

Horses of Healing and Hope in *Heartstone*

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Abstract

This article analyses the forms and functions of horses in director Guðmundur Arnar Guðmundsson's 2016 Icelandic drama film Heartstone, which explores the summertime coming-of-age experiences of two male teenagers and best friends, Christian and Thor, as they gradually come to terms with both their burgeoning sexuality and true depths of their feelings for one another. Because daily life in their small, isolated fishing village lacks any semblance of privacy or secrecy, Christian – as he continues to acknowledge that he is gay and falling in love with Thor – increasingly seeks out moments of healing and hope, both individually and with his best friend, among the horses at an adult friend's farm, far from the prying eyes of others. The limits of the horses' ability to provide solace to Christian, however, is deleteriously tested after it becomes obvious that other young people in town have become aware of his sexual orientation. In contrast to other films that feature horses as primary or supporting characters, this article instead focuses on the symbolic and storytelling significance of noteworthy representations of horses in their natural environments, as they demonstrate their natural behaviours. In doing so, it demonstrates how these animals provide for greatly expanded understandings of the range of emotions this central teen character is experiencing – as well as the various sorts of comfort they can provide to humans – as the plot moves forward. Christian finds himself contemplating suicide as a potential alternative means of escape from his repressive daily circumstances.

Keywords: *cinema; coming of age; companionship; sexuality; solace.*

Realising that others in his small Icelandic village are catching on to the reality that he is gay, a male teen escapes to the one remaining place that provides him comfort: amid the horses in the stable of an adult friend for whom he occasionally does chores. As the animals watch over him, the boy begins to sob uncontrollably, increasingly startling them. Failing to successfully achieve his desired sense of solace, the teen shifts his attention away from the nearby animals to notice a pistol hanging on a post nearby. His lower lip quivering, he contemplates his best course of action to bring him some semblance of peace at this particularly challenging moment in his adolescent life.

The above scene represents a climactic development in the 2016 Icelandic drama film *Heartstone* (directed by Guðmundur Arnar Guðmundsson), which explores the process by which the teen above, Christian (Blær Hinriksson), comes to terms with the fact that he has fallen in love with his male best friend, Thor (Baldur Einarsson), over the course of an emotionally

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charged and challenging summer. Given its subject matter, most viewers likely focus almost exclusively on the actions and interactions of these human characters and their surrounding others, to the exclusion of the horses in the film, during the viewing experience. However, this article seeks to articulate the significance of the forms and functions of horses in *Heartstone*, as sources of hope and (potential) healing, in relation to Christian's experiences as the film unfolds.

In contrast to other films that feature horses as primary or supporting characters, the present analysis instead focuses on the symbolic and storytelling significance of noteworthy representations of horses in their natural environments, as they demonstrate their natural behaviours and ways of being. In doing so, it demonstrates how the presence of these animals contributes to expanded understandings of the range of emotions this central teen character is experiencing — as well as the various sorts of comfort they can provide to him — as the plot moves forward. Christian finds himself contemplating suicide as a potential alternative means of escape from his repressive daily circumstances. Before launching into this analysis, however, an overview of the film's contents is needed to identify the complex circumstances that Christian finds himself experiencing on a daily basis.

Overview of the film's contents and Christian's complicated circumstances

From *Heartstone's* opening moments, it is evident that Christian and Thor have been close friends for some time, truly care about one another, and have each other's backs no matter what sorts of situations they encounter in their isolated fishing village, where privacy and secrecy do not exist because everyone quickly comes to know everyone else's business. On the verge of puberty, Thor, the smaller of the two, admires Christian's more developed physique, and he endeavours to be taken seriously as a masculine being by his mother and his two sisters, Rakel (Jónína Pórdís Karlsdóttir) and Hafdís (Rán Ragnarsdóttir). Although Thor regularly gets embarrassed and ridiculed by his family members, Christian's home life is far more challenging by comparison: his father drinks too much, is unashamedly homophobic, is physically abusive to him on occasion, and spends a good deal of his time arguing loudly with Christian's mother.

As this tale of self-discovery unfolds, Christian finds himself increasingly attracted to Thor, who finds himself increasingly attracted to a local girl named Beth (Diljá Valsdóttir). As a result, as the summer progresses, Christian finds himself in numerous situations where he feels pressured to feign romantic and sexual interest in Beth's best friend, Hanna (Kátla Njálsdóttir), whenever Thor is nearby to witness their ongoing interactions. But their late-night Truth or Dare sessions with the girls occasionally result in same-sex kissing, which offers an early indicator that Christian is falling in love

with Thor (rather than with Hanna). This state of affairs gets confirmed a bit later in the film when Thor's sister Hafþís, an aspiring artist, pays the two boys to serve as models for a homoerotic painting she wishes to create. In this scene, Hafþís applies makeup to the two shirtless boys' faces before positioning them directly beside one another, with Christian looking downward affectionately at Thor while holding on to Thor's bicep. It soon becomes evident, as his breathing becomes heavier, that Christian is becoming aroused by tenderly embracing and being in such close proximity to his best friend. He is therefore relieved when, seconds later, Thor's mother returns home with a male companion, and the modelling session must come to an abrupt end, which leads Christian to begin processing what has occurred by masturbating in his own bedroom immediately thereafter.

Although experiencing the trials and tribulations of adolescence while "living in a [metaphorical] goldfish bowl" (Pape 2017: n.pag.) can be difficult for any young person who desires freedom from the ever-prying eyes of others, it is especially so for Christian, given his perceived otherness within the story world. For starters, despite the fact that Christian verbally expresses support for Thor's romantic interest in Beth, it becomes evident at key moments that it is not easy for him to watch his own love interest becoming increasingly intimate with somebody else. Complicating his emotional reactions is the reality that Thor somewhat regularly sends mixed messages to Christian, such as when Thor initiates playful kissing with him or when, while lying closely with Beth and after kissing her goodnight, Thor reaches above the girl's head to grasp Christian's hand and hold it while they sleep.

As his feelings for Thor become increasingly evident to a growing number of their village's inhabitants, Christian and his likely sexual orientation seize the attention of Ginger (Daniel Hans Erlendsson), the local teen bully, who observes that Christian and Thor's everyday interactions increasingly blur the lines between homosocial friendship and homoerotic attraction (Brook 2017: n.pag.). As a result, Ginger enjoys calling attention to Christian's time spent with Thor, referring to the two boys in one scene as "the happy couple" and intentionally seeking to embarrass and humiliate them in several others by repeatedly suggesting they are gay lovers. Ginger takes such actions to an extreme while attending a house party thrown by Thor's sisters. "Hey, everybody, come check this out!" he announces to all of the other teens present, several of whom follow him into the home's kitchen, where he reveals Hafþís's homoerotic painting of Christian and Thor for all of the young villagers to see. "Are you finally coming out of the closet?" he asks as Christian attempts to retrieve the piece of artwork from Ginger's hands. As Thor's sister Rakel declares the party over and kicks everyone out of their home, Christian and Thor silently exchange awkward glances before Christian wanders into the night alone.

Perhaps worst of all for Christian, however, is the reality that he lives and therefore must interact regularly with his homophobic father, who clearly disapproves of his son's perceived difference, treats him coldly, and occasionally resorts to beating him both in the privacy of their home and in front of his friends. His father's negative views toward homosexuality emerge clearly during the film's opening minutes when the man physically assaults his male best friend, who like himself is also married to a woman, after the friend reveals to him that he is attracted to other men. (It is suggested that the friend may have made sexual advances toward Christian's father as this information was communicated, motivating him to react in such an extreme way, although this is never explicitly stated.) Immediately thereafter, he "becomes increasingly concerned about the amount of time the boys have been spending together, believing (through his homophobic lens) that they have become a bit too close" (Hart 2021: 150). During Thor's first visit inside Christian's home in the film (although it is implied that he has been there many other times over the years), Christian's father expresses his disapproval of Christian's increasingly close relationship with the boy by intentionally smirking at Thor. Later, after he has learned that his son and Thor were the subjects of Hafdís's homoerotic painting, the man executes a plan designed to separate the boys forever: using the pretence that the boys must help him to collect gull eggs, Christian's father attempts to have Thor fall to his death from the side of a cliff while doing so but ultimately finds that he cannot go through with this deed, which he has designed to look like an accident. He is subsequently appalled to see the boys' tears and lengthy embraces once Thor is returned safely to the top of the cliff, confirming his worst suspicions about his son's sexual orientation.

Given the complicated circumstances he regularly encounters, it is little surprise that Christian seeks moments of escape from the ever-prying eyes of the members of the village community, for whom "repression and a kind of curtain-twitching conformity is the norm" (Kiang 2017: n.pag.). This leads him to the farm and barn — and, even more specifically, to the horses — owned by Sven (Søren Malling), an adult friend who is also romantically involved with Thor's mother. For Christian, spending time among the horses, whether alone or with Thor by his side, enables him to explore his hopes and dreams while simultaneously enjoying a respite from the alienating, ever-repressive village environment within which noticeable differences tend to be markedly devalued (McNeely 2017: n.pag.). As the analysis that follows will reveal, horses are featured in four noteworthy sequences within *Heartstone*, where they serve as both sources of hope and (potential) healing for Christian.

Horses of hope in *Heartstone*

Because horses are widely regarded as being sensitive, emotional, and loving creatures, they can readily provide hope to humans experiencing a wide

variety of individual circumstances. Human interaction with horses frequently results in a unique “familiarity, an ease which outsiders may recognize” (Birke and Hockenhull 2015: 83). These majestic creatures remind humans that we, like them, exist in a universe that is ever-changing and immanently unfolding, and together we can “ripple in response to each other, we expand out ceaselessly, we become, we become, we become” (Pfoutz 2019: 148). This potentiality of becoming — of expanding and existing as one’s true self — is what draws Christian to the horses at Sven’s farm, where they initially serve for him as sources of hope for a brighter future.

In *Heartstone*’s first sequence featuring horses, which occurs shortly after Christian poses with Thor for Hafdís’ homoerotic painting and begins to come to terms with his true feelings for his best friend, Christian helps Sven to shoe a horse before asking if he and Thor can take two of the animals for a ride through the surrounding countryside. As they depart, the camera captures the vast landscape of green fields, towering mountains, and feathery clouds that envelops them, a striking contrast to the confines of their more typical village environment. A bit later on this liberating journey, during a solitary moment with his horse when Thor has stepped away to take care of a personal matter, the viewer observes Christian atypically at peace, as he shuts his eyes, runs his fingers affectionately through the horse’s mane, and basks in the warmth of the afternoon sunlight. The sequence concludes immediately thereafter, with Christian atop his horse leading Thor and his horse back to Sven’s farm.

What is perhaps most striking about this first sequence involving horses in the film is the liberatory potentiality they provide to Christian, who appears to be hopeful and at ease while enjoying quality time with the animals and with Thor. For Christian, the horses enable him to experience new, appealing domains that exist somewhere between his present and potential future, between the knowns and unknowns of his everyday life (Møller 2005: 328). Given that Christian does not verbally express his innermost feelings in *Heartstone*, these initial on-screen interactions with the horses, as well as those that occur in the additional three sequences featuring them, provide essential information to the viewer, as they contribute to greater understandings of the range of emotions Christian is experiencing as the narrative progresses, and of the various sorts of comfort the animals can provide to him as his circumstances continue to become even more complex as the summer unfolds.

It is widely acknowledged that different sorts of experiences in various geographical spaces and places, from the urban to the rural, can affect individuals in substantially different ways (Harper and Rayner 2010: 16). As Steven Allen and Kirsten Møllegaard express in their edited collection *Narratives of Place in Film and Literature*, different spaces and places can become infused with hopes and dreams as a result of the cognitive, emotional, and imaginary connections that individuals form with them over time (Allen and

Møllegaard 2019: 141). In these regards, it is important to note that all of Christian's interactions with the horses in *Heartstone* take him out of the alienating village environment and away from its patriarchal gender roles and expectations pertaining to masculinity and human (hetero)sexuality. In contrast, the settings in which he spends time with the horses offer Christian a pleasurable space of possibility in which he can feel free from the constraints he constantly encounters elsewhere in his everyday life.

With regard to cinematic representations of Icelandic wilderness, Birgir Thor Møller emphasizes that the greatest freedom an individual can experience can be found in the natural (i.e., uncivilized and uncorrupted) landscape (Møller 2005: 320). It is perhaps entirely unsurprising, therefore, that, on their next endeavour seeking solace by riding Sven's horses, Christian and Thor desire to venture even further from their village and into the surrounding wilderness.

Just days after their previous horseback ride, Christian is persuaded by Thor, Beth, and Hanna to "borrow" two of Sven's horses while the man is away from his farm so they can all camp together in a remote area to the east. Although he knows taking the horses without permission could potentially get them into trouble, Christian agrees to do so for (at least) two reasons: Christian wishes to venture once again into the welcoming wilderness environment, and Thor suggests he will be an unmasculine coward if he refuses. As they depart, the soundtrack emphasises the soothing sounds of chirping birds and clomping hooves, and the camera focuses on lush rolling hills and serene mountainscapes, suggesting an appealing, uncorrupted environment. The destination where they choose to set up their tent for the evening, foregrounded as the two boys gather firewood together, is revealed to be surrounded by several lakes and snowcapped mountains. A bit later that same day, as they dine with the girls by firelight, the bond between Christian and Thor is emphasised when the latter tells an awkward joke and only Christian finds it to be funny. Once all together inside the tent, Christian watches as Thor tenderly braids Beth's hair, and then as he and Beth exit the tent to obtain a bit more privacy. Now left alone in the tent with Hanna, Christian attempts to relieve some of the awkwardness of the situation by making shadow figures with a flashlight, but it soon becomes evident, both from the way Hanna is looking at him and as she moves in for a kiss, that he is expected to make a move on her. At first, Christian reluctantly returns the girl's kisses; moments later, he begins uncomfortably to undress her. But Christian is spared from the ongoing awkwardness of the situation when Thor and Beth return to the tent unexpectedly and the four settle in to sleep. After Thor and Beth cuddle and make out a bit (which Christian both sees and hears), Christian clears his throat loudly to discourage such behaviour. It is at that moment, after Beth has closed her eyes, that Christian and Thor exchange eye contact and smile, and Thor

extends his hand above Beth's and Hanna's heads to hold Christian's hand in the night.

The next morning, Christian appears to undergo a cathartic transformation — seemingly inspired by Thor's concluding gesture of the preceding evening — that provides him with relief from all of the stressors he has recently been experiencing. Awakening before everyone else, he walks to one of the nearby lakes, wearing only his underwear, and gradually descends beneath the water's surface. Once underneath the water, Christian clenches his fists and lets out two emotional screams before his facial expression turns peaceful, and the water above him becomes entirely still. Although it is unclear whether he has just released all the pressure he felt the night before to engage in a romantic and sexual relationship with Hanna or has instead come to the realization that the wilderness environment is one in which his queerness no longer needs to be entirely suppressed (or perhaps both), Christian is clearly a changed person when he rises again to the lake's surface. With help from Sven's horses, he has discovered a place that can serve as a highly appealing alternative to more restrictive ways of being and behaving, and one in which Thor may actually be reciprocating some of his own feelings (Møller 2005: 322). For as critic Donald Clarke points out, within this wilderness setting it becomes evident that the relationship between Christian and Thor may not be entirely platonic, offering hope to Christian as to what may come (Clarke 2018: n.pag.).

The newly light-hearted Christian returns to the tent and insists that the others join him immediately at the lake. He runs back to the water and, once there, engages in playful splashing with the two girls as the two horses look on from a grassy hilltop nearby. The smile on his face is infectious. But then, quite suddenly, everything changes, and this wilderness space of hope and promising possibility becomes irreversibly corrupted for Christian. Thor runs over to inform Christian that his father and Sven are approaching on horseback. Christian immediately becomes meek, and he wades back into the lake, squatting down, in a failed attempt to hide from his father. The man aggressively drags his underwear-clad son out of the lake by his hair, throws him to the ground, and starts to beat him in front of everyone else, declaring that his son is a thief. Christian's promise not to engage in any such behaviour in the future falls on deaf ears. The man continues his assault on Christian until Sven insists it must stop, adding that he is confident the boys will not again take his horses without permission. Christian shivers and begins to tear up as his father and Sven prepare to depart; the boy turns to gaze at the two horses he and his friends "borrowed," which are still witnessing the unfolding developments from afar, after his father promises to continue dealing with him back at home. Moments later, Christian breaks down in tears within the tent in front of his three friends, rejecting the girls' attempts to comfort him and feeling both humiliated and emasculated in front of Thor. To Christian, the special

wilderness environment that the horses enabled him to access no longer feels like a welcoming and liberatory safe space.

Horses of (potential) healing in *Heartstone*

In the aftermath of that embarrassing and abusive wilderness encounter with his father, Christian finds himself once again largely trapped within the confines of the village environment, with its limiting definitions of community and its desire to socially isolate and expel individuals who fail to adhere to what its typical residents regard as being “normal” (Ryll 2017: n.pag.). He receives a black eye from his father after he returns the horses to Sven’s farm, which leads Christian to consider attacking his father with a large rock and his long-suffering mother to threaten leaving her husband (and taking Christian with her) for good. These deleterious experiences quickly lead Christian to regard the horses at Sven’s farm no longer as sources of hope for a brighter future (as in the first two sequences featuring them), but rather as sources of (potential) healing for his injured psyche and body (in the final two sequences featuring the horses).

Spending time with horses has long been known to assist with the healing of individuals who have experienced various forms of trauma, enabling the “gradual reintegration of shattered senses of self” (Schattschneider and Auslander 2021: 14). Such trauma can result from numerous sources, including a troubled childhood or abuse at the hands of a parent (Schattschneider and Auslander 2021: 14). At least in part, horses may be particularly beneficial to human healing because they possess a distinct aptitude for attuning to the conditions and emotions surrounding them, enabling them to “sync up” with humans and/or other animals nearby (Pfoutz 2019: 141). Humans who are feeling particularly vulnerable can embrace the openness associated with being affected by the animals’ calming presence (Pfoutz 2019: 145). It is quite easy to understand, therefore, why Christian turns to the horses in an attempt first to heal his increasingly confusing relationship with Thor, and then subsequently in an attempt to find solace once it becomes obvious that other of the village’s inhabitants have caught on to his true sexual orientation.

The next sequence involving horses in *Heartstone* finds Christian performing chores at Sven’s farm, with Thor assisting closely by his side. This is their first interpersonal interaction since the wilderness trip, when Thor chose to hold Christian’s hand – despite the presence of the two young women – as they drifted off to sleep. It makes sense that Christian would want such an interaction to occur amid the horses at Sven’s farm, which offers a setting in which he and Thor tend to interact together more naturally and freely – with greater vitality and reduced inhibitions – because they are able to leave the added stressors of village life (at least temporarily) behind. The natural

freedom and actions of the horses in their everyday environment provide strong contrasts to the feelings of alienation, repression, and expected conformity to patriarchal social expectations that Christian continuously feels in other settings (Hart 2021: 154). As such, it is the perfect place for Christian to attempt to begin healing his relationship with Thor in the event that anything has awkwardly changed between them in the days since their shared camping experience went unexpectedly awry.

Two horses stand watch outside the barn as Christian and Thor begin to interact together inside. Thor mentions that Beth and Hanna want the boys to join them at the local dance, and to get drunk with them beforehand. Feeling a bit jealous of Thor's evolving relationship with Beth, Christian points out that neither he nor Thor drinks alcohol. In response, Thor states (unconvincingly) that he got drunk once while visiting his (absent) father in the south. In a seeming attempt to hurt his best friend, with whom he has also fallen in love, Christian adds, "Sure – you haven't seen your dad in years. He isn't even interested in seeing you guys." This motivates Thor to hurt Christian back by referring to the recent wilderness debacle: "At least he doesn't beat me." The tension that exists between them, as a result of their uncertain relational dynamics, is palpable. Christian's reaction is to grab a fistful of horse manure and throw it forcefully into Thor's face. Thor immediately responds in kind before the boys get into a brief physical confrontation that quickly turns into playful wrestling. At this moment, it appears that the horse stable will indeed provide an ideal healing environment, as Christian – now straddling Thor on the ground – jokes that Beth would never want to kiss him with manure on his face, and Thor jokingly invites Christian to kiss him instead. As the boys begin to laugh and smile, however, Christian bends down slowly and kisses Thor on the lips in a serious, rather than playful, manner. Despite Christian's assurance that the kiss meant nothing because he was just fooling around, Thor does not know what to make of this unexpected development. "What's wrong with you?" Thor inquires, glaring at his closest male companion.

Immediately following that confusing exchange in Sven's stable, Christian, Thor, Beth, and Hanna skip the local dance and head instead to the aforementioned house party being thrown by Thor's sisters. All of the village's adolescents are there. Christian dismisses Hanna's attempts at interpersonal interaction while he jealously stares at Thor dancing with Beth across the room. Moments later, Ginger the bully discovers Hafdís's homoerotic painting of Christian with Thor and displays it proudly for all of the partygoers to see. Embarrassed, Thor clutches the front of the painting closely to his chest as Christian looks away in shame before walking to the home's entryway, glancing back momentarily at Thor, and exiting by himself. Because Thor was seen dancing and otherwise interacting with Beth at the party while Christian chose instead to remain to himself, the young people who attended appear to

take the bully's suggestion about the painting's contents at face value: that Christian really *is* finally coming out of the closet. That message spreads quickly throughout the village.

When Christian and Thor run into each other outdoors the next day, Thor uses a derogatory term for gay males in his presence and expresses that he does not want to spend time alone with Christian. Later that afternoon, Christian's (intoxicated) father arrives unexpectedly at Thor's home in his truck, with his son by his side, to enact his "gull-eggs plan" that will free Christian from being attracted to Thor once and for all, after Thor ends up falling to his death from the side of a cliff. With Thor in the second-row seat, the man glares at him in the rearview mirror and condescendingly asks, "So, Hafdis still has a dream about becoming an artist?" Then, turning his attention to Christian beside him, he adds, with a sarcastic smile and then a laugh, "And the two of you are her main subjects." Once at the isolated cliff, Christian's father feigns concern for the boys' well-being by stating that they should wait a bit so they do not get blown over the edge before taking a swig of alcohol to boost his courage to execute his plan. While waiting, the boys sit beside each other in silence. Christian rises and walks to the edge of the cliff, looks down, shuts his eyes, and begins to breathe slowly through his mouth. As he considers jumping, his father grabs him from behind to keep him safe. It becomes clear at this moment that the man wants Thor to die on this day, rather than his own son. As the man approaches the boys with a harness, Christian reaches out and offers to put it on himself, but his father makes it clear that Thor must be the one. In response, Christian protests, telling Thor he does not need to listen to the man, but Christian's father commands him to be silent. Moments later, Christian and his father begin to lower Thor down the side of the cliff, using only a rope, to gather the eggs from the cliff's crevices; the man smiles and chuckles to himself as his plan officially gets underway. At first, Thor retains his composure as he heads downward and begins gathering the first few eggs, but he quickly panics when he looks directly at the water beneath him and realises he could readily plunge to his death. He insists on being pulled back up immediately. As Christian and his father begin to honour his request, one of the metal stakes they have been using to provide support for the rope — which Christian's father did not adequately pound into the ground — gives way, plunging Thor further down toward the water. Christian's father, apparently having had a change of heart, struggles along with his son to return Thor to the top of the cliff, where Christian reaches out his hand and pulls his best friend to safety. He then immediately embraces Thor tightly, breathing heavily with tears streaming down his face, as his father looks on, further confirming that the boy has fallen in love with Thor and cannot imagine living his life without him. The next time Christian, uninvited, meets up with Thor at his home, Thor informs him that he wishes to spend time alone before adding,

in an apparent reference to his friend's queerness, "Christian, just stop being so weird. Then everything will be fine." Thor refuses to even look at Christian after he says this.

Feeling entirely alone for the very first time, Christian ignores Thor's request to be alone and returns to his friend's home that same evening, hoping to find some sense of comfort, only to learn that Thor is spending the evening with Beth. Hafdís invites him inside, where she proceeds to show Christian a series of sketches she has made of him in recent weeks; each of them portrays a sad young man. Next, Hafdís apologises that everyone saw the homoerotic painting at the party before affectionately wrapping her arm around Christian's shoulder and assuring him that it would be okay if he is gay. Hearing those words spoken aloud for the first time causes Christian to panic. He storms out the front door, alone, into the night.

Heartstone's fourth and final sequence featuring Sven's horses begins immediately thereafter, during which the limits of the animals' ability to provide solace and healing to Christian are deleteriously tested after it becomes obvious that other young people in town have become aware of his sexual orientation. Christian runs as fast as he can through the Icelandic wilderness to get to Sven's farm, where he heads directly into the stable to be among the horses. He sits on the ground, quivering and crying, as two of the horses watch over him. As his sobbing continues, he lets out two brief screams as the camera closes in on one of the horse's eyes, revealing that it senses what the boy is feeling and experiencing. The horse expresses its discomfort with Christian's emotionality by backing away slightly, the camera focusing on the animal's front feet as this occurs. Next, as Christian's sobbing intensifies and he begins punching at an unseen metal object beside him, the two closest horses become frightened. They whinny and begin to turn and walk away from him. It is then that Christian notices a pistol hanging on one of the stable's posts. Feeling abandoned both by Thor and the horses during this time of extreme emotional distress, Christian resorts to attempting suicide in order to escape the overwhelmingly complicated realities of his everyday existence.

Concluding observations

Most analyses of animals in film focus primarily on them as primary or supporting characters, often performing trained actions and stunts on cue to the delight of audience members. In contrast, the present analysis, as previously stated, focuses on the symbolic and storytelling significance of *Heartstone's* horses in their natural environments, as they exhibit their natural behaviours and ways of being. In doing so, it has endeavoured to demonstrate that "while it may appear to a lay observer viewing a moment in an animal's life that the animal is 'not doing anything', an animal's behaviour is

comprehensible if one appreciates the context in which it emerges" (Horowitz 2014: 220).

Because Christian does not intentionally articulate his innermost emotions as the film progresses, viewers obtain additional insights into his state of mind and emotionality by witnessing his interactions amid the horses at Sven's farm — how he responds to their physical presence (and them to his), how he communicates emotion to them (and they to him), and how being in their company reflects something actual or desirable about himself and his (present or future) lived circumstances (Horowitz 2014: 222). In part, the presence of the horses in *Heartstone* is used to identify that Christian has returned to a special space that enables him to better articulate his life's desires and dreams and envision ways to realise them, free from the prying eyes of others (Møller 2005: 329). Additionally, just as dogs do in so many other films, at key moments the horses "serve as the model (human) partner" Christian ends up lacking after Thor pushes him away: "the ardent listener, the sympathiser, the faithful, and the loving" (Horowitz 2014: 232).

For those who are left wondering what Christian's future encounters with the horses at Sven's farm will be like, the answer does not appear to be promising. Although he survives the suicide attempt, Christian and his parents (who will immediately be divorcing) will soon depart to relocate permanently in the city of Reykjavik. Unfortunately, this is not a particularly surprising development in this coming-of-age tale of self-discovery, as it is common in many cinematic representations for characters who possess a noteworthy form of difference (such as Christian's queerness) to relocate to urban environments, which traditionally have provided a more welcoming sense of community belongingness that is far less typical in rural environs. Once this occurs, Christian's "otherness" will no longer pose a continuing "threat" to the perceived "purity" of the rural village setting and the individuals — including Thor — who will continue to reside there (Hart 2019: 180).

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