

Signifying Monkeys

I.

I gazed at the silverbacked gorilla through a transparent wall. His careful fingers caressed his toes. He picked up a stem of grass from the floor, brought it to his face; his prehensile lips reached for it, wrapped it, and released it. His hand flopped to the floor; it rested there for a second, then slowly relaxed and let the stem loosen to the floor.

Three young people, two women and a man, entered the humid air of the ape house, and I moved to share the view. I looked past the silverback to the leaner gorillas gathered outside in their pit, some of them lolling on rocks, some of them walking slowly on the grass, seeming careful to walk on the outer edges of their feet and the knuckles of their fingers.

Human screams startled me. The women were pointing at the silverback and covering their mouths in disgust. The man laughed nervously, then robustly. The silverback had vomited and was casually wiping up the vomitus from the concrete floor with his long right hand and licking it.

I watched the three people watching the gorilla. They discussed his behavior. One woman thought he was sick (he wasn't; gorillas just do that). The man thought the spectacle was amusing, and he teased one of the women with comparisons to her own dietary preferences. They all seemed to agree that a tremendous breach of etiquette had occurred, though none said so in quite those words. The man expressed his admiration for the gorilla's damn-the-critics attitude. They left, still loudly analyzing the event.

I stayed a moment longer trying to watch the animal's behavior with scientific detachment. But he was too damn human. I had to look away.

II.

Ever since Darwin, a doppelganger with the face of an ape has haunted art and literature..

An early example is Robert Louis Stevenson's [The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde](#). Few books have been interpreted in such a monolithically similar way by the culture at large. The meaning of Jekyll and Hyde is good and evil; ask anybody. But the novelette itself doesn't read that way.

Jekyll explains Hyde as purely evil, but he depicts himself as an ordinary human being, compounded of both good and evil, powerless to resist the lure of the purer Hyde. In other words, the two characters are not a dualistic balance; the scale is weighted in favor of evil. Stevenson depicts Hyde as distinctly simian—a choice of imagery that cannot have been lost on a Victorian world bruised by evolution.

After a rash of similarly sinister appearances, the ape began to evolve into a more sympathetic figure. King Kong, the most successful popcultural representation of the ape to date, impresses many viewers as a simple-yet-noble schmoie tragically whipped by technology. Of course, he can also be seen as a big black guy who digs white chicks—a view which probably accounts for some of the film's impact on the America of the 1930s. By the 1960s, [Planet of the Apes](#) had turned our first cousins into an ironic lens for looking in a more intellectual way at ourselves. That peculiar sensation crystallizes in a scene near the end of the film: a chimpanzee tells our human hero he's almost too ugly to kiss.

It wasn't until the 1960s that we started to study real apes in earnest. There were immediate revelations. The first was that we're not the only animals that use tools—chimps, for example, routinely use twigs to pick up ants. In 1972, a scientist named Patterson taught a gorilla named Koko sign language. The capacity for language was another trait we'd credited only to ourselves. If evolution had ruined our sense of divine preferment, the study of the great apes chipped away every other excuse for feeling superior.

Somehow, somewhere along the way, a startling role-reversal had taken place. We started to think of apes as peace-loving near-vegetarians, never inflicting violence on anything more complex than an occasional grub. Strange as it may seem, the myth of the saintly ape was just another incarnation of human arrogance. If we couldn't be better than everybody else, we could at least take comfort in being uniquely evil. Other animals kill for food; we're the only ones who kill for fun. So the reasoning went.

But then Jane Goodall brought back footage of chimps devouring young baboons. A few years later, Goodall witnessed a chimp war. The winning band hunted down the survivors of the losing band and exterminated them.

The apes seemed more human than ever.

III.

The hand of a primate is the most disturbing thing about it. There, in a monkey's paw or an ape's, is the opposable thumb on which we formerly pinned so much of our claims. There is the instrument of so much expression. There is our kinship and our uneasy sense of difference.

Once there was an gorilla named Digit, famous in some circles for his acquaintance with Dian Fossey, the naturalist who was first touched, in something like friendship, by a wild gorilla. Poachers killed Digit for his head and his hands. If you like, you can rent a film of Digit's carcass being carried to Fosse's hut. His deficiencies are disorienting: at first you hardly know what you're seeing. It seems merely a black and red abstraction for violence. Poachers could sell gorilla heads, stuffed with sawdust and posed with the fangs exposed, for a trophy. Gorilla hands were used to make ashtrays and other such bric-a-brac.

If that surprises you, sit with the image a moment: Smoke coming from the bowl of long black hands, which we can't help but see as monstrously disproportionate; skin that might be wrinkled black suede, coarsened and bagged at the knuckles; and on close inspection the fingertips whorled with a forgotten identity.

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