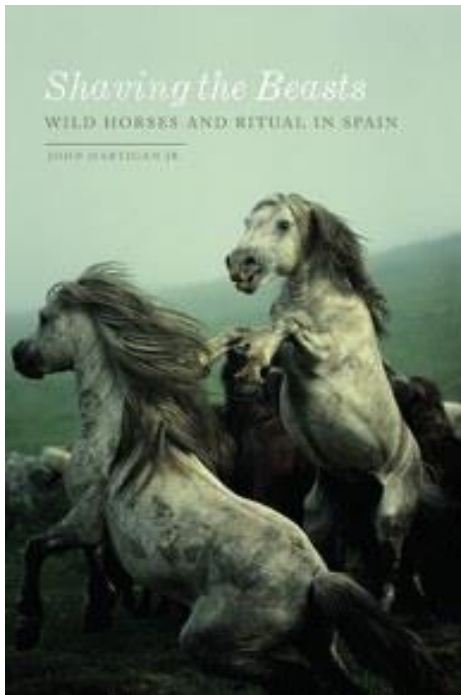


John Hartigan Jr, *Shaving the Beasts. Wild horses and rituals in Spain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 2020, ISBN 978-1-5179-0474-6, 312 pages, 54 b&w photos, 5 1/2 x 8 1/2.



John Hartigan Jr takes the reader along an unexplored road, the one of rural rituals in deep inland countryside of Spain.¹ The main difficulty for the author, who is an ethnographer, was to understand the horses, animals whom he did not know much about, as well as to adopt new methodological processes that forced him to go out from his comfort zone.

Overcoming these first difficulties, John Hartigan Jr's book presents, with structured and organized steps, the progress of the writer from its first approach of the cultural background of Spanish rural villages to the ritual he came to observe: the shaving of wild horses. This ancestral ritual takes place in northern Spain, at the border with Portugal, one of the few regions of Western Europe where the so-called "wild horses" still exist (their contacts with humans are reduced to once-a-year

interactions, with the animals living freely in the mountains): the Garranos. The ritual itself consists in catching and grouping the horses together, to shave them, in front of a large crowd. This event can be seen as stressful to the animals who are usually living free in the mountains and are not used at all to human presence or to interaction with them. The purpose of John Hartigan's study was to try to observe the ritual from the horses' point of view, to be able to learn to what extent this event impacts the horses' social relationships.

To this end, John Hartigan Jr presents his work and observations in three parts. He first introduces the reader to his ethnographic and ethological background, the data basis available for his investigation, as well as the local team that is helping him and their different backgrounds. Then he observes the horses and their social relationships in herds, in semi-freedom, as they have been brought closer to the location where the event is to take place. Finally, he focuses on the ritual itself, in different places where it usually happens every year, from the less touristic places to

¹ "The same social event of horses' shaving has been used as a background of the film "As Bestas" (2022) a French/Spanish film directed by Rodrigo Sorogoyen, from 2022.

the more crowded one, where the event has a profound touristic impact on the territory and the population.

His observations led Hartigan to the conclusion that horses have a natural gift to adapt themselves to any new event, as it only takes a few days for the equids to lower their level of stress and adopt new behaviors. Indeed, the main difficulty for them is the fact they are gathered in a confined space where usual social interactions are not possible, leading them more easily to conflictual situations – which is the point, from a human point of view, as it is the fighting between stallions that most of the crowd come to see, apparently. However, as the horses progressively adapt to the new situation, some social behaviors emerge again and the aggressive behavior due to the stress of change tends to disappear. This capacity to adapt is an impressive example of what John Hartigan Jr calls horses' "behavioral plasticity" (p. 249). However, the observations of the researcher are not linked to the event itself, but to the horses' social structures, especially the predominant role played by the mares and the importance of the eye contact in horses' social relationships. The study thus questions the stallion's role as central and shows the real importance of the mare and her "sociality" (p. 253).

The objective of the author is also to show how horses can be, as humans, "ethical subjects" of investigation, "posing and possessing equivalents rights and forms of being as humans" (p. 255), in the hope that it will allow more studies of the animals' social behaviors focusing on the animals themselves and not on the human's role towards them, relating his work to the review made by Laura Ogden, Billy Hall and Kimiko Tanita in 2013.²

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² Ogden, Laura A., Billy Hall, and Kimiko Tanita. 2013. "Animals, Plants, People, and Things: A Review of Multispecies Ethnography." *Environment and Society: Advances in Research*, 4, n° 1, 5-24.