

Yalda Afsah: Interview related to the exhibition Optimised Fables about a Good Life

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Yalda Afsah answers questions about a good life, well-being and the conflicts this topic causes.

The artist participates in the exhibition Optimised Fables about a Good Life (22/9/2022–1/1/2023) at PLATO.

The tool of the exhibition, which we offer as a kind of supportive element, is the genre of the fable. It is a narrative that somewhat mechanically instructs and provides guidance for a good life, usually in an attempt to impose the truisms and virtues of a given social order on the reader. The identification of humans with animals and their apparent domination over them naturally offers a number of critical and unanswered questions. Who subjugates whom or what, who cares for whom, and above all who is defined here as an independent subject, are all subject to scrutiny. Could you empathize with some form of fable? Who or what would be its main protagonists?

The fable as a genre is in some ways quite relevant to my work, centering around both human and animal protagonists. The bull in my film *TOURNEUR*, the horse in *CENTAUR* and the pigeons in *SSRC* play leading roles, and of course one could interpret them as symbols or signifiers for the larger questions that my films touch upon – the embodiment of an “untamed” nature and the critical reflection of humankind’s attempts to cultivate and thus control it, to name one. However, for me there are some decisive distinctions between the literary genre of the fable and what I am trying to achieve within my works’ narratives: Firstly, while the fable tends to use its animal protagonists in an anthropomorphized way, as an illustrative means leading to a moral conclusion, I do not aim to present the animals as a metaphor for

something else. Instead, they appear as social actors in their own right. They do act as a mirror to critically reflect on human nature or behaviour, yet they occupy their own space in my work. The second distinction lies in the question of the moral imperative itself, which is often central to the fable's conclusion. For me, however, it feels important to leave space for the viewers to evaluate what they see. While one can definitely read a sense of judgment into my observations of cultural practices such as dressage or bullfighting, my films always also reflect on the possibility of an overarching empathy between the species, an idea that is particularly present in the intimate relationship between horse and human in CEN TAUR, or in the potentially unexpected co-dependency between birds and men in SSRC. Lastly, the fable is a genre of fiction. While my work has a documentary focus, I am continuously exploring how space is cinematically constructed. It's an important aspect during the process of editing the material to think about the element of fiction, as I navigate the interface between reality and staging – the unique and authentic dynamics I observe from behind the camera may be perceived as strange choreographies on screen; the real settings, such as the bullfighting arena filled with foam, may appear as a stage. One of my aims as an artist is to begin to dissolve such dichotomies, ultimately calling into question the clear borders between nature and culture.

In a moment when we have all indicators that the Planet is going to collapse, do you feel any conflict linked to your decisions that are intertwined with the production of artworks and environmental issues?

I reflect on this question a lot – in my case, as a filmmaker, it is mainly concerning the environmental impact of travelling for shoots. TOURNEUR and VIDOURLE were filmed in France, CEN TAUR in Denmark, and SSRC in Los Angeles. Currently, I work on a new project, for which I recently travelled to Spain. For the way I work as an artist, it seems unavoidable to travel, and I have profited immensely from the experience I was able to make abroad, amongst others during my studies at Cal Arts in LA. I am very conscious of that and it's a conflict I cannot really solve. I have started to work a lot with people on site though, for example having a local line producer has proven very helpful in terms of preparing the shoots in advance without having to be on site. And of course, doing research online and meeting people on Zoom has become normalized through the experience of the pandemic – I think there is a lesson we can take from this period.

Wellbeing seems so self-evidently good that it escapes scrutiny, enabling it to slide from useful tool to expectation; of ourselves and of others. In fact, wellbeing has taken the place of morality. Instead of working to improve the world, we work to improve ourselves. What kind of wellbeing activities of the future can you predict?

I'm not really imagining wellbeing activities as such. You've mentioned the collapse of the planet and environmental concerns – I think the only way towards future wellbeing is to find ways of co-existence and to give up our anthropocentric worldview, which arguably is at the core of most of our planetary problems. My focus on the “animal other” leads many to think I make films about animals – but actually, more than anything, I am observing, exposing and reflecting on human behaviours and practices. As I mentioned before, I avoid taking on a moralistic tone in my works, but I do think we need to question the “human” category itself, which was invented within the ontology of the moderns to dominate and exploit all and everything deemed “natural”, including (but not limited to) animals.



The relationship between humans and animals and the processes that formally determine and establish it is crucial to the film work of German-Iranian artist Yalda Afsah (b. **1983**). The artist explores how this relationship can be constructed by means of film. At first glance, the documentary nature of her work often refers to theatrical forms. This specific practice of the artist is conceptually reflected in her documentary portraits of relationships between humans and animals, which reveal their ambivalent nature oscillating between care and control, physical strength and broken will, instinct and manipulation. Yalda Afsah seeks to question and dissolve these dichotomies while creating a space to consider the possibility of an umbrella interspecies empathy. In the subjugation of animals, anthropocentric power relations naturally manifest. Yalda Afsah studied at the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK) and the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).

