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A line of distinction: Orangutan farces and questions of interpretation

Abstract

In 2004, the American Academy of Television Arts and Sciences ruled that Bam Bam, an orangutan starring as a hospital nurse in the long-running sitcom *Passions*, could not be nominated for an Emmy Award on the grounds that 'a line of distinction' had to be drawn 'between animal characters that aren't capable of speaking parts and human actors whose personal interpretation in character portrayal creates nuance and audience engagement' (Anon 2008 [my emphasis]).

HELEN GILBERT

A Line of Distinction: Orangutan Farces and Questions of Interpretation¹

‘I’m not looking for trouble as men are ... I like acting.
It is so easy to amuse idle people.’ (Hornaday 62)



Fig. 1: The Disappearing Orange Trick. (Photo: Bronek Kaminski *Every Which Way But Loose*.)

In 2004, the American Academy of Television Arts and Sciences ruled that Bam Bam, an orangutan starring as a hospital nurse in the long-running sitcom *Passions*, could not be nominated for an Emmy Award on the grounds that ‘a line of distinction’ had to be drawn ‘between animal *characters* that aren’t capable of speaking parts and human *actors* whose personal interpretation in character portrayal creates nuance and audience engagement’ (Anon 2008 [my emphasis]). The judgment that Bam Bam could be a character but not create one suggests not only the extent to which the film and television industries guard the singularity of humans even while mining their similarity with other animals, notably apes, for comic purposes, but also what might be invested in acting itself as a marker of species difference. Since at least the late 1970s, the popular screen has harnessed the idea, long evident in traditional circuses and early zoos, that the most appealing animal acts turn on performance routines that, within constructed situations, subtly give ‘the impression that the animal has humanlike motivations, emotions and reasoning’ (Bouissac 118). Physical resemblances between performing animals and watching humans are not requisite to such acts — rats and parrots have performed starring roles as readily as have dogs, pigs, horses, elephants, dolphins and cats — but resemblance does add resonance to genres such as farce, where mistaken identity plots, slapstick physical humour and elaborate chase scenes are standard fare. Orangutans have lent themselves well to performing in these genres because of their expressive, individualised faces and their extensive use of gestural language, as well as their morphological similarity to humans. But are they capable of self-conscious representation? Like the silent mime, the orangutan actor ‘speaks’ volumes before an audience but always leaves room for interpretation.

Zoo and circus histories offer rich ‘behind the scenes’ accounts of orangutans’ intelligent work with (and occasionally against) humans in the world of popular entertainment, while science has demonstrated that orangutans have the greatest ideational capacity among non-human animals. Yet, this ability to understand situations abstractly and to devise appropriate actions does not necessarily confirm that orangutan performers are knowing actors as well as (apparently) natural ones. Faced with the impossibility of assessing what these animals think, and whether we humans could be the real butt of the jokes embedded in their performances, as my epigraph suggests, I want to consider briefly the representation of orangutans in comic films and what insights such works offer on the idea of acting as necessarily confined to self-reflexive impersonation by humans — a concept that works implicitly to limit personhood to humans. Acting here is approached in the sense of giving meaning to a role, although it is recognised that editing, through montage in particular, can and sometimes does give the appearance of acting (among humans as well as animals) even where emotion is not deliberately applied to the performance.² The films discussed shy away from tackling direct questions about orangutans’ thespian capacities, but are invested in showing them

as possessing the qualities thought to make up deliberate acting: will, deception, self-consciousness, empathy and at least rudimentary (gestural) language. Intentional impersonation by these human-looking creatures is thus held out as a possibility that can deepen the comedy as well as adding to the intrigue.

Before 1978, when *Every Which Way But Loose* launched a spate of comic films featuring orangutans, the (real) red ape had registered on screen mostly as quarry in jungle adventure tales, while humans were recruited to play orangutans and other apes as generic monsters in horror cinema, though *Planet of the Apes* (1968) should be noted as an exception to these patterns with its landmark depiction of highly intelligent orangutans (via costumed actors) and its explicit focus on social interactions among primate species. Yet, there is one very early screen work that encapsulates the dilemmas entailed in representing orangutans as comedians: Buster Keaton's silent film, *The Playhouse* (1921). This short farce, devised as a humorous tribute to theatrical forms whose mass appeal had waned with the coming of cinema, offers a brief glimpse of the virtuoso human performers whose athletic renditions of apes had been an energising force on the nineteenth-century popular stage. Using film's facility for simultaneous doubling, Keaton presents himself as a variety-stage actor who plays all the roles in the show, including the part of a circus orangutan that he has accidentally set free from a cage. The comedy turns on Keaton's extraordinary ability to imitate an ape imitating a man as he dines at the table, smokes a cigar and then jumps, unscripted, into the auditorium, making a woman faint. More subtly, the sequence also gains force from a cameo appearance of the real orangutan whose act has been sidelined by Keaton's sly imposture, though the animal is only glimpsed briefly exiting from the stage.

Inadvertently, this film pointed to a question that would resurface periodically as cinema drew the orangutan character into new narrative genres: could the real ape actually play the part? While point-of-view filming could enhance character construction, and footage could be shot, edited, spliced, or otherwise manipulated to shape representation in ways never available to the stage, orangutan actors could not be expected to develop the same physical or emotional languages as humans. And they were not always biddable before the camera, as a 1915 report of one film shoot involving 'an orang outang of enormous proportions' reveals: 'An elaborate stage setting was arranged, but when Chang "walked on" he promptly pulled up a drawing room carpet and rolled in it, turned a big settee into a pushcart and chased George K. Larkan, the hero, right round the studio with a cane' (Anon 1915 655). On the other hand, casting humans in orangutan roles had its own limitations in film, an essentially realist medium that was expected to efface signs of artifice unless it was conducive to the chosen genre. As more became known about orangutans' behaviour and cognitive sophistication, the less a man in an ape suit could plausibly finesse their representation — at least until the advent of sophisticated special effects.

Filmmakers eventually confronted the challenges that realism posed by presenting the idea of interspecies impersonation as a farce, albeit one open to ambiguity. The orangutan screen comedies turned on the ingenuity of an unusual actor who added verve and humour to well-worn scenarios by leaping across the shrinking evolutionary gap between apes and humans. That leap gained comic resonance from incongruity between the character and the action, so the 'act' worked best if the performer in question was recognisably an orangutan placed in human contexts. Whereas the adventure genre had required exotic jungle settings and the horror films preferred atmospheric country houses or villages, the comedies drew force from situating orangutans in urban societies. There, they could parody social and sexual mores, trick people into compromising situations, undermine species hierarchies and generally create mayhem, all to hilarious effect. The actual repertoire of the orangutan actor was not expansive but could be made to seem so through clever diegesis, aided by judicious filming and post-production work. In addition, cinema featuring real orangutans lent itself well to depictions of interspecies intimacy, a topic of great interest to audiences becoming better informed about human-ape affinities. This trope typically manifested through a 'buddy friendship' between an orangutan and a man or male child, marking a shift from the erotic pairing of woman and ape that characterised the horror films.

As *Every Which Way But Loose* showed, the combination of a rough and ready bare-knuckle fighter (Beddoe) and his orangutan sidekick (Clyde) in a freewheeling search for love and a little spare income proved to be a winning formula. This film and its 1980 sequel, *Any Which Way You Can*, not only drew handsome profits at the box office but also enhanced the popularity of screen star Clint Eastwood, despite being panned by critics. As Beddoe and Clyde manoeuvre their way through pub brawls and drinking sessions, police blockades, sleazy hotel rooms and numerous showdowns with the Black Widow motorcycle gang, the films express both a vision of egalitarian mateship and a fantasy of kinship between species. Unlike the women in Beddoe's life, Clyde is uncomplicated and trustworthy, even if inclined to minor mischief. His discretion makes him an ideal confidante and his strength proves convenient when man-muscle looks insufficient to get Beddoe out of a tight corner, but in fact Clyde ducks most of the fights, even covering his eyes and grimacing. His secret weapon against macho adversaries is a sudden, sloppy kiss on the lips, a tactic repeated in numerous orangutan farces. As well as working to temper the violence of Beddoe's world and even skew its versions of masculinity, such slapstick gestures call attention to the staginess of the film, and in doing so suggest that Clyde — and possibly even the orangutan playing him at such instants — knows exactly what he is doing. Paul Smith notes that Clyde's role in these films is as an 'alternative human' who embodies what is normally elided in constructions of the heroic male (176–77). Beddoe himself never treats the orangutan as anything but an intelligent ape who is equal to — or even better than — a person, but the representations of

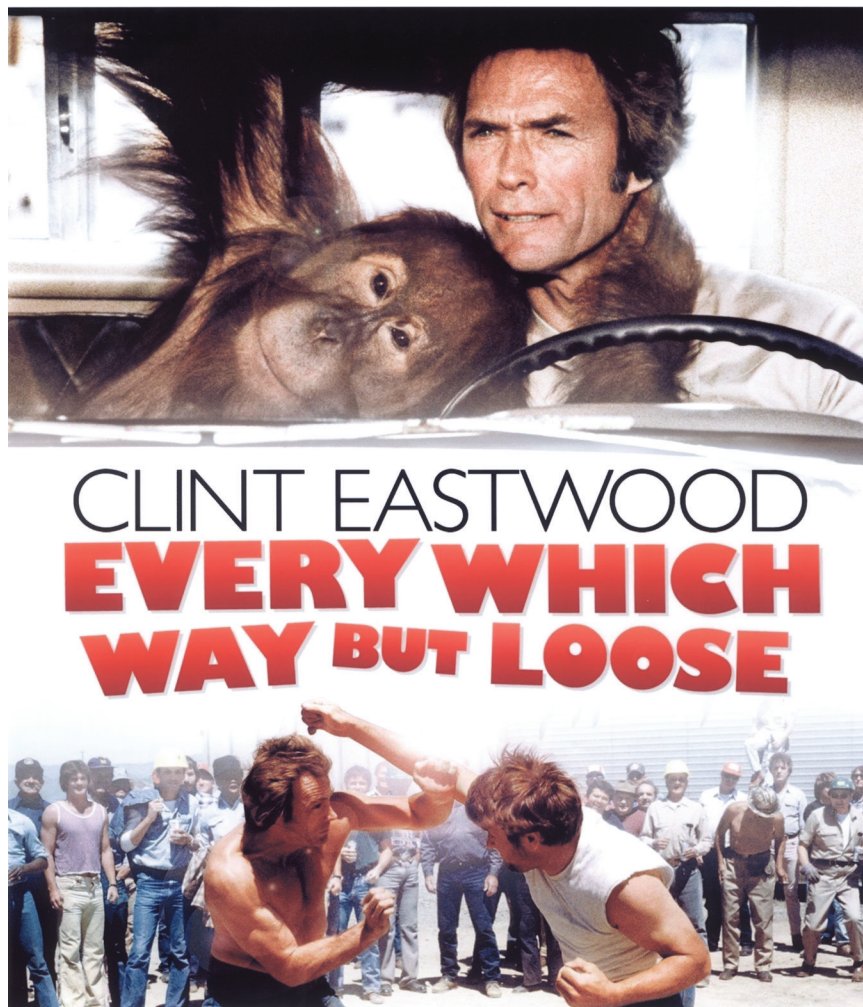


Fig. 2: *Every Which Way But Loose*.

species equivalence can only ever be provisional since their comedy inheres in an emphasis on the imperfect symmetry between ape and human. A roadside scene in the second film, for example, is played for laughs as Clyde stands with Beddoe and a friend to urinate while the camera lingers on their naked male backsides, all lined up in a slightly odd row. When Clyde goes to the zoo for a rendezvous with his 'girl', Bonnie, so he can share his human friends' carnal pleasures, the running visual discourse of species likeness with a critical touch of difference also extends to (male) sexuality.

Some subsequent Hollywood instalments made scarcely any attempt to plumb the intelligence and intimacy themes, simply using the orangutan as a generic device to execute physical gags. In *Going Ape* (1981), the farcical action revolves around three ex-circus orangutans bequeathed to a young man who is charged with keeping them from the clutches of scheming zoo officials and sundry opportunists. Although the orangutans thwart their human pursuers at every turn, they are weakly individuated as characters and register mostly as clever buffoons. Nevertheless, there are fleeting moments when this buffoonery starts to look like self-conscious acting, at least as constructed on screen. At one point, an orangutan leaps onto a makeshift lounge-room stage and insists on performing a disco dance with three defiant encores, while the youngest ape looks on, apparently amused even if its master is not. At another instant, one of the trio stalks an incompetent mercenary, parodying his gait as she creeps along behind him after he fails to see her as a real orangutan because she is reading a book. As frivolous as such scenes are, something of the idea of crafted impersonation, of moving beyond the modalities of masquerade, can be discerned in the visible effort it takes these near-naked orangutans to dance and walk as humans.

Once the disobedient orangutan act at the core of *Going Ape* had been widely screened, only so much currency could be derived from slapstick routines that had migrated without much nuance from the circus repertoire.³ Orangutan characters with something more than 'native' intelligence and impeccable timing were needed to bring variety into well-worn plots and to allow topical and even political commentary. A short-running 1983 television sit-com titled *Mr Smith* broached this challenge by creating a primate genius with an IQ of 256. Having mastered the intricacies of law, medicine and nuclear physics, he is recruited to work as a special consultant to a government think tank in Washington. His periodic demand for (human) rights, which is a running gag in the series, points towards philosophical debates about ape rights and the status of animals in human society, even though the drama's main action rests on family contretemps.

Television's other notable orangutan character, the nurse played by Bam Bam in *Passions* (2003–5), projects a similar desire to be recognised as a non-human person, but in a much more risqué fashion, which possibly fuelled the debate about Bam Bam's eligibility for the Emmy award. Nurse Precious has medical credentials, does her job competently and uses the internet as a resource when she needs specific information to deal with emergencies. While providing an obvious vehicle for comic relief, she is also an implicitly moral character in a corrupt human world where infidelity and vengeance rule the day. Her complex emotional life is played out in a series of fantasies in which she pictures intimate interactions between species. In one episode, she is assisting a human doctor at a birth when the action slides into reverie: out comes a baby orangutan! The infant is shown to its mother, who is also revealed as an ape, as the two 'women' share a smile. More provocatively, Precious imagines winning the love of the



Fig. 3: Mr Smith. (Photo: courtesy of NBC Productions.)

show's heartthrob, Luis, not by transforming into a human but as the orangutan she is. In her daydreams, Luis feeds her strawberries on their couch and rubs her feet sensually, declaring that she has 'really grown on him'. He also brings her flowers after she has his children, and there is even a brief fantasy interlude in the

series where the interspecies foreplay leads to sex. At once ludicrous and moving, Precious's visions of intimacy, and more broadly her desire to be recognised as a thinking, feeling, 'fellow critter' (to use Donna Haraway's term for resituating humans in egalitarian relation to other lively beings) is in tune with the great ape rights movement as spearheaded by ethicists such as Peter Singer.⁴

In cinema, the 1990s produced comic works that engaged with rights issues, if sometimes obliquely, through plots with a sustained focus on orangutan captivity in urban societies. This theme could scarcely escape irony when orangutans themselves were cast as characters. *Dunston Checks In* (1996), for example, suggests the harshness involved in ape training regimes even while the film itself harnesses the quirky energies of the simian actor. As Dunston wreaks havoc in a luxury hotel when he escapes from his owner, who uses him to burgle the rooms of rich guests, the viewer glimpses of the animal's cruel treatment at the hands of corrupt or narrow-minded humans. Most of the scenes are played for laughs but their resonances are unmistakable. At one point, Dunston knocks for attention from within a large crate that transports him to the crime site; at another, he makes rude gestures to his owner but carefully keeps out of reach to escape being beaten with a cane. There are also moments that hint at the orangutan's displacement from his jungle habitat, again within the film's farcical plot structures. 'Pongo pygmaeus! You've got an orangutan problem,' the wildlife control officer proclaims after flicking through mug shots to identify the exotic ape pest plaguing the hotel. Later, he stalks Dunston through a jungle greenhouse, only to find the orangutan hanging from the barrel of his stun gun. Such gags are interspersed with scenes pairing Dunston with the hotel manager's young son, either in mirrored actions or moments of shared trust such as when the boy and his teenage brother remove a large splinter from the ape's bleeding hand. The story ends with a repatriation spoof of sorts: Dunston relocates with his new human friends to Bali where a final shot shows him sitting in the trees with two other orangutans — possibly his wife and child — about to drop a coconut on a hapless guest.

Babe: Pig in the City (1998) presents a much darker view of the urban jungle in which apes sometimes find themselves as a result of their entanglements with humans. Even though the film's plot has farcical elements, Thelonius, its featured orangutan, is only rarely a comic agent. Aloof and seemingly arrogant, he manifests as the most complex character among the various critters improbably rescued from their crowded menagerie by the heroic farm pig. Ape theatricals also figure in this film, but whereas the chimpanzees are cast as the natural actors, the orangutan takes the role of director and scene scorer for their dinner-party performances, which they all approach as work taken on voluntarily because it earns them a little extra food. Thelonius's status as a moral being is demonstrated most poignantly by his attempts to protect his pet fish when the menagerie is raided by humans intent on impounding its denizens. After he is captured, his humiliation at being labelled with a number and photographed naked is palpable.



Fig. 4: *Dunston Checks In*. (Photo: courtesy of Carlo Momigliano.)

Offered a chance to escape, he refuses to leave his cage until he can put on his clothes. 'I'm not dressed', he says to the waiting chimps, one of whom replies, 'But Thelonius, you're an orangutan'. He repeats, simply, 'I'm not dressed'. At the film's end, the animals are all safely ensconced at Farmer Hoggett's rural haven, but whereas the other apes take easily to the trees, Thelonius insists on staying in the house with the humans. Because the narrative is constructed from a zoo-centric perspective, the viewer can read past the anthropomorphism by which Thelonius's character is realised to register the finale as not only a critique of his (enforced) acculturation to human ways but also a suggestion that he has now chosen how to live amid limited options.

In their comic execution of implausible scenarios in which performance itself becomes visible as artifice in action, however fleetingly, these farcical films do more than manoeuvre deftly around species boundaries. They also allow us to glimpse something of the orangutan actor's working processes. Coercion aside, such processes may not be so different from those of human actors, who also learn prescribed movements and responsive techniques, repeatedly presenting them to audiences, or the camera, for theatrical effect.⁵ Drawing from extensive observational fieldwork, Vicki Hearne argues that orangutans read performance situations creatively and with some appreciation of humour and that the apes' routines show them using a 'vocabulary' that they share with their trainers not only for cross-species interaction but also for self-expression and even jokes.⁶ The relational aspect of performance is the salient issue here. More generally,

Eugene Linden proposes that we should understand orangutan intelligence as ‘the kind of mental feats they perform when dealing with captivity and the dominant species on the planet — humanity’ (online). Is there any compelling reason why such ingenuity could not be harnessed for genuine acting?



Fig. 5: Apps for Apes. Caroonist Bryant Arnold. (Content originally appeared on CartoonADay.com [http://www.CartoonADay.com], and is made available through a Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial license [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.5/].)

NOTES

- ¹ Many thanks to Amanda Lynch for gathering data on orangutans in film and television, and helping to analyse shows such as *Passions*. Without her assistance, this essay would not have been written.
- ² Lev Kuleshov outlines this process by describing an experiment in which audiences read the emotions of an expressionless actor differently according to the contexts and interrelationships provided by different montage sequences; nevertheless, he concedes that it is not always possible to alter the semantic work of an actor, even through skillful editing. See ‘The Principles of Montage’ in *Kuleshov on Film*, 183–95.
- ³ *Going Ape* was scripted to use the acts and actors of ‘Bobby Berosini’s Orangutans’, an immensely profitable show that featured live in Las Vegas in the 1980s until Berosini became embroiled in a lawsuit over cruelty.
- ⁴ See Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri, *The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity*.

- ⁵ This argument derives from Peta Tait's view of animal acts as fitting the definition of theatre in *Wild and Dangerous Performances*, p. 2.
- ⁶ See Vicky Hearne, *Animal Happiness: A Variety of Irresistible Creatures*, pp. 173–96.

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