



## Apes In Science Fiction

### Professor Jim Endersby

27<sup>th</sup> September 2021

### How Not to Be Human

The idea for this series began with something one of my favourite SF writers wrote. In an autobiographical piece, Octavia Butler reported that African American people often asked her “what good is science fiction to Black people?”. This was her response:

What good is science fiction’s thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what “everyone” is saying, doing, thinking—whatever “everyone” happens to be this year.

And what good is all this to Black people?<sup>1</sup>

I like everything about this answer (and I quote it whenever anyone asks me why I waste my time reading, watching, studying or teaching science fiction). However, in these lectures I want to focus particularly on “whoever ‘everyone’ happens to be this year” (particularly because in the history of science “everyone” usually turns out to be white, European men). Butler’s comment makes me think of a question that one of my students once asked during a very fraught post 9/11 discussion about Islamophobia. A white student had just said “Well, we were blown up by them”, when the student sitting next to her, an American whose family originally came from the Indian subcontinent, simply asked “Who is this ‘we’?”.

This series will look at some of the ways science fiction has tried to answer the question of what does it mean to be human – which often turns out to be the same question as “who is this *we*?”. Many of the most influential definitions of human nature have involved contrasting human with not-human, by finding (or, more often, imagining) an ‘Other’, something or someone that embodies whatever the writer thinks is the opposite of human. In later lectures we will examine robots, aliens and women – each has been used to highlight supposedly essential human qualities such as rationality. For example, women have been used as an ‘Other’ by male writers who assumed that “we” meant “men”, because they defined human as *rational* and then assumed they were the more rational sex. So far, so obvious (and so sexist), but as we dig deeper into the ways SF has helped to construct various others, we will find the contrasts get more complex and confusing (but, with luck, more interesting too). When aliens start to seem more human than many humans, the question of defining human nature gets *really* interesting.

We will start with apes because they have long been at the heart of science’s attempt to define and explain human nature for so long (and they’re enjoying a bit of an SF renaissance at present). Scientific thinkers tended to assume that they were the perfect epitome of humanity because they were rational – capable of abstract thought, of mastering their passions and of using language to explain just how perfect they were. By contrast, animals could (apparently) not think or speak as humans do and so they became the obvious

---

<sup>1</sup> “Positive Obsession”, in: (Butler 2005, 134–135).

embodiment of the non-human. But the distance that once seemed so clear seems to have shrunk dramatically in recent decades.

## (Re-)imagining apes

I would like to start with a brief discussion of three hit films, each of which starred apes (or ape-like creatures), and which tell us something about how audiences thought about (or were expected to think about) our closest cousins.

King Kong was Hollywood's first major ape star, and he has become an iconic figure; even those who have never seen the original film instantly recognise the image of the giant ape clinging to the Empire State building. But what does Kong mean? What kinds of assumptions did audiences make about gorillas in 1933 and how did those assumptions shape audience reactions? The film is famous for the way the main female character, Ann Darrow (Fay Wray) screams – long, loud and often. Darrow is terrified of Kong and the audience is expected to share her fear. Even before Kong appears on screen, we are expected to be frightened (as the native people of Skull Island clearly are). Kong has to be terrifying, otherwise viewers cannot be surprised and moved when he acts gently towards Darrow, rescuing her from threatening dinosaurs, holding her carefully in his hand and finally laying her gently to one side, out of harm's way, while he faces the final battle and his death. By the time Kong lies dead at the foot of the skyscraper, the audience feels sorry for him; no longer a monster, but a tragic – almost heroic -- figure. But without the initial terror, the audience could not be surprised by its pity.

More than thirty years after *King Kong*, Stanley Kubrick directed *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which began with a sequence called "The Dawn of Man". It showed the early ancestors of humans, creatures who look far more like apes than people, living a nasty, brutish and short life on the drought-stricken African savannah. Life is dangerous, food is scarce, and the film implicitly asked, how did these poor, vulnerable creatures ever come to be Earth's dominant life form? Kubrick's answer, of course, was a mysterious black, alien monolith that triggered something in the ape-like creatures. After their exposure, one of the band who the audience has been watching picks up a discarded animal bone and begins to use it as a tool, quickly realising that it can be used to kill other animals for food. Once they are armed (and strengthened by their new meat diet), the main band drives off a rival group to take possession of a water hole and in the climactic scene, the leader of the now carnivorous apes kills his rival. He hurls his bone weapon up into the air and the story jumps forward millions of years, revealing a bone-like spaceship en route to the moon. The sequence implies that aliens triggered human evolution – opening our minds to the possibilities of tools, weapons, meat and violence.<sup>2</sup> Aggression is not just central to human nature, the film argues that it was what set us on the evolutionary odyssey that made us truly human, the path that would eventually lead to space flight and future technological wonders.

By contrast with the two earlier films, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) – the most recent re-make in the long-running series that began in the 1960s – depicts its hairy protagonists far more sympathetically. They are exploited, even tortured, in human laboratories, until they are eventually able to escape. They flee to the forests to live in peace, initially with no sign of wanting revenge on their former tormentors. However, over the course of the trilogy, conflict develops: some apes are unable to forget or forgive the suffering humans inflicted on them; and some humans blame the apes for the "simian flu", a plague that has decimated their species, creating the possibility that apes may soon supplant them as the Earth's top species. Human perspectives on this increasingly deadly conflict are largely absent (and human characters become rare and increasingly brutal across the three films, while the apes become ever more complex and sympathetic). By the conclusion of the final film, the human audience are all rooting for the apes as they finally leave people behind and enter their own promised land.

Why are today's science fiction apes so different to their twentieth century predecessors? I will argue that the answer can be found by looking at the relationship between science *and* fiction – the way the two work together to imagine apes as non-human others.

---

<sup>2</sup> (Krämer 2010)

## Evolving Apes

In 1864, Benjamin Disraeli commented in parliament:

What is the question now placed before society with a glib assurance the most astounding? The question is this—Is man an ape or an angel? My lord, I am on the side of the angels.

The question was, of course, being asked because of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories, first published in 1859. However (as I mentioned in one of [last year's lectures](#)), Darwin's *Origin of Species* made almost no mention of apes and even less of human evolution. It was the 'gorilla sensation', largely prompted by Paul du Chaillu's popular accounts of his African travels, that made the question of whether humans were apes or angels unavoidable.<sup>3</sup> Many Victorians would have agreed that human nature seemed to mingle bestial and divine qualities; the question was which was dominant – was Disraeli right, or was our essential nature more ape than angel?

Du Chaillu told his readers that the gorilla was “an animal scarce known to the civilized world, and which no white man before had hunted”. He recorded that the first time he saw its footprints, his “heartbeat till I feared its loud pulsations would alarm the gorilla, and my feelings were really excited to a painful degree”. While some of the Africans were left behind to protect their women, “the rest of us looked once more carefully at our guns... for the gorilla gives you no time to reload, and woe to him whom he attacks!”, adding that the “the male gorilla is literally the king of the African forest”.<sup>4</sup> Such details fascinated the public, made du Chaillu's gorilla hunts seem more heroic, and hugely helped his book's sales: *Explorations and adventures in Equatorial Africa: with accounts of... the chase of the gorilla* (1861), sold 10,000 copies in the UK in its first two years. Despite numerous criticisms of du Chaillu's rather cavalier approach to the truth, he established the gorilla's public image for many decades to come.<sup>5</sup> Numerous writers (and filmmakers) would continue to portray gorillas as threatening, a savage enemy for humanity to conquer.

It might seem predictable that European travellers would react with fear – and even hostility – to large, unknown creatures when they encountered them in dangerously unfamiliar settings. However, for earlier generations of Europeans, apes were often seen in a very different light. They did not distinguish one species from another (and most of those who wrote about them had never actually seen one), but whether called apes, 'pongos' or orangutans, the great apes were often assumed to be very closely related to people (indeed, they were often assumed to be some kind of people). Some Europeans argued they had degenerated into a savage caricature of their original humanity, but others offered the great apes as an of humanity's original, unspoilt condition.

For example, the eighteenth-century, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, used the name “orangutan” to express his ideal of a truly natural person, uncorrupted by society and its luxuries. He was almost unique among Enlightenment thinkers in hinting that perhaps apes might evolve into humans. More importantly, he argued that the non-European peoples who were then referred to as 'savages' were not only fully human but were in some ways superior to their supposedly civilised counterparts. They seemed to have better eyesight and hearing, but were generally healthier, happier and freer than many Europeans. Perhaps, he speculated, the cultivated and artificial lives of those of us who live in cities have rendered us feeble. Rousseau compared civilised people to domesticated animals, who – like humans – offered a sorry contrast to their wild ancestors: “we had only fashioned a steeper path of decline from our natural state; we had bred livestock to satisfy our artificial needs and had thereby made our senses still more dull and our constitutions more frail, so that in modern society we are hardly any longer even animals of a certain degenerate kind, but only pets, or prey, broken in by ourselves – weak, docile, fattened, and fleeced” (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*).<sup>6</sup> Apes – like the indigenous peoples with whom they shared their forests -- were, in Rousseau's view, closer to nature than he and his fellow Europeans – and they were better off as a result.

Rousseau never saw a great ape, even in captivity; his descriptions of them were based on travellers' tales. However, his preconceptions about the desirability of the state of nature led him to imagine the orang's life ways that are strikingly similar to modern accounts (and thus, accidentally, more accurate than many of the supposedly scientific descriptions that appeared over the following 200 years). He described them as solitary,

<sup>3</sup> (Hodgson 1999, 231).

<sup>4</sup> (Du Chaillu 1862, 83--84).

<sup>5</sup> (Olivier-Mason 2014, 102).

<sup>6</sup> (Wokler 1978, 111–113); (Moran 1995, 656–657).

vegetarian and peaceful, not the aggressive, promiscuous carnivores that others imagined them to be. A century later, Alfred Russel Wallace (*The Malay Archipelago*, 1869) confirmed that they were nomadic, not territorial; Rousseau had assumed the same thing, but only because he believed that private property was one of the sins of civilisation. And it was not until the 1960s that Western science confirmed Rousseau's assumption that orangs had no hierarchy, indeed no social organisation at all, not even long-term pair bonds. They are solitary, indolent creatures.<sup>7</sup>

So, in many ways, the orangutan would seem to be the embodiment of Rousseau's ideal of the Noble Savage – the original, unspoiled human. Except that Rousseau never use the term 'noble savage' in any of his writings and was clearly sceptical about any simplistic association of primitive life with nobility. He used the example of other, supposedly backward peoples – and orangutans – primarily as a way of criticising European civilization. He was asking “who is this we” but suggesting that ‘our’ way of doing things was not as superior as ‘we’ liked to assume. Like the French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne, Rousseau was arguing for what would now be called cultural relativism. When Montaigne praised cannibals, or Rousseau praised orangs, they were trying to unsettle their readers' unthinking assumptions of superiority; trying to persuade them to look again at their societies and standards and consider radical alternatives.<sup>8</sup> Both Montaigne and Rousseau were looking for *others* who were different to the imagined ‘we’ (European, civilised, etc.) with which their readers usually identified themselves. As we shall see, the ape remained a powerful other, but one that would be reinvented regularly according – depending on who “everyone” happens to be” at a particular time.

Rousseau's imagined orangs were, as we shall see, frequently misunderstood by those later readers who studied apes as part of their search for a universal, inflexible ‘human nature’. By contrast, Rousseau was more interested in the differences between people; his comparison between apes, savages and Europeans left him impressed by the flexibility and plasticity of our natures. As the historian Robert Wokler argued, Rousseau did not regard people as fallen angels, but as fallen apes.<sup>9</sup> However, people -- like the apes -- were capable of improvement, perhaps even of perfection. Given the right encouragement (mainly a healthy environment and a good education) even debased and degenerate Europeans might eventually evolve into Rousseau's ideal – free citizens.

Various writers took up the idea of the ape as an unspoiled human. For example, in 1781, the prolific French author Nicolas-Edmé Rétif de la Bretonne published a *Lettre d'un singe aux animaux de son espèce* (Letter of an Ape to Others of his Species), purportedly written by “César of Malacca”, who was the son of an ape and a local woman. Abandoned by his mother, César completed his education by reading Rousseau. His letter to his fellow apes was long attack on humans and he warned apes never to imitate them. And the English novelist, Thomas Love Peacock, wrote a novel (*Melincourt* 1817) whose main character was an ape, Sir Oran Haut-ton who also embodied the virtues of the natural man (particularly his silence). Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) was one of Peacock's sources and he also used his ape to satirise contemporary society. (Even though Sir Oran cannot speak he is elected to parliament – representing the Rotten Borough of Onevote.)<sup>10</sup>

During the nineteenth century, some continued to believe in the ideal of the noble savage and used it to argue that indigenous peoples should be spared the supposed benefits of civilisation (from slavery to smallpox). However, such views became increasingly rare as Europeans competed to carve up Africa, the last great continent whose resources had yet to be claimed by white people. Du Chaillu expressed views that many of his mid-Victorian readers would have endorsed:

I began to think how this wilderness would look if only the light of Christian civilization could once be fairly introduced among the black children of Africa. I dreamed of forests giving way to plantations of coffee, cotton, and spices; of peaceful negroes going to their contented daily tasks; of farming and manufactures; of churches and schools...<sup>11</sup>

Such views seem patronising (at best) today, but some of his countrymen assumed non-European peoples were so bestial and backward they could never be civilised or educated – only enslaved or exterminated.

<sup>7</sup> (Wokler 1978, 115).

<sup>8</sup> (Ellingson 2001, 1–3); (Moran 1995, 663).

<sup>9</sup> (Wokler 1978, 123).

<sup>10</sup> (Cribb, Gilbert, and Tiffin 2014, 110–112).

<sup>11</sup> (Du Chaillu 1862, 83).

The notoriously racist British anthropologist James Hunt suggested that those who wished to prosecute the British Governor of Jamaica, Edward John Eyre for executing over 400 black Jamaicans would probably want to prosecute du Chaillu for shooting gorillas.<sup>12</sup> To Hunt, Africans were simply animals – no more human than gorillas were; the image of the violent gorilla as a danger to white civilisation was very convenient to those who advocated aggressive imperialism

Thanks to Darwin and du Chaillu, the monstrous, dangerous gorilla gradually became a figure in popular fiction. The imagined ape gradually came to symbolise the more negative aspects of humanity's evolutionary heritage. H.G. Wells included an "Ape-man" among the disturbing creatures who populated *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896). The story is narrated by Edward Prendick, who arrives on the island after being rescued from a shipwreck. The name 'Moreau' stirs some memory in Prendick, and he finally recalls that Moreau was a notorious vivisector, whose experiments were so cruel and extreme that he was forced to flee the wrath of public opinion. The isolated island has allowed Moreau to continue his work and the result is the Beast Folk, animals who have been horribly vivisected and tortured into near-human form. Their animal instincts are checked by the fear of Moreau's 'House of Pain' and the 'Law' that he compels them to recite. The Ape-man is the most intelligent of the Beast Folk and, unlike most of them, he can speak. Prendick recalled that he "had a fantastic trick of coining new words. He had an idea, I believe, that to gabble about names that meant nothing was the proper use of speech. He called it 'Big Thinks' to distinguish it from 'Little Thinks,' the sane every-day interests of life". However, the Ape-Man also seems excited by the idea that those who break the law must go back to the House of Pain, hinting that sadism may be a uniquely human quality. After Moreau's death at the hands of one of his victims, Prendick finally escaped back to London but found himself haunted and "the horror was well-nigh insupportable":

I would go out into the streets to fight with my delusion, and prowling women would mew after me; furtive, craving men glance jealously at me; weary, pale workers go coughing by me with tired eyes and eager paces, like wounded deer dripping blood; old people, bent and dull, pass murmuring to themselves; and, all unheeding, a ragged tail of gibing children. Then I would turn aside into some chapel,—and even there, such was my disturbance, it seemed that the preacher gibbered "Big Thinks," even as the Ape-man had done.<sup>13</sup>

Wells' novel concluded with the haunting image of the beast enduring within us; even human intellect (the preacher's works) was no different to the ranting of an unthinking animal.

The idea the humanity's earliest ancestors were apes, bestial and savage, was one of the things that gave *King Kong* its power. The dinosaurs on Kong's Island suggest that the explorers are returning to the deep evolutionary past, catching a glimpse of what used to be; the evil ape is an image of the worst of human nature, but Kong's redemptive love for Anne could be taken as a sign of hope – that (like Rousseau's oranges), even the gorilla could be improved in time. However, if the makers of *King Kong* thought evolution was a potentially hopeful tale, others were less convinced. Two centuries after Rousseau described the orang as the unspoilt natural man, his arguments were attacked by a popular American playwright, Robert Ardrey, who asserted that most of the world's problems could be traced back to Rousseau's assertion people were naturally good, while civilisation corrupted them. This "Romantic Fallacy" as Ardrey called it, had been finally and thoroughly debunked by modern science. Ardrey's book, *African Genesis*, was a popular description of recent research into human origins. Science had proved that "man's soul is not unique. Man's nature, like his body, is the product of evolution".<sup>14</sup> In which case, socialism was just one of many ill-founded illusions leading humans astray: "if man is a part of the natural world than his competitive drive cannot be erased by the elimination of private property, an institution itself derived from his animal ancestry".<sup>15</sup>

The new science Ardrey referred to had begun with the work of the South African paleoanthropologist, Raymond Dart who in 1924 had discovered the species *Australopithecus africanus*, one of the earliest prehistoric human ancestors (or hominids, as they're usually known). Almost thirty years later he published a paper called the "Predatory Transition from Ape to Man" (1953) which argued the "simple thesis that Man had emerged from the anthropoid background for one reason only: because he was a killer"

<sup>12</sup> (Ellingson 2001, 252).

<sup>13</sup> (Wells 1896 (2009)).

<sup>14</sup> (Ardrey 1961, 153).

<sup>15</sup> (Ardrey 1961, 160).

Long ago, perhaps many millions of years ago, a line of killer apes branched off from the non-aggressive primate background. For reasons of environmental necessity, the line adopted the predatory way. For reasons of predatory necessity Dart was convinced that Australopithecus was not only carnivorous, but hunted using tools – weapons fashioned from bones.<sup>16</sup>

Ardrey combined Dart's claims with those who were researching living African primates to argue that humans – like all primates – were territorial and aggressive. This was human nature, as deeply ingrained in us as our bipedal gait, and equally incapable of being altered. Of course, Ardrey accepted that human moral behaviour – generosity, cooperation and altruism – were also the products of evolution, so there was hope for us as a species. But only if we gave up the dangerous illusion that our aggressive instincts could be ignored, or that they could be banished by simply changing a few laws or the school curriculum.

Ardrey's killer ape theory that directly inspired Kubrick's 2001.<sup>17</sup> The ape like creatures shown in the film are supposed to Australopithecines and the Dawn of Man sequence dramatized the exact moment Ardrey referred to: when one line of primates were forced by "environmental necessity" to abandon their vegetarian diet and become the "line of killer apes" who would evolve into humans.<sup>18</sup> And a few years later, when Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* was attacked for encouraging violence, the director cited Ardrey's work in his defence; it proved that violence was simply part of a human nature.<sup>19</sup> When the *New York Times*' film critic accused Kubrick's film of promoting "fascist" views, the director wrote in to argue he was simply telling the (scientifically verified) truth. "It is quite true", he admitted, "that my film's view of man is less flattering than the one Rousseau entertained in a similarly allegorical narrative" but he hoped that nobody would be forced "to view man as a noble savage, rather than an ignoble one" in order to avoid being called a fascist.<sup>20</sup>

## Planets of the Apes

The political implications of apes in the movies were even more explicit in a movie that appeared the same year as *2001: the original Planet of the Apes* (1968, dir. Franklin Schaffner), starring Charlton Heston, Roddy McDowall and Kim Hunter. Heston played an astronaut, Taylor, whose spaceship lands on a distant planet whose inhabitants are human but cannot speak. They wear skins and act like stereotypical Hollywood 'cavemen', primitive ancestors of human beings. But Taylor and his companions are shocked when the humans are attacked by talking gorillas, mounted on horseback and carrying guns. The apes kill many humans, apparently for sport, and capture others for medical experiments. The shocking spectacle of the human/animal hierarchy being dramatically overturned gave the film enormous impact and it was a box-office hit (to be followed by four sequels, TV series, books, comics and – to date – four remakes). Clearly, the apes hit a nerve with their audiences.

Not long after the film came out, its producer, Arthur Jacobs and associate producer, Mort Abrahams, bumped into Sammy Davis Jnr., who embraced Jacobs and told him *Planet of the Apes* was the best film about black-white relations he had ever seen; apparently, neither Jacobs nor Abrahams had any idea what Davis was talking about.<sup>21</sup> However, their audiences were more perceptive. The apes in the film enslaved humans, put them in cages, forced them to serve their ape masters, who whipped them when they disobeyed. African American audiences in particular seemed to have no difficulty in perceiving the film as an allegory. When the sequel, *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970) came out, some of its adverts used the line: "Can a planet long endure half human and half ape?", deliberately echoing Abraham Lincoln's claim that the USA could not survive "half-slave and half-free".<sup>22</sup>

There was, of course, nothing new about linking apes and people of African descent. Thomas Huxley's book *Man's Place in Nature* argued that humans had shared a recent common ancestor with the apes. One

<sup>16</sup> (Ardrey 1961, 29).

<sup>17</sup> (Milam 2019, 195).

<sup>18</sup> Richard D. Erlich; et al. (1997–2005). "Strange Odyssey: From Dart to Ardrey to Kubrick and Clarke". English studies/Film theory course, Science fiction and Film. Miami University. <http://www.users.miamioh.edu/erlichrd/350/odyssey.php>

<sup>19</sup> (Milam 2019, 199).

<sup>20</sup> "Now Kubrick Fights Back" (letter from Stanley Kubrick), *The New York Times*, 27 Feb 1972: D1.

<sup>21</sup> (Greene 1996 (1998), 2).

<sup>22</sup> (Greene 1996 (1998), 1).

anonymous reviewer repeated old arguments, that there were very sharp anatomical differences between apes and humans, particularly in their brains. As a result, humans alone could speak and reason. So, while the reviewer expressed their respect for Darwin and his theory, they nevertheless felt it was “entirely inconclusive”. And Huxley’s effort to build support by denying any clear difference between apes and humans simply weakened the evolutionary theory further. Much of the review was taken up with erudite discussions of the comparative anatomy of different apes, full of impressive technical terms. However, one gets a vivid sense of why some people got so agitated by the debate when the reviewer turned their attention to the fact that evolution meant all humans were a single species. The review quoted one expert who argued that “The inferior races of mankind exhibit proportions which are in many respects intermediate between the higher, or European, orders, and the monkeys”. While another made the following supposedly scientific claim, that:

the disgusting odour, the uncleanliness, the making of grimaces whilst speaking, the clear shrill tone of the voice, and the apelike character of the whole being, are just so many characteristic signs, which, in all the corporeal forms and relations of the negro, unmistakeably show the most decided approach to the monkey genus.<sup>23</sup>

It is hard not to shake the feeling that what really horrified evolution’s opponents was the implication of close kinship to Africans, rather than to apes. The supposedly ape-like characteristics of Africans were crucial to the review’s conclusion that, whatever the physical similarities between ape and human the really:

distinctive characteristics of man begin just where these resemblances of structural organisation leave off. This is the barrier which is absolutely insurmountable by the advocates of the theory of development, because the differences between the animals and man are not differences of degree, but differences of kind.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of an insurmountable barrier between ape and human had, of course, also been used by those who had used idealised apes as a way of critiquing the supposedly civilised behaviour of their fellow Europeans. The imaginary author Bretonne’s “Letter of an Ape to Others of his Species”, César offered as his strongest condemnation of humans that “man is cruel, and singularly cruel to his own kind... [and] to be convinced of this truth, we have only to see how he treats Negroes! It is a cruelty that passes the imagination and which he will exercise towards any of us”.<sup>25</sup> Apes were clearly morally superior to humans, since they shunned slavery. A version of that argument was used by the African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender* (20 June 1925) in a cartoon that commented on the famous Scopes Trial, then underway in Tennessee. As is well-known, a local schoolteacher – John T. Scopes – was prosecuted for teaching the theory of evolution (which had recently been banned by state law). The trial turned into something of a media circus – in which apes featured regularly. The *Defender’s* cartoon showed horrified apes observing a white lynch mob murdering an African American, and desperately hoping they were not related to such horrible, savage creatures.

The Scopes trial brought the association between apes and evolution back into the public eye and may have inspired the pioneering SF writer Claire Winger Harris to write her story “The Ape Cycle” (*Science Wonder Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring 1930). Science fiction was a largely male-dominated genre in its early decades, particularly during its supposed golden age (Forties and Fifties). However, the early pulp magazines were surprisingly inclusive and it’s only recently that various scholars have shown how many women wrote for the early pulps and helped to shape the genre.<sup>26</sup> Harris was a popular contributor to the magazines (and may have been the first woman to publish in them under her own name). Her stories regularly dealt with biological topics, including evolution, and were critical of the stereotypical white, male scientist (at least, more critical than many of her male contributors).

In the “Ape Cycle” a scientist, Daniel Stoddart, successfully trains apes to act as human servants, and they become an invaluable labour force. However, one of the characters wonders whether the stimulus of training and education might cause the apes to evolve until they become human. A thought which prompts the story’s main female characters, Melva, to comment that “if they ever do become human, we can’t have them work for us anymore. That would be slavery”.<sup>27</sup> Melva married Stoddart’s son, Ray, who discovers how to make

---

<sup>23</sup> ([Carter Blake] 1863, 546). See also: (Hodgson 1999, 239).

<sup>24</sup> ([Carter Blake] 1863, 567).

<sup>25</sup> (Cribb, Gilbert, and Tiffin 2014, 109).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example: (Yaszek 2018; Yaszek and Sharp 2016); and, (Sharp 2018).

<sup>27</sup> (Harris 1930, 392).

the apes into even more useful servants: “By making extracts of the known glands of human beings and discovering a few for himself, he was able to procure in a concentrated form the vital substance that controlled the mental growth of the race”.<sup>28</sup> The apes become increasingly intelligent, learn to speak and move from manual work to flying aircraft and running the countries. Unsurprisingly, they become increasingly unhappy about human tyranny. The appearance of an even more human ape (referred to in the story as a “missing link”, who looks a bit like a Neanderthal) triggers a revolution. The apes plan revolves around the fact that humans have largely left all the world’s work to the apes and gone to live in luxury on their country estates. Communications and transport are all in the hands of the apes, who successfully seize power, but only for a short time. The humans regain control by bombing the capital and killing all the ape leaders. However, the new human president wonders whether apes will always be a threat; perhaps, he ponders, they are “nature’s method of keeping us strong and pure”, ensuring that humans continue to struggle and evolve, instead of degenerating.<sup>29</sup>

Harris’ remarkable story, which explicitly linked human exploitation of apes and slavery, appeared three years before King Kong, and three decades before Pierre Boulle’s novel *La Planète des singes* (1963, *Monkey planet*), the novel from which the first *Planet of the Apes* film was adapted. It was not the first story to imagine apes seizing control; the same theme appeared in Haydon Perry’s “The Upper Hand” (*Contraptions*, 1895), but Perry’s apes were granted suffrage because they could speak.<sup>30</sup> Harris seems to have been the first to imagine an ape uprising explicitly as a slave revolt. In the racially charged atmosphere of the times (the infamous Scottsboro Boys trial began soon after the story appeared), it seems likely that at least some of her readers would have read the story as a racial metaphor.

The original cycle of *Planet of the Apes* films made extensive use of racial symbolism, but their makers tried to avoid oversimplification. No doubt some audiences saw the apes dominating humans as an image of reversed racial roles (perhaps an image of welcome revenge for black audiences, or the dramatization of their worst fears for white ones). However, the apes in the first two films are a divided community: the gorillas are strong, but stupid and militaristic, while the oranges are bureaucratic and devious, upholders of an inflexible religious orthodoxy that (among other things) denies the theory of evolution. By contrast, the chimpanzees are the most intelligent and sympathetic characters. Rod Serling, who wrote the initial drafts of the first movie was a liberal Jewish writer whose experiences of anti-Semitism fed into the script’s reflections on prejudice; his co-writer, Michael Wilson, had been blacklisted during the McCarthy era. The SF format may have helped political writers to deal with controversial topics that the Hollywood studios would otherwise have avoided.<sup>31</sup> Part of the appeal of these films was that they could be read as metaphors for many kinds of otherness. Nevertheless, the racial element remained dominant, as was apparent in a scene from the fourth film, *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972). Governor Jason Breck (who is obsessed with rising ape IQs and determined to prevent them conquering humanity) is talking to the ape’s leader, Caesar, who asks him “how do we differ from the dogs and cats you and your kind used to love? Why did you turn us from pets to slaves?”. Breck responded:

Because *your* kind were once our ancestors. Man was born of the ape and there’s still an ape curled up inside of every man. The beast that must be whipped into submission. The savage that has to be shackled in chains. You are the beast, Caesar. You *taint* us. You poison our guts. When we hate you, we’re hating the dark side of ourselves.<sup>32</sup>

– as Eric Greene argues, this is a visceral expression of Breck’s fear of the ‘other’, of evolution’s supposedly bestial legacy, and of the fear that drives racism, “hating the *dark* side of ourselves” (emphasis added).

## Women and Apes

Given the long-standing, racist associations between apes, savagery and primitivism, why are the most recent *Planet of the Apes* movies so different in tone? The first film’s director, Rupert Wyatt argued that his

<sup>28</sup> (Harris 1930, 395).

<sup>29</sup> (Harris 1930, 401).

<sup>30</sup> (Bleiler and Bleiler 1990, 700); Jess Nevins “Apes in Literature”, in: (Klaw 2013, 79).

<sup>31</sup> (Greene 1996 (1998), 25, 38).

<sup>32</sup> Original shooting script, quoted in: (Greene 1996 (1998), 94).

film was “ABOUT animal rights”, so it tells the story “from the apes’ point of view”.<sup>33</sup> The rise of animal rights has certainly been a factor (and it might be argued that the depictions of exploited and tormented apes in films and fiction helped fuel growing concern for their rights). However, there was a much more specific change: women moved into primatology (the scientific study of apes).

When Ardrey wrote his best-sellers, the study of apes (and fossil humans) was – like most science at the time – entirely dominated by men (Ardrey explicitly attributed the scientific revolution he claimed to be describing to the three “Wild Men” whose ground-breaking work he described). The historian and philosopher of science, Donna Haraway has shown how the field was revolutionised during the 1970s as increasing numbers of young women joined it. Women like Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas were all proteges of the well-known paleo-anthropologist Louis Leakey, who believed that ape studies would provide invaluable evidence about the ways human ancestors had behaved. He recruited women to do the field work, partly because they were (initially) untrained and he hoped they would be genuinely open-minded observers.<sup>34</sup>

When Goodall began her research in Africa in 1960s, the groups men studied male chimps. At the time, ape groups were believed to be dominated by a single, alpha male, who monopolised a group of females and thus fathered most of the young. Struggles for dominance between rival males were the key to understanding what some were calling ‘ape society’. By contrast, the few women in the field tended to be graduate students and were assigned the (less prestigious work) of studying mother/infant pairs. Almost nobody took any interest in what female chimps were doing (other than nursing baby chimps). When Goodall and other women researchers looked more closely at the behaviours of adult female chimps, they began to discern a matriarchal structure at the heart of chimp society. Male aggression seemed largely peripheral. And once female foraging strategies were studied, it became clear that females were intelligently maximising their own reproductive success – something that it had previously been assumed only the males were doing.<sup>35</sup> The stereotypical view of the ape, the Silverback gorilla pounding his chest like a latter-day King Kong, gave way to a more complex view in which, for example, female chimps used food and sex to manage conflict within the group, and stop male aggression dominating.

Among the women primatologists Haraway described is Biruté Galdikas, who studied wild orangutans in Indonesia and tried to rehabilitate those which had been orphaned back into the wild (and, like Goodall, her work was extensively reported by *National Geographic*). Galdikas become interested in apes like the celebrated chimp Washoe who had been trained to use American Sign Language (AMESLAN) and she got Gary Shapiro, one of Washoe’s trainers to teach one of her oranges, Sugito, to sign. Galdikas explained that she “had often regretted that I would never be able to talk to Sugito, so that I could examine how he perceived and interpreted the world. By teaching orangutans sign language in their native habitat, we might find out what was important to them, rather than to us”.<sup>36</sup> The experiment became disastrous when Sugito hit puberty and began to react to Shapiro as a male rival and then started killing other oranges. He had to be relocated to a distant part of the forest where he could live apart from his kind. As Galdikas wrote, “Perhaps the Biblical analogy was apt: Raised by a human mother and exposed to human culture, he had eaten of the ‘tree of knowledge’ and lost his orangutan innocence”.<sup>37</sup> Her comment takes us back to Rousseau and the idea of original innocence; apes were so much better than humans because they were untouched by original sin. Teaching apes to speak, think and act like humans could only corrupt them by exposing them to the numerous failings of human nature. (There are several moments in the *Planet of the Apes* films where the apes’ negative traits result from them ‘aping’ human behaviours).

The work of women like Goodall, Fossey and Galdikas was regularly popularised on television and other media; they helped to create a new image of the apes (and of science). The recent *Planet of the Apes* movies are a testimony to the way we now see creatures like gorillas. Thanks to endless, beautiful television footage in particular, we now think of them as gentle, peaceful creatures – and recognise that we are a much greater threat to them than they could ever be to us. (Which, as an aside, is one reason why none of the *King Kong* remakes works – we’re just not scared of gorillas anymore.)

---

<sup>33</sup> Wyatt, preface to: (Klaw 2013, 4).

<sup>34</sup> (Haraway 1989, 151).

<sup>35</sup> (Haraway 1989, 173–179).

<sup>36</sup> “Living with Orangutans”, *National Geographic*, June 1980, 157(6): 830–853. Quoted in: (Haraway 1989, 141--142).

<sup>37</sup> (Haraway 1989, 141--142).

## Conclusion: Searching for Our Inner Ape

Among the women who entered primatology in the 1970s was Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, who studied Hanuman langurs at Mount Abu in India. She became an internationally renowned anthropologist whose third book (*The Woman That Never Evolved*, 1981), developed the discoveries that she and other women had made about the sophistication of female primate behaviour. Hrdy argued that these strategies (long overlooked by male scientists) were crucial to way primate communities survived and flourished, and thus to the evolution of primates. However, her recognition that infanticide was sometimes part of those strategies was interpreted by some as showing that apes (and thus humans) were as violent as Ardrey had argued. Debates about apes and human nature are still rumbling on.

One of Hrdy's more recent contributions to these debates is *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (2009). She begins with an image that might have come straight from one of the *Planet of the Apes* films: a 747 full of chimps. She argues that if one were to actually fill an aircraft with chimps (or any other species of apes) and put them on a long flight, by the time they landed "Bloody earlobes and other appendages would litter the aisles" because "Compressing so many highly impulsive strangers into a tight space would be a recipe for mayhem".<sup>38</sup> So, she asks, why is it that humans can cope with this kind of situation, while other apes cannot?

Hrdy's answer is the humans possess an unusually high degree of empathy – we instinctively understand that our fellow passenger didn't mean to bash us with their backpack as they were trying to stow it, and that the mother of the crying baby is also wishing the baby would go to sleep and leave us in peace. The other apes can match us in many accomplishments that were once thought to be uniquely human (including communicating in sign language, making tools and hunting in packs), but they are nowhere near closing the empathy gap. Hrdy's book is a rich, complex and subtle one, whose impressive details I couldn't possibly summarise here, but the essence of her argument is that human babies are much more vulnerable than those of other primates, which makes them utterly dependent on the adults around them. By comparison with apes, human infants are born prematurely (if our oversized heads were allowed to develop any longer, we would never be able to leave the womb at all). One result was that our ancestors and their infants could only survive by becoming cooperative parents – the whole social group had to collaborate to protect and raise their young. A helpless infant growing up surrounded by adults to whom they were not biologically related (but on whom they depended) would have needed to be a mind-reader; it would have relied on the ability to understand what other members of their species were thinking. Empathy would have been the essential human trait that allowed our infant ancestors to find the adults who would feed them while avoiding those likely to harm them. By arguing that empathy is what made us human, Hrdy is offering a very different account of human evolution to the one Ardrey was telling fifty years ago.

So, who is right? Do the opening scenes of 2001 give us a realistic sense of Australopithecine life, or was Rousseau right to see the angel in our ape ancestors – a creature that didn't exploit or enslave other members of our species? The novelist Aldous Huxley (of *Brave New World* fame) attacked egalitarian beliefs like Rousseau's as "anti-scientific":

The doctrine of Original Sin is, scientifically, much truer than the doctrine of natural reasonableness and virtue. Original Sin, in the shape of anti-social tendencies inherited from our animal ancestors, is a familiar and observable fact. Primitively, and in a state of nature, human beings were not, as the eighteenth-century philosophers supposed, wise and virtuous: they were apes.<sup>39</sup>

But, of course, Huxley was describing brutal, savage, early-twentieth-century apes (his comments were made a few years before *King Kong* appeared). In the twenty-first century most of us agree that humans were originally apes; the question now is what sort of apes? Aggressive carnivores or peaceful collaborators? That question is addressed brilliantly in Paul McAuley SF novel *White Devils* (2004), a complex tale of biotechnology and genetic engineering running amok in a near-future Africa largely run by Western multinationals (who constantly parade their concern for the environment). In an updated re-telling of *Heart of*

<sup>38</sup> (Hrdy 2011, 3).

<sup>39</sup> "The idea of equality", in: (Huxley 1927, 19)

*Darkness*, science tries to recreate our pre-human ancestors. (And for once, I'm not going to give any spoilers: read it for yourself.)

The question is no longer whether we are apes or angels, but what kind of ape we evolved from (and how we evolved). However, that is still a way of asking about human nature. Can we point to something essential and say – that's the difference, that's what makes our species different? Or is the very idea of "human nature" just another way of saying "we", making one kind of person human, while another isn't?

© Professor Endersby 2021

## References and Further Reading

Suggestions for further reading are marked with an asterisk.

- [Carter Blake], Charles. 1863. "[review of] Huxley, T.H. *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*." *Edinburgh Review or Critical Journal*:541–569.
- Ardrey, Robert. 1961. *African genesis: a personal investigation into the animal origins and nature of man*. New York: Atheneum.
- Bleiler, Everett F., and Richard Bleiler. 1990. *Science-fiction: the early years*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press.
- \*Butler, Octavia E. 2005. *Bloodchild and other stories*. Second ed.
- Cribb, Robert, Helen Gilbert, and Helen Tiffin. 2014. "Imagining Orangutans: Fictions, Fantasies, Futures." In *Wild Man from Borneo: A Cultural History of the Orangutan*, 107--127. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Du Chaillu, Paul Belloni. 1862. *Explorations and adventures in equatorial Africa; with accounts of the manners and customs of the people, and of the chase of the gorilla, the crocodile, leopard, elephant, hippopotamus, and other animals*. 1st US ed. New York: Harper & brothers.
- Ellingson, Ter. 2001. *The Myth of the Noble Savage*. 1 ed: University of California Press.
- \*Greene, Eric. 1996 (1998). *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: race, politics, and popular culture*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- \*Haraway, Donna. 1989. *Primate visions: gender, race and nature in the world of modern science*. London: Routledge.
- Harris, Clare Winger. 1930. "The Ape Cycle." *Science Wonder Quarterly* 1 (3):388–405.
- Hodgson, Amanda. 1999. "Defining the Species: apes, savages and humans in scientific and literary writing of the 1860s." *Journal of Victorian Culture* 4 (2):228-251. doi: 10.1080/13555509909505991.
- Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer. 2011. *Mothers and others: the evolutionary origins of mutual understanding*. First Harvard University Press pbk. edition. ed. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Huxley, Aldous. 1927. *Proper Studies*. 1st ed. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Klaw, Richard. 2013. *The Apes of Wrath*. San Francisco: Tachyon Publishing.
- Krämer, Peter. 2010. *2001: a space odyssey, BFI Film Classics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- \*Milam, Erika Lorraine. 2019. *Creatures of Cain: the hunt for human nature in cold war America*. Princeton, N.J./Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Moran, Francis. 1995. "Of Pongos and Men: "Orangs-Outang" in Rousseau's "Discourse on Inequality"." *The Review of Politics* 57 (4):641-664.
- Olivier-Mason, Joshua. 2014. "'These blurred copies of himself': T. H. Huxley, Paul du Chaillu, and the reader's place among the apes." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 42 (1):99-122. doi: 10.1017/S1060150313000259.

- Sharp, Patrick B. 2018. *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction: Angels, Amazons, and Women*. Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press.
- Wells, Herbert George. 1896 (2009). *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press.
- \*Wokler, Robert. 1978. "Perfectible Apes in Decadent Cultures: Rousseau's Anthropology Revisited." *Daedalus* 107 (3):107–134.
- Yaszek, Lisa, ed. 2018. *The future is female! 25 classic science fiction stories by women, from pulp pioneers to Ursula K. Le Guin*. New York: Library of America.
- Yaszek, Lisa, and Patrick B. Sharp. 2016. *Sisters of Tomorrow: The First Women of Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press.