

THE HERO AND HEROMAKING ACROSS GENRES

Edited by
Amar Singh, Shipra Tholia and Pravin K Patel



THE HERO AND HERO-MAKING ACROSS GENRES

This book critically examines how a hero is made, sustained, and even deformed in contemporary cultures. It brings together diverse ideas from philosophy, mythology, religion, literature, cinema, and social media to explore how heroes are constructed across genres, mediums, and traditions.

The chapters in this volume present fresh perspectives for readers to conceptualize the myriad possibilities the term “hero” brings with itself. They examine the making and unmaking of the heroes across literary, visual, and social cultures – in religious spaces and in classical texts; in folk tales and fairy tales; in literature, as seen in Heinrich Böll’s *Und Sagte Kein Einziges Wort*, Thomas Brüssig’s *Heroes Like Us*; and in movies like Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar*, Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and in the short film Dean Potter’s *When Dogs Fly*. The volume also features nuanced takes on intersectional feminist representations in hero movies and masculinity in sports biopics, taking everyday heroes from the real to the reel, among other key themes.

A stimulating work that explores the mechanisms that “manufacture” heroes, this book will be useful for scholars and researchers of English literature, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, film studies, media studies, literary and critical theory, arts and aesthetics, political sociology, and political philosophy.

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*Edited by Amar Singh,
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First published 2022
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-36328-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-36332-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-34535-7 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9780429345357

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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DAREDEVIL PHILOSOPHY

Dean Potter's *When Dogs Fly*¹*Stefan Börnchen**Humanitas and the dog*

On the evening of 16 May 2015, Dean Potter, a BASE jumper, leapt off Taft Point in Yosemite National Park, clad in a wingsuit. In an attempt to clear a notch in the rocky ridgeline – into the open beyond – he fell to his death. He was 43 years old.

It was initially unclear whether Potter's dog Whisper, a bitch, and the protagonist in the 2013 short film, *When Dogs Fly*, had survived the jump. The film depicts the wingsuit jump that Potter undertook from a rock pillar at the north face of the Eiger – also known as the “Mushroom” or even “Magic Mushroom” – into the Grindelwald Valley below, carrying Whisper in a backpack (see “Dean Potter BASE Jumps with His Dog,” www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/article/video-when-dogs-fly-dean-potter, timecode 1:41). Recorded with a Go Pro helmet camera turned backwards, we see the dog with a neoprene helmet protecting her ears from the wind and her eyes guarded by a pair of diving goggles. The dog seems to be quite caninely content.

Animal rights activists lambasted Potter for this seemingly senseless endeavour and for what they saw as cruelty to animals (“5D's and GoPros make animal cruelty so visually beautiful,” “When Dogs Fly”). The film, in turn, portrays Potter's love for and tenderness towards the dog. Potter kisses her before the jump, and on its successful completion, we see Whisper romp about in unadulterated canine joy.

The purpose of this endeavour? I would like to argue that the thrill-seeker Potter does not want to merely stage a spectacular, YouTube-worthy enactment of the idiom “when pigs fly,” making the impossible seem possible. His leap is not merely a stunt characteristic of the extreme sport trying to prove that man and his dog can indeed fly without flying equipment, but it is rather – in its conceptual consequences and real, present danger – a philosophical performance.

It is my supposition that the art of extreme sport such as it was envisioned by Potter can only be understood in terms of the philosophical and theoretical tradition, which the sport in retrospect illuminates. This is why Potter's jump in a wingsuit, accompanied by his dog, is a matter for consideration in the academic discipline of the humanities. I shall argue that this is even more so the case with the *humanitas*, as illustrated by Potter's act, from which the term "humanities" is derived. In fact, it is a humanistic effort to answer the question posed by Potter, namely, "What does happen when dogs fly?"

Base jumping as "thinking in leaps" and a "leap into the groundless" (Heidegger)

Potter's leap from the Eiger Mushroom even surpasses his own ability to, in Nietzsche's words, "maintain himself on insubstantial ropes," to "dance," "at the abyss" (*Gay Science* 1974, 290) that his "moonwalk" of 2011 demonstrates, when he balanced from the Cathedral Peak in Yosemite on a highline to the moon (Potter "Epic Moonwalk above Yosemite," <https://vimeo.com/56298775>), and which – again, in Nietzsche's words – symbolizes the "free spirit *par excellence*" (*Gay Science* 290). For to whom could the rhetorical question, "Are we not plunging continually?" formulated in *The Gay Science*, "[i]n the horizon of the infinite," better apply, than to a wingsuit pilot (180–181)? For he, in fact, is a pilot (even though he technically does not fly, but undertakes a controlled fall, to be precise, with a horizontal flight of three metres to the descent of one metre, that is, a glide ratio of 3, when a glider makes about 9).

In Potter's own words, his jump, with the dog on his back, is about the truth:

I know the truth now. I know there's more than that fantasy of like, "Oh, we'll fly together." [. . .] What happens when dogs fly? It sure wasn't what I thought it was gonna be. It was the reality of it.

(Potter, "BASE Jumps with His Dog," 00:02:00–16)

What Potter suggests here, or rather, what he dares to do at the Eiger, is remotely reminiscent of the "essential thinking" Martin Heidegger has described as "thinking in leaps." In his *Parmenides* lectures, delivered in 1942–43, he says:

To think Being does not require a solemn approach and the pretension of arcane erudition, nor the display of rare and exceptional states as in mystical raptures, reveries, and swoonings. All that is needed is simple wakefulness on the proximity of any random unobtrusive being, an awakening that all of a sudden sees that the being "is".

The awakening for this “it is” of a being, and above all the remaining awake for the “it is”, and the watching over the clearing of beings – that constitutes the essence of essential thinking. The “it is” of beings, Being, shows itself if it does show itself, in each case only “suddenly” – in Greek ἐξαίφνης, i.e., ἐξαφανής, the way that something irrupts into appearance, from non-appearance. To this essentially unmediated and immediate irruption of Being into beings, which in turn only then appear as beings, there corresponds on the part of man a comportment that no longer adverts to beings but suddenly thinks Being. To think Being requires in each instance a leap, a leap into the groundless from the habitual ground upon which for us beings always rest. It is at the groundless that the free comes to light, and that is how we name it, provided we think nothing more of a being than its “it is”.

This genuine thinking occurs “by leaps”, for it ignores the bridges and railings and ladders of explanation, which always only derives beings from beings, since it remains on the “soil” of “facts”.

(149–150; German: 222–223)

It is precisely this “soil” of “facts” that Dean Potter leaves behind in his “leap into the groundless” at the Eiger mushroom. Seen in this light, Potter’s wingsuit jump is indeed particularly dangerous – a kind of “essential” thinking in the Heideggerian sense. Consistently, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes curiosity as the “tendency toward an ‘essential’ or ‘a peculiar way of letting the world be encountered in perception” (1993, 164),² and it is precisely this experience that wingsuit BASE jumping embodies in a particularly intense, physical form: Potter repeatedly refers to the “physicality” of the jump (Potter 2015). Hence, Potter’s feat is not merely a hedonistic “pleasure in being,” as Nietzsche called for in his famous imperative “live dangerously!” (*Gay Science* 228), an ego-centric attitude which daredevils like Potter are notoriously accused of, but rather a truth event in the Heideggerian sense.

Being “in” the world, standing “out” in the world, leaping “into” the world

Historically, Potter belongs to a tradition of man relating to nature or landscape, as described by Joachim Ritter in his essay *Landschaft: Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft*. In Ritter’s view, in its beginnings, philosophy was “θεωρία τοῦ κόσμου” (*theoría tou kósmou*), a contemplation of the universe (Ritter 1974, 144–145), the cosmic order as a whole. Like probably every mountaineer, Potter, too, is part of this tradition, being preoccupied with – in Heidegger’s words – “letting the world be encountered in perception” as a whole, although in a specifically dynamic manner, in his leap off a mountain.

With reference to the sojourn undertaken by Petrarch to Mount Ventoux in the year 1336, the first ever recorded mountaineering expedition, which was driven by nothing but the passion to view its highest peak (“sola videndi insignem loci altitudinem cupiditate ductus,” Petrarca 1995, 4–5), Ritter writes: “Landschaft wird [. . .] Natur erst für den, der in sie ‘hinausgeht’ (transcensus), um ‘draußen’ an der Natur selbst als an dem “Ganzen”, das in ihr und als sie gegenwärtig ist, in freier genießender Betrachtung teilzuhaben [. . .].” “Nature becomes Landscape only for the one who ‘goes out’ into it (transcensus), in order to become ‘out there’ a part of the whole itself, which is present in and as Landscape, in free and joyful observation” (Ritter 1974, 147).

In the history of ideas, it is this transcensus that leads Petrarch to become a precursor to the Alpinism that marks the last decades of the eighteenth century. For Petrarch, the primary concern is not so much the sportive climb as it is the wish to reach the peak as an elevated vantage point for his *theoría tou kósmou*. For it is from above – a point of view that is “*this-worldly*, though supraterrrestrial” (Spitzer 1942, 28) – that one sees most of the world.

It was easier for Pico della Mirandola. In *De hominis dignitate* (*On the Dignity of Man*), the tract he wrote exactly 150 years after Petrarch had climbed Mount Ventoux, Mirandola has God say to man: “Medium te mundi posui, ut circumspiceres inde commodius, quicquid est in mundo,” that is, “I have placed you at the very centre of the world, so that from this vantage point, you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains” (2009, 8–9). The position from which his human being views the world is thus “humanistic” in the sense that it is “anthropocentric,” albeit static. This is different in Heidegger, in whose view “the awareness” of man is “ecstatic,” and “man, ecstatically transcending himself, stands out/outside of himself into the open” (“Da-sein ekstatisch entrückt hinaussteht [ex-sistiert] in [. . .] das Offene,” Heidegger, *Metaphysik* 53).³ Now it is only a small step from this still somewhat static *standing* outside of (HinausSTEHEN)⁴ and yet, at the same time, already fairly dynamic standing *outside* of (HINAUSstehen) of man’s “awareness” or “perceptive encounter of the world,” respectively, to the leap into the groundless, as Heidegger postulates theoretically, and Potter, in fact, dares: so that observing the world becomes a categorical and highly dynamic leap “into” its midst.

What Potter may have experienced during his jump from the Eiger is already imagined in Georg Büchner’s *Lenz*, whose eponymous protagonist goes through the mountains, which in turn virtually penetrate him, and in the end tear through him with a view over all peaks, as he stands gasping, eyes and mouth wide open, bent over, and thinks he should draw the storm unto himself, to fix everything within himself.⁵

This is exactly what Potter does. In his essay about his jump from the Eiger, entitled “When Dogs Fly,” he writes,

I put technical data out of my mind and start single-focus meditative breathing and actively enter the artist’s flow.

I spit into the void and watch as the globule remains together and falls into the calm morning air.

(“Final Essay”)

The spit as a microcosmic globule, which falls through the quiet macrocosmic morning air, virtually floating, yet staying whole, not in the sense that Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock’s “Drop clinging to the bucket” (“Tropfen am Eimer”) does, but rather as a drop at the Eiger. As Potter goes on to say,

“Are you ready Whisper? Let’s get out of here!” [. . .] I spring with all my might away from the jagged rock face and join the air. The weight of Whisper tries to take us too steep and flip us but I perform the only manoeuvre that works every time: relax and arch. The physicality of the Locus yoga position, Salabhasana, while in freefall brings forth an involuntary groan from my open mouth.

We start spiraling down to reunite our family.

(“Final Essay”)

This is Lenz’s fantasy realized through extreme sport.

Man and animal

Assuming, therefore, that Potter’s jump from the Eiger Mushroom is, by way of extreme sport, a highly dynamized *theoría tou kósmou*, one may ask: what role does the dog play? Philosophical insight is the prerogative of human reason, and in the case of animals, Aristotle has pointed out the absence of reason, as well the inability to use language and, hence, produce “theory.”⁶ This philosophical position is one of the relatively few exceptions where Heidegger agrees with Aristotle. For, as Giorgio Agamben points out in his book *The Open: Man and Animal*, Heidegger is that “philosopher of the twentieth century who more than any other strove to separate man from the living being” (2003, 39).

Heidegger engaged intensively with thought in the biology of his time, especially as seen in the writings of Jakob von Uexküll and his conception of the “world,” which is the exclusive terrain of the human being, of “Dasein,” and the “environment,” which the animal inhabits. This becomes evident in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, the

lectures Heidegger gave in 1929/30, or in his *Parmenides* lectures. As Agamben says of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*:

For in the abyss – and, at the same time, in peculiar proximity – that the sober prose of the course opens up between animal and man, not only does *animalitas* become utterly unfamiliar and appear as “that which is most difficult to think”, but *humanitas* also appears as something ungraspable.

(2003, 50)

I would like to argue that Potter’s jump with Whisper on his back is quite categorically an enactment precisely of that unique bond between man and animal, that Agamben has discussed. The point is – formulated drawing upon Schiller’s theory of nature – that Potter, by way of his *jump into the abyss* accompanied by his dog, of all things, knows how “to elevate us to” “the beautiful nature of humanity,” and “towards everything that is magnificent and beautiful, and sublimely human” (Schiller, “Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung” 2004, 742–743). Hence, in that sense, to go back to Nietzsche’s view on our “continuous plunging,” there really is no “above and below” anymore.

Now in what follows, I shall argue that what occurs in Potter’s wingsuit jump with Whisper is a “return of the human being to animality” (Kojève 1980, 160),⁷ which Agamben has referred to as man’s “reconcil[iation] with his animal nature” (3).⁸ However, it is this reconciliation, this *harmony* of man (or the human being) with his nature and his animality (Kojève 6), that reveals – to borrow once again from Schiller – the “true worth” of the human being, as it “masters its nature without concealing it” (“Über Anmut und Würde” 488):⁹ thus revealing a “dignity” which is “not defined by a repressed animality” (Adorno), but rather by “a self-reflexive awareness” of its own animality or creatureliness.¹⁰

Admittedly, having now arrived at traditional binaries once again, it is not easy to imagine such a convergence of *humanitas* and *animalitas*. In fact, even Heidegger admits to this, i.e. Heidegger of all, whose “discourse on the animal” was termed by Jacques Derrida as “brutal, confusing, and contradictory” (Derrida 1992, 288), whereas Agamben speaks, somewhat euphemistically, of a “vacillation” on Heidegger’s part, reminding Agamben of the paradox of “mystical knowledge, “or rather non-knowledge” (59).

Given this conceptual complication, it might be useful to clarify that in the philosophical tradition, “nature” most often refers to all that comprises the human being, or rather even refers to the whole that surpasses it: the whole that in turn the animal represents as *pars pro toto*. Hence, the human being is defined both as *distinct from* the animal and also as *similar to* the animal in that, like the animal, the human being is a part of nature.

Potter's jump with Whisper on his back illustrates this as *mise en abîme* in three ways: first literally as "Hinaustreten," "standing or stepping into the open," and hereupon as falling into the abyss; second, by Whisper becoming a sort of smaller human being carried on the back of a larger one; and third, by Potter becoming the greater creature under the smaller one on his back.

How is this to be understood? The animal, as I said earlier, is traditionally defined as separate from the human being, who, as a rational being, is superior to the animal. And yet it is quite clear that in its instinctiveness, the animal is a step ahead of the instinctively "deficient" human being.¹¹ In the *Odyssey* (17, 290–327), it is the old dog Argos, who first recognizes Odysseus upon his return after his 20-year absence, even before his old wet-nurse does. Nietzsche draws upon this philosophical observation in a clear reference to the ancient school of thought called Cynicism, a term that is derived from *κῶων*, the Greek word for dog. In a consciously anti-historical polemic characteristic of late 19th-century Philosophy of Life (*Lebensphilosophie*), Nietzsche emphasises the instantaneity of the animal that attaches its life to the present moment and hence, according to Nietzsche, makes it happy. In *The Untimely Meditations*, he says:

Consider the cattle, grazing as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored [. . .] who at once forgets and for whom every moment really dies, sinks back into night and fog and is extinguished for ever. Thus the animal lives *unhistorically*: for it is contained in the present.

(1983, 60–61)

The conclusion that Nietzsche draws from this, that is, "the happiness of the animal, as the perfect Cynic, is the living proof of the rightness of Cynicism" is certainly – and possibly quite markedly – false, given that the animal, because it isn't a philosopher, can also not be a cynic – in the sense of "cynic philosopher," but at best just a dog. However, this does not apply to the advice that Nietzsche proceeds to give, a sort of "unless you become like animals" reminiscent of Jesus' "truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

Nietzsche writes:

He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like the goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid,

or, as in the short film *When Dogs Fly*, who cannot take off into the abyss like, first, the Alpine chough and then, the man and his dog,

will never know what happiness is, worse, he will never do anything to make others happy.

(Nietzsche 1983, 62)

**Suspended in the environment, being taken by the fall:
leaping out of the world into the environment**

In his use of the terms “Eingenommenheit” (“absorption”) and “Hingenommenheit” (“being taken by/in”), Heidegger draws upon Nietzsche’s theorization of the present, based on the animal. Heidegger’s terms underscore his idea that the animal – and here Heidegger draws on terms used by Uexküll – while it may well have an “environment,” does not have a “world.” As Heidegger says:

Behaviour as a manner of being is in general only possible on the basis of an animal’s *absorption* [Eingenommenheit] in itself. We shall define *the animal’s specific being-alongside-itself* – which has nothing to do with the selfhood [Selbstheit] of man comporting him- or herself as a person – [,] this absorption in itself of the animal, in which behaviour of any and every kind is possible, as *captivation*. The animal can only behave insofar as it is captivated in its essence. Captivation is the condition of possibility for the fact that, in accordance with its essence, the animal *behaves within an environment but never within a world*.

(Heidegger 2004, 238–239, qtd. in Agamben 52;
German: 347–348)

And the “being taken by” (“Hingenommenheit”) of the animal, quite in the Nietzschean sense, is only possible

where there is an *instinctive “toward . . .”* [triebhaftes Hin-zu]. Yet this being taken in such a driveness also excludes the possibility of any recognition of any being-present-at-hand [Vorhandensein]. It is precisely being taken by its food that prevents the animal from taking up a position over and against [sich gegenüberstellen] this food. [. . .] *captivation* [Benommenheit] of the animal therefore signifies: essential *withholding* [Genommenheit] of every apprehending of something as something. And consequently: insofar as withholding is a *being taken* [Hingenommenheit] by . . ., the captivation of the animal characterizes the specific manner of being in which the animal relates itself to something else even while the possibility is

withheld from it – or is taken away [*benommen*] from the animal, as we might also say – of comporting and relating itself to something else *as* such and such at all, *as* something present at hand, *as* a being. And it is precisely because this possibility – apprehending *as* something that to which it relates – is withheld from it that the animal can be so utterly taken by something else.

(Heidegger 2004, 242 and 247–248, qtd. in Agamben 53; German: 395–396)

Having said this, according to Agamben, Heidegger – somehow – concludes with regard to the “ontological status” of “the animal’s environment” that it is “*offen* (open) but not *offenbar* (revealed)” (Agamben 55).

It is precisely *within* this environment, or more specifically, *into* such an environment, that Potter’s wingsuit jump is directed, and with that also towards what Heidegger terms “essential disruption”:

For with the animal’s being open for that which disinhibits, the animal in its captivation is essentially held out [*hinausgestellt*] in something other than itself[.]

and, quite literally, the ecstatic “standing out of” or “standing outside of” [*Hinausstehen*] that was quoted earlier, reappears here:

something that indeed cannot be manifest to the animal either as a being or as a non-being,

because it is, as an object of philosophical knowledge, only accessible to human reason; however,

insofar as it disinhibits . . . brings an *essential disruption* [*wesenhafte Erschütterung*] into the essence of the animal [–]

(Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts* 272, qtd. in Agamben 61; German: 395–396)

and not only into the animal’s but also into the essence of Dean Potter the human being, who, through a leap, lets himself stand outside of his world [*Welt*] and then lets himself fall into the environment [*Umwelt*] of the animal.

The world becomes environment becomes case/fall: Uexküll’s “simple environments” and the ways within

Heidegger might well have known about wingsuit jumping. *Der Spiegel* carried a report about the “birdman” Léo Valentin and his “flight on canvas wings” from a “height of three thousand metres” in 1955 (see “Auf Flügeln

zur Erde.” *Der Spiegel*, 14 Dec. 1955, 53). In any case, after their wingsuit jump, Potter and Whisper landed, “suspended” by a parachute. Heidegger, in turn, repeatedly speaks of the animal being suspended in its environs. He thus says – and the skewed formulation, for its part, might indicate a notion of eccentricity – that “the animal finds itself suspended, as it were, between itself and its [environs]” (*Fundamental Concepts* 248, qtd. in Agamben 54; German: 361).

This wording is reminiscent of Uexküll’s “image,” which

appears to us if we follow the flight of the graceful parachutes of the dandelion in the wind or the corkscrew motion of the maple key or of the light fruit of the linden.

(151)

Thus, as we again see in Heidegger:

Plant and animal are suspended in something outside of themselves without ever being able to “see” either the outside or the inside, i.e., without ever seeing their being unconcealed in the free of being[.]
(*Parmenides* 260, qtd. in Agamben 58; German: 238)¹²

whereby “ἀλήθεια” (*alētheia*) is seen as “the open in the sense that it is unconcealed.”¹³ Heidegger says:

The stone is worldless [*weltlos*]. Plant and animal likewise have no world; but they belong to the veiled throng of an environment in which they hang suspended.

(Agamben 57)

As noted earlier, in these sentences, Heidegger draws upon the world-concept from Uexküll (Heidegger 1950, 43, qtd. in Agamben 71; German: 31). Moreover, the concept – or rather the metaphor – of the “suspended hanging-in” may also have been drawn from Uexküll. Does not this “suspended hanging-in” nearly exactly hold the balance between Uexküll’s static metaphor of the “nestedness” or “being encased in” of living beings in their environment, on the one hand, and the metaphor quoted earlier, that of parachuting in the wind, on the other? Uexküll writes in his *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*:

The animal’s environment, which we want to investigate now, is only a piece cut out of its surroundings, which we see stretching out on all sides around the animal [. . .].

We comfort ourselves all too easily, with the illusion that the relations of another kind of subject to the things of its environment play out in the same space and time as the relations that link us to the

things of our human environment. This illusion is fed by the belief in the existence of one and only one world, in which all living beings are encased. From this arises the widely held conviction that there must be one and only one space and time for all living beings.

(2010, 53–54)

According to Uexküll, this need not always be the case. In fact, Uexküll argues, “all living beings” are “encased in” different worlds, among those being worlds of varying magnitude. It is remarkable that Uexküll repeatedly describes the worlds of animals with possible ways within, *as* ways, hence leaving behind the notion of being “encased in,” to, in the end, render the conception of the world(s) as dynamic.

On the world of the limpet and its ability to “home in” as it were (see picture *ibid.* 59), Uexküll has this to say:

The ability to find the house door [. . .] can also be demonstrated among [. . .] mollusks [. . .]. Even more conspicuous is the same homing behaviour in the case of the common limpet [. . .]. The limpet lives within the tidal zone on the cliff bottom. The largest individuals dig themselves a bed in the rock with their hard shells, in which they spend the low tide pressed close against the cliff. At high tide, they wander about and graze the cliff rock around themselves bare. When low tide arrives, they return to their beds, but they do not always choose the same path home.

(57–58)

As one can clearly see (picture *ibid.* 59), the “homing” of the *Patella* limpet is nevertheless relatively simple, as is that of the paramecia, which move through their own “simple environment” (see picture *ibid.* 73), as well as the “return flight” of the young chough as it comes back “to the site from which it flew” (see picture *ibid.* 101). Even easier is the path taken by the “tick” who lets itself fall upon its “prey” from its “watch post” (*ibid.* 45–46). The path taken by the tick, and its environment, are indeed so simple that they – irrespective of their importance for Uexküll’s argument – are not even shown in images.

Other environments, and ways through those, that Uexküll explains are those of the blind person and the dog. Here, too, we see the human and a dog, where the dog is the master, and in all ways the leader – (see picture *ibid.* 100) and that of the “fighting fish” who, through its own conditioning, is brought to its prey not through the direct path that suddenly opens up, but rather through the habitualized detour (see picture *ibid.* 102). According to Uexküll,

one could say that the familiar path works like a streak of a more fluid medium in a more viscous one.

(102)

This comparison no longer has anything to do with “being encased in.” For Uexküll, the fish, as well as the plant, is “immediately” “submerged” or “immersed” in its “residential world” or “environment,” respectively (119, 146). This “residential world” is simultaneously a “medium” (ibid. 102), which, through its flow resistance, that is, through the workings of physical forces, determines the path that the fish takes. Its environment is no longer the static “environment of the animal” within which it is encased, nor is its “relationship” to its world akin to “the silk of a spider’s web woven tightly together to bear its existence [Dasein]” (Uexküll 53).¹⁴ On the contrary, the world of the fish serves it not merely as a static bearer, but is, at the same time, the “medium” for or vehicle of its movement. Seen as such, within this dynamic, the environment of the fish converges with its path within it, which has opened up not merely *in* or *on account of*, but rather *along* the stretch of the fluid that the fish traverses.

The world becomes environment becomes a path into the open: beyond the mountain, the free comes to light

Herein lies the analogy to Potter’s wingsuit jump. Not only does his jump reduce Potter’s human world, in his own words, through a “single focus [. . .] artist’s flow,” to a quasi-animal environment, where survival, and perhaps also desire, are at stake, but not any kind of human memory or knowledge: thus, to refer to Nietzsche again, to the sheer moment that the animal inhabits. Moreover, in this wingsuit jump – as in the case of Uexküll’s fish – its *environment*, on account of the resistance to the flow that Potter is propelled by, *constricts itself to the very way through it*. One might say, to use Agamben’s expression influenced by Heidegger, that in the moment of the jump, like Uexküll’s tick, Potter’s and Whisper’s environment *becomes* the jump/fall – that is, “an opening without revelation.”

As Heidegger himself says:

Plant and animal have no world [. . .]; but they belong to the veiled throng of an environment[.]

a throng exerted upon the wingsuit and parachute in the Bernese Oberland,

in which they hang suspended,

quite like Uexküll’s “flight of the graceful parachutes of the dandelion,” in Potter’s case a variation enabled by the technical means of extreme sport.

I would like to summarize here: Potter’s wingsuit jump and flight, which the film compares with the flight of an Alpine chough, is more than – to use Arnold Gehlen’s simplistic but popular expression – “a concentrated self-indulgence of disburdened/relieved liveliness” with its “jouissance of vital

functions” (Gehlen 1950, 59). Rather, Potter’s jump is geared towards a “peculiar way of letting the world be encountered in perception” (Heidegger) as a whole, which, as the modern experience of landscape, has inherited the antique Greek *theoría tou kósmou*. However, Potter is able to encounter the world as a whole only because the world – as if it went from the ontic through an ontological funnel to the no-longer-ontological – first constricts itself to a “simple environment,” then to an even simpler path within or, rather, through this environment, and, eventually, through it to its open, to its pure openness, as it were. While, according to Uexküll, the “advantage” that human beings have “over animals consists in our being able to broaden the compass of inborn human nature” (199), Potter’s attempt, however, is directed towards the very opposite: not a broadening, but rather a constriction of the world into the completely open, whereby, eventually, the world can be experienced as a whole. This is my interpretation of the ‘open’ as outlined here.

That Potter was, in the end, both literally and categorically in search of the “open but not revealed”, becomes evident in his last leap in the Yosemite, where he wished to clear a notch in the rocky ridgeline into the open that lay beyond: a notch that was to become a sad emblem of a tragically failed attempt at the “open but not revealed.” Life could not have been set more radically or literally to a “leap into the groundless” at which “the free comes to light” than Potter did.

Anthropophorous animality: man and dog in symbiosis

Like Heidegger and Agamben, Potter emphatically references the question of the relationship between man and animal through his leap into the open. Just as, according to Agamben, “on the last day, the relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and [. . .] man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature” (3), quite similar to how, in Kojève’s words, “man remains alive as animal in harmony with Nature or given Being,” and thus, entirely in the Nietzschean sense, becomes “*happy*,” Potter speaks, somewhat ironically, of his “glorious thoughts of unified human-dog-flight-symbiosis” (Potter “When Dogs Fly”).

In the process, it is technology that enables this symbiosis. As Potter writes, “Whisper[’s] [. . .] body slightly relaxes and adjusts within the BASE-rig backpack that secures both our lives as one” (Potter “When Dogs Fly”). In the film, he says: “Whisper’s connected with 20,000 pounds of straps.” While this formulation highlights the tremendous tensile strength of the slings with which Whisper is secured, one must not forget that they do not secure the dog to a firm hold on the ground or against the cliff face, but only to Potter’s body that is falling down with Whisper and with whom she in turn might eventually fall to her death. Hence, what is at stake here, is not the question of being secured onto firm

ground, but rather – even at the cost of life – of “*connectedness*,” of – to draw on Uexküll once again, “an all-encompassing being embraced” by “our environs.”

Here, too, we see a case of *mise en abîme*. Just as Whisper is secured on Potter’s back in what he calls her “base container,” so is Potter himself “in the calm morning air,” into which he leaps, to then harness the resistance flow to transform the fall into a dive.

One might describe this “connectedness” as a kind of cosmic swaddling – like the swaddling of a baby to soothe it. Referring to the feeling of cosmic security, Leo Spitzer spoke of “an inexpressible harmony”: “man [. . .] see[s] [. . .] things connected with himself [. . .] and [. . .] feel[s] that he is the center of a whole [. . .] wrapped round by ether” (11). It is evident that this complete lack of distance to the world or, rather, this merger *into* it, *with* it, is, psychoanalytically speaking, of a regressive nature. It is a feeling like this which, as quoted earlier, Kojève calls a “return of the human to animality.”

In the same measure as Potter is returning to *animalitas*, Whisper – during the dive, the film repeatedly focuses on her alone – is apparently attaining *humanitas*. For, as only human beings are otherwise known to do – especially the early modern humanists – Whisper wears a hat and goggles (Potts “When Dogs Fly: Dean Potter Takes His Dog Whisper BASE Jumping,” www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/article/video-when-dogs-fly-dean-potter, timecode 1:41). Here the concern is not, as in Agamben’s formulation, “the face of the wise man” turning “into an animal snout” (7), but rather an animal face being transformed into a kind of wise man’s visage. In fact, everything else that Whisper does before and during the dive is really the preserve of human beings: climbing the mountain, flying with a wingsuit, – in Potter’s words – her well-rehearsed role as “co-pilot,” the observation – *theoría!* – of the Landscape.

It is two areas of comparison which Potter frequently uses with reference to Whisper: the – cosmic – heaven and the human being. “Fog, stars and mountaintops transform into a massive furry flying puppy,” is how Potter describes his macrocosmically fantasised and yet, as a puppy, lovable and childlike dog, to then immediately describe her in microcosmic intimacy as follows: “I imagine holding Whisper’s warm paw as she sits beside us in our van, a trusty co-pilot everywhere we go.” Whisper is indeed virtually human. For, unlike Nietzsche’s characterization of the animal, Whisper can see the future: “Whisper knows where we are going and runs back and forth up the side of the Eiger gesturing, ‘. . . let’s go Papa, what’s taking so long?’” She is also Potter’s child. Eventually, he even sees her as merged with his girl-friend Jen. As Potter says about the wingsuit flight with Whisper:

We start spiraling down to reunite our family[,]

a “homing” quite in the sense as described by Uexküll. After landing,

[s]he runs to Jen and calls out with high pitch yips that indicate Whisper-happiness. Her triumphant performance is much the same as I feel, but I contain mine within a beaming smile.

Clouds swirl in the high peaks. The silhouettes resemble flowing brunette hair[,]

like Jen’s hair,

and bounding puppy midair[,]

(“When Dogs Fly”)

that is, in or within the “medium,” as described by Pico and by Uexküll, through which they have just plummeted.

Potter is well aware of what he is doing and describes it in precise terms. Even the first verse in Rilke’s eighth *Duino Elegy* – which Heidegger thematized as well – could not have been enacted more radically, or even more movingly, than by what Potter actually does in his so-called “unified human-dog-flight-symbiosis.” Rilke’s verses go: “Animals see the unobstructed / world with their whole eyes” (709).¹⁵

It is all over now. Whisper is indeed alive. But she can no longer fly.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Parnal Chirmuley, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for translating this chapter.
- 2 German: ‘die Tendenz zu einem eigentümlichen vernehmenden Begegnenlassen der Welt’ (Heidegger 1993, 170).
- 3 “Ex-sistenz nennt im Umkreis des Fragens von ‘Sein und Zeit’ eben dieses: daß das Da-sein ekstatisch entrückt hinaussteht (ex-sistiert) in die ekstatische Offenheit der Zeit. Ex-sistenz ist das Wort für das Innestehen in der ekstatischen Ausgesetztheit in das Offene” (Heidegger 1991, 53).
- 4 “Was bedeutet ‘Existenz’ in S. u. Z.? Das Wort nennt eine Weise [. . .] desjenigen Seienden, das offen steht für die Offenheit des Seins, in der es steht, indem es sie aussteht. [. . .] Das so erfahrene Ausstehen ist das Wesen der hier zu denkenden Ekstasis. Das ekstatische Wesen der Existenz wird [. . .] unzureichend verstanden, wenn man es nur als ‘Hinausgehen’ vorstellt und das ‘Hinaus’ als das ‘Weg von’ dem Innern einer Immanenz des Bewußtseins und des Geistes auffaßt; denn so verstanden, wäre die Existenz immer noch von der ‘Subjektivität’ und der ‘Substanz’ her vorgestellt, während doch das ‘Aus’ als das Auseinander der Offenheit des Seins selbst zu denken bleibt. Die Stasis des Ekstatischen beruht, so seltsam es klingen mag, auf dem Innestehen im ‘Aus’ und ‘Da’ der Unverborgenheit, als welche das Sein selbst west” (Heidegger 1976, 374)
- 5 “A surge swept through his breast at first when the rock seemed to leap away, the grey wood shuddered beneath him, and the mist devoured the shape of things then half revealed their giant limbs; the surge swept through him, he sought for

something, as though for lost dreams, but he found nothing. Everything was so small to him, so near, so wet, he would have liked to tuck the earth behind the stove, he couldn't understand that he needed so much time to clamber down the slope to reach a distant point; he thought he should be able to measure out everything with a few strides. Only sometimes, when the storm cast the clouds into the valleys, and they swirled up through the trees, and the voices awoke amongst the rocks, at first like distant rumbling thunder, then arriving with a roar in mighty chords as though they wished in their wild exulting to sing the praises of the earth, and the clouds galloped up like wild whinnying horses and the sunlight pierced them and came and drew his flashing sword along the sheets of snow, so that a bright, blinding light went slicing over the peaks and down into the valleys; or when the storm drove the clouds downwards and tore a hole in them, a light blue lake, and then the wind fell silent, and far below a sound like lullabies and church bells rose from ravines and treetops and a delicate red spread upwards in the dark blue sky and tiny clouds went past on silver wings and all the mountain peaks, sharp and solid, flashed and glowed far across the land. Then his breast burst. He stood there panting, his body bent forward, his eyes and mouth wide open. He thought he should draw the storm right into himself, embrace all things within his being. He spread and lay over the entire earth, he burrowed his way into the All. It was an ecstasy that hurt" (Büchner, *Complete Plays*, 212–213).

- 6 "Wenn Platon, Aristoteles und ihre Zeitgenossen Menschen und T[ier]e einander gegenüberstellen, so sagen sie für die T[ier]e θηρία [oder] τὰ ἄλλα ζῶα [] ('die andern Lebewesen'). Seit ca. 400 und besonders gern im Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit werden die T[ier]e als ἄλογα ζῶα oder einfach als ἄλογα bezeichnet [PLATON, nur: Prot. 321 c; XENOPHON: Hieron 7, 3; ARISTOTELES, nur: Eth. Nic. 1111 b 13; 1172 b 10]: Sie sind die Lebewesen ohne Logos, also sprachlose und dann auch vernunftlose Wesen" (Dierauer, "Tier; Tierseele" col. 1196).
- 7 Or, as this translation has it, "Man's return to animality."
- 8 Agamben quotes Kojève 158–159.
- 9 "[W]ahre Würde [. . .] wird die Natur nur beherrschen, nie verbergen."
- 10 "The Kantian dignity finally disintegrates into the jargon of authenticity. With it goes that humanity which has its basic nature not in self-reflection but in its difference from a suppressed animality" (Adorno 165). In German: "Im Jargon der Eigentlichkeit stürzt am Ende die Kantische Würde zusammen, jene Menschheit, die ihren Begriff nicht an der Selbstbesinnung hat sondern an der Differenz von der unterdrückten Tierheit" (Adorno 136).
- 11 Johann Gottfried "Herder [. . .] definiert den Menschen als Mängelwesen" (Gehlen 2016, 91).
- 12 Translation modified.
- 13 Translation modified, original: "alētheia [. . .] as the unconcealedness-concealedness of being."
- 14 Translation modified, original: "the spider's threads, [. . .] a solid web, which carries its existence."
- 15 "Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur / das Offene" (Rilke 2006, 709).

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