Should we be talking to the Chimpanzees?
Rob La Frenais

At the end of Frans de Waal’s classic popular science book Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes, two chimpanzees who had competed for the position of alpha male were shown a documentary film about their social grouping The Family of Chimps.

In this anecdote, the previous alpha male, Nikki, appeared in the film even though he had drowned in the zoo moat during a battle. The new alpha, Dandy ran screaming in to the arms of his old rival Yeroen at the apparent resurrection of the old deceased alpha in the film.

Rachel Mayeri’s Primate Cinema: Apes as Family, made partly at the Budongo Trail at Edinburgh Zoo, tries to get inside the heads of chimpanzees and discovers as much about humans as our closest relatives. Rather than trying to transpose human behaviour and ape behaviour in the way that Will Self’s illuminating novel Great Apes does, she attempts a different stimuli on a similar group of chimpanzees as studied by Frans de Waal at Arnhem Zoo in Germany. Before I discuss what Mayeri did at Budongo I will attempt to give a brief background on what seems to be happening in zoos and primatology as an interested outsider.

Elizabeth Hess’ book Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp who Would be Human later to become the movie Project Nim gives us a rare insight into the history of language studies and primatology. Ever since Roger Fouts’ development in teaching ASL (American Sign Language) to the chimpanzee Washoe, behavioural scientists have become split between two points of view. That of B. F. Skinner who maintained that language could be acquired by humans and non-humans alike and that of Noam Chomsky who argued that language had evolved in humans exclusively.

The paradox shown in the book and movie was when human-reared chimps were taken out of the often unconventional and non-scientific home backgrounds they found themselves in. It was still uncertain whether it could be proved scientifically that human-style language had emerged. Moreover, when these chimps reached maturity they became unmanageable, so found themselves as strangers in a strange land among socialised chimps in language research facilities, or worse still medical research labs or zoos.
It is remarkable how recently in history zoologists and zoo keepers have learnt that it is cruel to keep social animals, such as chimpanzees, in captivity with apes. More influence came from observations such as those by Goodall and Nishida and others observing chimps in the wild which brought about this revolution in zoo keeping, including observation of ‘fission-fusion’ where large groups of chimps split up in to travelling parties through the forest. Equally important were the chimp studies in captivity done by Gordon Gallup, in the ‘mirror test’ using a red dot placed in the forehead of a sleeping animal (acclimatised to see its own image in mirrors and to rub the mark off on awakening) which indicates self-recognition among these four species and places them in common with the often-unrecognised fifth great ape species, the human primate. The great apes have social, familial, and cognitive lives which are remarkably flexible, cultural and complex.

Goodall’s observations in the wild also went some way to resolve the paradox about ASL-trained chimps. Of course early language researchers regarded the juvenile chimp brains as a blank canvas. Goodall showed (and demonstrated this by dramatically pant-hooting at primatology congresses!) that chimp brains develop their own specific language structures. By trying to teach chimps human-based language structure in ignorance of chimp communication patterns they were essentially scrambling the chimp’s brains.

Morris was of course vilified in some quarters for enthusiastically applying evolutionary biology to human sexual politics and it could also perhaps be true that the new field of ‘ethology’ started with Konrad Lorenz in the 50’s and coming into vogue in the 60’s and 70’s with The Naked Ape by Desmond Morris, famous for his popular blockbuster science book. The Naked Ape ran Regents Park Zoo in the 60’s he was a pioneer in correcting the worst excesses of zoo practice. He began to integrate the findings of figures such as Jane Goodall into contemporary animal management for ‘higher’ or ‘great’ apes. Goodall showed (and demonstrated this by dramatically pant-hooting at primatology congresses!) that chimps develop their own specific language structures. By trying to teach chimps human-based language structure in ignorance of chimp communication patterns they were essentially scrambling the chimp’s brains.

Why do we give special consideration to chimpanzees, bonobos, orang-utans and gorillas? One reason is simply their size, the primates’ and today organisations such as the Great-Ape Trust campaign for the stewardship from a team of committed carers before hiring them, an example of adopting successful interspecies communication. In contrast to these approaches the primatologist Goodall closely observes social groups of chimps in the wild while creating minimal disturbance. Although in the early days at Gombe Research Station it was admitted they made mistakes, such as feeding them bananas, disrupting foraging patterns, playing or even physically holding chimps in the wild. This trust between chimpanzee’s and human’s has been proved fatal with the upsurge in poaching and the bushmeat trade. Where there are poachers, there are rich people prepared to pay for young chimps who are often forcibly taken from their mothers and sold as pets. As trainers of chimp actors know (part of the tragedy with Project Nim) cuddly juvenile chimps in the wild which brought about this revolution in zoo keeping, including observation of ‘fission-fusion’ where large groups of chimps split up in to travelling parties through the forest. Equally important were the chimp studies in captivity done by Gordon Gallup, in the ‘mirror test’ using a red dot placed in the forehead of a sleeping animal (acclimatised to see its own image in mirrors and to rub the mark off on awakening) which indicates self-recognition among these four species and places them in common with the often-unrecognised fifth great ape species, the human primate. The great apes have social, familial, and cognitive lives which are remarkably flexible, cultural and complex.

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Early experiments of teaching sign language to chimps have been documented like Nim Chimpsky, Washoe, Teco taught by Susan Savage-Rumbaugh, and more recently Kanzi the bonobo. Koko the gorilla a resident at The Gorilla Foundation1 interviewed her human carers before hiring them, an example of adopting successful interspecies communication. In contrast to these approaches the primatologist Goodall closely observes social groups of chimps in the wild while creating minimal disturbance. Although in the early days at Gombe Research Station it was admitted they made mistakes, such as feeding them bananas, disrupting foraging patterns, playing or even physically holding chimps in the wild. This trust between chimpanzee’s and human’s has been proved fatal with the upsurge in poaching and the bushmeat trade. Where there are poachers, there are rich people prepared to pay for young chimps who are often forcibly taken from their mothers and sold as pets. As trainers of chimp actors know (part of the tragedy with Project Nim) cuddly juvenile chimps grow into dangerous, strong and often violent adolescents before becoming even more dangerous adults.

Language researchers now realize these problems and allow for them in the development of their chimps in using the knowledge gained in observations in the wild to create a safe environment for their animals, many of whom, including Kanzi have been bred in captivity. They see the ability to allow bonobos and gorillas to apparently ‘tell their own story’ as vital in campaigning against poaching and destruction of natural habitats in Africa and elsewhere. These animals can never return to the wild but perhaps can help their cousins still out there by somehow becoming ambassadors to the human primates. But at what cost?

In a sense, by creating multi-generational human language-trained chimps like Teco, seen in one youtube video playing with his father, Kanzi in a disconcertingly human way. Humans have backed themselves even further into an anthropogenic world where human intervention into the lives of other species is preparable. There is also an entry point here into the politics of liberation, where the human carers become allied with their non-human primate charges although this is interestingly misaligned with the politics of animal liberation, as illustrated in Sarah Gruen’s primatology thriller Ape House: A Novel.

What about zoos? One reason we were very happy to have our research and filming project accepted by Edinburgh Zoo’s Budongo Field was that this was clearly a state of the art facility allowing chimps to live socially, with extensive indoor and outdoor enclosures and wildlife material replicated. Perhaps not as idyllic as the chimpanzee island studied by de Waal, but still with trees, nests, swings and private areas to accommodate a mature group of 10 chimps. Furthermore, Budongo feeds resources to and has a staff exchange programme with its partner in Africa. It can be said that through its chimpanzees, who have accrued from a historic collection can never be returned to the wild but they receive excellent stewardship from a team of committed keepers and zoo managers.

In Edinburgh cognitive non-invasive research takes place with chimpanzees with the help and co-operation of the keepers and zoo managers. The chimps are allowed to pass freely in and out of the research pods and are not forced to partake in any evolutionary experiments although they are sometimes rewarded with food treats. Also, while there are many areas of the public, they always have access to private, off-display spaces. That said, they can of course never actually leave.

This essential truth, along with the need to make money through public admissions and by definition public voyeurism always make zoos very conflicted spaces. Symbolically they represent a blind alley along which we humans are trapped in our relationship with animals. The writer John Berger talks of the ‘loneliness of man as a species’ and the gulf of incomprehension as we look into the eyes of animals. Other contemporary philosophers have followed with the much quoted Jacques Derrida finding himself, naked, before his cat, in The Animal That Therefore I Am.

His agonised musings on the interspecies gap begins like this:

“Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us? What animal? The other.”

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These discussions have continued in art theory books like Steve Baker’s *The Postmodern Animal* and in exhibitions such as “The Animal Gaze” featuring work about relations with domestic animals such as that of the Scottish artist Andrea Roe.

In Edinburgh Rachel Mayeri, in Cinema for Primates, Apes as Family has worked very closely with the inhabitants of Budongo, both human and non-human to produce a work which, in a sense undermines this loneliness referred to by both Berger and Derrida. By using three layers of primates ranging from real chimps in the zoo through to a Melke chimp “unit” (played by a human actor in an animatronic costume controlled by two puppeteers) to humans ‘acting as animals’, then feeding the results back to the (conscientious) chimps in the zoo she has opened up, rather than closed, the essential dilemmas of species interaction.

Rachel Mayeri, in her previous work Primative Cinema: Baboons as Friends refers to parallels with humans and baboons, reflecting the pioneering work of primatologist Barbara Smuts, who discovered in her fieldwork that she could not observe the baboons un-ignored, as if she was a rock, an event well described by Donna Haraway in *When Species Meet*.

“Smuts recognised that the baboons were unimpressed by her rock act. They frequently looked at her, and the more she ignored their looks, the less satisfied they seemed. Progress in what scientists call ‘habitation’ of the animals to the human being’s would be non-presence was painfully slow. It seemed like the only criterion to whom the supposedly neutral scientist was invisible was herself.”

In a key scene in Rachel Mayeri’s film, a highly convincing chimp-played by a human is in the bedroom, calmly watching soporific wildlife movies; TV zapper in hand, with a photo of a chimp-human family, the artist as one of the parents. Next to the photo is a dog-eared copy of Donna Haraway’s seminal *Primate Visions: Gender Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, a highly influential feminist view of primatology and primatologists. I will give the prolific Haraway the last word here in her critique of *Primate Societies* by Barbara Smuts et al

By Donna Haraway in *When Species Meet*.

“Children, all computer programmes and non-human nature: All are embodied, almost minds. Who or what has ‘fully human status’? As if the answer were self-evident, the adult human scientists who wrote (the chapter) ‘Future of Primate Research’ did not ask that question. And yet, primatology has persistently been about just what fully human status will be allowed to mean. The authors quietly acknowledged the maturations of the ‘almost minds’ that they signalled: adult to child, human to nonhuman primate, scientist to machine artificial intelligence. What is the end or telos, of this discourse on approximation, reproduction, and communication, in which the boundaries among and within machines, animals and humans are exceedingly porous? What will this evolutionary, developmental and historical communicative commerce take us in the technio-bio-politics of our time?”

Perhaps Mayeri’s ‘Cinema For Primates – Apes as Family’ attempts to point the way.

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