

## The Cutopia Paradox: Anthropomorphism as Entertainment

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### Abstract

An infant chimpanzee, dressed in riotous checks, bowtie and braces, cradled in human arms while it regards a camera, is perhaps further from us than a tiger lurking in the deepest jungle. Anthropomorphic sentiment negates empathy, blinding us to the real animal behind the “character.” The engaging creature we imagine we’d like to hold and protect is the product, most likely, of violent separation and trauma, stolen in order to bring us this enjoyment. We read the comical face, celebrating what appear to be traces of commonality; but the eyes of the small creature are windows to a realm we cannot comprehend. By following the life of a single chimpanzee, Cobby, the oldest chimp in captivity in the USA, this paper will explore our attraction to cuteness via the lens of chimpanzees in entertainment, regarding it as an intersection of emotion and metaphor that is potentially devastating to animals. We will argue that anthropomorphic sentiment and construction misdirects empathy away from the plight of real animals, and that every animal has the right to be acknowledged as a unique individual, rather than a generic entity. Animals that have been born in captivity and, to a lesser extent, those that have been extracted from the wild in infancy, can be seen as trapped between worlds. There exists, therefore, a hybrid population of animals that lives amongst us, amnesiacs dependent upon human compassion, or conversely, prey to its absence.

*Keywords:* animal, anthropomorphism, chimpanzee, entertainment, empathy.

### Resumen

Una cría de chimpancé, vestida a cuadros alborotados, pajarita y tirantes, acunada en brazos humanos mientras que mira una cámara, está tal vez más lejos de nosotros que un tigre que acecha en la selva más profunda. El sentimiento antropomórfico niega la empatía, nos ciega ante el animal real detrás del “personaje”. La criatura atractiva que imaginamos que nos gustaría guardar y proteger es el producto, probablemente, de la separación violenta y del trauma, robada para traernos este disfrute. Leemos la cara cómica, celebrando lo que parecen ser rastros de similitud; pero los ojos de la pequeña criatura son ventanas a un reino que no podemos comprender. Siguiendo la vida de un único chimpancé, Cobby, el chimpancé más viejo en cautividad en los Estados Unidos, este trabajo explora nuestra atracción hacia la ternura a través de la lente de los chimpancés en el entretenimiento, considerándola como una intersección de emoción y metáfora que es potencialmente devastadora para los animales. Sostenemos que la construcción y el sentimiento antropomórficos dirigen mal la empatía de la difícil situación de animales reales, y que cada animal tiene derecho a ser reconocido como un individuo único, en lugar de una entidad genérica. Los animales que han nacido en cautividad y, en menor medida, aquellos que han sido extraídos de la naturaleza durante la infancia, pueden apreciarse como atrapados entre mundos. Por lo tanto, existe una población híbrida de animales que viven entre nosotros, amnésicos dependientes de la compasión humana, o por el contrario, víctimas de su ausencia.

*Palabras clave:* animal, antropomorfismo, chimpancé, entretenimiento, empatía.

Parallel to the everyday world there exist a fantastic realm where animals, particularly those that are small and soft of fur, with large appealing eyes, behave in ways that directly mimic the human condition. They speak our language, wear our clothes, and share our preoccupations. We are granted access to this marvellous domain, which we shall call *Cutopia*, via the portals of popular entertainment and merchandising. The citizens of *Cutopia*, in the majority of cases, are resilient, optimistic, and quaintly amusing. Moreover they seem entirely immune from the troubles and hardships endured by animals in the real world, offering us relationships that are both convenient and reassuring. In fact they are not like real animals at all. The empathy we extend to the animal from *Cutopia*, the pink or blue construct or humanized mammal that smiles coyly as it regards us with dedicated attention, is false. Conversely, the empathy we feel for the creature that stares at us from a crowded, abattoir-bound truck is an emotion that acknowledges animal suffering, even to the extent of recognizing psychological fear beyond the imagining of physical pain. The recognition of fear in the faces of soon to be slaughtered animals elevates our ability to empathize at a psychological level that has the potential to challenge even the most convincing appearance of physical well-being. Cuteness then, or the emotional response to fictional creatures, seems aligned with the misuse or misdirection of empathy and thus needs to be analysed and evaluated.

This paper will explore our attraction to cuteness via the lens of chimpanzees in entertainment, and to regard it as an intersection of emotion and metaphor that is potentially devastating to animals. As a case study we will follow the life of Cobby, the oldest chimpanzee living in an accredited zoo in the United States of America. His long journey, from jungle to quasi-human domesticity, to performing on television and, finally, life in a zoo, offers a story that is comparatively free of suffering, but one that will nonetheless cast light on practices that can combine cruelty and exploitation with great caring and kindness. This is not a simple story to tell as animals born in captivity and, to a similar extent, those that have been extracted from the wild in early infancy can be seen as trapped between worlds. While a chimpanzee left to live in the wild is, presumably, perfectly good at being a chimpanzee, its domesticated or imprisoned counterpart quite simply is not. This, of course, applies to all animals. The cultivation of pampered companions, the noble rhetoric surrounding “man’s best friend,” and the various modes of worship and fetishism surrounding animal types are ubiquitous. Certain animals, in particular those that are young and compliant (preferably with large eyes), provoke emotional responses that can readily arouse parental and protective impulses. The opportunities for maternal/paternal rehearsals or proxies are abundant within the accessible animal kingdom, but more elusive accessibilities can be synthetically substituted via entertainment.

There exists, then, a hybrid population of animals that lives amongst us, amnesiacs dependent upon human compassion or, conversely, prey to its absence. The legions of domestic pets, or their darker cousins, the stray animals that secretly stalk the alleyways of large cities, are perhaps the most obviously separate from the utopian concept of animals living in the Eden-like environment of “the wild.” But they form only a part of the ever-increasing numbers of creatures born into captivity, forfeiting their instinctual birthrights and constituting an order of non-human life that is flanked on the one side by creatures from the wild and on the other by *Cutopians*. This third, or hybrid category, represents a collection of real species that have been successfully sublimated by human dominance. It is a strange reflection on our relationship with chimpanzees that because of, or in spite of, their genetic proximity, we still treat them as a slave class - there for our entertainment, for risky biomedical experiments, and even food.

However, the most mysterious driving factor in these relationships is our desire to anthropomorphise our fellow creatures and to represent them as humanoid. This preoccupation can be traced as far back as ancient hunting rituals and the symbolism of various deities, with animals believed to possess powerful spirits or, at the very least, to represent them. But the mythologising and imagining of the thoughts and impulses of non-human creatures is not necessarily a form of empathy. As an example, Franz Kafka imagined, in “A Report to an Academy,” the thoughts of an ape that has survived a caged journey from Africa, but immediately encountered a paradox: “Of course what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it” (qtd. in Daston 38). Elliott Sober, however, argues that the denial of anthropomorphic interpretations and inclinations can be equally problematic:

Anthropomorphism is often defined as the error of attributing human mental characteristics to nonhuman organisms; people are said to fall into this error because they are sentimental and uncritical. It is a revealing fact about current scientific culture that the opposite mistake—of mistakenly refusing to attribute human mental characteristics to nonhuman organisms—does not even have a ready name. The ethologist Frans de Waal has suggested the somewhat ungainly phrase “anthropodenial” to label this second type of error. (85)

Clearly, in order to empathize without the benefit of a shared language or communication system, a degree of “humanized” attribution is inevitable. It is when this becomes distorted or exaggerated to the point of fantasy that anthropomorphic sentiment becomes counterproductive in terms of animal welfare.

The gulf of language persists as the greatest barrier between us and other species, therefore we insert our own, inevitably exaggerating any wished for proximity. This form of fanciful representation extends to types as well, with the ugly and the predatory uniformly perceived as evil and the vulnerable and cute perceived as good. John Berger sees anthropomorphic representation as a concept that has evolved with historical circumstance. This is most apparent when we

compare the contemporary proliferation of synthetic animal toys with the semi-concealed multitudes that provide us with food sources.

Until the nineteenth century, anthropomorphism was integral to the relation between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity. Anthropomorphism was the residue of the continuous use of animal metaphor. In the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them. And in this new solitude, anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy. (Berger, 102)

The desire to narrow the gap between ourselves and other species seems age-old, a dilemma that was once veiled by ritual and is now veiled by sentimental fantasies. However, the façade presented by humanised animals, a make-believe universe constructed from varied motivations, never succeeds in entirely concealing the fellow creatures that have inspired it. Intermediary storytellers and shamans, from Aesop to Dr. Dolittle, have only succeeded in emphasizing the gulf between animals and humankind. The attribution of familiar human foibles and the suggestion of an elusive language that might be known to a limited group of cognoscenti are tropes that persist in the present. The contemporary idea of the “horse-whisperer” for instance implies a realm of arcane skills that resist classification. Perhaps the most curious development is the anthropomorphization of the anthropomorphic object, best exemplified perhaps by toy bears that walk and talk in the form of Winnie the Pooh and his contemporary counterpart “Ted.”<sup>1</sup> Such magical and artificial entities help us to accept the duality in our animal relationships inherited from long distant forebears.

The French illustrator J. J. Grandville (1803–1847) saw the animal kingdom as a feast of anthropocentric satirical opportunities. By epitomising human types as animals, he created an anthropomorphic society that utilised other species as comedic constructions: turkeys in top hats, foxes as politicians, and cats as burglars. In one drawing that stands apart from the rest he depicts a group of fish dangling baited lines into a river bobbing with human heads (Grandville 28). Here the animal transcends the role of metaphor and instead issues a moral challenge. But such representations, in Grandville’s and in other works, are all too rare. What is uncanny about Grandville’s oeuvre though is that he depicts a world where animals have become disenfranchised, conscripted into a hybridity of status where they are neither animal nor human. He anticipates the ambiguous populations of animals, both real and synthetic, that inhabit the contemporary world, animals that have been born into captivity [in some cases the rare survivors of their species] and animals that have been constructed and anthropomorphised for our amusement.

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<sup>1</sup> “Ted” is a wise-cracking, adult teddy bear featured in the film *Ted* (2012) written and directed by Seth MacFarlane.



*Cobby's Hobbies* (Calvin Productions, 1964)<sup>2</sup>

Fifty-two years ago a small chimpanzee, dressed in vaudeville style clothing by his trainer, hobbled into a television studio in bespoke leather shoes. As the cameras rolled he was released onto a set that featured a lamp, a telephone, and an umbrella. He turned to the trainer as he encountered each object, responding to visual instructions from behind the camera. The hours passed and many actions later the hot lights were dimmed and the cameras turned off. When the film footage was edited a squeaky voice-over was added as though the animal had provided a comic soliloquy for our amusement. The individuality of this animal was thus further established for his audience, but it was a constructed individuality, one that was bestowed rather than conceded. Welcome to *Cobby's Hobbies*, a television program that would pitch an infant chimpanzee against a vast array of props and situations over many episodes. The spectacle of this diminutive creature blundering good-naturedly through the human world aimed to delight us in a number of ways. Firstly, he offered us a face that was an exaggeration of our own; large features, prominent eyes that appeared to engage with us via the proxy of the camera, and a guttural pant that perhaps equated with a laugh. But what happened to this appealing creature after the credits rolled? And what happened to him when production finished altogether? What did the viewer really know about Cobby, the animal behind the illusion?

In 2014 we, the authors, decided to follow the story of Cobby the chimpanzee by seeking out and interviewing those who have been close to him, both professionally and privately. This proved to be an illuminating endeavour, necessitating a rapid learning curve regarding the contemporary world of chimpanzees and the impact of anthropomorphic appeal and genetic proximity to humans on their wellbeing and future prospects. Cobby, according to best estimates, was born in an African jungle in 1958. The circumstances of his capture and subsequent sale to an American entertainer named Murray Hill [aka Arlan Seidon] are unclear, but Hill was to become Cobby's *Svengali* until 1968. The tiny

<sup>2</sup> Courtesy of the American Library of Congress



chimp was taken into the Hill domicile, trained and cared for, eventually making stage appearances and actively earning his keep.<sup>3</sup> Hill's successful incorporation of chimpanzees into his nightclub act catapulted his career in the inevitable direction of television, the most powerful conduit of illusion the world had yet known.<sup>4</sup> Filmed in Kansas City by Calvin Productions in 1964, *Cobby's Hobbies* followed a simple formula, culminating in the production of over one hundred, four-minute episodes. But the program, unlike similar predecessors, failed to catch on. Calvin and Hill persevered but the program's reach was limited to a few regional television stations in the United States and, improbably, two in Australia. Disappointed but unstoppable, Murray Hill decided to turn his attention to the circus, quickly developing his own family acts while expanding his business in the wider direction of training and hiring out a variety of animals.

According to members of his family, Hill could be tough and generous in equal measure. He was a man who cared responsibly for his animals, family, and employees as long as he was incontestably "the boss." During their infant years, both Chatter (an older chimp, whose foray into television had proven more successful) and Cobby resided in the Hill household, living as quasi-siblings to Murray's four children. The eldest of these, Robin, later described the chimps as her "hairy brothers" and related how they were treated as bona fide family members, sharing meals and even clothes with the Hill children.<sup>5</sup> However, as chimpanzees approach physical maturity, around the age of seven or eight years, they become far more difficult to control and potentially dangerous to humans in their proximity. With apparent regret, Murray was obliged to donate his beloved chimps to zoos, as he saw no palatable alternative. This thoughtful decision proved fortunate for Cobby, who has lived in the San Francisco Zoo ever since.<sup>6</sup> In the compromised world of chimps in captivity this was indeed a happy outcome. But while Cobby began his zoo life many other members of his species were destined for lonely imprisonments or the unimaginable horrors of bio-medical research laboratories.

The transition from infant to adolescent is a dramatic development in the life of a "showbiz chimpanzee." Their cute, semi-human appeal is erased by size and, frequently, aggression, perhaps partly the result of confusion; one day an indulged pet, the next a reviled outcast. As chimps grow their "cuteness" currency diminishes radically. In the public imagination adult chimps are much less appealing than their infant selves, so entertainment roles become both unworkable and inappropriate. Moreover, the adult chimp bears little resemblance to the cute infantile version, to the extent that many associate the species only with the infant and fail to recognize the adult as the same animal. They are, in effect, expelled from

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that chimpanzees in entertainment are, without exception, infants.

<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Hill disapproved of bestowing human names onto animals.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Seidon in conversation with the authors, San Francisco, November 2014.

<sup>6</sup> At time of writing Cobby is still alive and well at the San Francisco Zoo, aged 57. Chatter's fate is less clear.

*Cutopia*. As many chimps can live on into their forties, fifties, or even longer, the problem of what to do with them becomes highly vexatious. Show business veterans inevitably join the discarded ranks of exotic pets and other “post-cute” animals in a cruel limbo of life behind bars, often deprived of companionship and subject to dispassionate treatment as experimental specimens. This class of creature faces a life of smothering limitations, forever divorced from any ancestral dignity and excluded definitively from the sentimental embrace of humankind. It would, however, be fanciful to imagine that these societal outcasts dream of utopian lives in “the wild,” as they have never experienced it. In fact “the wild” has become an increasingly romantic concept as areas that were once natural habitats diminish at alarming rates. Ironically, captivity may ultimately preserve the species, but it will survive as a modified version of its original.

The primatologist and researcher Lisa Hamburger who, for several years was Cobby’s trainer, wrote a Master’s thesis in 2003 examining the effects of captivity on the social options of chimpanzees. As case studies, Hamburger used Cobby and his three female companions, Tallulah, Maggie, and Minnie, who had been sharing his enclosure for over forty years. It is worth noting that all four chimpanzees were wildborn. Hamburger found that the three females had formed a coalition against Cobby, the alpha male, largely to defend Maggie from his unwanted attempts at domination or, more particularly, copulation:

The study population at the San Francisco Zoo has a sex ratio of one male to three female chimpanzees. After an extended period of time [...] with daily interactions, the females appear to have formed an alliance [...] banding together to displace the male [...] and working as allies to take desired food items from the male. (Hamburger 4)

The artificiality of their situation can be compared to a human scenario, as many female chimps resist mating with males who are familiar from their infancy, preferring, in the wild, to migrate to other social groups for mating. If this compromising of social options is seen to be typical, then a very different order is being established amongst captive groups, further modifying the ideal of the chimpanzee from “the wild.” Hamburger’s study suggests that captive populations of any species will exhibit modified behaviours and thus differ in fundamental ways from their original order. Such shifts in the social structure may well obstruct breeding programs as well. When we consider the predominance of captive-born chimpanzees in the United States, it is clear that while species survival may be achieved, future populations may have undergone significant social transformations.<sup>7</sup>

To return to the particular example of Cobby and his hybrid upbringing, Murray Hill provides a complex and possibly signifying case study. On the one hand, he can be seen as a shrewd and non-emotive entrepreneur who considers his

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Steve Ross, chief primatologist at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, monitors the population of known, captive chimps in the USA, and estimates the number at approximately 1850, including the large number living in non-accredited zoos or as exotic pets.

human clients as “suckers” and his animal employees as capital. On the other, he is known to have cared for his animals almost paternally, placing them on at least an equal footing with his children. To quote his second daughter, Nada: “he loved his animals and they loved him.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, it was in his own pragmatic interest to maintain good health and good relations with his “meal tickets” and to this end he was a harsh disciplinarian. But, according to his daughters, a high degree of empathy existed also. He exemplifies a centuries old human paradox in this regard. By way of contrast (or perhaps elucidation) Robert Bresson’s film *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) explores these conflicting motivations through several human subjects and their treatment of a donkey named Balthazar. While the donkey is both slave and dependent, he maintains a dignity and stoicism that elude his human counterparts, who enact a self-destructive cavalcade of the seven deadly sins. While Bresson’s story is apocryphal it nonetheless reflects our duality and inconsistency of action with regard to animals. The most significant feature of this film is Balthazar’s passive acceptance of the misfortunes that befall him, as though he is blessed with a fatalism that dilutes his suffering.

This style of depiction is the opposite of the anthropomorphic approach, where meaning will be imposed via any means possible: voice-over, costume, mood-leading sound, whatever will effectively elicit an emotive response from an audience. Bresson, instead, relies purely on empathy. In one powerful scene Balthazar is brought to a circus and encounters other animals in cages. The donkey slowly peruses the cages, exchanging eye contact with, amongst others, a tiger. The two animals connect with a tacit language that is at once moving and yet unknowable. It is clear that the hunter and the prey here possess a commonality when enslaved by a shared oppressor. Again, Bresson employs empathy, between the animals and between them and us, the audience. The difficulty with anthropomorphic layering is that it compromises empathy by replacing it with sentiment. In the case of Cobby and other anthropomorphized animals, we the viewers are engaged with the representation of the animal rather than the animal itself. Unlike Balthazar, who seems unshakeably himself in any situation, Cobby is an actor and, as such, is adept at falsely narrowing the gap between non-human and human. John Berger articulates the inevitable distance between humans and animals that anthropomorphic sentiment can never hope to overcome. He reminds us that while animals were the subject of the first artworks, the first forays of figurative language and the first rituals, they remain unknowable: “The animal can be tamed. [...] But always its lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man” (Berger, 102).

This distance goes beyond normal measurement; Cobby, the infant chimpanzee, dressed in riotous checks, bowtie and braces, cradled in human arms while he regards a camera, is perhaps further from us than a tiger lurking in the deepest jungle. The urge to anthropomorphise his small body and enjoy his facial

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<sup>8</sup> Nada Seidon in conversation with the authors, Chicago, November 2014.



contortions engulfs us in a wave of sentimental indulgence that effectively blinds us to his unnatural plight. The engaging creature we imagine we would like to hold and protect is the product, most likely, of violent separation and trauma, stolen from his family group in order to bring us this enjoyment.<sup>9</sup> We read the seemingly comical face, celebrating what appear to be traces of commonality, but the eyes of the small creature are windows to a realm we cannot comprehend. When Cobby looked at the camera, the viewer [often an urban child] experienced an engagement that was both unique to that individual and improbable for most in the modern real world. This one-to-one interaction, although synthetic, offered an intimacy that reveals a significant absence in contemporary human experience. Conversely, the impassive eyes of Balthazar the donkey offer a truer portrait of the unknowable inner world of the non-human animal. Likewise, the returned gaze of a domestic pet will always be incomplete; there is a lack of intensity or priority beyond the basic functions of appetite. A visit to the zoo will prove even less satisfactory in this regard as even the least sensitive viewer of animals will be aware that he or she forms only a generic backdrop to a creature's gaze. There is no exclusivity of the kind offered by the TV chimp or the cartoon animal. Unlike the zoo animal, the television counterpart has no purpose other than to perform for you. When this exclusivity is offered by an animal that seems to exist between species, an animal that is dressed in human clothing and engaged with human activity, then a special, if artificial, relationship is formed. However this relationship is founded in fantasy and can perpetrate a distorted understanding of both the animal in question and its species. The ubiquity of animals in entertainment exposes us to a (C)utopian universe where our fellow creatures appear to enjoy an equality that is simultaneously ludicrous and reassuring. But the very familiarity of this fantasy can blind us to potential threats of extinction, cruel practices and any meaningful understanding of a species. This is the dark side of *Cutopia*.

Jacques Derrida has pointed out that what we really mean when we use the wildly generalizing term "animal" is "non-human": "*Animal* is a word that men have given themselves the right to give. [...] as if they had received it as an inheritance. They have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept" (124). Derrida's rejection of this binary separation demands further examination of the spread of species thus delineated. While it is clearly ridiculous for a chimpanzee and a cockroach to be grouped together, a generalized conflation of mammals is similarly problematic. To counter this we look for further binaries, from hunter versus prey (carnivore versus herbivore) to, in the context of this paper, wild-born versus captive-born. In essence though, our tendency is to explore the sub-categorization of animals in terms of their proximity to, or distance from our own experience. This is what

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<sup>9</sup> These family groups are often slaughtered for bush meat and to enable the stealing of chimpanzee infants.

drives our interactions with those that seem closest to us, and are thus capable of engendering emotional connections. The extreme divergence of human responses to animal cruelty might be seen as a mirror to our mysteriously varying levels of empathy, but this is arguably the result of cultural programming via belief systems. René Descartes's disregard for the suffering of his wife's dog (even if this story is apocryphal) illustrates how empathy can be modified according to rationalisation or belief.<sup>10</sup> A lover of puppies and kittens might feel no compunction stepping on a spider, thus enacting an inherent hierarchy of empathetic sensibilities. "Empathy," therefore, can be seen as a relative term that can cover a spectrum of emotional calibrations, scaling from the "zero point" of callous indifference to profound, pro-animal sympathies. The historical position of the Catholic Church, that animals do not have "souls" and are thus inferior to humankind, has recently been revised, but its impact in previous centuries has been significant.<sup>11</sup> Descartes's view that the body is purely a mechanical instrument and that animals, without a soul, should be understood as such, provided intellectual support for both religious dogma and vivisection. This position proved influential and remains clearly widespread to this day.

A perverse acknowledgement of the qualities possessed by animals is the human need to dominate. The use of animals in circus acts or similar performances is an implicit statement of this domination. The spectacle of an animal that is known to be strong, wilful or fierce obeying its human master provokes a mixture of amazement and delight. As the viewer observes the trick or performance, admiration is directed to the trainer rather than the animal. A tacit acknowledgement of the hundreds of hours that have led to this performative moment inspires applause and excitement. Rather than oppressed or brutalized, the obedient animal is assumed to be both smart and willing. And once again, the animal that so performs is seen to exist in a space between species, a space where hybridity has elevated it to a level beyond its origins. The more the animal can approximate human activity and appearance, the more we are tempted to consider it "intelligent." We are less inclined to wonder if this human training has impacted on the animal, either positively or negatively, as the inner life of the creature is neither our immediate concern nor our immediate point of engagement.

The animal that behaves or appears as semi-human has been culturally appropriated while the animal that has surrendered its head, fur or body parts has been terminated as an individual. The head mounted on the hunter's wall is closer to the teddy bear or the animated mouse than many may choose to believe. Such trophies imply human authority over the might of the animal kingdom and uniformly feature slain creatures that are renowned for their power, speed or size.

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<sup>10</sup> Descartes is popularly believed to have nailed his wife's dog to a board and proceeded to dissect it, impervious to the small creature's cries of agony as he had rationalized that these were the result of mechanical impulses rather than real suffering.

<sup>11</sup> In a public audience in 1990 Pope John Paul II declared that animals do indeed have a soul. More recently, the current Pontiff, Francis, has stated that "dogs go to Heaven."

It is a curious fact that “cute” animals are spared from this form of tribal display. The idea of a kitten’s head mounted on a wall is unthinkable, but why is this? Perhaps such a totem would imply human cowardice, or is it because our dominion over kittens is entirely unchallenged? Another explanation might be that empathy towards animals that are cute, or that represent a species of individuals rather than types are more likely to induce compassion. The status of the “cute” animal, in human eyes, is strangely separate from that of the giant or the threatening carnivore. When Derrida describes the gaze of his cat, a gaze that inspects his naked privacy, he responds to this cat as an individual rather than a generic clone: “It doesn’t silently enter the bedroom as an allegory for all the cats on earth, the felines that traverse our myths and religions” (115). While this animal remains inscrutable, its individuality or uniqueness is registered; it is not reduced to the collective identity of a hunter’s mounted trophy. While the hunter may recall the fatal event in detail, the act of killing and mutilation has forever deleted the victim’s uniqueness. Conversely, Derrida’s co-habitation with his cat produces a familiarity that further enhances the creature’s status as an individual and, more importantly, one that lives largely by its own rules.

I see it as this irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, enters this place where it can encounter me, see me, even see me naked. Nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized. (Derrida 116)

While Derrida is acutely aware of his cat’s gaze, the gaze of the other, it is a gaze that eludes comfortable exchange. Conversely, the eyes of the TV chimp seem dedicated to the very warmth of exchange the cat fails to offer. In a further distinction, the cat or pet almost certainly has a name. Whether this name is borrowed from human usage or is, say, conventionally feline (e.g. Tiddles), it affords the creature a degree of anthropomorphic significance. Likewise, the entertainer animal that performs in the public domain also has a name. To name something is to acknowledge its right to exist. A mountain on the moon does not exist for us unless it is named. A chimpanzee does not exist for us, as an individual, unless it is named. Conversely, a stag that appears in the cross-hairs of a rifle is simply “a stag.”

The positioning of animals as generic rather than particular was accelerated by the advent of the industrial revolution, where animals became only supportive of, rather than central to, the lives of humankind. However, a contradictory position, perhaps the result of societal misgiving, has emerged with regard to our engagements with our fellow creatures. While our primordial interest in other species is clearly as a source of food and, to a lesser extent, labour, the need to compensate these exploitations seems equally primal. Berger describes the genesis of this traditional paradox thus:

they [animals] were mortal and immortal. An animal’s blood flowed like human blood, but its species was undying and each lion was Lion, each ox was Ox. This—maybe the first existential dualism—was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed. (102)

The farmer who eats a beloved animal, although subject to the duality described by Berger, respects that animal's ultimate gift. The supermarket meat package allows for no such regard.

The discovery of extinction of species by the French zoologist and pioneer of paleontology Baron Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) shook the assumption that animal species were inexhaustible. Berger suggests that the industrial revolution brought about an accelerated extinction of species, leading to an unrequited but suppressed outbreak of human guilt. This was salved by the introduction of substitutes in the form of teddy bears and other toys, anthropomorphic animations and, of course, an increased visibility through a variety of animal-based entertainments: "it was not until the nineteenth century that reproduction of animals became a regular part of the décor of middle-class childhoods—and then [...] with the advent of vast display and selling systems like Disney's—of all childhoods" (104). So the mass production of substitute animals seeped into virtually every first-world household, frequently intermingling with (and sometimes being attacked by) domestic pets. Increasingly, it became possible to simultaneously cherish real and artificial animals within the bosom of the home while actively contributing to their accelerating demise through everyday consumerism. Increased hunting, harvesting and related environmental incursions have rendered many species extinct, despite a global infatuation with animal cartoons, toys, and pets. Berger points out that encounters with real animals in zoos inevitably lead to disappointment when compared with their fantasy-garnished replicas. This is because real animals are preoccupied with their own lives, compromised as these may be, and routinely show little interest in their human audience.

While the zoo appears to be a less contrived form of animal entertainment it nonetheless remains contentious. While some might consider the inmates pampered and protected from survival uncertainties, others would argue that it deprives animals of motivation or purpose.<sup>12</sup> Firstly, while the cage itself acts as a frame for the seemingly unadorned representation of the animal, it is an unfortunate structure that we inevitably associate with the forfeiting of freedom. It represents security from the outside while crushing elementary liberties from the inside. It might be argued that the implicit dangerousness of many animals is vicariously enhanced by the use of cages and bars, thus adding a thrill factor for the curious viewer. The German zoo pioneer Carl Hagenbeck (1844-1913) exemplifies our multivalent relationship with animals in captivity, a position echoed to some degree by the English naturalist and writer Gerald Durrell (1925-1995). Hagenbeck not only captured and exhibited wild animals for the "infotainment" of

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<sup>12</sup> This paper will not discuss these complex issues in depth but will instead look at the "entertainment" aspect of animals in cages.

the public, but also displayed human “others” in adjacent cages.<sup>13</sup> All the while, though, he worked towards introducing less draconian environments for his captives, eventually creating the modern zoo enclosure that replaces bars with the moat. The influence of Hagenbeck’s innovation has been slow to spread though, with cages still in plentiful use throughout most levels of zoological architecture. However, neither Hagenbeck’s nor Durrell’s concerns for the welfare of captive creatures challenges the act of capture in the first instance, or the resultant psychological issues imposed on these creatures. In *A Zoo in my Luggage*, Durrell describes his assembly of a menagerie of animals acquired through dealings with various hunters, wardens, and the like in 1950s Africa. While clearly enjoying the characteristic behaviours of his charges, Durrell describes their singularity without any curiosity about its origins. In this way he exemplifies the attitudes of fifty years ago, when animals were often indulged as engaging pets while little thought was afforded to their birthright or psychological wellbeing. It is revealing that Durrell’s book is contemporaneous with Cobby’s capture and sale. For all Durrell’s enjoyment of the personality of his chimp, Cholmondeley, he gives little thought to his psychological condition, eventually finding him unmanageable and handing him over to the London Zoo.<sup>14</sup>

In nearly all cases, fictive animal characters from film and TV were drawn as “good” in the sense that they would use their non-human attributes, usually involving superior acuteness of the senses, to help, protect, and/or amuse their human co-characters, in turn engaging and amusing us, the viewers. “Bad” animal characters were more likely to appear in animated or literary fantasies until the advent of horror movies such as *Them* and *Jaws*, but even in these cases, human folly or intervention was uniformly the cause of their animosity.<sup>15</sup> These acts usually took the form of environmental disturbance such as radioactive leakage or scientific adventurism gone wrong. In the rich field of primate and simian typecasting, the role of the angry or vengeful ape has become synonymous with the gorilla in the public imagination. The chest-beating giant with inestimable brute strength is nonetheless portrayed, in *King Kong* (1933) for example, as capable of emotion and tenderness.<sup>16</sup> Our cultural need for equilibrium though, also calls for a benign ape, a gentler creature or clown that can work with us rather than against

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<sup>13</sup> Hagenbeck displayed pygmies and other exotic humans in simulated environments alongside non-human species.

<sup>14</sup> Cholmondeley also “enjoyed” a brief television career and became a popular drawcard at the zoo. In 1951 Cholmondeley escaped from his cage, climbed onto a bus and bit a woman’s leg, a wound that required two stitches. Upon recapture, Cholmondeley’s keeper described him as “good as gold and, as always, a perfect gentleman” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 January 1951). Notwithstanding this, a later escape culminated with the animal being shot dead.

<sup>15</sup> *Them* (1954, dir. Gordon Douglas) describes an invasion of giant ants modified by radioactive leakage, while *Jaws* (1975, dir. Steven Spielberg) describes the unprovoked carnage wreaked by a killer shark. A slightly later film, *Orca* (1977, dir. Michael Anderson), provides a revenge motive for similar attacks perpetrated upon the human world by a killer whale.

<sup>16</sup> The 1933 version of *King Kong* was directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack.



us. The chimpanzee, of a certain age, fits this casting call perfectly.<sup>17</sup> The infant chimpanzee provides a perfect foil for human heroes such as “Tarzan” or “Jungle Jim,”<sup>18</sup> assisting with climbing, retrieving, and message delivery when needed, but reliably endearing as the clumsy, well-meaning buffoon who can induce laughter at the *dénouement* of a tense narrative. The reward of a banana is enough to reassure us that this comical creature is happy and well looked after, despite such humble return.

Within this context it is appropriate to refer to these animals as “actors” considering they were both performing and animating a role that had been authored by another being. What were the training circumstances away from the eye of the camera? Were they adequately rewarded for entertaining us, for helping to form our paradoxical worldview? And what happened to them after their currency as entertainers had expired? Cobby the chimp offers a window through which we can explore shifting attitudes to animals in entertainment, from the 1960s to the present. His “childhood” loosely coincides with the space program, television sit-coms, and the proliferation of advertising. Chimpanzees were routinely cast as both comic and “lovable.” The latter is a curious word that doesn’t necessarily equate with “loved.” As innocents we are happy to watch these “actors” and enjoy their apparent clumsiness and good naturedness, imagining, perhaps, that their wish is to be more like us. We are programmed to believe whatever fantasy is offered through the magical conduit of television, rarely following the occasional inclination to question the reality of such marvels. After all, it’s only harmless entertainment, isn’t it? The phrase “harmless entertainment” prompts a disturbing question though: how should we define its opposite, which presumably is “harmful” entertainment, an ironic consideration in the context of this paper.

If the animal performing a quasi-human action, perhaps dressed as a quasi-human and filmed as a quasi-human, does indeed wish to become a quasi-human, we can only ask “why?” If our innocent answer is “to ensure a better life,” then it follows that the life of an animal is inevitably inferior or miserable. If our answer takes the form of an endorsement of the creature’s intelligence, then we might assume that such a transmutation is possible, notwithstanding the total

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<sup>17</sup> This template was both challenged and inverted by the *Planet of the Apes* films, where adult chimpanzees wreak vengeance on the cruel human world that has enslaved them. These films, of course, do not use real chimpanzees for their protagonists, instead introducing audiences to the concept of the adult chimp via prosthetic costumes that mostly resemble (particularly in the original film) baby chimps on a larger scale. Recent films (*Rise of the Planet of the Apes* 2011, dir. Rupert Wyatt and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* 2014, dir. Matt Reeves) depict mature chimps with far more visual accuracy, further exploring the “good vs bad” axis within the primate universe. But these films bear too much similarity to the idea of “fantasy revenge,” where a creature that is perhaps intended as symbolic (e.g. “creature from the black lagoon” or ET) appears as an avatar for general, intra-human conflicts, and the need for empathy.

<sup>18</sup> Both featured a tame chimpanzee: Cheetah in the *Tarzan* films (1932-48) and Tamba in the *Jungle Jim* TV series (Screen Gems 1955/6).

absence of success stories in this regard.<sup>19</sup> We might also assume from this fantasy (that we are so willing to follow) that the animal that aims for quasi-human status is motivated by admiration and therefore wishes to imitate—to “ape.” Clearly, such speculations are, at best, half-formed, and they fade with the closing titles of the program. When an entire series, such as *Cobby’s Hobbies* fades, then the non-human actor fades from public view as well.

There is little doubt that large eyes resonate with us at a primordial level, engendering emotion-driven responses such as nurture and protection. Wide eyes can also be interpreted as indicators of innocence, fear or wonder. But the great paradox inherent within this reading of cuteness is that the eyes of an animal, as indicated earlier, resist any confirmation of meaning. They are, in fact, the most unfathomable feature of any animal, windows to a world that might contain the secrets of the universe or, conversely, nothing beyond the most fundamental survival functions. Their inscrutability, as evidenced by the donkey Balthazar, by Derrida’s cat and, penetrating the mask of anthropomorphic garnish, by Cobby the chimpanzee, presents us with one of the great mysteries of human inquiry. The animal that is offered for entertainment, as we have seen, is a representation that effectively obscures rather than reveals the real individual we observe. While Cobby has never enjoyed total control of his long life, he has maintained an enigmatic inner “persona” that is his and his alone. While trainers and keen observers have described him having mood swings, or good and bad days, and while the political equilibrium between him and his female companions can be understood at a basic level, the one thing he can tell us beyond any doubt is perhaps the most valuable message he can impart—he has always been, and will always be, a unique individual quite distinct from his television representation. We must remind ourselves that every animal, whether cute, nameless, big, small, dangerous, endangered, pampered or mistreated, possesses a sovereign identity that is incontrovertibly its own.

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<sup>19</sup> This point seems to be underlined by the relative lack of successful communication resulting from teaching sign language to Koko the gorilla and Nim the chimpanzee, both featured in recent documentary films (*Koko: A Talking Gorilla*, dir. Barbet Schroeder 1978; *Project Nim*, dir. James Marsh 2011).



Cobby, aged 56, at San Francisco Zoo, 2014 (photo: Michael Vale)

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