

Why ape apes?

Response to Primate Cinema: Apes as Family
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In *The Lives of Animals*, J.M. Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello states that 'there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another'. In 'Primate Cinema: Apes as Family', Rachel Mayeri's installation shows footage of apes watching humans ape apes on a screen placed inside the chimpanzee enclosure at Edinburgh Zoo. Actors dressed as chimpanzees play out primate drama to the sometimes engaged, sometimes enraged, sometimes apparently uninterested inmates of the zoo's Budungo trail. One of costumes is very realistic and uses animatronics to permit subtle facial expressions. The other humans are deliberately done out in far less realistic outfits, but their body language and postures have been carefully choreographed and rehearsed. The installation uses two screens. On one screen we see how the real chimpanzees are reacting; on the other, we see what is being shown to them on the television in their enclosure, the story acted out for them by the human apes.

Why look at animals? The answer to Berger's question can perhaps be answered by another equally famous animal quote: 'Animals are good to think'. Lévi-Strauss's phrase does not translate perfectly from French and one meaning can be to understand 'good' as the singular of goods. Animals are thinking material. In literary cultural life, this is often the case. Animals regularly figure as metaphors or tropes - as furry humans. Their presence represents things for us, and nearly always these are human things. Animals seem rarely present or considered in their own right.

In the life sciences, animals do often appear 'in person'. Their living bodies are used in research. You could argue that scientists, claiming positivist knowledge gained by this instrumental approach to non-humans, just think they do not use metaphors, and that animals in science are in fact also laden down with metaphors which shape the social construction of biological or medical knowledge. The scientific animal is just another way of 'thinking ourselves into the being of another'.

Living animals are appearing more often in person in the visual arts, and Mayeri's work is one example of this. As a vet, it is this direct presence of the animal that interests me most. It is a reluctance to discuss this type of presence that to me also seems very apparent in academic animal discourse, probably because of the intellectual taboo of anthropomorphism. This applies across the humanities and sciences. We do not know how to speak about animals in the right sort of way. We seem to enter a kind of intellectual paralysis whenever we try.

Mayeri's work invites us to question this, from the anthropomorphic expressions on the 'life-like' chimp's face to the barely disguised humans aping around. The domestic and the wild are juxtaposed in a number of ways. Wild apes in a zoo for starters; a very domestic drama played out for them and shown on TV screens placed in their enclosure, the Budungo trail, which is itself a domestic recreation of a 'wild' habitat. The main primate character in the drama lives in a house, which is invaded by a troop of wilder apes, who end up trashing it and having sex in the kitchen.

Can art get the animals 'talking' in a way that academic discourse (in whatever discipline) singularly fails to? Wittgenstein wrote, 'If a lion could speak, we would not understand him'. Need that be the case? Would it also be the situation with our domestic animals, who have lived with us in such close proximity and for so long? My childhood hero James Herriot called one of his veterinary bestsellers *If Only They Could Talk*. But 'talking' need not just be about language – bees can tell us incredibly complex stories through dance, once we have learned to understand them. The primatologist Barbara Smuts, has written: 'My own life has convinced me that the limitations most of us encounter in or relations with animals reflect not their shortcomings, as we so often assume, but our own narrow views of who they are...'

Ssssnnnwhuffffll?
Hnwhuffl hhnwfl hnfl hfl?
Gdroblboblhobngbl gbl gl g g g glbgl.
[...]

From: The Loch Ness Monster's Song, Edwin Morgan *Collected Poems*, Carcanet 1990

I think it is easier to get animals talking through art than through philosophy. In art and poetry, the problems and restrictions of methodology and language can be more adventurously challenged. However, animals in the visual arts, alive or dead, or in the process of dying, also cause me some concerns. The Danish artist Marco Evaristti recently exhibited goldfish in water-filled Moulinex food blenders at the Trapholt Art Museum in Kolding, near Copenhagen. A sign near the installation invited gallery visitors to switch the blenders on if they wanted to. A few people did. Then, following protest from animal rights groups, the sign was left up but the blenders were unplugged, so that when people pressed the switch a much more powerful situation was set up, both artistically and ethically. Anyone who wished to liquidize the fish then had to face up to their intended action, face up to the fish if you like, as it remained swimming in front of them. Was it just paucity of imagination, or disregard for the inherent value of the fish that prevented the artist from asking the more interesting question at the outset?

I wonder if art projects using living animals need to go through an ethical review process in the same way as scientific ones? If not, then it seems like a good idea to establish an industry code of practice. And I do think some important ethical principles are raised by *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family*. The installation shows us chimps watching people dressed as chimps enacting primate drama. If we go into a zoo and watch people watching chimps (and other animals), the reaction you mostly see is laughter. All sorts of antics, probably none more so than animal sex, cause folk to laugh. Zoos hope they may educate a bit too, but they know that, above all else, they have to deliver and provide an animal spectacle involving charismatic animals.

Not surprisingly, there is a big problem surrounding zoos within animal advocacy. Edinburgh Zoo has a good reputation and its Budungo enclosure even has the blessing of Jane Goodall. *Primate Cinema* relates to the field of environmental enrichment or manipulation for captive primates. It does that just by being what it is: the placement of an unnatural object into the animals' environment and then watching their response. From the chimps' point of view, it doesn't really matter whether this is science or art. I don't think they recognize disciplinary boundaries in that sense.

So we could ask, what's in this work for the animals themselves, both the particular chimpanzees of Edinburgh and captive chimpanzees generally? One possible answer could be that it makes their confined lines more bearable. There is a large literature on enrichment across many species, especially farm and laboratory animals. The strong animal rights view on this is clear, however – the slogan they use is 'Empty cages, not bigger cages'. Here, the response would be the same, 'Empty cages, not brighter ones'.

Some people are more pragmatic. Zoos are not going to close overnight, nor are most people going to stop eating meat. If there is something that can be done now to improve the lives of these animals, perhaps we should do so. I am in favour of brighter cages if it is meaningful for the animals concerned. The question is, is it?

In Mayeri's installation, the chimpanzees seem aware that something unusual has been put into their enclosure and also that there are more people around than usual, pointing things at them. Is that causing harm? We see one chimp sitting down and rocking backwards and forwards. That kind of behaviour is usually taken as a displacement activity indicating some kind of emotional distress. There are also several violent outbursts directed at the television screen or triggered by activities on it. The accompanying documentary about the making of the artwork has zoo staff explaining that these responses can be seen in the wild too. I am not sure that this means it is completely okay that they are happening here and I wondered how upsetting the television images really were for the chimpanzees. Could they, for example, cause an individual animal to become confused or depressed? Might there be psychological harm arising from emotional contagion, in the same way that we may feel uneasy for several days after seeing a disturbing film?

Art can link humans and animals in a range of activities, not all of which may be of obvious benefit to the animals: the making of money and personal reputations, pushing back the frontiers of a discipline and exploring its possibilities, peer recognition, curiosity even. That applies to science too, and to my own discipline of veterinary medicine, so I am leveling no specific criticisms in saying this. As an animal advocate, I personally hope that art involving living animals would always have an agenda. It should be one that helps further a general argument in society which says that animals are sentient and have lives that matter to them. Whilst, overall, it does not seem to me that animals were seriously harmed in the making of this piece of art, let's not forget that their lives have been deeply compromised by being put in a zoo in the first place. Living animal artwork should be supported by a range of activities that help people engage with some of the complex issues involved if the ambition is to really get the animals talking to us.