

## Tilburg University

### Gorillas as Others

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## GORILLAS

became part of the then prevailing image of the great apes which, with some exceptions, was quite negative: lustful, brutish, and aggressive. Their huge size and the – from the human point of view – aggressive nature of encounters in the wild contributed to this image. These were exactly the same sort of characteristics that were attributed time and again to non-Caucasian “races”. Emmanuel Frémiet’s bronze statue of a gorilla snatching an African female, displayed at the 1859 Salon de Paris, sums up the stereotype pretty well (see below).

This statue also plays upon the Beauty-and-the-Beast theme, already present in the ancient theme of sylvan satyrs abducting shepherdesses, which resurfaces on many occasions in the European imagination. The gorilla stereotype is in tune with the character of Caliban in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611). Caliban, a wild native of the tropical island upon which Europeans are shipwrecked, is a quintessential bestial European Other, an avatar and condensation of earlier figures such as the Plinian Races and the Wild Man. It is an ambiguous being, a monster, as the text states some 40 times, “a thing most brutish”, a “thing of darkness”, “as disproportioned in his manners [as] in his shape”. Caliban, the Beast, lusts after the young and attractive Miranda, the Beauty, and is enslaved by her father, the prince and scholar-magician Prospero, a paragon of civilized European humanness.

The interaction of Anne Darrow and an apish monster in Merian Cooper’s 1933 film *King Kong* or in Peter Jackson’s 2005 remake fits in this tradition. Here however, the monster’s nature is more complex, more ambiguous; it has positive aspects as well. In addition, Jackson refers extensively to the history of human indifference to and exploitation of the apes, and plays with traditional gender stereotypes. This *King Kong* is unlike the monstrous al-

iens confronted by an attractive female in Ridley Scott’s film *Alien* (1979) and its sequels, and closer to the positive depiction of the chimpanzee in Peter Høeg’s brilliant 1996 morality tale *The Woman and the Ape*.

A colonial propaganda film made in the 1950s in the Belgian Congo on behalf of the Belgian government was still typical of the traditional negative attitude towards apes. It circulated widely in Belgian cinemas, programmed on Sunday afternoons for families with children. The footage shows in great and, by present-day standards, shocking detail how scientists of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences shoot and kill an adult female gorilla carrying young. Subsequently, the body is skinned and washed in a nearby stream, with the distressed youngster sitting next to it. The adult’s skeleton, skin and other body parts were collected for scientific study and conservation, while the live young gorilla was sent to the Antwerp Zoo.

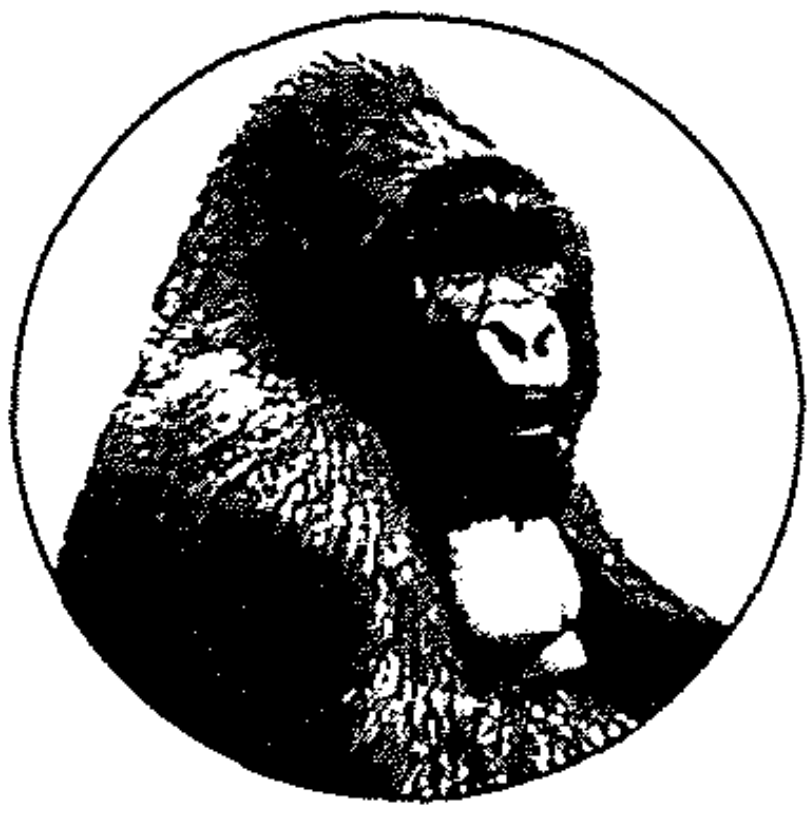
Just a decade later, such a cruel scene had come to be unthinkable as

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Gorillas were discovered by the Western world somewhat later than the other great apes. Chimpanzees and subsequently also orang-utans had been arriving in Europe on merchant ships since the 17th century. Gorillas







## GORILLAS

suitable for Western families with children. The publicity around field studies of and language studies with great apes since the 1960s brought about significant changes in the way Westerners felt about them. A forceful new icon was the picture of a young Jane Goodall and an equally young chimpanzee reaching their fingers to one another, as portrayed in a 1967 issue of *National Geographic*. This was reinforced by the photos and film of Dian Fossey, overwhelmed with emotion as the wild gorilla Digit chooses to sit beside her and examine her notebook and pen – an interaction so sensitively recreated in the film *Gorillas in the Mist*. Likewise, psychologist Penny Patterson's sign language research and friendship with female gorilla Koko provided another, well-publicized challenge to traditional stereotypes. Both filmmaker Jackson and fiction writer Høeg are trying to come to terms with such positive appreciations against the background of relentless oppression and exploitation by humans.

Through the ages, the Caliban character has been portrayed as a brute primitive, a noble savage, the missing link, an unemancipated slave, a colonial native, and a postcolonial citizen. The chimpanzee appears as a noble Caliban in Jane Goodall's and Dale Peterson's book *Visions of Caliban: On Chimpanzees and People* (1993) – a far cry from the ferocious orang-utan in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). Early hominins too started to appear in illustrations and museum dioramas as peaceful human-like beings in idyllic natural settings, although pictures of monstrous brutes wielding clubs persist to some degree, as did less positive views of apes, especially baboons.

*Raymond Corbey*

*For more on this subject, see R. Corbey: The Metaphysics of Apes: Negotiating the Animal-Human Bound-*

*ary. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press*