Rachel Mayeri, still from
Primate Cinema: Apes as Family.

Should we be talking to the Chimpanzees?

Rob La Frenais

A provocation to accompany Primate Cinema: Apes as Family

At the end of Frans de Waal's classic popular science book *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes*[1] 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*[2] 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 Budungo 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*[3] (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 owners have realized that it is cruel to keep social animals, such as chimpanzees, singly or in small groups. If you look closely at a zoo's history you can see that the animals there come from a complex series of backgrounds, ranging from individuals bred in zoos to those rescued from poachers, retired circus chimps, and (in one case at Budongo) ships' mascots. When Desmond Morris, famous for his popular blockbuster science book *The Naked Ape*[4] 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's observations in the wild also went some way to resolve the paradox about ASL-trained chimps. Of course the 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 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.

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' starting with Konrad Lorenz in the 50's and coming into vogue in the 60's and 70's with *The Naked Ape* can be criticised for trying to explain all of human behaviour and in terms of animal behaviour. Perhaps primatologists are understandably guilty of seeing all of life through the lens of their intense observations of animals in the wild and their total immersion into the minutae of the lives of the 'higher' apes.

But the first efforts of the primate language researchers, such as Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, took things further, bringing into being a new notion of human-type rights for 'higher primates' and today organisations such at the *Great Ape Trust*[5] campaign for these. Self's 1997 primatology satire *Great Apes*, in which Guardian-reading chimpanzees decry the plight of captive humans, brought this new movement into sharp focus.

Why do we give special consideration to chimpanzees, bonobos, orang-utans and gorillas? One reason is simply their size, hence 'great' 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 on the forehead of a sleeping animal (acclimatised to seeing its own image in mirrors and tries 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.

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 Foundation[6] interviews 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 minimum disturbance. Although in the early days at Gombé 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 taken forcibly 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 irreparable. 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*[7].

What about zoos? One reason we were very happy to have our research and filming project accepted by Edinburgh Zoo's Budongo trail 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 although 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.

Nim Chimsky and Laura signing.
Image courtesy of © Susan Kuklin.

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 take part in psychological experiments although they are sometimes rewarded with food treats. Also, while there are many areas where they are on display to 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 historic 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*[8]. 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."

"I often ask myself, just to see, who I am – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, they eyes of a cat. I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment."

Derrida concludes after some lengthy discourse about what the cat is not doing:

"…it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will ever have ever given me more food for thinking through this absolute alterity of the neighbour or of the next-door than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of a cat."

These discussions have continued in art theory books like Steve Baker's *The Postmodern Animal* [9] 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 underlines 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 lifelike 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 (consenting) chimps in the zoo she has opened up, rather than closed, the essential dilemmas of species interaction.

Rachel Mayeri, in her previous work *Primate 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* [10]:

"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 'habituation' of the animals to the human being's would-be non-presence was painfully slow. It seemed like the only critter to whom the supposedly neutral scientist was invisible was herself."

Cinematic Cat by Andrea Roe
Model cat, Maltesers box,
fibre optics, power supply.
© Andrea Roe 2005

This affected Mayeri's approach in her new project but created new dilemmas:

"People have asked me – why did you try to communicate through cinema, instead of theatre? Or, did you want to (or get to) touch or hold the chimps? I guess I wanted to resist the desire to have a personal, physical relationship with the chimps. I admit to having the urge to reach across species, to make friends with chimpanzees, but I don't entirely trust it. I think about the thousands of zoo visitors who press themselves against the glass of the enclosure, make faces, tap on the glass, to try to get chimps to perform for them or react to them. What's in it for us? What's in it for the chimps? Can I keep up my end of the relationship? I hoped to make a film that would be for them first – showcasing chimps, not humans. (Of course, without using chimps as actors.) The result was probably more for us than for them – it wasn't as strangely "chimpcentric" as I had imagined it would be. Maybe a chimp director, commissioned to make a film for humans, would also make movie ultimately for chimps. It could be primate nature."

Interestingly, the current context for Mayeri's *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family* is part of Tue Greenfort's homage to Donna Haraway. The Worldly House archive in an old boathouse as part of the current Documenta 13, Kassel haunted by video images of Haraway's dogs, written about memorably in *When Species Meet*.

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* [11] by Barbara Smuts et al:

"Children, AI computer programmes and nonhuman primates: All here embody '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 embodied 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 permeable? Where will this evolutionary, developmental and historical communicative commerce take us in the techno-bio-politics of difference?"

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

Dr Rob La Frenais has been a contemporary art curator for 25 years, working internationally and creatively with artists mainly on original commissions. Before that he was the founder and editor of *Performance Magazine*. For the last 15 years he has curated The Arts Catalyst's programme. He believes in being directly engaged with the artist's working process as far as possible, whilst actively widening the context within which the artist can work. He has been interested in primatology for some time, since curating the exhibition *Interspecies* and this exhibition, but the views expressed here should not be taken to represent those of the world of primatology and zoos.

[1] Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1983.
[2] Will Self, *Great Apes*, Bloomsbury, London, 1997.
[3] Elizabeth Hess, *Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp who Would be Human*, Bantam Books, 2008.
[4] Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1967.
[5] www.greatapetrust.org
[6] www.koko.org
[7] Sara Gruen, *Ape House: A Novel*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2011.
[8] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I am*, Fordham University Press, 2008.
[9] Steve Baker, *The Post Modern Animal*, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000.
[10] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
[11] Barbara Smutts, *Primate Societies*, University of Chicago Press, 1987.