

Dangerous Play

*Orcas, Mêtis, and the
Global Lockdown*

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Abstract: Since 2020, orcas off the coast of the Iberian Peninsula have been ramming boats, causing damage and, in some cases, sinking vessels. Some scientists are reluctant to call the events intentional acts of aggression and report that what the orcas are doing can be categorized as play. This paper investigates the potential connection between what has been called the “anthropause” that took place during the COVID-19 lockdown and the start of new orca behaviours. It will propose that the orcas are indeed playing but not in the way that has been described by the scientific community. Instead, I argue, the orcas’ behaviour embodies the Greek idea of *mêtis*, a concept that employs a cunning intelligence to outwit stronger opponents. I theorize that the orcas are motivated to keep human interference in their waters at bay and use physical violence under the guise of play to achieve this goal, challenging the narrative of human exceptionalism in the process.

Keywords: *orca; Strait of Gibraltar; mêtis; animal revolt; animal resistance; anthropause*

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In late 2023, the American comedian Josh Johnson began his stand-up routine with a line that elicited a hearty bout of laughter: “I don’t know if you all have heard, but... The orcas are at it again.”¹ The comedian was referring to the unusual behaviour Iberian orcas have been exhibiting in the waters around the Strait of Gibraltar. The clip made the rounds on social media as it had been so widely reported that it is now a well-known phenomenon and meme. Since 2020, orcas, also known as killer whales, have been interfering with vessels off the coasts of Spain and Portugal, often with agonistic outcomes at unprecedented rates.² Between May 2020 and the end of July 2024, 804 “interactions” were recorded, defined as orcas responding to the presence of boats and approaching them. Of the 804 interactions, approximately 10 percent did not include physical contact, while 32 percent did include physical contact but did not result in damage. Of the remaining interactions, the orcas caused damage to varying degrees: in 38 percent of cases, damage to the vessels did not disturb navigation, while 20 percent of the time, physical contact with vessels impeded navigation. During this period, eight boats sank as a result of damage, with water ingress.³

Two dominant theories have been put forward to explain the potential reasons for this behaviour. One suggests that it is a type of play. As orcas have high cognitive abilities, they reproduce behaviours through social learning. This type of engagement with boats may be natural curiosity, a behaviour that is similar to socializing or fads.⁴ A second theory is that this behaviour is the result of an adverse event, where one or more of the orcas had a negative encounter of anthropogenic origin.⁵

Several scientific reports about the phenomenon have stated that there is no evidence the new behaviours were aggressive on the whales’ part and concluded that the use of words such as

1 Johnson, “Orcas vs Yachts”.

2 Esteban et al., “Killer Whales of the Strait”, 1700.

3 López, email correspondence, August 28, 2024.

4 “Interactions”, 15.

5 Esteban et al., “Killer Whales of the Strait”, 1706; López and Esteban, “Development of a Scientific Study”, 44.

‘aggression’ or ‘attack’ to describe such interactions is inappropriate.⁶ This contradicts the opinions of some sailors who see the behaviour as threatening, frightening, and indeed aggressive. Mariners who travel through what is being called “orca alley” are using deterrent methods, most of which are illegal under EU law.⁷ These methods have proven to be largely ineffective and pose significant risk to the Iberian orcas as they are critically endangered.⁸ Social media posts reflect a social-justice explanation for the phenomenon, as some have interpreted the orcas’ behaviour as an underclass revolt against the elite.⁹ Memes on social media and T-shirts display sayings such as “capsize the rich” and “join the orca uprising.” In his stand-up routine, Johnson played off this idea, highlighting that the orcas have, in a sense, become gangsters who are striking back at the “one percent”: “Who would have thought that the orcas would be the ones to step up?”¹⁰

A potential factor that has received little to no attention is the timing of these incidents. The first reports of orca incidents took place in May of 2020, a few weeks after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown measures had been relaxed and humans returned to their normal activities. The pandemic temporarily halted global shipping schedules, fishing boats, and pleasure vessels in the Western Mediterranean, but when traffic started back up after the first lockdown, the interactions began.¹¹ Whether or not this is a coincidence or a factor in the orcas’ new behaviour raises larger questions about humanity’s influence on animal wellbeing.

This paper intends to open new areas of speculation around the orca events, paying particular attention to notions of intentionality, and poses the following questions: Are these incidents examples of

6 “Interactions”, 14; López and Esteban, “Development of a Scientific Study”, 11.

7 “Interactions”, 19.

8 Esteban and Foote, “*Orcinus orca*”.

9 Ashcraft, “Solidarity!”

10 Johnson, “Orcas vs Yachts”.

11 The Executive Summary of the International Whaling Commission from 2024 noted that GTOA-CEMMA and CIRCE are in the process of examining the potential correlations between changes in vessel traffic and the emergence of the behaviour. Results are forthcoming.

orca resistance? Is there a possible connection to the COVID-19 lockdown? And how can we interpret this new behaviour in the waters around the Strait of Gibraltar?

To address these lines of inquiry, the article will be organized into three sections. First, I will look at the notion of animal resistance and detail the orca incidents happening around the Iberian Peninsula. Second, I will explore the potential connection between these behaviours and the timing of the COVID-19 global lockdown, also known as the “anthropause”. Finally, I will argue that what the orcas are undertaking can be theorized as animal resistance, and that their actions, whether viewed as explicitly aggressive or as a form of play, engage with the Greek concept of *mêtis* [μητις]. In the conclusion, I will consider the ways that orcas are pushing humanity to reinvent relations between all living species.

I. Animals and Resistance

To attempt to understand what is happening with the orcas in the region around the Iberian Peninsula, it is worth turning first to the topic of animal resistance, in which there is a growing interest within animal studies. In society at large, animal defiance is frequently dismissed and labelled as misbehaviour, stubbornness, or an accident. The donkey who refuses to pull the cart, the dog who refuses to stay off the couch, and the tiger who kills his circus trainer: all are forms of resistance as they can be defined as disobeying and challenging authority.

A growing number of scholars are exploring animal resistance and the concomitant anthropocentric mechanisms that undermine animals who oppose their own exploitation. Jason Hribal focuses on animal resistance and animal labour and capital, effectively arguing that animals are part of the working class. He has painstakingly researched accounts of individuals who resist in places such as zoos and the entertainment industry, thereby giving a voice to the thousands, if not millions, of animals who fight against human sovereignty. For example, Hribal recorded events in the life of an orangutan named Fu Manchu at the Omaha Zoo, who kept a piece

of wire hidden in his mouth to pick the lock and escape multiple times.¹² Orangutans at the San Diego Zoo escaped repeatedly and each time, additional steps were taken to secure the exhibits. During construction, all orangutans were kept out of sight, apparently for fear that they would watch what security measures were being installed and figure out how to disarm them. An adult female named Kumang was not deterred and escaped several times, once by enlisting her daughter to use a wooden mop handle to ground the electric wires so she could safely climb out. As Hribal summarizes, Kumang and her daughter had “figured out the basic principles of electricity”.¹³

Animals used in the entertainment industry who resist their captivity often attract media attention, such as the famous magicians’ Siegfried and Roy’s white tiger, Mantacore. When Roy Horn commanded Mantacore to do a trick they had performed countless times, he refused. To correct him, Horn hit him on the head with his microphone to get him to obey. Instead, Mantacore took a swipe at Horn, who fell to the floor. Mantacore grabbed him by the neck and dragged him backstage. The magicians claimed that Mantacore actually saved Horn, who they said had suffered a stroke while onstage before the attack; Mantacore supposedly pulled Horn offstage to help him. As Kelly Oliver writes, “Roy’s accident reveals the illusionist’s most profound illusion: that he can master animals”.¹⁴ It took four people and a fire extinguisher to get Mantacore to release Horn, who was rushed to the hospital. He suffered a stroke during the attack and with massive blood loss and punctures to his carotid artery, he flatlined. He was eventually brought back to life, but his health and livelihood would never be regained.¹⁵

Orcas in marine parks have resisted their human trainers for decades. Court records show that SeaWorld has documented over one hundred instances of orcas resisting authority and being aggressive

12 Hribal, *Fear of the Animal Planet*, 116; cf. Linden, *Parrot’s Lament*, 146–48.

13 Hribal, *Fear of the Animal Planet*, 116.

14 Oliver, *Animal Lessons*, 1.

15 Leckart, *Wild Things*.

toward trainers in the space of twenty years. This number is certainly higher, as small nicks and aggressions are often not reported.¹⁶ Tilikum, the now well-known orca who violently killed his trainer and two other people, is an example of captive orca resistance that has been addressed by scholars. Several explanations were put forward to make sense of this violence, most of which did not attribute intentionality to the act. Some animal rights groups said that Tilikum was psychotic from decades in captivity, but Hribal writes that he was not crazy and that his resistance was intentional. Tilikum's decision to drown his trainer was a bold and purposeful act: "Call the orcas criminals. [...] But don't say they are victims who didn't understand what they were doing."¹⁷

Ron Broglio uses art, philosophy, and literature to help understand the stories of animals who escape death on the way to the slaughterhouse, animals who disrupt, jam, and ruin technology, as well as animals that simply inconvenience human plans in day-to-day life. For example, sheep in the United Kingdom cross over cattle grids to reach greener pastures by ingeniously rolling themselves over the grate; and a male chimpanzee in a zoo in Sweden planned his attacks by collecting and storing stones that he could later throw at zoo visitors.¹⁸ Broglio's research addresses animal revolution in philosophical terms while grounding his conceptions in corporeality, vulnerability, and animality. Notably, he broadens our understanding of how animal resistance takes countless forms.¹⁹

Sarat Colling's book *Animal Resistance in the Global Capitalist Era* documents more examples of individual animals who resisted confinement and torture in an effort to gain their freedom. One story is about Old Whitey, a steer who repeatedly broke out of his confinement at a large ranch and hid in the Diablo Mountains before finally being killed by the rancher.²⁰ His struggle for freedom highlights the

16 Hribal, "Tilikum".

17 Hribal, "Tilikum".

18 Broglio, "Incidents", 17, 26.

19 Broglio, "Incidents", 22.

20 Colling, *Animal Resistance*, 26.

depth of resistance experienced by animals in captivity. Colling argues that animals who escape their exploitation gain sympathy and empathy when humans see the animal not as a commodity but as an individual being with the desire to live. She argues that all animals are political and social beings and that their efforts to escape oppression are not extraordinary, but commonplace.²¹ Crucially, she encourages readers to listen to animals and see them as agents of their resistance, not dependent upon human “saviours”, and in this way, humans can move forward in solidarity with animals to oppose and fight for their freedom from exploitation and early death.

The Iberian orcas started their unusual activity in May of 2020, and the reported stories of these interactions share similarities. For example, in July, a crew reported that nine individual orcas were ramming the boat’s hull with their bodies, destroying the rudder, disabling the engine, and spinning the boat 180 degrees in the process. While one of the sailors radioed for emergency help, the crew prepared to abandon the ship as it floated rudderless for over an hour. The whales continued their assault and called to each other, their whistles so loud that the crew had to shout to each other in order to be heard.²²

Six days earlier, in the Strait, a pod of four orcas stopped another vessel. They rammed the boat, tipped it sideways, and turned it around for almost an hour before they stopped. The night before, there was another attack in the same waters. A fifty-foot private vessel went from travelling at eight knots to an abrupt standstill. Confused, the crew turned their lights on the surface of the dark water and realized it was a group of orcas who had stopped the boat and reversed its direction. Attempts to correct the vessel’s trajectory failed, as each time they put the ship back on course, the orcas would turn them back around. One of the passengers said it felt like the orcas were trying to lift the boat out of the water. Finally, just two hours before this attack, on a different boat in the Strait, a single sailor was relaxing and listening to music when he heard and

21 Colling, *Animal Resistance*, 86–89.

22 Smillie, “‘I’ve Never Seen’”.

felt something “like a sledgehammer” as the orcas hit and turned his boat 180 degrees with incredible force. The whales dislodged the autohelm and steering cables and lifted the vessel six inches out of the water.²³

The harassment continued, and in September 2020 the Spanish Coast Guard banned smaller boats due to the threat the orcas posed.²⁴ Further, in 2023, an orca rammed a yacht off the coast of Scotland, raising the idea that perhaps the behaviour was spreading.²⁵ As the orca-on-vessel violence persisted, *The New Yorker* noted in an article titled “The Year of the Orca” that it is difficult to ignore what many journalists and the public are concluding: These attacks appeared to be intentional.²⁶ In April 2024, these same orcas were spotted off the coast of northern Spain, a hundred miles from where they are normally found during this time of year, circling a boat. While not engaging with the vessel, these orcas are deviating from their habitual migration patterns, baffling scientists.²⁷ In the Facebook group “Orca Attack Reports”, which has over 75,000 members, sailors share tactics for sailing through “orca alley” and chronicle their attempts to stop orcas from harassing their vessels (firecrackers and banging on metal are among the methods employed). There are also apps to track orca sightings and interactions.²⁸

Whales have engaged violently with sea vessels in the past. A sperm whale sank a whaling boat in 1820, and after a rescue boat came to scoop up the crew, a killer whale attempted to sink that boat as well. Nathaniel Philbrick’s book *In the Heart of the Sea* recounts these attacks and writes that killer whales had been known to repeatedly ram and sink wooden yachts.²⁹ In 1972, a wooden sailboat carrying a British family that was circumnavigating the globe was damaged by a killer whale. The vessel sank and the family struggled to survive

23 Smillie, “I’ve Never Seen”.

24 Reuters, “Spanish Coastguard”.

25 Hoare and Joekendijk, “Orca Rams”.

26 Riederer, “Year of the Orca”.

27 Baker, “Infamous Boat Sinking Orca”.

28 “Orca Attack Reports”, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/435540734439160/>.

29 Philbrick, *Heart of the Sea*, Ch. 5 “The Attack”, Ch. 7 “At Sea”.

on a life raft, spending a total of thirty-eight days lost in the Pacific, before eventually being rescued by a Japanese fishing trawler. The ordeal was documented in the book *Survive the Savage Sea*.³⁰ These incidents, along with a handful of others like them, demonstrate that there is a precedent for such behaviour among orcas. None of these incidents, however, either historical or more recent, involve violence directed specifically at individual humans. There are no records of orcas killing a human in the wild.³¹

II. The Anthropause and Potential Behavioural Explanations

In 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, which led to unprecedented changes in how humans and non-humans alike conducted their lives. The world came to an abrupt halt in a globally coordinated effort to stop the spread of the virus. The pandemic afforded scientists, biologists, and ecologists an extremely unusual opportunity to study humanity's impact on the planet, as it has now been considered a "biocultural event" and led to reductions in fossil fuel consumption and noise pollution worldwide.³² A group of ecologists and biologists dubbed this event the "anthropause", defining the term as "an unusual, substantial, temporary, continental-to-global-scale reduction in human mobility".³³ The result of the drastic slowing of human activity led to short-term environmental improvement. At this point, I want to speculate that the anthropause influenced the Iberian orcas and is a potential factor in their new behaviours.

Studies of sound levels reveal the degree to which human activity affects the environment. One report found that the COVID-19 "quietus" led to as much as a 50 percent reduction in seismic noise. Humans create not only surface disturbances but also noise that "extends for many kilometers radially and hundreds of meters in depth".³⁴ One

30 Robertson, *Survive the Savage Sea*; cf. Hattenstone, "We Pledged."

31 Esteban et al., "Killer Whales of the Strait", 1700.

32 Searle et al., "After the Anthropause", 74; Manning et al., "Effect of COVID-19", 2.

33 Rutz, "Studying Pauses and Pulses", 158.

34 Lecocq et al., "Global Quietening", 1338.

study tracked global-scale seismic noise generated from cities, railways, and other forms of transportation and found that the “length and quiescence of this period [March to May 2020] represent the longest and most coherent global seismic noise reduction in recorded history, emphasizing how human activities affect the solid Earth”.³⁵ Some studies revealed that animals shifted how they communicated during the anthropause. With less noise pollution, birds lowered the volume of their singing and even the structure of their songs.³⁶

Anthropogenic noise poses a serious threat to marine populations. Worldwide, marine shipping accounts for 90 percent of international trade.³⁷ Over the past century, there have been substantial increases in marine shipping, a trend that is projected to continue. The low-frequency, high-energy noise from these vessels travels across hundreds of ocean kilometres and throughout entire ocean basins.³⁸ Orcas, whales, and dolphins depend on acoustics for navigation, hunting, reproduction, and communication. Over the past two decades, researchers have recognized that marine noise pollution is a major threat to cetacean well-being.³⁹ Adverse effects for orcas, other whales, and dolphins include: a reduction in communication range, disruption of reproductive behaviours, increased energy expenditure as animals travel further for food as noise prohibits access to important habitats, increased stress, temporary or permanent loss of hearing, physical injury inducement, and, in some cases, death.⁴⁰

Reports demonstrate that cetaceans are negatively affected by anthropogenic noise. Marine traffic in North America came to an abrupt halt for two days immediately after the events of September 11, 2001. In the Bay of Fundy in Canada, scientists studied North Atlantic right whales’ stress levels by testing the faecal glucocorticoid,

35 Lecocq et al., “Global Quieting”, 1342.

36 Derryberry et al., “Singing”.

37 UNCTAD, *Review of Maritime Transport*.

38 National Research Council, *Ocean Noise*, 6, 65–67, 89, 93, 128.

39 Dearden et al., “COVID-19”, 6–7.

40 Richardson et al., *Marine Mammals and Noise*; Parsons and Dolman, “Noise as a Problem”.

a non-invasive method for studying physiological responses of wild-life to stressors. Results showed that decreased marine noise during those two days lowered stress levels in the whales.⁴¹

A study involving endangered killer whales in the Salish Sea documented changes in behaviour when marine vessels voluntarily slowed their speed when travelling through a 16-nautical mile stretch. Results from the decrease in noise suggested that orcas had improved foraging experiences, potentially leading to an overall improvement in the population's health.⁴² A different study on the effects of naval sonar on free-ranging cetaceans, including pilot, sperm, and killer whales, found that orcas showed a combination of the highest severity scores and the widest distribution in received sound pressure levels, including many at received levels below 120 dB. The data indicated strong behavioural changes in orcas, including prolonged avoidance and cessation of foraging (with a severity rating of 7 out of 10, 10 being the most severe) and moderate avoidance of the sound source (severity rating of 6 out of 10). The study found that there were no experiments involving killer whales during which no response to the sonar was scored.⁴³ Anthropogenic noise is a concern for wildlife management and conservation, to such an extent that litigation related to the reduction and control of man-made noise has made it to the Supreme Court of the United States.⁴⁴

Studies illuminate the changes that took place in the waters around the Iberian Peninsula starting in March of 2020, when the lockdowns were most extreme. The Western Mediterranean's Strait of Gibraltar, along with the Panama Canal, the Bosphorus Strait, and the Strait of Dover, is one of several marine choke points where heavy traffic from cargo ships, tankers, fishing vessels, cruise ships, and pleasure vessels pass. The Western Mediterranean was the area with the most drastic reduction in marine activity during the first months of the pandemic; the number of tankers was reduced by 22.2 percent

41 Stevens et al., "Quieter Ocean", 2.

42 Joy et al., "Potential Benefits," 17.

43 Miller et al., "Severity of Behavioral Changes," 386–88.

44 Stevens et al., "Quieter Ocean", 2.

and recreational vessels showed a significant decline of 93.7 percent. Overall, there was a 62.2 percent decrease in traffic across all marine vehicles in the area during mid-April. However, fishing, cargo, and tanker vessels made a swift recovery after the lockdown conditions were lifted. While passenger vessels, such as cruise ships, remained the most affected, and their numbers were slow to recover despite the ease of lockdown conditions, recreational also boats exhibited a fast recovery, restarting their activities in mid-July.⁴⁵

The Iberian orcas are an endangered group comprising only around thirty-nine individuals.⁴⁶ The organization Grupo Trabajo Orca Atlántica (GTOA), who have been studying the Iberian killer whales for years, concluded that, within the group, there are fourteen orcas engaged in these interactions and are collectively known as “Gladis”, with distinguishing second names. Gladis was chosen because it references one of the animals’ first vernacular labels, *Orca gladiator*.⁴⁷ The genus name *Orcinus* refers to Orcus, the Roman god of the underworld. Orcinus has been interpreted as “of or belonging to the kingdom of the dead” or simply, “from hell”. Both terms reflect humanity’s historical fascination with — and fear of — the animals’ strong and threatening presence.⁴⁸

Two main scientific hypotheses have been proposed to explain the orcas’ behaviour. The first theorizes that these incidents reflect a form of self-induced curiosity or play. The orcas, it is thought, are fascinated by moving vessels that can be turned or stopped with contact. This theory works well to explain the juvenile orcas’ behaviour.⁴⁹ Previous examples of what has been categorized as playful behaviour, are often raised when exploring this theory. For example, in 1987, a female orca in a pod off the Northwest coast of the United States was seen carrying a dead salmon on her head. Others soon copied her and suddenly salmon “hats” were in fashion. The

45 March et al., “Tracking the Global Reduction”, 3–4.

46 Esteban et al., “Killer Whales of the Strait”, 1700.

47 López and Esteban, “Development of a Scientific Study”, 14.

48 Ford et al., *Killer Whales*, 69.

49 López and Esteban, “Development of a Scientific Study”, 44.

behaviour eventually went out of style.⁵⁰ When the orcas in the Strait began nudging and ramming yachts and sailboats, many in the scientific community classified the behaviour in a similar way: A type of play that was catching on with others.

The second hypothesis is that there could have been an adverse incident of anthropogenic origin, where one of the orcas was injured, or they witnessed others from their group being injured, which in turn triggered the behaviour.⁵¹ Of the fourteen, Gladis Blanca — one of the most active orcas in the group — was thought to fit well with this hypothesis as she, along with Gladis Negra, was recorded with bodily wounds in 2020, although the origins of the injuries were not confirmed.⁵² Several whales have suffered lacerations and even amputations as a result of interacting and competing with fishermen who hunt tuna in the same waters.⁵³ As scientists have noted, killer whales employ two strategies for feeding on tuna: active hunting and depredation from longline fisheries.⁵⁴ The orcas scan the waters for fishing boats that have tuna caught on a line and try to pull the tuna off the line before they are reeled to the surface by the fisherman.⁵⁵ This poses a threat to the orcas, who can and have been injured by the boats as well as the lines.

Conclusions by the scientific group GTOA point to the behaviour of the orcas as “cautionary”, meaning that the orcas stop the boats in a precautionary manner to prevent future harm from occurring.⁵⁶ Compelling evidence that supports the hypothesis, they argue, is the story of Gladis Blanca, an adult female who is estimated to be around twenty years old. In Galicia in 2015, she was seen interacting with fishermen and sailboats, without making contact. Yet since 2020, she has been observed as one of the most active orcas engaging with vessels in the region. In 2021, she had a calf, and scientists

50 McKnight and Ross, “Malice, Mischief or Fad?”

51 López and Esteban, “Development of a Scientific Study”, 45.

52 López and Esteban, “Development of a Scientific Study”, 15.

53 Esteban et al., “Killer Whales of the Strait”, 1700.

54 Guinet, et al., “Killer Whale Predation”, 111.

55 Esteban et al., “Dynamics of Killer Whales”, 31.

56 López and Esteban, “Development of a Scientific Study”, 45.

believed that she would stop interacting with boats to reduce the risk of injury. Instead, she continued to go under the boats, accompanied by her offspring. There is extrinsic motivation for this type of action and the goal is to prevent further harm. As biologist Alfredo López notes, “What moves her to do that is stronger than motherhood for her, it is not a game at all, it is something very serious that she executes with precision”.⁵⁷

Some in the media have latched on to the theory of responsive behaviour, going as far as calling it revenge, which makes for a compelling narrative. Ultimately, however, scientific reports find that the orcas behaviour is not aggressive. “We analyzed terminologically the terms attack and aggression, it has not been possible to relate the interactions between orcas and boats with this terminology [...] We have found no reason to classify the events as: aggressiveness, anger, hostility or violence.”⁵⁸ One reason for this is possibly because scientists fear any language that implies that the orcas are a threat to humans and capital interests would trigger retaliation. They are concerned to such an extent that, in the fall of 2023, a group of thirty marine scientists published an open letter urging the media not to call the behaviour “attacks”, despite the patterns that can appear to contradict that premise.⁵⁹

The COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns provided nonhuman animals with a taste of what life could be like with minimal human-generated disturbances. It was arguably the quietest period experienced in marine environments since the start of the Industrial Revolution. Over the course of decades, anthropogenic noise from shipping, recreation, and fishing vessels increased incrementally in the waters around the Iberian Peninsula. During the lockdown, the abrupt decrease in traffic in these waters, the reduction in human noise pollution, and the improvement in air and water quality were likely detected by the orcas; they could perceive the differences between the before, during, and post-lockdown periods. There are several

57 López, email correspondence, August 28, 2024.

58 López and Esteban, “Development of a Scientific Study”, 11.

59 Barrett-Lennard, “Open Letter Regarding Killer Whales”.

reasons why the orcas would be motivated to resist human presence in their waters. Habitat loss, competition for food, and the physical risks in their environment—such as dangers posed by fishing lines and boat motors—make their survival precarious. The return of humans to orca territory post-lockdown was a jarring contrast to the “quietus” that marine life had been experiencing. The shift back to the pre-COVID state meant that the habituation time, where animals become used to a disturbance over a longer period, was dramatically shortened and the return of potentially threatening anthropogenic noise levels was abrupt. The influence that the anthropause had on the orcas’ behaviour deserves further investigation. According to a recent report from the International Whaling Commission, this possibility is being scientifically studied and reports are forthcoming.⁶⁰

III. *Mêtis* and Orca Resistance

The fact that orcas are disrupting boats and marine traffic is indisputable. Occam’s razor would suggest that the simplest and therefore most likely explanation is that their goal is to stop the boats from moving. While orcas could cause damage in several ways, they primarily choose to go after the rudder, the crucial piece of equipment that allows the vessel to sail. The narrative that says the orcas are not purposeful in their actions dismisses the bravery and tactical precision that certain members are undertaking. They are attempting (and often succeeding) to steer the boats off course or make them inoperable.

I agree with the perspective that Gladis Blanca and others are working with precision to prevent further harm, and I also agree that the behaviour is a type of play, but not in the sense that some scientists are suggesting. Instead, I propose that the orcas’ actions can be understood in terms of the ancient Greek concept of *mêtis* [μητις], which refers to cunning intelligence, used to outwit opponents by using a combination of savvy, skill, and subterfuge.⁶¹ *Mêtis* is a creative practice of crafty resourcefulness that is used in uncertain times

60 “Interactions”, 15.

61 Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity*, 77.

against adversaries that have the upper hand. *Mêtis* is wily; some might even refer to it as cheating or unfair play. It is a weapon or strategy employed by those in a weaker position.

In their work, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant outline several key characteristics of *mêtis*. First, *mêtis* gives the underdog an advantage: “In some cases, it will be considered the result of cheating since the rules of the game have been disregarded. In others, the more surprise it provokes the greater the admiration it will arouse, the weaker party having, against every expectation, found within himself resources capable of putting the stronger at his mercy”.⁶² This is not an ideal way to compete if one is a devotee of good sportsmanship and fair play, but if winning is the ultimate goal, then *mêtis* is a boon for the weaker opponent.

Mêtis appears in *The Iliad* with the story of a young charioteer, Antilochus. Although his horses are inferior and he stands no chance of succeeding, Antilochus uses *mêtis* to gain an advantage and win. A characteristic of *mêtis* includes skilful timing and meticulous observation to pounce at the precise moment.⁶³ As such, Antilochus sees an opportunity in one muddy section of the course that has narrowed after a rainstorm; here, he drives his chariot obliquely in front of his more experienced competitor, risking a crash. This manoeuvre looks like an accident to his opponent, who — although he has the advantage of superior horses — is forced to rein them in to avoid disaster. Additionally, there is an element of deceit in *mêtis*. Antilochus comes across as inexperienced and foolish; his rivals believe that the dangerous manoeuvre is the result of carelessness and a lack of control. He appears to be something he is not in order to fool his opponents, whose superior age, experience, and horses should have given them a clear advantage.⁶⁴

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, French philosopher Michel de Certeau discusses the concept of *mêtis* as a dynamic opportunity for the

62 Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, 13

63 Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, 12–14.

64 Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, 22.

weak to utilize tactics against the strong. He investigates the ways that those who appear to be passive and compliant with the rules operate in everyday life. This extends to the “age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise or transform themselves in order to survive, which has [...] been concealed by the form of rationality currently dominant in Western Culture”.⁶⁵ Certeau draws our attention to the tactical manipulation of everyday practices that can transform what is happening just under the surface.

As a means for the disempowered to shift unequal power relationships, *mêtis* can be adapted to describe orca behaviours. Using this framework, we can theorize how the orcas are creating a secondary production of the “image” that assumes their actions are unintentional. Certeau encourages paying attention to the images produced — not by the creators of the images — but by those who orchestrated a secondary reading, a “production hidden in the process of utilization”.⁶⁶ He likens this to a way for the weaker of the two parties to turn the tables on the more powerful. In this way, orca ‘play’ deceives some observers into believing that these are trivial antics, but they are far from mindless or unsophisticated and are just as legitimate as overt political rebellion.

Certeau further clarifies two methods for achieving goals: tactics and strategies. Strategies are available to those who are automatically assumed to possess subjectivity. Strategies are for those with a sense of power and autonomy, such as a proprietor, a city, or an enterprise.⁶⁷ Tactics, on the other hand, are used by the underdog — those without autonomy or access to strategy. A tactic is the stealthy, inventive, and creative approach for those without automatic subjectivity; tactics are for the “other”.⁶⁸ The general practices that Certeau describes as tactics are *mêtis*. They provide ways for the weak to achieve victory over stronger opponents, allowing the disadvantaged to take advantage by using “clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things”. It

65 Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xi.

66 Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xiii.

67 Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xix.

68 Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xvii–xx.

is “poetic as well as warlike,” suggesting that these tactics are evidenced in other texts; Certeau points to Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* and *Le Livre des Ruses: La Stratégie politique des Arabes* as examples.⁶⁹

Assessing media coverage about animals who resist, it is clear that it is uncommon to categorize animal acts of resistance as intentional. As Certeau notes, one of the characteristics of *mêtis* is that it does not rely on rationality, going against predominant Western thought when it comes to animals. It is not rational to attribute intentionality to animal actions; animals are considered to be instinctual and thus incapable of premeditation and agency. Research that describes nonhuman animals—even our closest nonhuman relatives, primates—as capable of what we think of as revolt is difficult to find. Due to humanity’s reluctance to recognize the possibility of revolt outside of its own proper experience and framework, it can be useful to turn to other theories of resistance in marine animals.

In his article “Do Fish Resist?” Dinesh Wadiwel looks at industrial fish farming, also known as aquaculture, and resistance. As Wadiwel incisively writes, the fact that humans must invent strategies and engineer technologies to counter the problems that arise when humans try to catch fish is proof in itself that these animals resist. He argues that the difficulties fish pose to humans attempting to harness them proves their ability to oppose their exploitation. While the term “harvest” is often used by the industry, it is misleading as it implies that fish are ready and waiting to be used by humans. The truth is that the industry had to develop new technology in order to manipulate the fish, such as the use of lights in pens to influence behaviour and measures to control metabolism in order to reduce aggression, countering the fight that fish mount against their own torture and eventual death. As he puts it, “these technologies [...] have been formed against the creative resistance of fish.”⁷⁰

Fahim Amir echoes these logics and provides an example of pigeon resistance in urban settings. The development of strategies

69 Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xix.

70 Wadiwel, “Do Fish Resist?” 202, 219–220.

to counter pigeon agency is evident in the metal prongs and cut glass attached to ledges on buildings in cities. These inventions exist because of a power struggle; Amir sees such developments in city planning as a result of the conflict between pigeons and the humans who want them to go away.⁷¹ Adopting Wadiwel and Amir's framework, we may regard the fact that humans are developing strategies to manage the difficulties posed by the orcas as an indication of resistance. Sailors are firing flare guns, pouring diesel into the water, releasing sewage, and blasting heavy metal music to dissuade orcas from damaging their boats and hindering their movement.⁷² The proof of their agency lies in the fact that humans are working to mitigate the inconveniences, loss of property, loss of income, and other threats posed by the orcas as they confront the human presence in their waters. In addition, scientific groups are working to find solutions to manage the threat the orcas present. All of this supports the view that the orcas' behaviours count as resistance.⁷³

Wadiwel draws on Michel Foucault, who questioned how we understand knowledge, how the 'truth' conditions what is possible, and how that, in turn, determines relationships of power. Foucault allows us to see that resistance can be understood as engaging agentially without having to demonstrate a certain cognitive capacity, which supports the view that fish can resist even though their intelligence (as well as their sentience) remains a scientific question mark.⁷⁴ While there is evidence that orcas, like other cetaceans, are highly intelligent in ways that humans tend to frame and value intelligence (i.e., they share common cognitive capacities with humans), expecting that an animal must possess an arbitrary set of cognitive skills that are common in humans in order to be seen as capable of resisting human oppression is a slippery slope. While the requirement might make it easier to argue that the elephant, orca, and chimpanzee can resist and revolt, it leaves out the vast majority of

71 Amir, *Being and Swine*, 37.

72 López and Esteban, "Development of a Scientific Study", 38–39.

73 "Interactions"; López and Esteban, "Development of a Scientific Study", 5.5.2 "Security Protocol Development".

74 Wadiwel, "Do Fish Resist?" 203.

the animal kingdom, ignoring the possibility that even the tiniest of creatures are able to resist humanity's attempts to control, exploit, or eliminate them.

In his article “‘When They Fight Back’: A Cinematic Archive of Animal Resistance and World Wars”, Geoffrey Whitehall writes that there is enough proof in animals' actions to merit recognition that they are resisting and rebelling, and that it should not require further context. Hand-picking flashy examples of resistance, such as the killer whales who have turned against their trainers in marine parks, is unjust to animals. There are countless rebellious actions undertaken day in, day out, year after year, by millions, if not billions of animals, both wild and tame, that resist human sovereignty and oppression.⁷⁵ The fact that news articles focus on more spectacular incidents undermines the ongoing state of nonhuman resistance to human domination.

Resistance can take many shapes and yet can instigate change and exact consequences. Although the orcas of the Iberian Peninsula are not captives, like the orcas working for SeaWorld, they are nevertheless subject to the powers of human capitalistic enterprises. The enormous size and technical capabilities of container ships, fishing vessels, and cruise ships not only impose restraints on orca mobility and threaten their wellbeing, it also limits the scope of their response to humans intruding in their territory. As Certeau reminds us, these tactics— as opposed to strategies— are the choice for those who face devastating retaliation if they are more openly defiant. Orcas are primarily attacking smaller vessels and avoiding larger boats and commercial enterprises; scientists theorize that the rudders on the smaller boats are a more attractive object. It denies that the orcas have any notion of what they are doing, failing to entertain the idea that they are not engaging with commercial vessels because it is riskier, so they choose only those vessels where they are less likely to become victims of retaliation or incur injury. They are choosing to approach boats that pose fewer risks. This is not a coincidence. It is a calculated choice.

75 Whitehall, “When They Fight Back,” 283–85.

Detractors who argue against the notion that animals can revolt often raise the issue of intent. However, when looking at the rebellious activities performed by human populations in precarious situations, as in the case of enslaved people and peasants, it is practically impossible to obtain evidence that proves the intent behind these acts.⁷⁶ When it comes to defining the parameters of what counts when it comes to animal revolt, it is vital to note that the same structure of domination also defines and reinforces these rubrics. Intent is a state of mind, and positing it as a requirement to prove that an action was meant as rebellion is onerous, not only for humans but certainly also for nonhuman animals.⁷⁷ It is an anthropocentric hurdle put in place to dismiss the notion that animal violence qualifies as revolt, and it is misguided. The question should not be, “what are the intentions of these animals when they resist, and what is their goal?” But rather, “what is the institution of their repression?” This is an indicator of what types of resistance are available. Provided that the institutions are doing their job, it follows that forms of resistance may be extremely limited, leaving the informal or subversive as the only option.⁷⁸

Political scientist Aylon A. Cohen proposes that analysing modes of political exclusion is a pragmatic approach to understanding animal resistance or revolt. They argue that animals, by the act of resisting and creating conflict, automatically insert themselves into the realm of politics as subjects with agency, regardless of whether the actors acknowledge or speak of this conflict.⁷⁹ Put differently, animals should not be excluded from the political sphere and burdened by a requirement to provide human-designated proof of intent. Critical interpretation and evaluation points to the fact that nonhuman animals express agency and purpose in moments of insubordination and violence. Their corporeal communication implicitly implies intent.

Within posthumanist and new materialist paradigms, there is growing recognition of the significance of corporeality, or “the role played

76 Scott, *Weapons*, 290.

77 McGary and Lawson, *Between Slavery and Freedom*, 46.

78 Scott, *Weapons*, 299.

79 Cohen, “From Mute Objects,” 250.

by the body as a visceral protagonist within political encounters”, as Diane H. Coole and Samantha Frost write.⁸⁰ When animals resist with their bodies, it is a non-linguistic speech act that, like all speech acts, requires interpretation.⁸¹ As James Scott observes, purpose and motive are “inscribed in the acts themselves”.⁸² If there is a pattern of resistance and it continues in any form, it indicates intent. Ignoring commands, feigning ignorance, slowing down, making vocal complaints, breaking equipment, refusing to move, and engaging in confrontation by violently ramming sailboats all demonstrate the intent to disobey authority, to resist, and to revolt.⁸³ What the orcas are doing is resistance; it is purposeful and intentional.

Both Homer’s *mêtis* and the tactics described by Certeau help contextualize orca behaviour. Approaching unannounced, disabling a crucial piece of equipment, and, even when the vessel sinks, not harming human life—these are the sly, cunning, and effective forms of rebellion that mitigate the potential for dangerous retaliation from humans. Though they are endangered, the fourteen orcas opposing human presence in their waters are captivating the attention of millions around the world. The orcas’ resistance to humans intruding into their territory continues to make headlines and will be the subject of study for years to come.

Conclusion

Animals have always resisted human authority. It is, as some have argued, the norm and not the exception.⁸⁴ It goes largely unrecognized because of embedded anthropocentric systems that prioritize human worth, dominion, and self-defined human intelligence above all else. Animals who defy human sovereignty are discounted so that we can continue the unmitigated violence against them.⁸⁵

80 Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 19.

81 Cohen, “From Mute Objects”, 251–252.

82 Scott, *Weapons*, 301.

83 Best, “Animal Agency”.

84 Whitehall, “When They Fight Back,” 283.

85 Colling, *Animal Resistance*, 58; cf. Wadiwel, “Do Fish Resist?” and Hribal, *Fear of the Animal Planet*.

This paper has argued that the timing of these attacks, which began soon after the COVID-19 lockdowns were lifted, raises questions about the sensitivity of wildlife to human activity. I argued that the anthropause is a factor in the start of these behaviours, as anthropogenic noise poses a serious threat to cetacean wellbeing, and the orcas around the Strait of Gibraltar likely noticed the abrupt return to pre-COVID sound levels.

What some scientists are calling orca “play” is not without purpose. Orcas such as Gladis Blanca are going after vessels, using precise and savvy tactics to disrupt commerce, inconvenience sailors, and damage property. I proposed that it is a type of play: a cunning and intentional tactic to subvert human authority. The orcas are practicing creative resistance by engaging with *mêtis*. This aligns with the findings of researchers, such as the GTOA, who have argued that the behaviours were motivated by an incident of anthropogenic origin. In the view that I have advanced, orcas are opposing the foreign presence in their waters in a calculated and serious manner without incurring lethal retaliation. The Iberian orcas are shifting power relations by turning the tables on humans who tread in their waters.

The proposition that the orcas are engaging in this behaviour with intention and that they are working with precision to stop boats from going through their territory raises crucial issues. If orcas are doing this to stop human intrusion, it would require reflection on our part—a moment of accounting. We would need to consider that, in order to get this behaviour to stop, we might have to take our boats out of the water. Our species is typically unwilling to make a sacrifice so large for the sake of another species. To credit the scientists’ concern, history has shown that humans are more likely to destroy animals than change their behaviour.⁸⁶

As human-centred narratives are challenged, acts of animal resistance and revolt will become more obvious. With this shift, the discourse on moral obligation toward nonhuman others will take on a

86 Humane Society International, “Human–Wildlife Coexistence”, <https://www.hsi.org/issues/human-wildlife-conflict/>.

sense of urgency, and a more co-habitable future will become feasible. In the current challenges we face, it becomes clear that we humans have a decision ahead of us. What may be required of humanity in this age of increasing clashing needs and limited resources is what French philosopher Michel Serres calls “cosmic humility”.⁸⁷ The orcas are taking action to help rouse humanity from its stupor. They are demanding that we pay attention.

87 Serres, “Natural Contract”, 12.

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