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Working animals

Hidden modernisers made visible

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1. Abstract

Working animals are often conceptualised as a phenomenon of the pre-industrial age. Historians often assume that they became obsolete in the process of industrialisation. But a closer look at the development of the urban transport systems and the process of mechanisation in agriculture illustrates that working animals played a crucial role up to the middle of the 20th century. They were agents of modernisation and not phenomena of a pre-industrial era.

This video essay first gives an overview of the relevance and the variety of working animals. Then it illustrates the close interaction of men, women and children with their working companions. Although humans decided when the animals had to work, the work itself was always done in cooperation between human beings and animals. In other words: Work not only produces products, it also creates ties. Work, therefore, is profoundly ambivalent: it can be a means of alienation, but it can also be an opportunity for emancipation.

2. Script

Introduction

Working animals – often they are conceptualised as a phenomenon of the pre-industrial age. Historians regularly assume, that working animals became obsolete in the process of industrialisation and the modernisation of agriculture. But a closer look at the development of the urban transport systems and the mechanisation of agricultural production in the 19th and 20th centuries illustrates, that working animals played a crucial role up to the middle of the 20th century. They were, in other words, agents of modernisation and not, as often perceived, phenomena of a pre-industrial era.

Content

This video essay first gives an overview of the relevance of working animals and illustrates their variety. It then shows three specific forms of human-animal interactions at work. The film clips used in this presentation are taken from the Online Portal of the European Rural History Film Association.

Relevance

Animals were seldom categorised and counted as working animals in the official statistics. But nonetheless, they were important. And their numerical relevance can be reconstructed. The number of working cows, for example, can be calculated from scientific investigations which were undertaken into the working capacities of cows in the 1930's and 40's.

The cultivation of living resources depends on the weather, the topography and the soil structure. It took more than half a century to turn the strong, but clumsy and far too heavy steam-power machines of the 19th century into light, versatile, motor driven machines, which could compete with animal power. In Switzerland, for example, it was only after World War II when the number of tractors outnumbered the animal driven machines.

Dogs

Dogs were not only used for protecting goods and herding cattle and sheep. They also played a crucial role when it came to transporting goods to the markets. In the 19th and 20th centuries dogs became particularly relevant for delivering milk from farms to the creameries. In many cities, they were indispensable for the milkmen who delivered milk to the consumers' homes.

Cows

Animals are multifunctional creatures. Cows, for example, are not only producing meat and milk. In many European regions, they were used in great numbers as draught animals on small and medium

sized farms. In order to balance their milk and draught performance, they seldom were harnessed for more than a few hours per day. And they were spared from draught work for some time before and after giving birth to a calf.

Breeding bulls

Breeding bulls were difficult to keep since they often became dangerous for those who had to handle them. But work was considered as easing their character. There is clear evidence that working bulls were kept longer for breeding purposes than those who lived idle on farms.

Donkeys

Donkeys were often used as pack animals. They were known to be frugal, persistent and often as stubborn as their masters.

Horses

Horses were not only the strongest and fastest, but also the most prestigious among the working animals. Labourers responsible for the horses on bigger farms were better paid than ordinary farm labourers. And their reputation among the rural community was often higher than that of small farmers who were depending on cows as draught animals.

Up to the late 19th century, most of the urban transport systems were depending on horsepower. Cities, therefore, often had a far higher horse density than rural areas. Since the cities could not produce the feed for the horses they needed, they simultaneously shaped their rural surroundings. There, not only the fodder for the horses was produced, but also the horses themselves. Farms located on the outskirts of the cities took on the task of educating young horses to work and accustoming them to urban noise levels.

Learning by doing

Animals, like men, are not simply born to work. They have to learn it before they can perform it. The teaching techniques varied across cultures and times as much as the pulling harnesses.

Foals, for example, usually were free to roam beside their working mothers in their first year. Then they were tied to a pulling adult in order to get adjusted to the working rhythm. Only if horses were three or four years old, they were actually expected to work along older companions.

Eating and recreation

Both, men and animals get tired when they are working. Unlike motor driven machines they are not able to work continually, without resting. As living resources they further have to eat and drink regularly. When men and animals were working together, they also rested, ate and drank together.

Children

Children, like men and women, were an integral part of the peasant economy. While the burden of work was too heavy for many of the children, the film sources indicate, that working with animals was an empowering experience for many of them. An important aspect that becomes clear from the film clips is the close interaction of men, women and children with their working companions. Although men decided unilaterally when the animals had to work, the work itself was always done in cooperation between human beings and animals.

As Jocelyne Porcher, the French sociologist has argued: Work not only produces products, it also produces ties. Work, therefore, is profoundly ambivalent: it can be a means of alienation, but it can also be an opportunity for emancipation.

3. References and Credits

3.1 Filmography

The video essay is based on the following films which are accessible via the indicated institutions. Meta data can be found by following the links.

European Rural History Film Association (ERHFA), Online Portal

- Aus Ödland wird Kulturland, Reference Number: AfA 0213, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=106
- Das Geschenk der Inkas, Reference Number: AfA 0012, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=34
- Das Pferd als treuer Helfer, Reference Number: SRF0268, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=527
- Duvanel-Film, Reference Number: AfA 0205, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=1973
- Kleiner Acker, grosse Hoffnung, Reference Number: AfA 0170, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=46
- It liet fan de Burd, Reference Number: FFA AV0402, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=1416
- La paysanne au travail, Reference Number: AfA 0017, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=11
- Nur ein Stück Brot, Reference Number: AfA 0223, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=93
- Nützt den Segen, Reference Number: AfA 0002, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=17
- Pferdekuranstalt, Reference Number: ZEM F445, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=1589
- Pulvermilch, Reference Number: AfA 0244, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=765
- Rapsernte, Reference Number: AfA 0257, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=768
- Rationelles Arbeiten mit Landmaschinen, Reference Number: AfA 0181, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=334
- Reichtum der Scholle, Reference Number: AfA 0009, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=28
- Richesses de la Terre, Reference Number: Cs007, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=14
- Schweizerisches Zuchtvieh, Reference Number: AfA 0305, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=302
- Stadt und Land, Reference Number: LS5506, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=2277
- Viehschau 1953 der Viehzuchtgenossenschaft Schaffhausen, Reference Number: AfA 1210, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=1878
- Wir und die Milch, Reference Number: Cs002, https://ruralfilms.eu/filmdatabaseOnline/index.php?tablename=films&function=details&where_field=ID_films&where_value=203

Austrian Film Museum, Vienna

- Vienne en Tramway, <https://stadtfilm-wien.at/film/47/>

Memoriav Bern, Memobase

- Schweizer Filmwochenschau (SFW), Es geht auch ohne Motor! (0332-3), https://memobase.ch/de/object/bar-001-SFW_0332-3

3.2 Images

The images used in this video essay are accessible via the following institutions. Meta data can be found by following the links.

Archives of Rural History, Arbeitstiere Online – Bildquellen zur Tierarbeit

- Ochsen neben Dampfmaschine für die Dreschmaschine, ID-Nummer: 110, https://images-historerurale.ch/arbeitstiere_online/index.php?tablename=t_bild&function=details&where_field=ID_bild&where_value=110
- Pferde auf dem Bahnhofplatz in Zürich, ID-Nummer: 53, https://images-historerurale.ch/arbeitstiere_online/index.php?tablename=t_bild&function=details&where_field=ID_bild&where_value=53
- Pferde beim Huf- und Wagenschmied, ID-Nummer: 56, https://images-historerurale.ch/arbeitstiere_online/index.php?tablename=t_bild&function=details&where_field=ID_bild&where_value=56
- Pferde mit Strassensprengwagen, ID-Nummer: 58, https://images-historerurale.ch/arbeitstiere_online/index.php?tablename=t_bild&function=details&where_field=ID_bild&where_value=58
- Pferdetram auf der Münsterbrücke in Zürich, ID-Nummer: 556, https://images-historerurale.ch/arbeitstiere_online/index.php?tablename=t_bild&function=details&where_field=ID_bild&where_value=556
- Rind, Erziehung zur Arbeit, ID-Nummer: 18, https://images-historerurale.ch/arbeitstiere_online/index.php?tablename=t_bild&function=details&where_field=ID_bild&where_value=18

3.3 Acknowledgements

Sound: Peter von Siebenthal, Projektstudio Kehrsatz

Speaker: James Macsary

4. Further Reading

4.1 Bibliography

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- Moser Peter, Über die Erziehung der Kühe und Zuchtstiere zur Arbeit, in: *Wege und Geschichte* 2015/1, S. 15-19.
- Porcher Jocelyne, Mulier Chloé, Jourdan Félix, Deneux Vanina, *L'animal de rente*. Quelle rente? in: *Traverse* 2021/2, S. 164-178.
- Porcher Jocelyne, Estebanez Jean (eds.), *Animal Labor. A New Perspective on Human-Animal Relations*, Bielefeld 2019.