Fang* was translated into 89 different languages.

<sup>5</sup> Will James went on to write other books on horses and their cowboys, which attained less fame: *Sand* (1929); *Scorpion: A Good Bad Horse* (1936); *The Dark Horse* (1939); *Horses I've Known* (1940); *My First Horse* (1940).

who further glorified the twofold relationship of horse and child, elevated to the ranks of main characters in the 19 volumes that made up the *Black Stallion* and the *Flame* series he wrote between 1941 and 1989. The first volume, *The Black Stallion*, was awarded the *Young Reader's Choice Award* in 1944<sup>9</sup>.

The success that these books encountered paved the way for other works of film and literature (*Justin Morgan had a horse* (book) 1945; *Misty of Chincoteague* (book) 1947; *The Red Stallion* (film) 1947; *King of the Wind* (book) 1948<sup>10</sup>; *Son of Black Beauty* (book) 1950; *Crin Blanc—White Mane—*(film) 1951; (book), 1959; *Gypsy the Colt* (film) 1954; *Poly* (TV series) 1961; (22 books) 1964-1988, etc. Far from distancing themselves from the twofold identity paradigm of the horse as subject of love/object of transgression, they provided it with new nourishment. They inaugurated a new literary and film genre resting on the emotional relationship between two protagonists who work together: the child and the horse, both of whom were elevated to the ranks of hero. All the above-mentioned works fully incorporated these same schemas. While the child experienced some kind of social failure or trouble, the horse was crystallized in its nineteenth century romantic representations, as strong, fierce and indomitable (and usually a stallion), an allegory for untamed nature and the triumph of released force. Yet, like the child, the horse was portrayed as alone and misunderstood (Flicka, Black, Flame, Pie, Red, Sham, even Poly<sup>11</sup>) and often the object of human pursuit (Thunderhead, Crin Blanc, Fury, Gypsy). The narrative of these works was woven around the encounter with the horse, shining but threatened protagonist in the world of men, and the child who conquered its affection; within the context of a growing

anthropomorphism, the horse now tended to be portrayed as an alter ego for the distressed human [5, 37].

## **2. The Triumph of the Horse as Alter Ego, Promoted by the Popular Arts**

### *2.1 Were "Horse Whisperers" Invented by Children's Literature?*

The literary works that are responsible for creating new codes of human-horse relations were the fruit of urban and often female writers (Anna Sewell, Enid Bagnold, Maria O'Hara, Marguerite Henry), who were not from families involved with horses but had dreamed of them since childhood and were obliged to wait until adulthood to have one of their own. Thus, as people who were free from a "*habitus*" [38, 39] which could socially determine their relationships with horses, they were able to invent an ideal horse-human relationship based on an alter ego paradigm. Their perception of the horse favored poetry and romanticism over equestrian technique. And it was from this configuration that the inspiration of another type of relationship to the horse was born: through the prism of a citizen's urban and non-professional point of view, that perceives the horse not through its functionalities but as an allegory of the integrity of the wild. These authors' distance from equestrian culture freed up their emotional connections to the sensitivity of an animal that was as powerful as it was fragile. It fueled their imagination, encouraging them to conjure the relationship of love and reciprocity they had fantasized about since childhood. Within this context, these authors rose up against the violent treatment that horses were so often subjected to, all the more unbearable in the light of an anthropomorphic gaze in which the horse became another version of the "self". Thus, in 1877 Anna Sewell used her novel *Black Beauty* to denounce the painful use of bearing reins and cropped tails, so futilely inflicted on horses by fashion, as well as the exploitation of abusive owners who drove their animals to exhaustion and death. And in *Smokey the*

<sup>9</sup> The series has been continued up to the present thanks to the efforts of Walter Farley's son Steve, who has written five sequels following his father's death in 1989.

<sup>10</sup> *King of the Wind* won the Newbury Medal in 1949.

<sup>11</sup> Even if Poly is a pony, he is described following the same scheme, seen as wild by his mean owner and rescued by the young boy Pascal who is the only one capable of understanding him.

*Cowhorse*, Will James took a stance against the brutality of traditional horse training methods in the United States (referred to, in the vernacular, as “breaking” a horse), and which cause a breach in the animal’s ability to trust a human being. This condemnation was taken up later by Walter Farley, in an ensemble of works. Thus, in 1948, in his first volume of *Flame*, he spoke of such cruel methods, through the gaze of his hero, Steve, confronted with the miserable spectacle of breaking a wild horse [40]:

*“The tired animal stumbled. The long bull whip cracked and the hard leather end caught the horse on his haunches. Snorting, he regained his stride and ran still faster about the ring. And all the time the man pivoted with him, bull whip raised and ready. Would Tom never stop? Steve asked himself. [...] What satisfaction was he getting out of this driving, driving, driving? And still the beat of hoofs went on, echoing more often now to the sharp, staccato cracks of the bull whip. Steve felt he could take no more of it.”*

Maria O’Hara rebelled with similar vehemence, in 1941, through the words of Rob Mc Laughlin, Ken’s father and owner of Flicka’s ranch [41]:

*“No Bronco buster is going to break my horse. [...] It ruins a horse!” He was shouting. This was one of his pet tirades. “He loses something and never gets it back. Something goes out of him. He is not a whole horse anymore. I hate the method, waiting until a horse is full grown, all his habits formed, and then a battle to death, and the horse marked with fear and distrust, his disposition damaged. He’ll never have confidence in man again. And if I lose the confidence of my horses....”*

It is also worth mentioning that the pronoun “it”, customarily used for animals, was switched to “he”, thereby raising the horse to the ranks of personhood. Furthermore, McLaughlin’s words are hardly different from what we find expressed in the thought of Ray Hunt, who, together with the Dorrance brothers, can be considered one of the founders of the contemporary current of the horse whisperers. In 1978, he published a

text, in which he declares [42]:

*“Well, I never rode a broke horse but then maybe I’m a sorry hand. It seems to me that there is a better way of doing things so that the horse gets more sure. He learns something every day; he has to worry less about it; he gets more confidence in himself and in me. It is a learning thing to me.”*

Thus, we can argue that this counter-model of human-horse relationships, which positions respect and patience in opposition to brute force, has its roots in the way, close to 100 years before these professionals came on the scene, a group of writers had imagined it, as it emerged from their childhood dreams preceding their practice as riders. This permitted a revolution in the way the horse was conceived, evolving from the centaur archetype (the horse an extension of the self, of one’s own body) to that of alter ego (the horse as projection of the idealized other). This change of paradigm was characterized by a narrative model that was always put together on the basis of the same schema:

(1) *The similarity*: the child’s social alienation is mirrored by the loneliness of the misunderstood horse. (2) *The life rescue*: in every narrative, the horse experiences momentary vulnerability (imprisonment, injury, illness) and is then rescued by the child, who wins its trust. (3) *The singularity of mutual love*: the child’s frailness precludes the use of force with the horse, incarnation of wildness and muscular strength. Thus, the animal is won over through love and assistance, creating a singular bond between the two: the horse accepts the child’s will, through love rather than submission. (4) *The sacrifice*: the child’s love for the horse reaches its paroxysm through the sacrifices that he or she makes for the animal: renouncing glory (*National Velvet*), renouncing ownership, by letting the horse free (*Thunderhead*, *The Black Stallion* return-films, *Flame*, *Misty of Chincoteague*), and even risking his or her life (*My Friend Flicka*: Ken spends the night at the riverside in order to save his filly and comes close to losing his own life; in *White Mane*, the

child throws himself into the Rhone river with his wild horse, preferring death to another separation). (5) *The transgression*: freedom from an oppressive situation which is overcome by horse and human together, such as the taming of horses considered to be too wild and crazy (*Smokey the Cowhorse*; the trilogy *My Friend Flicka*; *White Mane*; *Fury*; *Gypsy*; even *Poly*) or sporting triumph (*The Black Stallion* series; *National Velvet*; *Misty of Chincoteague*; *The Red Stallion*; *Kind of the Wind*).

We observe, furthermore, that the child who enjoys such a special connection to the horse is almost always a boy. The novel *National Velvet*<sup>12</sup> is one of the very rare exceptions we encounter. This book from 1935, which was made into a film in 1944, was pioneer in placing the love of a young girl, Velvet, for her horse, Pie, at center stage; the protagonist is driven to disguising herself as a man in order to win one of the most important steeplechase races. Author Enid Bagnold's work, inspired by her desire to demonstrate women's determination and abilities, became successful through its adaptation to the cinema, which also led to the creation of a 58-episode American television series which ran from 1960 to 1962. A film sequel was done in 1978, bearing the title *International Velvet*. Yet this fusing of selves between a young girl and a horse was to remain an exception<sup>13</sup>. It is a model that takes almost half a century to come of age, through the post-war period and equitation's incorporation into a new society of leisure and consumption [43, 44], aligning itself with the assertion of women's quest for social affirmation [45, 46].

<sup>12</sup> The human protagonists of *Misty of Chincoteague* are two children, a sister and brother, yet it is the latter who rides Misty's mother to victory.

<sup>13</sup> Another story worth mentioning is *Gypsy Colt* (an American film from 1954) which told a tale of love between a young girl and a four year old black stallion. However, more than an original creation, it was an American adaptation of *Lassie Come Home*: the faithful and intelligent Gypsy, sold by young Meg's parents because they cannot afford to keep him, makes a 500 mile trip across the United States in order to get back to her. Furthermore, this adaptation transfers the role of female dog to male equine (stallion) and that of the little boy to a little girl.

## 2.2 From Cultural Paradigm to the Transformation of Practice: Women's Transgression

From the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, a new cultural paradigm for human-horse relations characterized by the twofold identification of the horse as subject of love and vector of transgression was ushered in. This recodification of the meaning of the horse, through the myth of the alter ego, both preceded and promoted horse riding's entrance into leisure society. In France, for example, the number of riders who are licensed members of the French Equestrian Federation (FFE) has grown more than fourfold between 1984 (145,071 licensed riders) and 2016 (663 194 riders)<sup>14</sup>. This growth emanates from equitation's appropriation by members of the middle classes [47] and their increasing levels of disposable income [9], as well as other significant changes in riders' demographic profiles: encouraged by the discourse of popular culture, they are now essentially youth (in 2016, 67.6% of licensed FFE riders were under 21 years of age; of this population, 36.2% were children 12 years older and under, and 23.1%, adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16)<sup>15</sup>.

The contemporary practice of equitation in France is also strongly characterized by its feminization. It is true that equestrian practice has been mixed-gender since the birth of the French Equestrian Federation in 1921. Nonetheless, the increase in the number of women riders dates primarily from the 1960s [48], to reach 53.5% in 1975 [43], and become hegemonic in the 1990s<sup>16</sup>. In 2016, they represented 83% of all licensed riders<sup>17</sup>. The French case is by no means exceptional: the contemporary evolution of riding in the West points everywhere to its largely female and youth practitioners, as Adelman and Knijnik have

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.ffe.com/journaliste/Publications/Statistiques>.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ffe.com/journaliste/Publications/Statistiques>.

<sup>16</sup> In 2001 women and girls made up 73.9% of all licensed riders.

<sup>17</sup> The FFE is today the third largest sports federation in France in terms of licensed athletes (amateur and professional) and the first in terms of the number of female participants.



emphasized [49]. In Sweden, 65% of licensed riders are under 25 and 84% are female. Over 80% of riders in the United States are female; in the United Kingdom, women and girls represented 74% of all riders in 2016 (The British Horse Society, <http://www.bhs.org.uk/our-charity/press-centre/equestrian-statistics>).

These figures cannot be explained by women's desire for emancipation alone, that is, as women attempting to demonstrate their equal ability in sport and in the professional world as might have been the case in the early 20th century [43, 44, 50]. Rather, it appears to be linked to more complex phenomena, such as the singular rapport that nourishes the woman-horse relationship in particular ways: a human-horse relationship that is fed by a paradigm springing from the 19th century world of art and literature which redefined the horse as an ideal companion for humans [7]. This was a paradigm that perhaps offered elements that were deviant in terms of gender norms, yet, held at the same time, other aspects that were easily adaptable to gendered ways of being [34, 49]. In sum, the subversion of the way horses have been culturally represented, as they move from instrument to alter ego, favors the feminine transgression of conventional practices.

This phenomenon, correlating the aesthetic and emotional re-codifying of the horse and the evolution of riders, is confirmed by the simultaneous growth of this new population of riders and intensified forms of discursive production. Thus, the 1990s are characterized by the emergence of a youthful and feminine turn in equitation as well as the profusion of literary and film works devoted to horse stories. Therefore, according to our study, during a period spanning more than 100 years, from 1877 to 1989, the total of film and literary works that were produced are in the sixties—including the prolific *Black Stallion* series (19 volumes) and *Poly* (22 volumes)—23 films and four television series. The inverse situation can be noted in the period running from 1990 to 2016: in a mere 26 years, we note an exponential growth of

production, with close to 70 films, six television series and hundreds of works of literature, ranging from novels to comic books. Statistics for December 2016 gleaned from French language work that is available through Amazon show 2,308 references (with the entry word: “histoire de chevaux”), 3/4 of which target children and youth<sup>18</sup>.

The development of these works reflects the massive turn to children and youth in equestrianism, as well as societal changes in gender relations and how this is reflected in horse cultures. Initially, the heroes of horse stories were essentially male, even under the pen of women writers such as Anna Sewell, Maria O'Hara, Marguerite Henry or Cecile Aubry (Poly). However, since the 1990s, there has been growing media awareness of the predominance of a female public of riders, readers and consumers [51]. This has encouraged a subversion of classics, turning the proverbial “little boy” into a “little girl”, in works such as *The New Adventures of Black Beauty* (New Zealand, 1990); *The Young Black Stallion* (USA, 2003); *L'Étalon Noir* (French cartoon 2006, adaptation of *Black Beauty*); *Flicka I, II and III* (USA, 2006; 2010; 2012) and *Black Beauty* (USA, 2015). The phenomenon persists throughout the 2000s, expressed in a proliferation of new works: a wide range of films that bring the girl-horse relation to center stage including *Ready to Run* (USA, 2000); *Racing Stripes* (USA, 2005); *Klara's Horse* (Sweden, 2010); *Sarah's Horse* (USA, 2011); *Shadow and I* (The Netherlands, 2011); *Coming Home* (Norway, 2011); *The Greening of Whitney Brown* (US, 2011); *Rodeo Princess* (USA, 2012); *Zafir* (Denmark, 2012); *MacBride's Horse* (USA, 2012); *The Wild Stallion* (USA, 2013); *Whisper* (Germany, 2013); *Angel and I* (USA, 2013); *Storm Rider* (USA, 2013); *Our Wild Hearts* (USA, 2013); *Midnight Stallion* (USA, 2013); *Spirit Riders* (USA, 2014); *A Fine Step* (USA, 2014); *A Horse Tale* (USA, 2015); *A Horse for Summer* (USA, 2015); *Running*

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<sup>18</sup> Made up exclusively of literary works devoted to equine themes in France, or translated into the French language.

*Forever* (USA, 2015); *Welcome to Happy Valley* (USA, 2015); *A Gift Horse* (USA, 2015); *Rodeo and Juliet* (USA, 2015); *Horse Camp* (USA, 2015); *A Sunday Horse* (USA, 2015); *Whisper 2* (Germany, 2015); *A Horse Story* (USA, 2016); *Texas Rein* (USA, 2016); *Emma's Chance* (USA, 2016); *My Best Friend* (Canada, 2016); *Race to Redemption* (USA, 2016); *Storm Rider* (USA, 2016); *Lucky Dream Champion* (USA, 2016), etc. There are also new series which appear as novels and on television, tending toward teen dramas [52], such as *Saddle Club* (Canadian-Australian, 2001); *Heartland* (Canada, 2007), *Horseland* (American cartoon, 2006) and *Le Ranch* (French cartoon, 2013).

Despite this hegemony of the feminine which reflects female predominance in equestrian practice itself, male heroes do not disappear, remaining visible particularly through the revival of the genre of horse stories in films for adults or at least family<sup>19</sup>. The latter have been popular since the 1930s, illustrated by films such as *Ride Him, Cowboy* (USA, 1932), *The Broadway Hill Run* (USA, 1934), *Lucky Day* (USA, 1950), *Tonka* (USA, 1958), *Heureux qui comme Ulysse* [Happy he who is like Ulysses] (France, 1970), *Champion* (UK, 1984). Although dwindling in number since the 1990s against the background of the boom in children's works, horse stories with male human protagonists have been reappearing in various forms, meant as adventures stories for the general public (horsemen, horsewomen and non-riders). Some prime examples are *Seasbiscuit* (USA, 2003); *Hidalgo* (USA, 2004); *Derby Stallion* (USA, 2005); *Pom le Poulain* [Pom the Colt ] (France, 2007); *Lads and Jockeys* (France, 2008); *The Cup* (Australia, 2011); *War Horse* (USA, 2011); *Gazelle* (France, 2013); *Jappeloup* (France, 2013); *Des Chevaux et des Hommes* (Island, 2013); *50 to 1* (US, 2014); *Harry and Snowman* (USA, 2015), yet there are also dramas such as *Shergar* (UK 1999), *Mister V* (France, 2002); *Cavaliers Seuls*

[Horsemen Alone] (France, 2009); *En équilibre [In Balance]* (France, 2015). These adult or family films do not preclude nor exclude female heroines and protagonists, yet they appear in a more balanced proportion to male heroes than is the case in works meant for children and youth. Some prime examples are *The Horse Whisperer* (an American book published in 1995 and adapted for the big screen in 1998), *Zaina, rider of the Atlas* (Franco-German 2005); *Danse avec lui [Dance with him]* (France, 2007); *Secretariat* (USA, 2010); *Sport de Fille [A Girl's Sport]* (France, 2011); *Ma Bonne Etoile [My Lucky Star]* (France, 2012).

This increase is most certainly a result of the growing demand for these types of work—reflecting the increasing numbers of riders and their changing profiles, in terms of age and gender—yet at the same time serves to stimulate demand, intensifying discourses and new projections. It demonstrates their importance in learning and in creative processes especially for the young people, providing images and texts for the construction of forms of thinking, feeling and imagining [53, 54]. Thus, these works also play an important role in the formation of gendered identities through the frameworks they enable [55]. As of the 1990s, they disseminate the figure of the horsewoman that, no longer a male projection, has overcome the constraints that had been socially imposed as the “women's condition” [45]. Indeed, the taming of the horse by love and not by force corresponds more to feminine than masculine projections<sup>20</sup>. It frees women from the need to confrontationally challenge codes of their social identity, by assimilating male projections [56] in order to promote equality in skills and abilities, in a process often understood as a “the tomboy

<sup>19</sup> Juvenile works with boys still exist also, such as *The Adventures of the Black Stallion* (Canada-France, 1990), or *A Horse Called Bear* (USA, 2015), but they are few.

<sup>20</sup> Notably incarnated in fantasies bodily encounters, immortalized in numerous canvases and sculptures of the 18th and 19th centuries, projecting the construction and learning of masculine virility [57]: *Les Chevaux de Marly* by Guillaume Costou (1745, Musée du Louvre and Place de la Concorde); *Cheval arrêté par des esclaves* (1817), *Course de chevaux libres* (1818), *Mazzeppa* (1823) by Théodore Géricault; *Mazzeppa et les loups* (1826) by Horace Vernet.

syndrome”<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, this situation is reinforced by the gendering of the horse [34]. Indeed, the horse is stereotyped as stallion: of the 162 equine stories studied, less than 5 focus on the story of a mare! This is correlated to the fact that the horse is historically assimilated within the collective imagination as an allegory of virility and masculinity [57, 58]. Such assimilation of the horse as stallion (stereotype of the male figure), can also be seen as aiding the young girl to project herself into a future relationship with a male partner; girls are thereby unconsciously exposed to the first emotions of love, thus sublimated by the mediation of the horse. These particularly intense behavioral forces of the pre-adolescent latency phase seem to be an important factor contributing to the horse’s success with young girls [7], even if most of those equine stories propose a very normative, even stereotype, heterosexual romance pattern... [34, 56].

### 3. How Popular Art and Culture Influence the Human Horse Relationship Today

The existing correlation between the intensification and changing ways of representing the horse through popular art and culture—in particular, those geared toward a youthful audience—and rider’s practices, leads us to believe that the relationship is very significant. In the interest of verifying this hypothesis, I carried out a quantitative survey of 274 adult riders from France and other parts of the world, from January 2013 to December 2016.

#### 3.1 Study Description

All of the participants in this study are adult horsewomen and horsemen who are sufficiently passionate about horses to have decided to devote all or

part of their professional activity to them<sup>22</sup>. They are between the ages of 18 and 70 and 90% of them are female, which places our sample slightly above international and French averages. Age distribution corresponds to general statistics on adult riders<sup>23</sup>, which here means a majority of youth age 25 or under (56%; in more precise terms, 26% between the ages of 18 and 20 and 30% between ages 21 and 25)<sup>24</sup>. The older age groups are approximately equally represented: the first category, covering only 5 years is somewhat under-represented, whereas the last one, being open-ended (ages 60 and over), is somewhat over-represented. Thus, 5% are between 26 and 30 years of age, 6% between 31 and 40 years of age; 12% between 41 and 50 years of age; 8% between 51 and 60 years of age and 13% over 60. The socio-professional status of our respondents are mostly students (53%); professors or researchers (8%); executives (4%); horse breeders or trainers (2%); office workers (1.5%); crafts persons (1%) or workers (0.5%). The remaining 30% identified themselves through the category “other”. They come from 20 different countries: France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Austria, Estonia, Croatia, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, New Caledonia, Colombia, and Brazil. Notwithstanding the predominant youthfulness of our respondents (61% were under the age of 30), they are all long-time riders: 85.5% have been riding for 11 years or more (with 36% riding for more than 20 years). They are also regular riders: 86.7% ride at least once a week and 35.2% ride every day. 80% of them began to

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<sup>21</sup> Many horsewomen of 40 years or older confided to us in interviews pertaining to an earlier study we did that their equestrian practices led them to developing tomboyish behavior during their youth, due in part to the near absence of equipment (attire) as well as of heroic horsewomen who could serve them as role models [7]. Their projections were thus necessarily masculine.

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<sup>22</sup> All students were enrolled in specialized programs linked to the equine sector, such as stable management, equine business and equestrian tourism.

<sup>23</sup> Although children make up the majority of those who ride, they were not included in our survey, which looked specifically at the influence of children’s literature with equestrian themes on adult horsemen and horsewomen who are professionally involved in the equine sector or who will be in the future.

<sup>24</sup> Age categories were more precise for younger age groups, due to the large number of respondents who fell into those categories and to the more marked psychological and social transformations that occur during this period of transition to maturity.

ride very young, at age 10 or earlier (with 22.3% reporting to have begun riding before age 5).

### 3.2 Popular Culture Influences the Desire to Ride

Among our first findings is the perception that the desire to ride is not necessarily spawned within the family. Family and friends are significant influences: in 39.3% of our sample, there was a family member who already rode horses, whereas 19.6% report having a friend who was a rider. Yet inspiration coming from wider cultural sources is also fundamental: 26% of all the riders we spoke to claimed that their desire to ride came<sup>25</sup> from films (cinema, television); 21% from books and 11% from specialized magazines. Finally, 26% of them said that their yearning to ride came from horse toys and games, thus underlining the importance of play in the social construction of childhood [59]. Our first findings thus attest to the influence of popular culture and of the imagination (novels, films, toys) fundamental for 84% of our respondents in stimulating their desire to ride. It also comes out through their initial motivation, which first emphasizes a desire for contact with animals (87.5%) and second, the need to escape (42%), which prevail over interest in sport (34%) or equestrian techniques (31%). Thus, initial interest in riding seems to emerge from the double paradigm that popular culture deploys: the emotional connection to horses and the aspects of adventure that they enable. These elements weigh much more heavily than the desire to learn a technique.

Thus, films and books can be seen as playing a vital role in shaping the imagination/fantasy of our respondents, fueling their desire to ride and to be around horses. In the interest of understanding more about this process, we asked respondents to tell us which works were most significant to them during their childhood and youth. We provided them with a wide list of the most well-known works in the genre and also gave them room to add on any other important ones through an open ended question. Their answers

confirm the popularity of films over literature. In fact, the five most appreciated works that our respondents mentioned were films or film adaptations of works of literature, classical and contemporary. Thus, number one was *Seabiscuit* (65%), followed by the films *The Black Stallion* (52%), *The Horse Whisperer* (44%) and then by *Black Beauty* (version from 1994) and *National Velvet* (both mentioned by 43%). The film *My Friend Flicka* was mentioned by 33.5% our respondents, while *Crin Blanc* [White Mane] was cited by a mere 13%, all of whom were French speaking.

Although books are referred to as second to films, they still command significant influence. The *Black Stallion* series is by far the most appreciated, cited by 45% of our respondents, followed by *Black Beauty* (37%). The more recent *The Horse Whisperer* is mentioned by 21% of those who took part in our study, followed by the French-language *Crin Blanc* (19%), and the *My Friend Flicka* (18%) series. The novel *National Velvet*, less known that its film adaptation, was cited by 13% of our respondents. Among the works that respondents added on to the list we supplied them were the animated film *Spirit* (mentioned by 5%), as well as the recent television series -*Saddle Club* and *Heartland*, each one garnering around 8% recognition. Five per cent of our respondents referred to the older series *The Adventures of the Black Stallion*; *The Adventures of Black Beauty* and *Fury* (Fig. 1).

This fine-tuned analysis also shows us that there is no clearly-demarkated boundary of references by generation. In fact, the younger ones appropriate the classical works that were so important to their elders (firstly, *The Black Stallion*, *Black Beauty* and secondly, *National Velvet*, *My Friend Flicka*, *Crin Blanc*) in a similar measure to those of their own childhood (*Seabiscuit*, 2003; *The Horse Whiperer* 1995/1998; *Saddle Club*, 2001 and *Heartland*, 2007). Thus, what we see, notwithstanding the profuse production of new works since the 1990s, is the resilience of the founding works that were responsible for the re-codification of

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<sup>25</sup> Several possible answers.

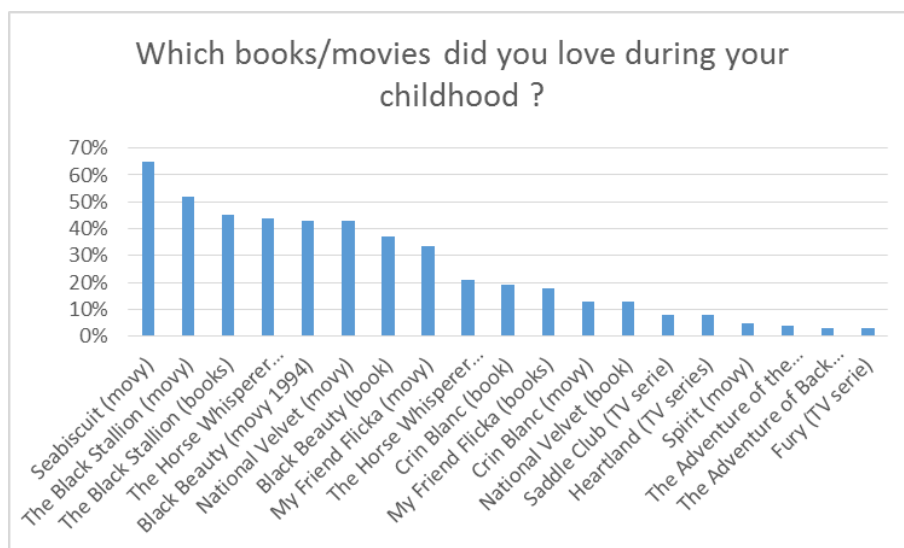


Fig. 1 Riders' most beloved horse stories (during childhood).

our relationship to the horse<sup>26</sup>, through the double paradigm of horse as subject of love/object of transgression.

It is also important to note that the projections that are romantically stimulated by these works do not spawn the desire to take part in one form of equestrian practice in particular, nor do they preclude the urge to engage in competitive modes. In fact, our respondents named a wide variety of initial desires (our survey allowed them more than one response) in relation to riding: 60.7% referred to jumping, 36% mentioned dressage and 21.3% named cross-country as practices that stirred their interest. Riding in the out-of-doors, which seems to correspond more to the fantasies of “becoming one” with horse—at a full gallop into nature—that founding works enlightened, was something that only 37% of our respondents reported having dreamt of. Thus, we see that popular literature and film and the “dream relation” between horse and human they promoted do not induce any particular technique or practice into the imagination of beginners.

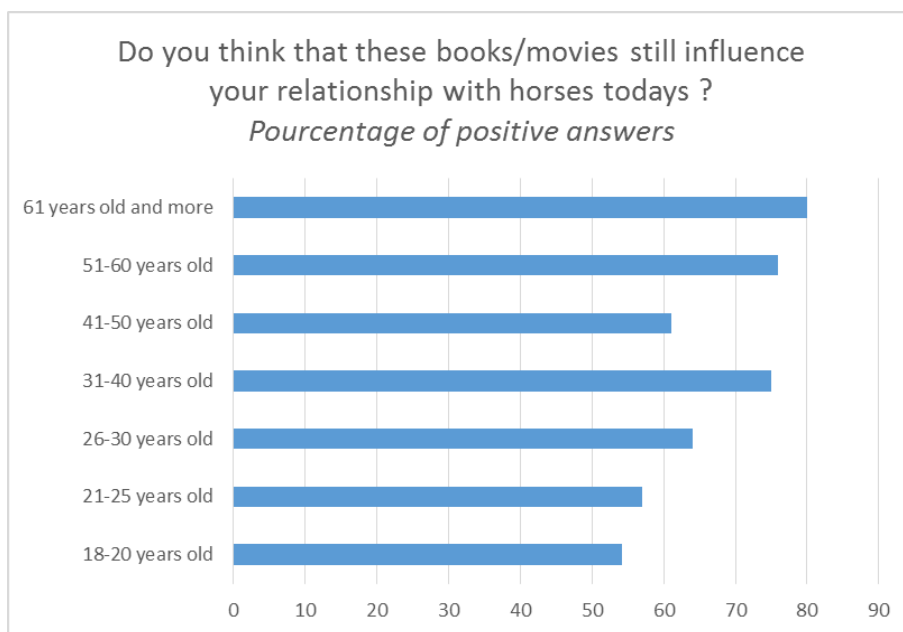
<sup>26</sup> A good example of this is Laura Grave, 29 year old American dressage champion who selected, among the different pieces of music she incorporated into her dressage performance at the 2016 Olympics Games, the theme song of the 1972 series *The Adventures of Black Beauty*.

### 3.3 Arts and the Imagination: An Enduring Influence on Horse-Human Relations?

If popular literature and film, as well as the horse alter ego paradigm that they have created, still stimulate people’s desires and dreams of riding, this also raises the issue of how imaginings actually survive the reality of equestrian practice. Do they continue to inspire riders, after years of equestrian practices, in their daily rapport with their horses? Our survey results seem to suggest they do. 62.5% of them, in all different categories, confided that they feel these works of film and literature continues to influence their relationship to horses. Once again, this sensibility is not dependent on the type of riding they do, which has seemingly changed little since their initial desire to ride. Classical disciplines are subject to some alterations, in detriment to the grip that jumping originally held: 46.1% of the riders surveyed actually engage in it, while 50.2% practice dressage and 24.2% take part in cross country. Trail riding absorbs 37.5%. Responses also indicate increased diversification, with “other practices” evolving from 18.7% (desire to practice) to 30% (current practice).

Furthermore, age, as it correlates to years of riding experience, is a determining factor. Contrary to that which could perhaps be expected, the older the riders

**Popular Horse Stories and the Invention of the Contemporary Human-Horse Relationship through an Alter Ego Paradigm**



**Fig. 2 Importance of age for recognition of influence of literature and film on practice.**

and longer their riding experience, the greater the number that report continued inspiration from the founding myths that inspired their initial desires to engage with and ride horses. Riders between the ages of 18 and 20 are less receptive: only 54.2% of them report that they continue to feel inspired by these works in their current equestrian practices, in contrast to 57% of those in the 21-25 years age group, 64% of those in the 26-30 age group, 75% of those in the 31-40 age group, 61% of those between 41 and 50, 76% of those between 51 and 60, and 80% of those who are over 60 (Fig. 2). It seems that consciousness of the influence of popular literature and film and the myths they propagate around the horse-human relationship require some stepping back and assimilation by riders. They also require taking some distance from prevailing prejudices surrounding literature for children and youth and its themes, a position which harder to achieve at a younger age. This is one way to explain the efforts that many young adults make to establish such a distance. For example, Anne<sup>27</sup>, a young rider in the 18-20 groups, claimed “Those works inspired me when I was young, but not anymore; my relationship to horses has

evolved.” Her response could be understood as suggesting “I am no longer influenced by what inspired me as a child, because I have grown up!” As part of their physical and psychological construction, these young adults need to assert their distance from constructive myths from childhood [60] that older adults who have gone beyond these pressures are more likely to re-evaluate. Thus, 72.5% of those aged 31 and over recognize the persistent influence of these works on their relationship to the horse, compared with only 56% of 18-30 year-olds.

The hiatus that we observe in the 41-50 age groups emerges from male responses: not a single man in that category answered the question affirmatively. This particular case makes the determining influence of gender clear, as even more important than age. Thus, when we put all age groups together, we see that 65% of the women report that books and films that influenced their childhood continue to have an impact on their current rapport with horses, whereas only 27% of our male informants gave affirmative responses. In this sense, receptivity toward these works and their influence in daily practice seems to be significantly gendered. It confirms the notion that the codification of

<sup>27</sup> Pseudonyms have been attributed here arbitrarily.

the relationship to the horse through the double paradigm of subject of love/object of transgression corresponds more to women's projections—feelings of love sublimated by the mediation of the horse/vector of social accomplishment—than men's<sup>28</sup>. These gendered representations are illustrated in the answers of female respondents, justifying the influence that these works have over their daily rapport with their horses through the ideal of a relationship of osmosis, based on mutual affection and understanding (the myth of the alter ego). Responses gravitate largely around the semantic field of “the dream”, and show how movies and films have contributed to their desire for a relationship with horses which goes far beyond practical aspects: “*They (those works) shaped my wishes and dreams of the relationship and of the atmosphere around horses*”; “*We dream of having the same relation with horses*”; “*They made me want to have a horse that wants to be with me (rather than “has to” be with me)*”; “*They gave words to my feelings*”; “*They made me dream of horses and owning a horse*”; “*They express that longing for a horse*” “*They made me want to have a horse-friend, to understand horses, to think like a horse*”.

Such female respondents also insisted on the importance of these books and films for their own personal construction: “*When I was younger, they were extremely important and nourished my need to think about horses and to claim my horse lover identity*”; “*These movies and books took a big part of my childhood*”; “*They fed my obsession*”; “*They were my alternative until I was allowed to get a horse of my own when I was 13*”; “*I was obsessed with horses when I was a child and read horse novels give me the possibility to immerse in that world, as I could not have my own horse until I started to work and could afford it.*” Responses attest to an interesting permeability between dream and daily life construction of the relationship to horses which also unfolds through

projections. Thus, horsewomen willingly use the dream relationship to the horse as a model to which they aspire: “*Those movies and books influence me, because they show the relationship of friendship and respect that we should have for our horses*”; “*In a lot of these books and movies there is a very special human-horse relationship. I strive to have that with every horse I work with*”; “*Since I have an emotional attachment to horses, these books/films reaffirmed my level of engagement and partnership with horses*”; “*They inspire me as an ideal relation of love and harmony with my horse*”; “*They make me dream big and persist in working horses*”; “*Some gave me the desire to understand this animal, to specialize in dressage and to create an atmosphere of mutual confidence and not a dominant/dominated relationship*”; “*It gave me the desire to have the magical relation that I have now with my mare and to have a go at free riding*”.

Some of these horsewomen go on to talk about which works had a particular influence on them and why, with comments such as: “*In White Mane, it was the relation that the boy had with the horse that inspired me. It's what I'm beginning to have with my foal*”; “*The Black Stallion give me the desire to “become one” with my horse*”. In this regard, *Black Beauty* was a work that made a deep impression on a certain number of our respondents, insofar as it took the point of view of the animal and thus encouraged identification with the suffering inflicted on the horse by human mistreatment. It is cited as bringing new awareness and an influence on respondents' own behavior: “*I perhaps felt very strongly that the horse in Black Beauty had feelings and hearing his story told by his own words made a strong impact on me*”; “*I just passed my horse on to someone... I remarked to my friend that I didn't want him to be passed along the line to someone who didn't care for him, as Ginger in Black Beauty*”; “*I didn't sell one of my mares that I don't ride, because she is very attached to my other mare. Well, they love each other so much, that I don't want to break their hearts by separating them, the way Black*

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<sup>28</sup> And this is so even though the heroes of these works are mostly little boys, right up until the 1990s.



*Beauty and Ginger suffered when they were sold...*" Finally, although less frequently, certain horsewomen justified their interest in these horse stories through the second element of the paradigm, horse as object of transgression (vector of accomplishment), with comments such as the following: "*They inspire me because they encourage both of us (me and my horse) not to give up and to believe that anything is possible with time and patience*"; "*They made me see what could be achieved*"; "*They inspire me (as examples of) adventure, escape, and the possibility of amazing connection*".

Certain horsewomen also responded negatively to these horse stories, creating an opposition between the fictive elements of cultural mythology and practical equestrian reality. It is interesting to note that those myths are here, once again, perceived as a feminine projection of human-horse relations, sometime also denounced by women. For example, the young horsewoman Charlotte<sup>29</sup> (between 21 and 25 year old) declares: "*I always knew horses and love them, but it seems like every book/movie is too sentimental and 'too much' for me. It isn't reality at all or too 'girlish' for me!*" Another informant, a man, makes a similar argument: "*It is just fiction. I think that horse movies are destined for women. The stories are romantic and the ambiance is feminine.*" Although this way of thinking is not necessarily repeated by other male respondents, the majority of them claim not to have been influenced by such stories, which in general terms many of them see as far removed from reality and even running counter to their own riding experience. They make remarks such as: "*It is just fiction*"; "*It's not reality*"; "*We each build our own relationships based on the facts of the horse, not on fiction*". Those few men who do claim to be influenced by film and literary works align themselves with a semantic field linked to patience and perseverance, rather than love and osmosis. Their references tend to be works that focus on objectives (vector of accomplishment or

reconstruction) such as *Seabiscuit* (the film that was most often cited by the men who took part in our survey, at around 70%) or *The Horse Whisperer* (cited by around 40% of them).

This emerging dichotomy confirms the notion that the myth of a human-horse osmosis, constructed on the foundation of the twofold paradigm of horse as subject of love and object of transgression, responds more to women's than to men's desires. Furthermore, the association of the horse with an alter ego, which requires relations based on affection, respect and understanding, is illustrated by the very strong correlation that exists between positive responses to film and literary works and an ethological sensibility: 100% of respondents who claimed to be influenced by these works also believe that equine ethology enables us a better relationship to horses and riding. Yet, their conception of ethology tends toward somewhat of a merging and even confusion between scientific ethologists (equine behavior studies) and celebrity "whisperers": Pat Parelli, Monty Roberts, Andy Booth, Tom and Bill Dorrance, Elisabeth de Corbiny are frequently mentioned, alongside scientists such as Andrew McLean, Marthe Kiley Worthington, Michel-Antoine Leblanc, Claire Neveu, H el ene Roche, etc, that remain less famous.

Age and gender are key determinants of respondent's receptivity to and intellectualized acceptance of the influence of popular horse stories from film and literature on horsewomen and horsemen's daily practice. Yet the specific type of equestrian practice that they engage in and their nationality do not, in our findings, emerge as relevant variables. Neither does a perspective on social status emerge clearly from our data, since most respondents could be considered middle or upper middle class, nor does status as economically active or retired status appear to influence their responses.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This article has shed greater light on the conceptual revolution on horses that took place within the context

<sup>29</sup> Pseudonyms have been attributed here arbitrarily.



of the emergence of Western leisure society. It enables us to capture the founding role of popular works of film and literature, especially those that were destined for children and youth and which, since the end of the 19th century, began to re-codify the horse in terms of a constructive, affect-driven relationship enveloping the developing child or young person. They favor a conceptual revolution in the meanings that are attributed to the horse, from the centaur archetype (the horse as the prolongation of the human body: projection of the self) to the alter ego archetype (the horse as the accomplice: projection of the idealized other).

This revolution in the way of thinking about the horse resonated more with female representations and aspirations than it did with male ones, notwithstanding the predominance of male protagonists in cultural discourse until the 1990s. Thus, the reinvention of the horse, as subject of love and object of transgression, favoring social engagement and accomplishment, became more important for young women and their paths to self-development than to young men. This is illustrated by the way riders' profiles change; since the 1970s, in many Western countries they become increasingly female. Popular literature and film thus both respond to and take part in the social projections that they disseminate, an evolution that is also characterized by the massive feminization of its protagonists; as of the 1990s, the little boys-turned-hero of earlier horse stories are largely replaced by young female characters. Insofar as these stories contribute to the way children and childhood are constructed, that is, to a way of imagining that stimulates desires and projections, they also contribute to the transformation of horse riding, shaping a new place for horses in society. Furthermore, the social imagination that they nurture goes beyond actual equestrian practices. Our study shows that most of the devoted riders don't turn away from the founding myths of their childhood; rather, they incorporate them as a legacy that inspires their everyday practice. This is

true, regardless of their nationality or the specific type of equestrian practice they engage in (as demonstrated by the ongoing fondness of American dressage champion Laura Graves for the Black Beauty TV series). However, this quest for a relationship of osmosis, built up around the myth of the alter ego and reciprocal bonds of love, is gendered: it is taken on largely by women, with men remaining much less sensitive to it. Age also emerges as criteria influencing the conscience perpetuation of these sentiments, largely engaging those who are older. This fact, which may seem surprising, may be seen as evidence of how maturity is necessary in order to recognize how one chooses to preserve founding myths as an inspiration for life, and how, along with other elements of existence, one continues to be influenced by the forms of imagining that shape our childhood.

Thus, the influence of popular equine stories has been a major determinant in the recodification of horse and riding in contemporary western society, culminating in today's new circumscribed normalization. This has involved a subversion of ancient equine representations that favored masculine hegemony over horses, which were, throughout the ages, perceived as a tool of power. Subversion, in turn, has meant the transgression of earlier forms of equine practices, re-appropriated by women within a more global context of their emancipation. Nonetheless, this cultural revolution tends to install the domination of a new form of representations within which the human-horse relation is necessarily based on love and reciprocity, and sometimes stereotypes (a love that is so great that it enables even a person who does not know how to ride to tame or train an animal, as in *Klara's Horse*; *Coming Home*; *The Greening of Whitney Brown*; *Whisper*, etc.). As our survey has shown, these new norms have begun to be perceived as oppressive by some of today's practitioners, most of them men.

In short, we see that women have had to fight to have access to horses and riding, through a long historical

process that first obliges them to assimilate masculine norms [43], before finally allowing them to create their own, with the transformation of the mythologies that dominate horse and human-horse relations. Yet this shift leads to a new process of normalization, one which aims to separate the genders, by substituting the hegemony of men with the hegemony of women (as illustrated by the movie *Sport de fille*). This deep evolution, largely carried out through the redefinition of the horse as a subject of love/object of transgression in the collective imagination, again paradoxically challenges, although from the opposite direction, the capacity of horse riding to truly constitute “the only mixed sport”...

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