Grazing the Green Fields of Social Media

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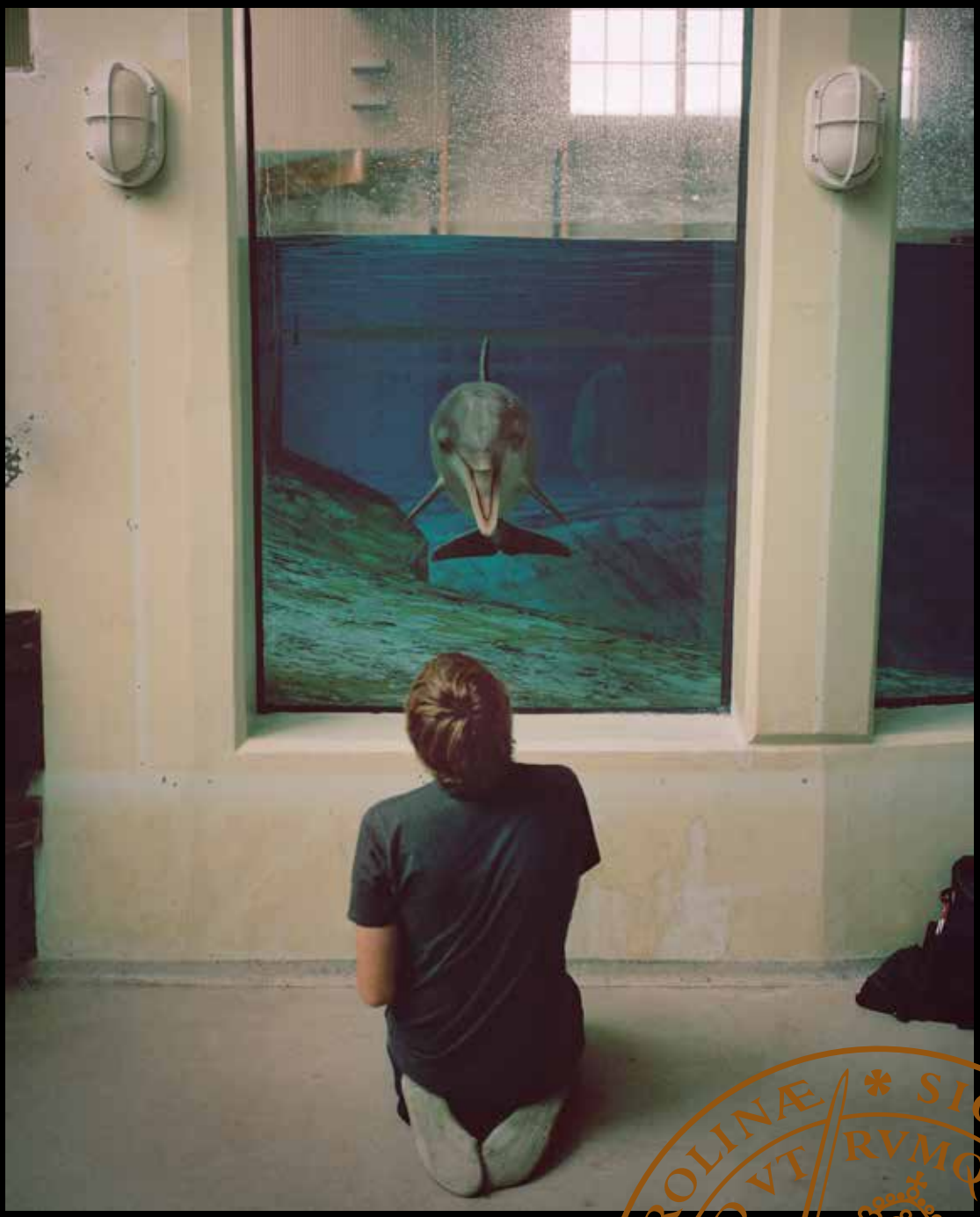

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GRAZING THE GREEN FIELDS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Tobias Linné

Cows with Instagram and Facebook accounts

On Instagram and Facebook, accounts created by the Swedish dairy industry are made to look as if there are cows behind them. With these accounts, the dairy companies communicate through the cows, addressing the visitors in the way a person would. This chapter is about these accounts which have become a highly successful part of the dairy industry's marketing strategy.[1] It deals with how the relations between humans and other animals are configured in these online spaces, how specific images and narratives of these relations are produced and legitimized, and what these images and narratives suggest in terms of the power relations between humans and other animals. Questions are also asked about what social positions are available for the cows in the marketing spaces of the dairy industry and with what consequences for real cows?

Two social media accounts of the Swedish dairy industry are analysed. One is from Instagram and is called Bregottfabriken@Instagram[2]. It is an account promoting *Bregott*, a bestselling brand of butter produced by Sweden's largest dairy corporation, *Arla*. The other is a Facebook account of the Swedish dairy company *Hjordnära*,[3] which is a branch of the second largest Swedish dairy corperation, *Skånemejerier*.[4]

Popular media images and narratives are crucial parts of the processes in which the norms that govern the relations between humans and other animals are established and sustained (Molloy, 2011; Malamud, 2012). Several animal studies and critical animal studies researchers have been looking at how other animals figure in different fields of media and popular culture (Squire, 2012; Packwood Freeman 2009; Herzog and Galvin, 1992; Arluke and Bogdan, 2010; Lerner and Kalof, 1999; Phillips, 1996; Spears et al., 1996; Glenn, 2004). Farmed animals rarely figure in the news or in TV shows, but rather frequently in advertisements for food products (Phillips, 1996; Molloy, 2011). Hence, where farmed animals are concerned, advertising is a particularly important media setting to analyse, as

it could be argued that it is this marketing imagery that shapes a good deal of the public's understanding of farmed animals.

The new visibility of farmed animals

Especially since the so-called horse meat scandal in 2013, transparency and visibility have become key trends in food production and consumption. Food industries have begun using DNA-testing to see which animals the meat in burgers and pre-cooked meals have come from, and books about the secret additives hidden in regular food have become bestsellers. This can be seen as a development opposite to what has long been the dominant tendency in modern western society; the concealment of the animal origin of meat (Elias, 1994). Modern society meant the establishment of slaughterhouses, in which animals could be killed away from the observation of most people (Potts, Armstrong and Brown, 2013). Meat has, during the twentieth century, increasingly been disguised at the dinner table as cuisine (Nath and Prideaux, 2011; Fiddes, 1991). Adams (2010) writes that the dead animal is the absent referent of meat, and describes how the meat eater becomes separated from the animal and the animal from the end product.

During the last decade, many researchers (Gillespie, 2011; Cole 2011; Stanescu, 2014; Tiengo and Caffo, 2012) have noticed a shift in the cultural invisibility of animals that are used for food, a shift that calls for a revision of the ideas about the concealment of meat. Jovian Parry (2009, 2010) describes a new trend in gastronomic discourse – "new carnivorism" – that can be seen in books, articles, documentaries, popular gastronomy TV shows and restaurants serving animals "from nose to tail." Here, the animal is reintegrated into the discourse surrounding meat, and the role of animal slaughter in meat production is acknowledged. There seems to be a new group of consumers interested in witnessing all parts of the process of transforming the animal to food (Parry, 2009, 2010; Potts, Armstong and Brown, 2013). Other authors such as Cole (2011) and Stanescu (2014) have used the concept of "happy meat" to describe how some meat producers have started to market themselves as in touch with the "natural" life and death of animals. By this, they can distinguish their meat from the more industrially produced cheaper meat which makes up by far the largest proportion of meat consumed in society.

While cows often have been used as symbols in dairy marketing, the real lives of the cows have mostly been invisible and cut out from the advertising and marketing campaigns for dairy (Molloy, 2011, p. 110). However, just as with animals farmed for meat, there seems to be a new trend of making at least some parts of the lives of some of the animals in dairy production more visible than before. Dairy industry marketing campaigns in social media can be seen as part of this trend,

presenting the subject, the cow, no longer as separate from the object, the milk, as before (c.f. Ståhlberg, 2014).[5] This "happy milk" imagery presents the production of dairy as natural and ethical, an image in which the cows play a central role.

A caring exploitation

Cows are typically framed as "food animals" in human society (Stewart and Cole, 2009). As such, they are often strongly objectified when represented in various media and popular cultural contexts. Packwood Freeman (2009) explains how farmed animals in the news media are described as commodities and how the media fails to critique the ethics of animal agriculture from the animals' perspective, ignoring emotional issues that farmed animals face and denying farmed animals' individual identities. In a survey of TV commercials during the late 1990s, Lerner and Kalof (1999) note similar findings. Animals used or consumed by humans tend to be portrayed in a distanced way, and the commercials typically avoid humanizing other animals.

Even though food animals are often instrumentalized, they are also personalized under certain circumstances. Farmers for example often give names to their dairy cows and recognize their different personalities. The personalization of cows also takes place in the advertising context. Here, cows often figure in personalized narratives and are awarded individual identities as part of corporate discursive strategies to sell the animals as food (Glenn, 2004).

A common delusion around dairy production is that it is not doing any harm to the animals (Wicks, 2011). In reality, the dairy industry has many connections to and similarities with the meat industry, not only in that the offspring of cows that are not selected as dairy replacements are often sold for meat production, but also in that the animals in the dairy industry are caught in similar relations of human dominion and exploitation. However, with little actual access to farmed animal spaces, the majority of people in the industrialized western world have little experience of farming practices other than the idyllic and nostalgic representations of green pastures with free-range, happy, and content cows that they get from food advertising (Molloy, 2011).

On the Facebook page of Hjordnära, images and narratives of happy cows who are well taken care of are central. The tone is loving and caring, as in the caption of an image from September 9, 2013, showing a heifer on a lush meadow, which reads "Hjordnära and the adorable little heifer Lilla Mu wish you all a lovely week."[6] The scenes from the cows' everyday life typically show animals who are well cared for. One example is an image from Hjordnära's Facebook page November 29, 2013, taken from inside one of the barns showing a cow lying down

on plenty of straw and sawdust. The company Hjordnära never have to explicitly claim that they are taking good care of the cows. Instead they post pictures that show well cared for cows, and let the commentators draw their own conclusions about the cow's wellbeing. In the commentary fields, many of the commentators notice that the cow in the image above has plenty of bedding material to lie on:

> It is so wonderful to see that the cows have such nice mattresses to lie on, it isn't always like that I would say. Have a good weekend all cows and "carers" (Hjordnära, November 29, 2013)

For every posted image of a happy cow, Hjordnära receives praise by the commentators: "This is what a happy cow looks like" (November 29, 2013), "Your cows live a good life" (July 23, 2013). Presenting the company as caring for the cows' wellbeing and honoring transparency, also means juxtapositioning oneself against the modern, non-natural, industrialized, large-scale dairy producers which have not made these "humane" improvements in their treatment of animals. On the Hjordnära Facebook page, these discourses also sum up the image of the other, the non-animal friendly farmer, the non-Swedish farmer. One comment provides an example:

> Thank you all Swedish farmers, animal caretakers and COWS!!! You are the best! We have the world's strongest animal protection laws that protect the welfare of the cows and their right to express their natural behaviour. We are a role model for the rest of the world with our low usage of antibiotics. Good care for the animals means healthier animals. That is common sense - happy and healthy cows give plenty of milk! Cows are wonderful animals! I think we should quit celebrating Mothers Day! From this year on, we should celebrate Cows Day instead! (Hjordnära, May 25, 2013)

As Stanescu (2014) shows, in the happy meat/milk discourses, speciesism blends well with nationalist and racist sentiments. In the comments on the Facebook and Instagram accounts of the dairy industry, nationalist ideas echo in recurrent calls to buy only Swedish-produced milk, because of the Swedish farmers' more ethical approach to the treatment of their animals. In this way, ethical dilemmas concerning the exploitation and killing of animals are cast aside in favour of a focus on localism, sustainability, and tradition (Tiengo and Caffo, 2012).

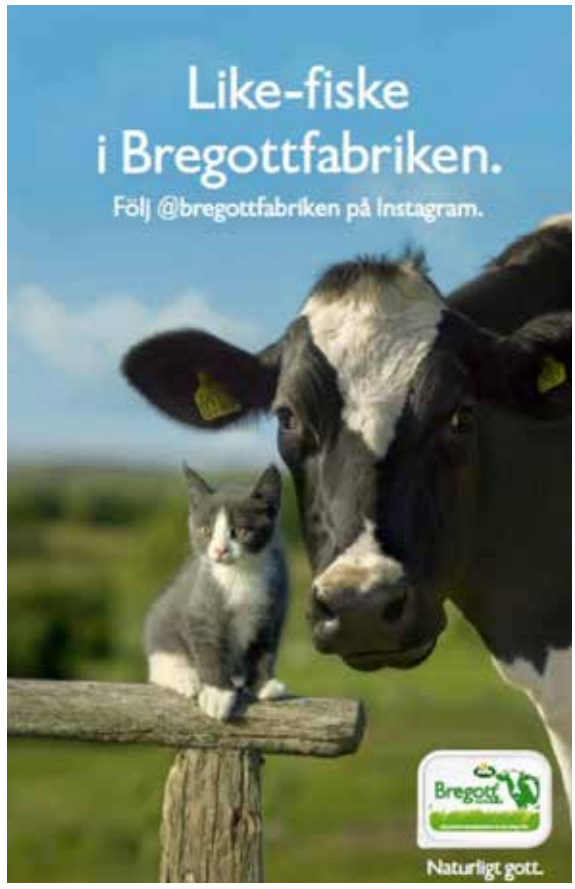
Transcending the human-cow divide

On the Facebook and Instagram pages of the dairy industry, the cows are discursively framed as having an emotional life of pleasure and pain, a memory, and a

sense of the future, a psychosocial identity over time and individual welfare in the sense that their life can fare well or ill for them (c.f. Regan, 2004). At the Hjordnära Facebook page, cows are often addressed with their names and with descriptions like ”Beautiful little Helene” (August 1, 2013). The cows are made into quasi-subjects, awarded a certain degree of personhood, and occupy social positions that are usually reserved for pets (Stewart and Cole, 2009). The Bregottfabriken@Instagram account has an ironic tone, playing with the notion of the cows as quasi-subjects with wishes and desires. One example is a post on June 8, 2014, labeled “Time on my own in the Bregottfabriken” with these hashtags:

> #mindfulness #instamood #calmandnice #livinginthepresent #nostress #takingitslow #meditation #bregottfactory #breathe #timetorest #reflecting #insight #bregott #philosophizing #enlightment #backtowork

The Instagram and Facebook accounts play with tearing down the boundary between humans and animals by personalization and by making the cows into almost-humans behaving in ways humans would. Another example is the cow in the picture to the right from Bregottfabriken@Instagram (December 20, 2013) ”Trying to get more likes” posing for a selfie with a cute kitten.



Other examples from the Bregottfabriken@Instagram account include cows that according to the tag lines are going to Marbella on Holiday (February 18, 2014), waiting for Santa Claus (December 24, 2013) coming back from work after the Christmas holiday (January 8, 2014) getting

a sun tan (July 22, 2014), getting grass stains on their pants (December 16, 2013) and having long-distance relationships (January 21, 2014).

Another aspect of the cows' presence in social media relating to them being positioned as quasi-subjects is that they seem to fulfill social and affective functions for the commentators. When Hjordnära post images of cows on their Facebook page, they often do it with greetings and salutations from the cows, wishing the visitors a nice weekend (September 6, 2013) or even throwing them a kiss (July 28, 2013) (this also occurs on the Bregott instagram page, where the cows wish the visitors a Merry Christmas, for example). Many of the visitors reply, as shown in the conversation below from the Hjordnära Facebook page on November 29, 2013:

> Hjordnära: Just woke up. Have a nice weekend everyone!
> Karin: Same to you sweetie!:-)
> Betty: The same to you! Kiss on the muzzle.
> Majvor: Thanks, and the same to you little cow.

The social connections between humans and cows on the Facebook and Instagram accounts go deeper than just exchanges of salutations. The cows awaken memories from the past, of relations to other cows and humans as the example below from Hjordnära's Facebook page from July 28, 2013 shows:

> Ingegärd: Beautiful images....They bring many happy childhood memories to life.
> It is good to be alive.

> Eva: I remember my heifers Rosa and Stjärna, from when I was a child, it was so cozy! It was back in the 50's.

While this can be interpreted as an interest in the cows as individuals, it is also important to note that the real cows get nothing out from these quasi-social interactions. The cows are instruments put to use by an industry that wants to connect to its customers. Furthermore, they are affectively useful for the visitors, in a manner that resembles the affective functions that pets fulfill in human-dominated households. Many comment on how good the cows make them feel, how seeing the cows and learning about their lives make them happy and calm (Hjordnära, 13 August, 2013; Bregottfabriken@Instagram, 4 February, 2014) and how much they think that people have to learn from cows:

> Cows have a curiosity and a joy for living that we humans could use more of. Cows are enjoying the present! We should live more like the cows and

> enjoy this wonderful summer! We should be happy for the grazing heifers and cows in the meadows. (Hjordnära, May 25, 2013)

The social engagement with the cows online is a complex phenomenon that can fulfill many social functions for humans and may be explained in different ways. The cows from the Facebook and Instagram accounts primarily seem to function as symbols or metaphors for something else, objects for humans to think with as Lerner and Kalof (1999) describe it, and it seems they are primarily acknowledged as subjects as they transcend their species and attain human-like qualities or quasi-human subjectivity (c.f. Stewart and Cole, 2009).

Bregottfabriken's personalization of the cows is imbued with contradictions, ambivalence, and irony. It comes across as funny because the readers know that the real cows are not actually getting sun tans or trying to get more likes by posing with cute kittens. Ultimately, this personalization furthers the end goal of the dairy industry, to objectify the cows and sell their bodily fluids as commodities. But it does so by first ascribing the cows with personalities, by promising an unproblematic interspecies relationship between humans and cows that, in reality, is an illusion. This anthropomorphism is paradoxical. As Pedersen (2010) notes, the projection of human-like qualities on to animals often serves to emphasize human-animal discontinuities. In the end, the tearing down of the human-cow boundary by awarding the cows with subjectivity on the Facebook and Instagram accounts actually works to reinforce the very same boundary. The animal subjects which are produced are almost, but not quite, human. The underlying implication is that humans are not morally obligated to consider the farmed animals' interests. Although the animals may be like humans, they are in fact only animals, and a definite boundary exists between us and them.

As opposed to true subjectivity, quasi-subjectivity is precarious (Stewart and Cole, 2009). The recognition of the cows as quasi-subjects is only temporary, and it only applies to the cows when they figure in the Instagram and Facebook accounts. Outside of this context, they are objectified and made ripe for human consumption. The humour of the Bregottfabriken@Instagram account also functions as a way to trivialize the cows' lives and questions about their welfare. When the cows become funny characters, it is harder to take any concerns for how they are actually treated seriously.

What makes it even more ironic is that the ascribed subjectivity of the cows have little to do with the ways in which the cows are actually treated in the dairy industry. The cows are ascribed subject positions of being in control of their own destiny (that they would be able to go off on holiday whenever they wanted or be able to have relations with their families) when they are actually nowhere near of being in control of these things.

Disfigured cows

Animals are often seen as effective advertising tools. They can be used to transfer desirable cultural meanings to the products with which they are associated and function as a symbolic and allegorical shorthand to quickly conjure up simple marketing constructs that render the animals objectified (Lerner and Kalof, 1999; Phillips, 1996; South, 2012). For the dairy industry, the cows from the Facebook and Instagram accounts are tools for economic purposes. The awarding of cows with emotions and a social life is a commodification of the cows' symbolic value, built on the promises of an interspecies encounter and a life in harmony with animals and nature.

On the Facebook and Instagram pages, there is a recurring discussion concerning whether or not the images posted are "real". Commentators on Bregottfabriken@Instagram ask where the pictures are taken, if they are photoshopped, if they are really Swedish cows, and the dairy industry representatives assert the accurateness of the accounts. Animals' existence in media and popular culture is, however, by necessity diminutive compared to natural contexts (Malamud, 2012) and since this is advertising, the dairy industry is in no way obliged to present a "real" image of the cows' lives. One example is the cultural image of the calm and happy cow, an image connected to ideas of natural landscapes and rural tranquility. This says very little about actual cows. It is more of a human fantasy, an inscription on the animals' character that reconfigures the attention that might be directed toward actual characters, natures and situations.

Much like how feminists have discussed how women are two-dimensionally characterized and objectified under the male gaze, so are nonhuman animals cast in this mode under the human gaze. Under the human gaze, animals are not just figuratively, but literally, seen as raw material. The image on the front page of the Hjordnära Facebook account provides an example. The image shows a cow standing in a green meadow, with a youghurt carton pasted into the image next to the cow. The tag line runs "Tender and sweet. Without any lumps". The text and the image create a strange effect. Who/what is the product? Who/what is it that is "Tender and sweet. Without any lumps"? The comments on the Facebook and Instagram accounts on many occasions also reinforce the identity of the animals as commodities. The cows are, for example, often referred to in ways that completely trivializes their death, for example, by being called "hamburgers" (Bregottfabriken @Instagram June 20, 2014).

By artificial insemination, genetic manipulation (to produce more meat, milk, or eggs) and other measures, farmed animals are incorporated into production technologies. In mass production, animals are modified and designed to suit the production system and optimize productivity, they are de-animalized, alienated

from their own bodies and from their bodily functions (Noske, 1997). One expression of this from the Facebook and Instagram accounts of the dairy industry is the commonly invoked metaphor of the cow as a machine producing milk. This metaphor is in the very name ”Bregottfabriken” but it is also occurs frequently on the Bregottfabriken@Instagram account, with commentators referring to the cows as “good-looking milk machines” (January 31, 2014). On one occasion, one of the people behind the Hjordnära Facebook account writes:

> You have to agree that cows are fantastic animals. Quite simply a living biologic and organic factory where the grass goes in in one end and the byproducts come out in the other end, and to us, they deliver a good, cheap and nutritius life elixir in the shape of milk. I bow in respect to the cows and the farmers that care for them. (Hjordnära, July 19, 2010)

The idea of the milk machine emphasizes the relation between cows and humans as clean and morally unproblematic, hiding the exploitative relation at work when people take the milk from the cows (Molloy, 2011). Referring to cows as milk machines can be understood as an expression of what Davis (2011) calls a procrustean relationship. Writing about food industries and how animals are physically altered to fit in with the goal of the industries, Davis uses the image of Procrustes from Greek mythology. Procrustes was a bandit who physically attacked people by stretching them or cutting off their legs, so as to force them to fit the size of an iron bed. The food industries are procrustean, Davis writes, because: “Animals are physically altered, rhetorically disfigured, and ontologically obliterated to mirror and model the goals of their exploiters” (Davis, 2011, p. 35). The advertising of dairy products and the presence of dairy cows on the Instagram and Facebook pages of the dairy industry are apparent examples of such a rhetorical disfiguring. Cows are visually represented so as to further the exploitation of their bodies. On the Facebook and Instagram accounts, cows are seemingly given a voice to speak for themselves, but they are only allowed to express how happy they are to be exploited. A prime function of these anthropomorphised animals is to tell consumers that they can access their bodies without ethical dilemmas and that whatever is done to them is justified by the wishes of the animals themselves (Pedersen, 2010; Davis, 2011; Glenn, 2004).

Anthropomorphism is a complex phenomenon, blurring the human-animal boundary, often with promises of a greater understanding of animals as thinking and feeling subjects of a life. The creation of rational, emotional, and self-conscious animal subjects with the ability to speak (as in this case), renders the distinction between other animals and humans hypothetically contestable and opens up possibilities for less exploitative relations. However, the behaviour consequently

encouraged by these advertisements of dairy cows in social media (buying and eating other animals) serves to tacitly reinforce the boundaries between human and nonhuman animals whose only real value in the end lies in their body parts and bodily fluids (Glenn, 2004). The dairy industry does not dismiss the facts that cows are sentient beings, but uses this knowledge for their own purposes, inventing suitable thoughts and feelings for the cows that help downplay any ethical conflicts related to dairy production (c.f. Squire, 2102; c.f. Williams, 2004).

Concluding discussion

The dairy industry accounts on Facebook and Instagram are made to look like windows into the everyday life of the cows supposedly behind the accounts, but much like humans presenting their everyday life in social media, some things are exaggerated and others left out. The cows' everyday life in green pastures is the centre of attention in the marketing efforts, despite that for the vast majority of animals whose milk becomes dairy on the supermarkets shelves, this idyllic rural setting is fiction.

The posts and the comments of the Instagram and Facebook accounts construct a narrative, not only of the naturalness of the life of the dairy cows, but also of the naturalness of dairy production. Absent from the dairy industry advertising is the industrialized side of animal agriculture, the subjugation of nature in factories, the killing of animals, the forced insemination of cows, and the separation of the calves from their mothers. The social media accounts confuse visibility with transparency and hide the part of the cows' lives when they are not grazing the green fields, but are confined and tied up in barns. There is little connection to the real embodied animals behind this represented reality as the cows have their real life and nature concealed through their exposure (Glenn, 2004). As Davis (2011) writes, the human use of the cows becomes their ontology, what they are, and their teleology, what they were made for.

The social media accounts of the dairy industry promotes a certain type of relationship between humans and other animals, in which what is defined as the ethical problems of dairy production/consumption is that modern consumers are disconnected and unaware of the realities of modern rationalized and industrialized food production (which typically is represented as non-Swedish). In contrast to this, stands the organic, environmentally and ethically aware dairy industry seemingly providing consumers with transparency and visibility. In this discourse, the exploiters – the dairy industry and the consumers that are aware of the realities of animal agriculture and buy "ethical" products – come across as activists for animals. At the same time, the moral question of animal exploitation is dismissed as

sentimentalism that has no place in real life (Parry, 2009, 2010; Potts, Armstrong and Brown, 2013).

There are, however, other voices on the webpages, voices that bring up ethical questions about animal exploitation and contest the images being pushed by the dairy industry and many of the commentators. To some extent, the webpages seems to provide an opportunity for activists to questions the realities of dairy production as can be seen in comments on both the Hjordnära Facebook page (November 29, 2013; September 27, 2013; September 11, 2013) and the Bregottfabriken@Instagram page (March 8, 2014; May 25, 2014). There are also accounts set up by activists to resemble the dairy industry accounts (one is called Therealbregottfabriken@Instagram) providing counterimages to the idyllic happy cow scenery. This phenomenon is deserving of further academic attention and investigation.

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Hjordnära
https://www.facebook.com/Hjordnara (Accessed 15 August 2014).

Endnotes

[1] Skånemejerier, the dairy industry corporation of which Hjordnära is part has been described as a social media success story, reaching over 100,000 followers of their account within a year.

[2] http://instagram.com/bregottfabriken

[3] https://www.facebook.com/Hjordnara

[4] The accounts have been analysed using an open-ended textual analysis method, focusing on how the accounts communicate with the visitors, as well as on the comments that the visitors make to the posts and on the interaction in the commentary fields.

[5] Other examples of this new transparency and visibility of dairy production include a traceability system that, via a mobile phone application, makes it possible to use a code on the milk carton to see which farm the milk in the carton is from and then read more about that farm. Another example is the so-called open farms events, where the public is invited to come out to a farm and see how their production of dairy is carried out.

[6] All captions, tag lines, slogans and other texts from the dairy industry webpages translated by the author. The orignal wordings in Swedish can be found at http://instagram.com/bregottfabriken and https://www.facebook.com/Hjordnara