**Unbridled: Dragging Nudity in Ann Oren’s *Piaffe* (2022)**

**Killian O Dwyer**

‘Man would be the only one to have invented a garment to cover his sex. He would be a man only to the extent that he was able to be naked, that is to say, to be ashamed, to know himself to be ashamed because he is no longer naked.’

(Derrida, 2008: 5)

Protruding from an exposed rump, a horse’s tail hangs down, long and fibrous, trailing fluidly across the surface of white linen bedsheets. Neither clipped nor braided, this collection of animal hair appears *au naturel*, shining lustrous in the daylight flooding in from a nearby window. Somewhere between a rich chocolate and deep coffee, the colour of this voluminous ‘skirt’ contrasts vividly against alabaster human flesh and the spread of stark white cotton on which it lays. The woman sporting this fine display of animal hair sits upright on the bed, her legs tucked in close to her body, one on top of the other. Naked, her back is to the camera, with her head turned to the left, adopting a pose reminiscent to Ingres’ neoclassical masterpiece *The Valpinçon Bather* (1808). Despite the fact that this woman is naked, any scrutiny traditionally directed at her exposed flesh seems secondary in this very instance. Rather, it is the tail that takes centre stage, visually foregrounded on the unmade bed as a tantalising endpiece seeking to be brushed or stroked by eyes or hands. Still facing away, the woman moves to her feet and crosses the floor to the open window where she stands for some time, observing the world outside. Her tail gently swings behind her naked frame, before settling again into a static column of long hairs that hang provocatively from a spot just above her bare buttocks.

**[INSERT IMAGE 1 (colour) Eva reclines on bed (Piaffe, 2022, Dir. Ann Oren, Germany) Copyright: Schuldenberg Films.]**

The scene outlined at the beginning of this chapter is lifted from Ann Oren’s 2022 fantasy drama *Piaffe,* an erotic coming-of-age film where a fledgling Foley artist[[1]](#footnote-2) starts to sprout an unusual appendage from her backside while working on a commercial for an equine-inspired mood stabilizer (Abele, 2023). Eva, a shy introverted Berliner who works as a theatre attendant for a giant zoetrope-ian peepshow, is forced to complete the commercial for her non-binary “sister” Zara, the original Foley artist, who suffers a nervous breakdown (G’Sell, 2024: 169). Taking up the array of objects normally used by Zara in their shared apartment, which doubles as a makeshift recording studio, Eva repeatedly attempts to produce and capture sounds that match or accentuate the silent movements of horses within the commercial. Chomping on a gold chain while deftly drumming coconut husks into a box of sand, Eva continually supplicates herself throughout the film to the image of a Trakehner stud performing a soundless piaffe (a slow elevated trot, acquired through extensive training, in which the horse does not move forward), in the hopes that she might synchronise with this majestic animal – in more ways than one (ibid: 170).

As her skills in Foley improve, a horse’s tail starts to manifest from the area of skin covering her sacrum, appearing first as a bald phallic stub before growing into a fine skirt of hair that flows over her bottom and down the back of her legs (fig. 1). The longer the horse tail grows, the friskier Eva becomes. Soon, she is overtaken by a seemingly wild abandon as she prances like a pony in nightclubs wearing only a simple white vest with matching briefs. Between the fanatical cantering to underground techno and the quieter moments of naked repose, *Piaffe* celebrates the transformative power of a mysterious human-equine relation, brought on by a horse’s tail that proudly dangles from a woman’s exposed rear end.

Animal Drag, as the name suggests, is a process of creaturely adornment, where animality arguably plays an integral role in destabilising the West’s historic encapsulation of nature and the hierarchal privileging of human exceptionalism. In her contribution to *Humanimalia,* Nicola McCartney outlines a distinct claim: that Animal Drag is a practice and theory of bodily modification, be it material, habitual or temporal, that attempts to bridge questions of sex, gender, species and race, with the intention of dismantling the edifice of binary logics that underpin patriarchal dogma (McCartney, 2024: 265). In this sense, Animal Drag is a process of parodying and exaggerating the material, symbolic and idealised histories that tie animality to adornment, with the overarching ambition to unweave the tenets of cultural and social formations on which the human-animal divide lies (ibid). Through an analysis of Terry Notary’s performance in Rubin Östlund’s satirical drama *The Square* (2017), McCartney argues that to drag as animal is to both play and disrupt conventional states of embodiment and attire within human tradition, through an insistent reinterrogation of what clothing, costume, ornamentation or prosthesis necessarily “is.” By focusing on the varying registers of shared vulnerability that continually crosses species lines, Animal Drag is a means of unsettling the social and material modes of class, race, ability and species that currently subtend the hierarchal arrangements of late capitalism and colonial expansion (ibid: 278).

This notion however, that animality can necessarily be performed as a method for decentring humanity, is a theoretical practice open to extensive criticism. McCartney herself acknowledges this fact, stating that the supposed agential work of Animal Drag can easily resuscitate certain anthropocentric assumptions regarding the nature of being in philosophy and reinstate numerous anthropomorphic allegories which have long furnished the cultural stronghold of subjecthood (ibid: 261). In *Animal Capital,* Nicole Shukin raises similar concerns, arguing that animal life has borne the brunt of complex capitalist economies and libidinal investments which renders animals materially and speculatively as inseparable from the production lines that transform their real bodies into universal commodities (Shukin, 2009: 24). Not only does the promise of immediacy offered by fast fashion, telecommunication and automobility ignore the creaturely genealogy of capitalism, the sheer momentum and ubiquity of rendering animal bodies into consumer goods means that animal life paradoxically becomes invisible to the cultural masses despite their concrete input from the outset. They are made, according to Carol J. Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat,* into ‘absent referents’ for the interrelationships of class oppression, racial violence and animal slaughter typified in the name of colonial and capitalist progression throughout history (Adams, 2015: 23-4), as evidenced by the North American fur trade of the 1670s, the disassembly line of industrial abattoirs of the 1810s, and the development of the fast fashion model since the 1970s.

Yet, it is not only the cultural legacy of costume and dress that renders animals inseparable from and invisible to the chronology of human exceptionalism over time, but also through the total *absence* of clothing altogether. ‘Nudity,’ as philosopher Jacques Derrida eloquently unravels in *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* is an ontotheological property that has long maintained a hierarchal distinction between the so-called moral rectitude of humans and the innocent, non-conscious awareness of animals. ‘Clothing,’ Derrida writes:

‘Would be proper to man, one of the “properties” of man. “Dressing oneself” would be inseparable from all the other figures of what is “proper to man,” even if one talks about it less than speech or reason, the *logos,* history, laughing, mourning, burial, the gift, etc’ (Derrida, 2008: 5).

Nudity, in this sense, is a sentiment or affect of impropriety woven from a distinctly Judeo-Christian tradition, which ironically *clothes* humans *and* animals with the paradoxical double-bind of nudity.[[2]](#footnote-3) To be nude, in a philosophical sense, is an “animal state” that calls man to consciousness, to cover his *malséance* (“impropriety”) and protect his modesty from the shame that threatens to degrade his erect posture. At the same time, nudity is also a property that has long been construed as a state unique to animals, in the sense that they are deemed to be naked in nature *without* any knowledge of this condition. They exist, in other words, *in* nakedness prior to any originary distinction of good and evil, in apparent absolute innocence of this predicament, which equates animality with nudity and, by extension, as a bestial representation of nature’s apparent primitiveness or savagery within Western contexts (ibid: 64). Thus, human ‘nudity’, I would argue, is a form of Animal Drag that has extensively and ironically *clothed* nonhuman animals as naked and *disguised* humans as subjects throughout history; an invisible culture of veils that safeguards the propriety – “the properness” - of Enlightenment discourse (Derrida and Cixous, 2001: 55).

This chapter seeks to complicate the double bind of Animal Drag outlined above; the dressing of nonhuman animals *in* non-nudity and the dragging of humans *in* self-nudity.By recognising that humans, rather than animals, are the ones who ‘wear’ nudity like a second skin, what I consider in this case to be an issue of *chimerical drag*, this chapter argues that the condition of effectively ‘being nude’ is in fact a phenomenon that is forever deferred in culture. Instead, as seen in *Piaffe,* nakedness is an indeterminate and variable threshold which highlights drag’s capacity for erotic transformation across species lines, a restaging of the ‘surface encounter’ shared between humans and nonhumans which, to extend Zaynah Akeel’s argument in her chapter, exposes the various registers of vulnerability that uphold Cartesian subjecthood. The unexpected growth of a horse’s tail from Eva’s backside, seemingly brought on by the alluring pulse of underground techno, signals the arrival of a new unbridled intimacy between the two figures of nudity described by Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, of a new *species* of animal or *chimerical drag* cultivated by the registers of sound.Focusing on the ambiguous noises of dragging, clicking, chewing, flicking and rubbing produced by Eva, and sometimes her botanist lover Novak, as Foley in *Piaffe,* I also suggest that sound, rather than sight, harbours a unique ability to luxate the imposed difference between ‘the animal’ we conceptually cloth as naked and ‘the human’ we dress as exceptional.

**Bare (Animal) Life**

Nudity, like McCartney’s notion of Animal Drag, is not a universal or fixed state or condition. Being naked is a fluid and unstable phenomenon open to interpretation; what constitutes as exposed sex or flesh in society shifts from culture to culture and varies across space and time (Levine, 2008: 190). While nudity is often simplified colloquially as a natural state of being in the world, its meaning or significance in the wider social imaginary represents a morass of idealised values and assumptions predominantly informed by colonial and theological powers which have maintained a longstanding fascination with unclothed figures (ibid: 189). In *The Nude,* Kenneth Clark provides a now widely accepted, yet conceptually dubious, art-historical distinction between ‘the naked’ and ‘the nude’; the first being a state of deprivation or cowering humiliation at an apparent lack of clothing, while the second is positioned as an aesthetically ‘balanced, prosperous and confident body re-formed’ (Clark, 1972: 3). Phillipa Levin, however, tackles this difference head-on in “States of Undress,” arguing that the study of unclothed bodies in visual culture can only be adequately theorised through the lens of colonial expansion and enterprise (Levine, 2008: 191). Whereas a lack of clothing among colonised people was often portrayed by Western anthropology as primitive, vulnerable, innocent or approximate to nature, the figure of the nude cultivated by European fine art traditions celebrated the heroism or physical prowess of “civilised” bodies as they prostrate themselves across marble plinths and painted canvas’ (ibid: 189). Thus, as Donatella Barbieri and Denise Ackerl confirm in their contribution to this volume, while unclothed bodies on the surface seem to share a common condition, their individual presentations represent a consistent mediation of distinct modes of analysis long informed by issues of gender, race, sexuality and class.

Paramount to the moralisation of unclothed bodies by Western authorities is the ontotheological signature of Christian dogma, which equates all visible expressions of nudity with the inherited nature of “original sin.” As Giorgio Agamben reflects in *Nudities,* the ‘metaphysical transformation’ of the Genesis story, in which Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise owing to their “deviant” human nature, illustrates how the graceful ‘naked corporeality’ of the sexes under God is reformulated as a source of shame and reduced to mere ‘biological functionality’ (Agamben, 2011: 60). Both Adam and Eve were never in fact naked spiritual bodies prior to The Fall; rather, they were animal bodies clothed *in* the grace of God, which clung to the surface of their skin like a heady garment of glory. It is only by way of inherited “original sin”, as an inclination of their innate animal instincts (Cavarero, 2016: 3), that this divine couple lose the supernatural grace bestowed unto them by the Almighty Father and, as a result, any perception of nobility attributed to the human form. Denuded, they are compelled to fashion loincloths made from fig leaves and nonhuman animal skins in response to their newly realised biological functionality. This ontotheological story that links clothing with grace and nudity with nature, an entanglement which Agamben describes in *Nudities* as a ‘chimera,’ is a corporeality attributed to all forms of life following the Fall, thus establishing an immovable nostalgia for lost Edenic innocence as well as an origin point for continual return, reflection and redemption (Agamben, 2011: 69). Since it only becomes visible after sin, rather than coinciding with it, nudity belongs to the progression of time and history rather than the development of appearance or being, manifesting as an event or experience of baring or denudation precipitated by moments of undress. ‘In this sense,’ Agamben muses in *Nudities*, ‘it can be said that in Christianity there is no theology of nudity, only a theology of clothing,’ which adorns the naked body like a continuous veiled parody on what “true” nudity actually “is” (ibid: 58).

It is for this reason that Derrida, at the beginning of *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* calls for words that might displace the appearance of a *dressage* (“training”, or “schooling”), which compels humans to continually “drag up” feelings of shame and superiority in order to differentiate themselves from other animals (Derrida, 2008: 1):

‘In the beginning, I would like to entrust myself to words that, were it possible, would be naked […] I would like to choose words that are, to begin with, naked, quite simply, words from the heart’ (ibid).

Throughout *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida continually circles back to the issue of *who* or *what* one instinctively follows in the journey for self-determination, as an area of philosophy where the animal question rubs vicariously up against the entwined concept of origin and the figure of nudity. Famously, Derrida’s critique is centred around an unusual encounter one morning in his bathroom with a little cat – ‘a real cat’, Derrida stresses, not an allegorical or figurative one – which calls forth a sense of impropriety that is entirely specular, unjustifiable and unavowable (ibid: 4). Caught starkers, in a state of undress, Derrida recalls feelings of shame conjured up by the insistent gaze of his feline companion, ‘a benevolent and pitiless gaze, surprised or cognizant,’ which Derrida tries to deflect by instinctively covering his so-called private parts (ibid). The inquisitive scrutiny afforded by the watchful eyes of this little cat does not align with the ‘animal-machine’ proposed by Descartes in *A Discourse on the Method,* in which all animals are figured as machines of repetition and reaction, cut off from any capacity to respond (Turner, 2014: 160; Oliver, 2009: 142). As Derrida notes early on, Descartes’ desire to privilege human speech over animal noises, an argument first made by Aristotle in *Politics* (350 BCE), effectively assigns ‘a deep sadness’ or ‘melancholic mourning’ to nature and animality that reflects an impossible resignation at being incapable of a response as such (Derrida, 2008: 19). Yet this encounter in the bathroom, of a ‘certain animal nude before the other animal,’ turns the table on Descartes’ ‘animal-machine’: for it is the bottomless gaze of the cat that seems to be looking for a *response* and it is the naked Derrida that *reacts* by clothing himself in an age-old sense of shame (ibid: 4). ‘Ashamed of what and naked before whom?’, Derrida asks himself time and again throughout *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ‘why let oneself be overcome with shame?’ (ibid). This question of *who* or *what* “is” naked that Derrida asks himself repeatedly should not be considered a desire to return to some original Edenic state, but rather as a destabilization of the obedient prefigured human subject so embedded within the Cartesian legacy that structures culture itself (Turner, 2013: 2; Turner, 2020: 1).

‘Nudity,’ Derrida outlines in *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* is the ontotheological property *par excellence* that discriminates the human subject from the nonhuman animal based on a sentiment or affect which, as mentioned earlier, ironically *clothes* humans *and* nonhuman animals with a paradoxical double-bind based on an issue of *consciousness*. According to Western reason, animals are denied the capacity for reason and consciousness, which therefore ensures ‘theanimal’s’ exclusion from the realm of law and order; a decree handed down from the likes of Descartes, Rousseau and Heidegger (O’ Dwyer, 2024: 6). Since animals are framed as deprived of human speech, as Akira Mizuta Lippit writes in *Electric Animal,* they are considered by Western philosophy to be incapable of reflection, imagination and foresight, and crucially, the ability to know that they are in fact unclothed (Lippit, 2000: 14). Following this logic, animals cannot feel shame at their lack of clothing; rather, they “wear” nakedness without knowing it – ‘naked without *existing* in nakedness,’ Derrida specifies – neither feeling, seeing, reflecting or imagining themselves as naked at all (Derrida, 2008: 5). Paradoxically, this means that animals are in fact *not* naked, since modesty, the benchmark for covering exposed flesh, is just as foreign to animals as is the notion of immodesty. Humans, on the other hand, are the only species to have invented a garment to hide their nakedness. Derrida writes: ‘he would be a man only to the extent that he was able to be naked, that is to say, to be ashamed, to *know* himself to be ashamed.’ This, for Derrida, is the crucial distinction between two temporalities or figures of nudity that adorn both humans and animals in the world which contradict one another:

‘The animal would be *in* non-nudity because it is nude, and man *in* nudityto the extent that he is no longer nude. There we encounter a difference, a time or *contretemps* between two *nudities without nudity*’ (Derrida, 2008: 5).

There is no nudity in nature, Derrida argues; instead, there is only the sentiment or affective experience of what it means to exist in nakedness. Clothing is not the only technology invented by humans to adorn their bodies; nudity is a figurative shroud woven from an ontotheological tradition that *drags* both human and animals *in* and *with* a cultural phenomenon of exposed flesh as a proverbial second skin. It is a veil that both distinguishes and shares an invisible property across the human-animal divide, what Derrida might be referring to in *The Beast and the Sovereign* as a monstrous *chimera*, ‘a composite essence of man and beast’ that exposes the artificial and precarious nature of human exceptionalism within society (Derrida, 2009: 80). In the *Iliad*, Homer describes this mythical creature to be a mingled monster derived from a multiplicity of animals; the head of a lion, the entrails of a goat and the fiery tail of a dragon, which is later slain by Bellerophon. Much like the mythical fabulation of this monstrous hybrid, nakedness manifests in culture as a chimerical figure that continues to contradict itself: as an animal *in* non-nudity because it does not know it is nude, and a man *in* nudityto the point where he wishes to be non-nude. Nudity, in this sense, not only highlights the limits between species in order to displace what it means to be ‘human’, it projects a hybrid monstration across species lines where, in the words of Derrida: ‘the beast becomes the sovereign who becomes the beast […] the beast and (*et*) the sovereign (conjunction), but also the beast is (*est*) the sovereign, the sovereign is (*est*) the beast’ (Derrida, 2009: 18). Nudity, therefore, is not simply a veil, prosthesis or process of consciously revealing and operating in liminal spaces, similar to McCartney characterisation of Animal Drag (McCartney, 2024: 271); rather, nudity is an undecided and undecidable chimera, as witnessed in Ann Oren’s *Piaffe*; a restless, irreducible fiction or myth that disturbs the surface of all living species, albeit in the eyes of man.

**The Dark Horse of Moving Images**

Teeth clacking against metal. The sound of grit scraping against a solid weight. Champing at the bit, with eyes cast upwards in devout supplication, Eva rhythmically thumps coconut husks into a shallow tray filled with earth, matching the lope of a horse as it moves onscreen (fig. 2). To the audience, her earnest expression reads as a look of hunger, tongue lapping at the gold chain pulled across her mouth and cheek, as she maintains focus on the moving images before her. Straining at the gilded bridle, Eva manages to release her mouth with a filly’s headshake before she reaches around, still hunched over, to scratch at her rear end, where a future tail promises to grow. Trotting in place, the stud onscreen seems relaxed, supple, flexing the joints of the front legs to the postproduction Foley of drumming coconuts, before the sound starts to bleed into the heavy thumping of underground techno. Hooves kicking up dirt. The scene is thick with the sounds of industrial electronic beats. Darkly pulsating and deeply alluring. The piaffe continues.

**[INSERT IMAGE 2 (colour) Eva champing at the bit (Piaffe, 2022, Dir. Ann Oren, Germany) Copyright: Schuldenberg Films.]**

*Piaffe* is not a breed of horse-related films familiar to the post-war generation, where children’s literature and popular culture was filled with dreams of horse ownership or forming a lasting equine bond despite economic hardship (Addison, 2005: 163). Instead, it is a film that fantasizes about the capacity for erotic transformation across species lines, or, better yet, a visual poem in moving parts, one that welcomes all animals over the threshold of sexual differences (Derrida; 2008: 36). Clearly, Eva is a chimerical figure. At first, shy, retiring, easily shamed by the director for the commercial she initially fails to impress with her amateur Foley. “Are you mute or just dumb?”, he hisses in her ear after the screening, using an insult normally reserved for nonhuman animals. Even the enigmatic botanist Novak, who visits the giant zootrope where she works, initially pays her only a cursory glance or two, his mind preoccupied by the illusory animation of ferns slowly unfurling through the peepholes before him.

Soon, however, a horse’s tail begins to grow, bald at first, appearing on the surface of the skin as a pseudo-human phallus that protrudes suggestively from Eva’s backside (G’Sell, 2024: 169). It would be wrong to think that this little appendage was a sign of penis envy; it does not visibly stiffen like the ferns in the zootrope which continually unfold as a series of never-ending vegetal erections. Instead, the long ‘skirt’ of flowing hair that sprouts from the dock doubles as the exposed nerve endings of a new fibrous, sexual organ, an erotic endpiece which serves as an alternative mode of pleasure to Freud’s Oedipal model (to borrow from Elisabetta Garletti’s invocation of Foucault and Preciado in her chapter “Tail Envy”). Each strand seems to inform and stimulate the rest, working as one to bring their host body to a hoof-stomping climax. As the tail grows longer, Eva becomes more chimerical, more difficult to discern between human or horse, more sexually adventurous as the dividing line becomes whisker thin. When she is not reclining nude with a rich trail of animal hair dragging behind her across white linen bedsheets, Eva dresses as a show-jumping dandy, kitted out in a slim-line riding jacket and elegant top hat, studying the outward appearance of her burgeoning sexual confidence in a full-length mirror. This unexpected growth does not seem to cause Eva any distress or alarm, nor does it present itself as some sort of visible confirmation of her place in society (the double entendre of a ‘woman’s tail’ or ‘tailbone’, as Kathryn Yusoff and Mary Thomaspoint out in *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies,* is a figure of speech which suggests that women are more tied to their animal pasts than men by way of reproduction (Yusoff and Thomas, 2018: 59). Rather, Eva notably welcomes its unusual protrusion as a mark of her newfound animal eroticism, a sexual manifestation that remains unfathomable to an immediate observer yet presenting itself as something deeply pleasurable for her alone.

Layering showjumping attire, white undergarments, animal hair and bare skin, *Piaffe* reads as a visually poetic critique on the question of *surface*, as an issue salient to the notion of animal or *chimerical drag* in this chapter. As Ron Broglio astutely observes in *Animals and the Human Imagination*, thinking about animals in the current cultural landscape means taking seriously the possibility that everything operates “on the surface” (Broglio, 2012: 238). Since Aristotle, nonhuman animals are still often represented as soulless and speechless creatures without any capacity for interior reflection or spiritual transcendence. Notably in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History,* Hegel claims that animals have no true reality, are unable to interpose anything between an impulse and its satisfaction, and are therefore divided from themselves *within* themselves, meaning that they are unable to attain an ethical life (Hegel, 1975: 49-50). Thus, animals in Hegelian philosophy are simply born and pass away, leaving behind no monuments, burial sites, institutions, laws, or histories (Derrida, 2021: 19). For all intents and purposes, animals are construed by philosophy as creatures that exist on a surface level only, unable to differentiate between inside and outside, or gain access to the so-called “inner life” of man (Broglio, 2012: 239).

Animal Drag is equally all about surfaces. As McCartney notes, dress and adornment are key aspects of how performances of animality can play or parody the superficial treatment of animal lives in the human domain (McCartney, 2024: 265). Addressing the ways in which industrial, capitalist and artistic histories have contributed to the representation of animals as subsurface (see Akeel’s chapter) and, by extension, as subaltern, means reevaluating the physical and metaphysical uprightness of humans, which Broglio considers to be a vital node in collapsing the lofty heights of human exceptionalism and the significance attributed to interiority and reflexivity (Broglio, 2012: 246). Here, the in/visible veil of nudity returns as a form of animal or chimerical drag that exposes the asymmetrical nature of these imposed hierarchies that are underpinned by patriarchal dogma. In *Inclinations,* Adriana Cavarero writes that the metaphor of “upright man” so pervasive in the social imaginary literally functions as a principal and norm for the elevation of an ethical posture (Cavarero, 2016: 6) and which, as Kelly Oliver observes in *Animal Lessons,* simultaneously distinguishes him from animals and women by confirming his visible status of ‘being erect’ (Oliver, 2009: 143). Rectitude, as Derrida notes in *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* is at the heart of this sense of shame that engulfs moments of stark nudity, as an affect or sentiment that is primarily derived from the experience of standing upright (Derrida, 2008: 37). For Derrida, erection is a process of hominization, of recognising oneself as human by ‘being erect’ vertically, as a way of distancing oneself from animals, but also orientationally, by practicing the face-to-face encounter during copulation that is unique to humans. The naked male, in this sense, is the surface or symbol that epitomises this dual meaning behind rectitude as both a verticality and an orientation, as a sign of the propriety of human sensibility which this notion of Animal Drag, as argued by McCartney, aims to give a good “dressing-down.”

In contrast to this history of rectitude, which Derrida observes to be an occurrence equally implicated in the Edenic origin story of Genesis, Eva’s variable states of undress in *Piaffe,* one could argue, is an outright dragging of nudity itself, where the question of surface becomes an indeterminate and variable threshold of erotic transformation rather than sexual objectification. Having already developed a horse’s tail, Eva enters a strange BDSM relationship with the mysterious botanist Novak, whose fascination with the hermaphroditic qualities of ferns is redirected to the inviting “specimen” hanging down from her behind. His desire, it would seem, is to “get below the surface” of this bizarre animal manifestation that tests the limits of human rationality and to ‘tame’ or ‘train’ her unfolding erotic transformation. Although their physical encounters are marked by a certain mutual ‘awakening’ of her newfound eroticism, as witnessed in a scene where Novak pushes a thorny rose down her gullet while simultaneously stroking her sexually sensitive tail until she orgasms, this sequence highlights a further problematic that separates the sexual lives of humans and nonhuman animals. As Nicole Anderson points out in “The Masturbating Animal”, the figure of ‘the human’ is philosophically and metaphysically defined according to ‘the animal’s’ inability to engage with erotics in general, in which the so-called “impulsive nature” of an animal’s sexual life is rendered both paradoxically manageable and untameable at the same time (Anderson, 2024: 218). Whereas an animal is unable to interpose anything between an impulse and its satisfaction according to Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History,* meaning that they are deemed incapable of conscious reflection and regulation, humans, by contrast, are uniquely positioned as beings who are gifted with the capability to determine themselves *through* their claim to self-conscious certainty (Hegel, 1975: 49-50). In other words, humans “become” human through their ability to rationalise and civilise sex as such, as an ‘object’ or ‘end’ rendered separable and thus controllable. We arguably bear witness to such desire in *Piaffe* when Novak seems to ‘train’ Eva, in one instance visibly disrobing her during a sound recording session before batting her highly sensitive tail against her thighs as she trots on the spot to a satisfying climax (G’Sell, 2024: 171). However, despite his attempts to master her “wild sexuality” (which again highlights the colonial and patriarchal stake in philosophies or practices intent on “civilising” sex itself), Eva soon grows to mistrust Novak’s intentions, eventually rebuffing his advances in a highly symbolically scene that takes place within the very zootrope that occupies so much of his attention early on. What is clear throughout the film is that the figure(s) of nudity, which Eva “wears” to varying degrees, is a performative inversion of what it means to be *au naturel* or civilised. Laying naked on the bed, her body becomes the surface where two contradicting temporalities of nudity wrestle with one another, as the animal *in* non-nudity and the human *in* nudity. Together, they represent a chimerical figure that confronts how gender, sex and species have become codified by a Cartesian legacy that still treats their shared vulnerabilities as a “surface issue.” The “dark horse” of *Piaffe,* it would seem, is how nudity can in fact be *re*surfaced as a state of being that is forever deferred or undecidable in culture, as a human-animal relation that can be, in the best possible terms, meaningless.

**Naked Sounds**

Clicking, snorting, sighing, whinnying; *Piaffe* is a record of animal sounds that cut straight to the chase, to the heart of the matter, below the surface of the *humain propre*. Contained within the moving images of a human-equine relation centred around the question of nudity, noises are engineered after the event – postproduction – where unlikely props recreate the ambient sounds of events unfolding onscreen. Gnawing away at the limit of human comprehension by way of the ear canal, these sounds blur the line between representation and truth, where what is heard does not originate from what is seen. Foley is a form of audiovisual trickery, reproducing the sound of an action or natural occurrence portrayed in a film using unconventional or unrelated materials, for either realistic or exaggerated effect.Ambient sounds in *Piaffe,* as Eileen G’Sell observes in her review of the film, are amplified to a few decibels higher than what is considered a normal range, where the noise of straining leather, hair brushing, and swallowing becomes even more visceral to an eagerly listening audience (G’Sell, 2024: 171). The sound of skin on skin, hand on hair, hoof on ground and gasp from mouth all feed into the affective power contained within this highly poetic work. Without doubt, it is a film of animal sounds (whether they be human animal or animal animal), that I would argue are just as naked as the words Derrida dreamed of in *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* words which he suggests are, quite simply, from the heart:

‘In short, I was dreaming of inventing an unheard-of grammar and music in order to create a scene that was neither human, nor divine, nor animal, with a view to denouncing all discourses on the so-called animal, all the anthropo-theomorphic or anthropo-theocentric logics and axiomatics, philosophy, religion, politics, law, ethics, with a view to recognizing in them animal strategies, precisely, in the human sense of the term, stratagems, ruses, and war machines, defensive or offensive manoeuvres, search operations, predatory, seductive, indeed exterminatory operations as part of a pitiless struggle between what are presumed to be species’ (Derrida, 2008: 64).

The affective power of sound in *Piaffe,* to use the words of Shukin in *Animal Life and The Moving Image,* is a ‘striking tool’ to move bodies, where the instrumentalization of film’s power is aesthetically and biopolitically formulated to *make feel,* to mark a site beyond the surface of the film screen where the vitality of (animal) life can be *felt* anew (Shukin, 2015: 187). By amplifying sounds that straddle the human-animal divide, where it is difficult to discern whofrom what*,* *Piaffe* initiates an encounter between the listening ear and the watchful eye of the subject which threatens to luxate the human need for self-certainty. To appropriate Derrida in *Margins of Philosophy,* the art ofFoley threatens to take a proverbial hammer to the presumptive assurance of Western thought, to literally batter it around the ears, confound it, deafen it, deaden it, dislodge it from the safety of self-certain representation, separate it from itself, in order to describe and decry its comprehensive, rigorous structure (Derrida, 1982: xiii).

The fact that Eva’s erotic transformation is spurred on by the silent recordings of prancing horses, to which she must recreate ambient and animal sounds, is suggestive that the film screen in particular becomes the privileged surface for a human-animal exchange where, to borrow from Broglio, ‘human animals and animal animals trade marks’ (Broglio, 2012: 240). Eva’s newfound talent for Foley, catalysed by the sexual power she seems to draw from her equine appendage, creates a shift in emphasis from representational content to the force of sonorous lyricism. Gaily, she skips down cobbled streets with horseshoes attached to the bottom of her brogues, the sound of metal amplified until it ricochets throughout the scene and beyond. In another instance, alone in her makeshift recording studio, Eva tenderly brushes her tail next to a telephone receiver, engaging in a novel form of phone sex with her lover Novak. Overall, the film is a compelling exploration of noise as a means for feminine arousal or heightened stimulation experienced by a woman who seems to be more turned on by sound than her male counterpart (G’Sell, 2024: 172). Sound, in this context, is a register that resists the finality of meaning and invites undecidability over the threshold of sexual differences. Similar to how nudity is an undecided and undecidable chimera; a restless, irreducible fiction or myth that disturbs the surface of all living species, sound is an impression or feeling that is registered by the body as a vibration that starts up without warning and fades away before any rational determination or meaning can be attributed to its passing (Derrida, 1986: 9-10). If the naked appearance of a horse’s tail from a woman’s backside in *Piaffe* is a parodic commentary on what nudity “is”, then Foley arguably becomes a new *species* of animal or chimerical drag that strikes at the heart (or ear) of self-assuredness, casting doubt on the privileging of visual mastery in the Western canon. What is necessary, according to Derrida, is to ‘increase the surface of the impression and hence the capacity for vibration,’ to render the conditions of human exceptionalism undecidable from the inside, beyond the transparent partition of the aural membrane in the ear (Derrida: 1982: xv). Here, Foley might present itself as an unheard-of grammar, a species of parodied sounds that creates a scene which is neither human, divine, nor other animal, but which, as Derrida suggests in *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* mightdenounce all discourses on the so-called animal, all the anthropo-theomorphic or anthropo-theocentric logics and axiomatics so engrained in human culture, where animality is felt anew (Derrida, 2008: 64).

**[INSERT IMAGE 3 (colour) Eva’s piaffe in the nightclub (Piaffe, 2022, Dir. Ann Oren, Germany) Copyright: Schuldenberg Films.]**

Hanging down from the waistband of her white cotton briefs, Eva’s tail swings to the sound of underground techno. Alone in the centre of a dimly lit nightclub, she performs a piaffe, trotting on the spot, whinnying like an excitable filly (fig. 3). What form of nudity she is, or is not, “wearing” in this instance is uncertain. Stripped down to her *under*garments, Eva arguably straddles the boundary that Derrida speaks of in *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* the limitbetween two nudities without nudity, as a human-animal *in* nudity (in the sense that she is not fully nude) and an animal-animal *in* non-nudity (owing to the fact that her newfound animal eroticism is laid bare for all to see). It is difficult, on reflection, to ascertain whether she is in a state of undress or a process of adornment. Cantering to the percussive rhythm of an electro-inspired beat, Eva is not denuded by the film camera, nor is she “dressed” as distinctly human for that matter. Nakedness is not a veil that she seems to wear or pay any attention to. She is not bound by what Hélène Cixous calls in *Stigmata* a ‘nuditude,’ the seeing of oneself as nude through the sight of another’s exposed form (Cixous, 1998: 19). Clopping at a steady pace, Eva’s semi-state of undress or drag is a visual reminder that what counts as nudity is a myth in the eye and mind of the beholder. The fact that one might interpret her physical appearance as being naked or clothed suggests that an ontotheological lens still informs the discourse around what she necessarily “is” in this moment.

Yet, what Eva’s equine performance in the nightclub communicates to its audience is that animal drag *is* inherently chimerical, in the sense that its parodic intervention undermines the assured rigidity we ascribe to gender, sex and species to the point that the human-animal divide becomes an aporia of profound undecidability. Animal Drag, as previously mentioned, is a practice that aims to collapse the edifice of human exceptionalism by disturbing the superficial and violent treatment of animals by the industrial, capitalist and artistic economies of the world. Rather than addressing animality as simply a “surface issue,” this chapter leans into the notion that Animal Drag also resonates beyond traditional visual frames of reference, as an artform that is equally percussive, poetic and aesthetically striking. Sound is a register that lends itself to methods of parody and confrontation, by going below the surface of the primacy attributed to vision within society. *Piaffe’s* novel approach to illustrating the chimerical qualities of Foley evidences the fact that “naked sounds” have the potential to blur the line between representation and truth in the same way that drag can disrupt the bare life of the *humain propre*. Foley turns the “naked truth” of an object into something which it is not, producing a sound that resonates ambiguously within the confines of the attentive ear. A challenge for the reader of this chapter would be to play the film again, except this time with eyes closed, listening to the sounds of brushing, sighing, snorting, gulping, scraping and pounding that extends across species lines. The erotic transformation that takes place in *Piaffe* is not only visible, it is also sonorous.

And in this final scene, both species of animal drag converge together, sight and sound, working in tandem to create an instance where animality can be felt anew, or, in the words of Derrida, to bring forth an unheard of grammar of words that, were it possible, would be naked; words that are naked and, quite simply, communicated straight from the heart (Derrida, 2008: 1). Deftly, Eva pounds her horseshoed brogues into the floor of the nightclub, drumming up a beat that vibrates throughout her body, below the surface, what she alone can feel as such. All attention is centred on her solo performance in the middle of the room, which can only be described as a celebration of a newfound sexual dressage, an unbridled intimacy fostered by a human-animal relation that continues to stimulate and excite, even after the music ends.

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1. An individual who creates sound effects that are added to film postproduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. While Kenneth Clarke provides a distinction between ‘being nude’ and ‘being naked’ in *The Nude,* stating that the former connotes a ‘well-balanced’ and ‘confident’ body, whereas the latter suggests a state of depravity, Derrida does not pursue such thinking in *The Animal That Therefore I Am.* For Derrida, nudity and nakedness are both anthropocentric concepts that adjudicates *who should* be clothed and *what is* without clothing. Regardless of Clarke’s distinction, Derrida maintains that both ‘nudity’ and ‘nakedness’ are idealised states prescribed to humans and animals respectively, yet both function to subordinate ‘the animal’. As a result, this chapter at times uses nudity and nakedness interchangeably despite Clarke’s distinction, owing to the fact that both discriminate against animal being as such. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)