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Abstract

It is generally accepted today that the turbulent life of the American primatologist Dian Fossey developed over time into the stuff of legend; so much so that its singularly nasty end – she was murdered in 1985 in circumstances that are still far from certain – is seen by some as ‘something she might well have made up for herself’ (Torgovnick 91). Fossey’s celebrity (or, perhaps better, her notoriety) is attributable to several different factors, not least the 1988 Hollywood film (*Gorillas in the Mist*) celebrating her exploits.

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It is generally accepted today that the turbulent life of the American primatologist Dian Fossey developed over time into the stuff of legend; so much so that its singularly nasty end — she was murdered in 1985 in circumstances that are still far from certain — is seen by some as ‘something she might well have made up for herself’ (Torgovnick 91). Fossey’s celebrity (or, perhaps better, her notoriety) is attributable to several different factors, not least the 1988 Hollywood film (*Gorillas in the Mist*) celebrating her exploits. The various scandals and rumours surrounding Fossey’s life, and the unsolved mysteries surrounding her death, also produced an inevitable knock-on effect on her discipline, itself no stranger to celebrity. As Linda Fedigan observes, the celebrity status of primate science today owes a great deal to the mid- to late twentieth-century media focus on Fossey and the other two so-called ‘trimates’ (Jane Goodall and Biruté Galdikas) whose pioneering work generated funding for primates and the scientists who studied them; who motivated others, particularly though by no means exclusively women, to follow in their footsteps; and who triggered a wave of public sympathy in North America, Europe and elsewhere (2001 63). It is also indebted to the popular appeal of conservation in its mythic form as an emotionally charged programme for saving animals. Conservation, and animal welfare more generally, have probably provided the most important route to public recognition through which primate science, popularised for a global TV audience, has simultaneously drawn attention to shared ethical issues and personalised these by encouraging audience members to identify emotionally with individual animals’ lives (Fedigan 2001; Mitman 2005). In this affect-heavy context, animals are as likely as human beings to be celebrity subjects; indeed, one of the features of this particular sub-field is the densely constructed web of mediated relations through which human beings are made to converge, in staged acts of sympathetic imagination, with animals and vice versa, performing media-friendly versions of what Michael Taussig (1993) calls, in a separate if not wholly unrelated context, ‘mimetic excess’.¹

This simulacrum of convergence, perhaps the most striking of primatology’s mythic narratives, is conspicuously gendered, with the figure of Woman, assigned a similarly mythic role as chosen mediator between animal ‘nature’ and human ‘culture’, being seconded into the service of mending the broken link between both of these and the master-figure of Original Man (Haraway 1989 150). Donna Haraway’s work, in particular, has been instrumental in opening out these and

other myths surrounding the development of primate science in the two decades immediately following the end of the Second World War. In *Primate Visions* (1989), Haraway provides compelling evidence for her view that primate stories often function today as ‘allegories of inventing nature in a world where the cost and the work of the construction can no longer be invisible’; in other words, they operate as mythic narratives in which the historical work of myth, and the social and political circumstances behind it, come to the surface even as the myth itself tries to empty history and politics out (1989 131; see also Barthes 1972 151).

Consequently, one of Haraway’s main aims is to put history and politics back into the post-war mythologies surrounding coded relations between (female) primatologists and (male) primates, dislodging the ‘spaces of origin’ embedded within these mythic structures and reconnecting them instead to historical contexts — decolonisation, the nuclear threat, the Cold War — that required, as a kind of ideological antidote, the ‘renaturalization’ of white/Western/scientific Man (145, 153). One common trope is unification. Here, (female) primatologist and (male) primate are fused in a multifaceted ‘drama of touch’ (149) that not only reaches across differences of all kinds — sex, race, species — but also does so in a ‘timeless’ setting in which each acts as a surrogate for the other and both are rehabilitated to a natural wildness to which Man, their ultimate stand-in, is reconciled and restored. Another is salvation. Here, relief is provided from the destructive fall-out of advanced industrialism by the staging of ideologically reassuring ‘rehabilitant narratives’, notably the lush audiovisual productions of *National Geographic*, in which endangered apes are painstakingly rescued in order that imperilled humanity might be rescued from itself (156).

There are counter-myths to these, of course, for example, the myth of the female primatologist as inspirational eco-warrior (Mowat 1987), shamanic sorceress (Montgomery 1991), or tragic if by no means innocent victim to Africa’s ‘inherent’ propensity to violence, madness and despair (Krasner 2000; Shoumatoff 1988). The important point here is that both popular and academic work on Fossey, as if mesmerised by the myths it seeks to analyse, tends to fall — precipitously at times — into extended mythmaking of its own, with sometimes excruciating results. Allowances should probably be made for some, for example, Marianne Torgovnick, who gamely confesses that she finds it difficult to achieve critical distance from her subject, but still seems entranced by her own metaphors: ‘Fossey had come to the gorillas with a gentle, idealized image of their lives as marked by primitive harmony: it was to be a kind of Eden, translated to the animal world. So [she] had trouble accommodating facts that reeked of death and ashes’ (98–99). It is difficult, though, to find much credit in popular biographical accounts of Fossey, which run the gamut from the portentously New Age (Nienaber) to the stock-feminist (Norwood) to the sentimentally protective (Mowat), with this last providing further evidence of the imitative fallacy, the seemingly insatiable desire to ‘out-Fossey’ Fossey, that accompanies even the most supposedly even-handed of commentaries on her life and work.

Her various biographical accounts, in fact, read more like mythographies than memoirs; and more still like competing exercises in sympathetic imagination, implicitly invoking celebrity parasocial relations in order to create mediated effects of intimacy with the biographical subjects they narrate. An extreme instance of this is ventriloquism. In *Gorilla Dreams*, for example, Georgianne Nienaber not only contrives to perform the role of spirit-medium for Fossey; she also reconstructs animated conversations between Fossey and her favourite gorilla, Digit, thereby literalising Sy Montgomery's metaphor of the trimates as shamanic 'wisewomen' with privileged access to animals' thoughts and memories and a magical capacity to effect the mystical reunion of human and animal consciousnesses across time and space (Nienaber 50–51; see also Montgomery 1991).

Posthumous accounts like these play between memory and myth to produce a series of alternative celebrity images of Fossey: embattled action heroine; sensitive animal advocate; freedom-loving feminist icon; reckless 'madwoman confronting the primitive' (Krasner 245); tragic victim of uncontrollable historical forces, redeemed by her 'extraordinary love' for the animals she protected and for whom she would eventually lay down her own life (Shoumatoff 42). Romantic myths of vulnerability come to the fore ('In many ways I was more vulnerable than the gorillas I was determined to protect' — [Nienaber 19]); so too myths of precedence and uniqueness ('I was truly a lone representative of my species, about to be welcomed with open arms by *Gorilla birengei birengei*. I would become the first human to be completely accepted within their society, the first to bond with them, and the only one to die while protecting them' — [Nienaber 20]). Over and against these, though, is the equally powerful sense of Fossey as a belated figure, seemingly condemned throughout her life to operate in others' shadow: Montgomery, for example, sees her as demonstrative, seeking attention despite the relatively isolated existence she led at her secluded research station (Karisoke); but also doomed, fighting a losing battle with 'Jane [Goodall] and her chimps for the limelight' and repeatedly predicting that both she herself and 'her' animals would suffer untimely deaths (Montgomery 228).²

The comparison with Goodall is instructive. While Fossey was certainly aware of her rivalry with Goodall (Montgomery offers the anecdote that Fossey, while working on the book that would later become *Gorillas in the Mist*, joked that she would call it *In the Shadow of In the Shadow of Man*),³ the differences between herself and Goodall have been romantically exaggerated, with Torgovnick — tongue admittedly in cheek — likening Goodall to the 'conventional light-haired heroine to Fossey's dark-haired counterpart: *Gone with the Wind*'s Melanie to Scarlett — both of whom have their "fans" among readers' (103). Goodall, of course, is a celebrity in her own right, and she regularly gathers hagiographic accolades: 'the mother of primatology'; 'the foremost global celebrity animal person'; 'the superstar who revealed nature to the rest of the world' (McHugh 189, 192). In some ways, she fits the bill as a celebrity conservationist much more

readily than Fossey: adopted from a fairly early stage as a darling of the media, she continues well into her seventies to maintain a 'marathon lecture circuit, which keeps her travelling as much as 300 days per year, drawing packed crowds from all over the world' (McHugh 196).

Fossey lectured too, but her celebrity or, perhaps better, the production of her celebrity image has been quite different. For one thing, it is a fractured image, in which celebrity and myth — celebrity as myth — form part of a lively trade in mystery and rumour. Joshua Gamson's 'economy of tidbits' comes to mind — that unseemly scramble, inadequately parsed as celebrity gossip, in which rival media agents (publicists, journalists, and the like) fight it out over access to the celebrity image and 'unmined pieces' of celebrity personalities' lives (94). In this context, the elusiveness of Fossey's life, and the inconclusiveness of her death, can be seen as conspiring to make her celebrity image precious precisely because it is so obviously unresolved.

For another, it is a *hybrid* image in which 'real' and 'fictional' selves combine and human and animal subjects intermingle. Digit and Dian, the celebrity cross-species pair, feature in much of this work, sometimes playing themselves but just as often made-up characters. Repetitions and resemblances abound. Some charm: Dian imitates Digit imitating Dian, while the celebrity of one nourishes the celebrity of the other. Others shock: Digit's death prefigures Dian's; both of these are unbidden, brutal, bloody. In a hall-of-mirrors effect, the victim narratives begin alarmingly to proliferate. Celebrity does not necessarily produce such effects, but it exacerbates them. Celebrity martyrology — the registering of iconic bodies in pain — ironically confirms the Fossey legend as 'dark romance' (Hayes 1991); as endlessly repeating versions of the same story; as the infinite regress of human-animal mimesis; as the death-driven chronicle of a life foretold.⁴

For a third, as the preceding fantasia suggests, it is a traumatic image. Celebrity may not be created by death, but it is certainly consolidated by it; and Fossey's life is often represented, not least by Fossey herself, as having been marked out for violent destruction from the start. As Gillian Whitlock remarks of her 1983 memoir, *Gorillas in the Mist*, the eponymous gorillas are treated as subjects of mourning even at the moment of first contact; memoir doubles as obituary in a context of traumatic suffering framed by the recurrent image of the animal graveyard, with its plaintive arrangement of individualised burial sites (479). A doleful, agonised air similarly hovers over much of the secondary literature about Fossey. Harold Hayes begins his account with Fossey's death, framing it immediately in terms of murder mystery; while Georgianne Nienaber goes one further by performing a kind of imaginative resurrection in which the 'spirit of Dian, [still standing] watch over her beloved gorillas', speaks to us from beyond the grave (Nienaber xvii).⁵

A fourth component of Fossey's celebrity image is her activism. Unlike Goodall, whose iconicity has largely been structured through nuclear-family relations and

gentler forms of animal advocacy (McHugh 191), Fossey has acquired the mythic reputation of a rambunctious individualist, battling it out alone against hostile forces (poachers, corrupt government officials, and others) before eventually giving her life for the animals she loved. This ‘loner’ image has bolstered the myth in turn that Fossey was only ever able to connect with the gorillas, had little sympathy for the people with whom they shared the country, and failed to extend a sense of kinship that might work for the survival and wellbeing of both (Armbruster 222). Torgovnick’s portrait is particularly misleading in this regard. ‘It would be possible’, she says,

to characterize Fossey’s history as one of blindness towards Africans [which] in her case [was] ultimately quite dangerous ... Fossey’s indifference to the Africans’ needs may [eventually] have doomed her. She stubbornly refused to think about gorillas from the Rwandans’ point of view, and this blindness, or wilfulness, may have cost her her life. (94)

It would be possible, perhaps, but it would also be inaccurate. Consider, for example, this telling passage from near the end of her memoir:

Foreigners cannot expect the average Rwandan living near the boundaries of the Parc des Volcans and raising pyrethrum for the equivalent of four cents a pound to look around at the towering volcanoes, consider their majestic beauty, and express concern about an endangered animal species living in those misted mountains. Much as a European might see a mirage when stranded in a desert, a Rwandan sees rows and rows of potatoes, beans, peas, corn, and tobacco in place of the massive *Hagenia* trees. He justifiably resents being refused access to parkland for the realization of his vision. (239).

In passages like this one, Fossey abandons the romantic narrative that she adopts elsewhere and that others have been so keen to construct around her. Her emphasis instead is on educating local people about the value of ecological sustainability by stressing the interrelatedness of human and animal welfare — an ecological perspective which, while recognised by several of her critics, is largely missing from popular accounts of her work. Fossey’s views here might be described as patronising, but they are not dismissive. Rather, they are pragmatic, just as her view on gorilla tourism was that it needed to be ‘properly directed’ in the interests of the majority, counteracting greed and tribalism by empowering ‘consistent, uncompromising individuals able to consider the needs of animals before their own’ (241).

Fossey’s pragmatism similarly underpinned her stated preference for ‘active’ over ‘theoretical’ conservation — a key distinction that helps to explain much of her local activist (as opposed to global advocacy) work. Active conservation, she believed, involved the day-to-day, sometimes necessarily punitive measures (enforcing anti-poacher laws, safeguarding limited habitat, and so forth) needed to secure the freedom of animals whose very existence was under severe threat (242). Theoretical conservation sought instead to build infrastructure, for example,

by encouraging the growth of tourism and the industries surrounding it, and by using the income derived from industry and commerce to meet long-term social and ecological goals (58).

It is certainly true that Fossey's preference for active over theoretical modes of conservation brought her into conflict with the authorities, who were keen to develop the money-spinning potential of an emergent industry (ecotourism) in a new nation (Rwanda) keen to bolster its international credentials by indexing national ambition to economic growth. It is also true that theoretical conservation has since won the day in postcolonial Rwanda, where gorilla tourism is one of the largest income-generating activities in the country, and where a raft of new programmes and initiatives, some of them directly profiting from her legacy, might, as Farley Mowat melodramatically puts it, have Fossey 'turning in her grave' (Mowat 329). Still, it is important to get beyond the myth of Fossey as 'anti-African'; if anything, she was 'anti-foreigner' in the restricted sense of what she calls 'the self-eulogizing attempts of expatriates to impose the notion of wildlife as a treasured legacy' — to inflict a Western conservationist ethic — on a local, impoverished people for whom 'wildlife is [generally] considered an obstacle [unless] it proves economically viable [in the shape of] skins, meat, and tusks' (241).

Part of the appeal of active conservation, then — for Fossey at least — was that it empowered local Africans to take responsibility for protecting their natural heritage; and part of the downside of its theoretical counterpart was that it ignored realities on the ground.⁶ In both cases, Fossey was acutely aware of the perils of celebrity, not least because she saw her work as practical rather than evangelical; heroic in its own way but unselfish and unheralded, its rightful place was 'behind the scenes [and] far from the public eye' (58). This brings me to one last aspect of her image, and in many ways the most troubling: her paradoxical status as an anti-celebrity celebrity. Ambivalence rather than opposition might be more accurate. Evidence suggests that she was keen to play the part of the reluctant celebrity, uncomfortable in the media spotlight and fiercely protective of her own privacy, which she often saw as being shared with 'her' gorillas and was increasingly fearful of losing as her work became internationally known. Still, pragmatic as she was, she was quick to recognise the value of celebrity in generating global publicity for what, in most other respects, was an intensely local cause.

A classic example here is the soul-searching that followed the slaughter of her 'beloved Digit' (183), himself already something of a celebrity figure, having featured prominently in national tourist-board promotional material and as her co-star on internationally networked TV shows. In discussing post mortem options with her Karisoke colleague Ian Redmond, Fossey recalls having been in two minds, equally determined to capitalise on Digit's legacy and concerned that the world 'would climb evangelistically onto a "save the gorilla" bandwagon upon hearing of [his] death' (207). The results of the discussion are well known:

the Digit Fund, set up to support active gorilla conservation in Africa; and mass media coverage, captured in a further iconic moment: Walter Cronkite announcing Digit's death to a shocked TV audience of millions in the US.

In one sense, it is easy to see why Fossey became famous, and why the different meanings surrounding her legacy are still debated with the same passion as she displayed in her work with Central African mountain gorillas during her short but colourful life. In another, though, it is hard to pin her down, for she is nothing if not a contradictory figure, and these contradictions feed into a composite legend that offers frequently contending, and always inconclusive, interpretations of her life and work. Controversial to a point, she was an obvious candidate for celebrity, and while she was never particularly comfortable with her celebrity status, she was astute enough to know how to manipulate it in what she thought was the best interests of 'her' gorillas, who — whatever else we may doubt about her — she undeniably put before herself.

Memoir has been a primary vehicle for the circulation of the various mythic narratives and celebrity images surrounding the Fossey legend: narratives and images that sometimes have a hallucinatory quality in their capacity to turn her life into the stuff of dreams and nightmares, generating a high-romantic vocabulary of sacrifice and transcendence that has been applied by academic critics and popular biographers alike. While this vocabulary may stretch patience at times, it at least shows how attempts to explain the Fossey phenomenon almost inevitably founder — and why she herself often seemed at a loss to explain it to herself. This is not to turn Fossey into a mystic, and I hope to have made it clear that I have little sympathy for the view that her life 'fits certain "deep structures" in shamanism: for example, intimacy with mountains, and, most of all, friendship with animals and access to the language of the beasts' (Torgovnick 109). Fossey was emphatically not, as Torgovnick suggests, 'a modern woman with impulses that might, in other contexts, have become religious'; nor, in her mountain retreat, did she ever become fully cut off from the modern world (109). Rather, as Brian Noble (2000) rightly asserts, she was a 'worldly primatologist' whose local conservation work resonated with a global public that proved both emotionally disposed to support her and morally convinced of the rightness of her cause.

Contemporary celebrities, across a number of fields, can be seen to act as touchstones for an equally wide variety of competing legacies. This is very much the case with Fossey, in whose truncated life a number of different hopes — some of them in more-or-less direct competition with one another — continue to be invested. It is necessarily unclear how Fossey will be remembered in future, and what uses will be made of a life's work that, in the decades since her own life abruptly ended, appears to have lost little of its original market appeal or romantic cachet. Whatever the case, though, it seems highly likely that the various mythic narratives and mediated meanings that have gathered around her will continue to proliferate; and that hers, like her romantic soul-mate Digit's, will remain a decidedly unquiet grave.

NOTES

- ¹ Mimetic excess, according to Taussig, is a form of ‘mimetic self-awareness’ in which ‘mimesis is turned in on itself’, usually for transformative purposes, for example, to effect new understandings of the relationship between self and other, subject and object, sameness and difference (252–53). One of the most arresting features of Fossey’s practice is the acute mimetic self-awareness it displays towards lived human/animal relations; the most radical interpretation of this is that it works towards new forms of ‘subject-forming entanglement’ (Donna Haraway’s phrase) in which the species boundary is crossed and both parties — animal and human, primate and primatologist — are mutually transformed (Haraway 2008; see also Whitlock 2010).
- ² Fossey is also belated in other ways, for example, in her indebtedness to the field biologist George Schaller — a celebrity conservationist in his own right — whose pioneering work with gorillas, dating back to the late 1950s, is not always acknowledged in popular accounts of her work.
- ³ *In the Shadow of Man* (1971) was the title Goodall gave to her bestselling field study, based on her research on chimpanzees in Tanzania. Highly acclaimed, the book confirmed her fame rather than created it, consolidating her position as one of the most publicly recognised female scientists in the world.
- ⁴ Celebrity conferred a victim status on Fossey that she herself fiercely contested; the same might be said of ‘her’ animals. Admittedly Digit’s death, graphically related in her 1983 memoir *Gorillas in the Mist*, turns him momentarily into a sacrificial figure, heroically holding off poachers so as to allow other family members to escape (206). Generally, though, Fossey sharply rejected the instrumental view of animals as victims. Her aim instead was to ascribe agency to them: to see them as fully cognisant subjects in a world of their own fashioning. However, she recognised the usefulness of victim images in attracting attention to, and funding for, conservation work.
- ⁵ A staple of popular biography on Fossey is the use of her Christian name. While first names commonly feature in popular work of this kind, the claim to familiarity is arguably the greater when the subject is (1) a woman (2) a celebrity or (3) both. Once again, the desire for intimacy is the key, which is used in turn to create an affective bond between writer and reader. The conservation theme tightens this bond by adding a moral element of protection; but note that with (female) celebrity conservationists like Fossey, the celebrity figure is as likely to be a conduit to affection as an object of affection, with animals serving as the ultimate emotional goal.
- ⁶ Whether Fossey’s own idiosyncratic brand of active conservation was actually empowering to local Africans is, of course, another matter: for a starkly negative assessment, see Weber and Vedder 2001.

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