

## What's new pussy cat? A genealogy of animal celebrity

John Blewitt  
Aston University

### **Abstract**

Animal celebrity is a human creation informing us about our socially constructed natural world. It is essentially relational expressive of cultural proclivities, political power plays, the quotidian everyday as well as serious philosophical reflections of the meaning of being human. This article attempts to outline some key contours in the genealogy of animal celebrity showing how popular culture including fairground attractions, public relations, Hollywood movies, documentary films, zoo attractions, commercial sport and mediatized moral panics, particularly those accompanying scientific developments such as cloning, helps to order, categorise, licence aspects of human understanding and structures of feeling. The nature of [animal] charisma and celebrity are explored with assistance from Jumbo the Elephant, Guy the Gorilla, Paul the clairvoyant octopus, Uggie the film star, Nnette the orangutan and Dolly the sheep. Ultimately, the issue of what it is to be human lies beneath the celebritised surface or, as Donna Haraway noted, “of having to face oneself”.

### **Introduction:**

In 1974 the American philosopher Thomas Nagel published an article with the title “What’s it like to be a bat?”. Although the title itself is enough to intrigue anyone with the remotest curiosity regarding the problem of other minds, the relationship between mind and body, and the still unresolved problem of whether it is possible for one species - or being - to understand the subjective experience of another, Nagel’s populist title also tells us something about the nature of animal celebrity. In looking at animals we have an irresistible tendency to look at ourselves. Their significance, popularity, celebrity often reflects our own concerns whether through processes of sublimation or projection. The sixteenth century French essayist Michel de Montaigne, in his quest to discover how to live, famously asked “when I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more she is to me?”. In a later version of the same essay he even attempted to adopt the point of view of the cat, adding “we entertain each other with reciprocal monkey tricks. If I have my time to begin or to refuse, so has she hers”; elsewhere he writes “in how many ways do we not speak to our dogs? And they answer us” (quoted in Bakewell, 2011: 136). He also wondered whether our five human senses were actually sufficient to fully understand the world. Perhaps, he thought, we need the concurrence of eight or ten. In our own time, after contemplating his own cat, the linguistic philosopher Jacques Derrida (1992: 379) wrote “nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized”. Nonetheless, this existence offered him a possible key to his own ‘self’ as well as to that ‘otherness’ he had himself created. He concluded, “but cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror?” (Derrida, 1992: 418). Exploring this contention, philosopher Kelly Oliver (2009) sees Derrida learning to be human in response to other animals and recognizing that it is important to go beyond binary thinking if animals of all descriptions are to be thought of as constituting a broad diversity of beings. For Oliver human meaning and human kinship has been bought at the expense of animal kinship and animal meaning but the celebratisation of some non human animals perhaps suggest that this purchase has not always been a sound one. In looking at the use, depiction and presentation of non human others in

culture, politics, sport, art, science and so on we engage in a relational exercise that is as much about us as them. Animal celebrity is a human construct and tells us something about the human socially constructed natural world into the bargain.

## Public Diplomacy and Animal Celebrity

At one level a captive octopus might gain celebrity through his uncanny clairvoyant powers of predicting the outcome of international football matches or endangered giant pandas may acquire renown because of their significance to geopolitics, as during the Nixon-Mao era, or to the quotidian yahboo of party politics as when Angela Eagle MP asked Sir George Younger in the British House of Commons following the arrival of two giant pandas to Edinburgh Zoo in 2011, “is the Leader of the House alarmed to realise that there are now more giant pandas in Scotland than there are Conservative MPs?” (Eagle, 2011). Animal celebrity is consequently relational becoming so for reasons other than those to do with deep ontological reflection. Quite often the reasons are to do with human politics and culture. Of course, giant pandas have a distinct advantage, a head start in the animal celebrity market as the WWF know very well. Foreign relations specialists know this too. Pandas have the credibility of being an endangered species, look cuddly have big moony eyes and so have automatic non human conservation charisma. They also attract visitors to zoos, cameras to politicians and politicians to their ostensible publics. An-An and Chi Chi became major players during the Cold War’s thaw in the 1960s and 1970s. Relations between the United States, China, the Soviet Union and to some extent the United Kingdom became somewhat easier. Chi Chi had lived at London Zoo since the late 1950s because she had been barred entry to the United States. She was originally bound for Chicago Zoo but because she hailed from a Communist nation couldn’t get through customs and immigration (Nicholls, 2010). For China pandas were, and remain, an important element in the exercise of ‘soft power’ and for other nations their importance to the exercise of a public diplomacy has transcended any consideration of the CITES ban on the importation or exportation of endangered species for commercial purposes. Breeding programmes are invariably presented as a major reason for a giant panda’s global travels and this has invariably led to all manner of media speculation over whether a pair will mate, will fall in love, will like each other sufficiently to do what pandas are notoriously reluctant to do to order, especially in captivity. Although popular media coverage of a panda’s sexual exploits and sexual proclivities may occasionally border on the prurient the giant panda’s celebrity is actually quite complex. Image, conservation status, mystery, politics, bizarre diet and global cultural merchandising are all part of the overall assemblage. They play into and are played on by a wide range of human actors whose goals may be in effect removed from respecting non human others but nonetheless these pandas offer a mirror to our own all too human condition. Just before Tian Tian (“Sweetie”) and Yang Guang (“Sunshine”) arrived at Edinburgh Zoo in December 2011 *The Daily Telegraph* (Telegraph View, 2011) reminded readers that we humans are essentially political animals and, in the West, economic supplicants noting,

The good news is that Tian Tian has produced offspring before; the bad news is that when our correspondent went to meet her in China, she seemed especially indolent, sitting still and chewing on bamboo (as she is wont to do for 14 hours a day) throughout the encounter.

Mind you, the pandas may find their hosts strangely familiar. In economic terms, at least, we British are very much in panda mode – consuming an awful lot, but not

really going anywhere. These giant animals will remind us that China, meanwhile, is on the up; and perhaps that's the point of the modern version of panda diplomacy.

Even more excitement has been generated over the clairvoyant powers of a captive octopus. Now although few people may have considered what it is like to be an octopus many people did in fact look to an octopus in 2010 to predict the future. When human beings sometimes claim psychic powers celebrity, often notoriety, can be gained instantly but when an octopus is seen to reveal such qualities then that is a whole different ball game. World Cup football played an important part in Paul's short lived fame and life at the Oberhausen Sea Life Centre in Germany which also gained a considerable amount of publicity and as a result of Paul being able to predict the outcome of all of Germany's matches. He exercised his paranormal powers by selecting a mussel food treat in one of two perspective boxes each carefully adorned with the flag of a contestant nation. Football lent Paul his celebrity, just as conservation politics and international diplomacy lent fame to Chi Chi and An-An, Tian Tian and Yang Guang. Paul proves that you don't have to be cute and cuddly to be celebrated or to exude charisma but it does help if there are also commercial and political imperatives involved. Celebrity, globalization, capital flows and the new media ecology are integrated into elite sports which are increasingly being underwritten financially by the media business (Boyle and Haynes, 2009). Sport is often politics by other means just as zoo breeding programmes is diplomacy in the public eye. In these contexts celebrity status is not too difficult to achieve either for man or beast but these celebrities much have something of note or at least to note. You do have to be in some way out of the ordinary, beyond the everyday but of the everyday, or resonate with the deep past of human history. In fact, Paul's capacity to foretell the outcome of future events does have some ancient parallels. In many early civilizations including those in Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome, the practice of extispicy was well known and extremely important. Extispicy, however, did involve the ritual slaughter and a detailed examination of an animal's entrails to seek any anomalies that may have predictive value. For the Babylonian diviner the liver was of exceptional importance. Any depression or deficiency on the right side of the liver would be a bad omen whereas if these appeared on the left the omens would most likely be positive (Jeyes, 1978). Although such a practice is in today's culture of rationalism regarded with scepticism the human desire to see in to the future remains a strong one. On Paul's death of natural causes, a few months after the World Cup, Oberhausen Sea Life Centre was reported as considering giving him his own burial plot and perhaps a small shrine in its grounds.

### **Celebration and Celebrity: *IT'S SHOWTIME!***

Animals can be 'attractors' for humans, and as attractors they have been celebrated and have become celebrities. Movie stars such as Uggie, who won the Palm Dog award at Cannes in 2011 and gained a special mention at the Prix Lumiere Awards in France for his screen performance in the modern silent movie *The Artist* (2011), generated considerable publicity, a sizable social media following and undoubtedly a great deal of human pleasure. His celebrity was an articulation the human's public fascination with glamour and image and a recognition that even canine celebrities are only human too. The contrived promotional controversy over whether he or Laika, the canine star of Aki Kaurismaki's *Le Havre* (2011), was truly deserving of the Palm Dog or not, fueled the public campaign for Uggie to be given an honour in his own country. The Academy resisted calls for Uggie to be nominated for an Oscar -- wary perhaps that Rin Tin Tin had allegedly won more votes in 1929 for best actor than the actual [human] winner, Emil Jannings (Orlean, 2011). However, Uggie's presence at the 2012 Oscars, his photocalls on the red carpet, images

of him with paw on statuette and bow tie exquisitely fastened, strengthened public demand to properly recognize and celebrate non-human actors like Uggie. Just like other male Hollywood stars or celebrities, wrote *Daily Mail* newspaper columnist Jan Moir (2012) “he also likes to chase tail. He used to be ‘really bad’ in his relationships with cats, but has mellowed and become better behaved over the years”. His dogginess was part of his star quality. He performed tricks for sausages rather than money and Oscars. However, in December 2011 Movieline formally launched a “Consider Uggie” campaign on Facebook and in February 2012 the first Golden Collar Award Ceremony, sponsored by Dog News Daily, a digital media and marketing business, was held in Los Angeles. Uggie won ‘Best Dog in a Theatrical film’ for his performances in both *The Artist* (2011) and for *Water for Elephants* (2011). However, underlying this amusement is something more serious. Throughout human history it has not been unknown for dogs, and other non humans, to be applauded, worshipped or honoured in some way. Keith Thomas (1984) shows that the keeping and pampering of non-working dogs for fun and amusement was the preserve of the royal family and aristocracy but, as Fudge (2002) notes with the widespread adoption of pets in later times domesticated dogs were ascribed a status somewhere between animal and human. Hunting dogs were frequently treated better by these aristocrats than their tenants and in ancient Rome were even crowned during the festival of Diana. The renowned anthropologist Sir James Frazer (1993) discussed in detail how, in numerous cultures, human woes could be transferred to animals and banished. Animals have frequently been used as symbols, icons, totems and mascots. In *Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend*, Susan Orlean (2011) describes Rinty’s relationship with his trainer Lee Duncan as actually being ‘totemistic’ - a neglected child, a loyal loving dog, and a human-animal relationship that was more satisfying than that between humans themselves. Indeed, dogs have co-evolved with humans and human society and, as Orlean points out, Rin Tin Tin’s celebrity, like that of Uggie’s and probably many other non-human celebrities, has been built upon the readiness of people to tacitly acknowledge the biophilic bond they have always had with animals and natural systems. What Uggie and his like obviously demonstrate is that being intelligent creatures they have a capacity to learn which for Fudge (2002: 83) means that in their fictional representations, “and the cinematic skills they display, our relationship with animals is simultaneously upset and reinforced”.

This biophilia, this curiosity about the lifeworlds, achievements and minds of non-human others, has sometimes been considered to be a species characteristic of homo sapiens and is a quiet tendency in the genealogy of animal celebrity. In *The Mind in the Cave* David Lewis-Williams explores the meaning of prehistoric cave art as being an exploration of, and derived from, altered states of consciousness and experiences that may be considered religious. Long ago, the mind of modern humankind was seeking answers, and in doing so looked to other creatures for help and some answers. The non-human animals that have been incarcerated in animal collections, menageries and zoos perhaps also serve to help us understand them and us, if only we allow this to occur. Animal science has intriguingly sought both similarity and difference and although the trajectory of male and species dominance has been acute, there have always been suspicions that this dominance and difference is not as clear or as distinct as some would like. This is clearly evident in the work of primatologists and the various cultural and media articulations their findings and beliefs have inspired (Haraway, 1989). In the London Zoo of the nineteenth century a major attraction was the African elephant Jumbo. Purported, and certainly presented, as the biggest land animal in the world, Jumbo was certainly a source of human entertainment and wonder, and not just because of his size. His story, his tragic life and suffering, his love and devotion, his frustration and anger, led both the Zoo’s countless thousands of visitors, aided by the national press, to be awed by, empathize with, admire, fear and love Jumbo in return. His presence was not so much perceived as emblematic of

an imperial male culture but as a victim of it, a proxy for the suffering, cruelty and unfreedoms that modernity had already created for those who were not in the top rank but who were expected to benefit from and rejoice in the achievements of power and the powerful. His violence and destructiveness was therefore understandable (Chambers, 2007). Here was a non-human creature from another warmer, dryer land imprisoned in cold dank London. He was, like zoo animals remain today, a money-making attraction and the attendant marketing communications undoubtedly created and enhanced his celebrity status and perceived charisma. When the Director of the Zoo decided to get rid of the difficult Jumbo and his equally difficult keeper, Matthew Scott, by selling him to the American showman PT Barnum for £10 000, there was uproar, not least from Jumbo himself. The *Daily Telegraph* launched a public campaign to keep Jumbo in London. *The Times* printed sympathetic letters questioning the Zoo's decision, but Barnum knew that the animal's size and reputation could only add value to his business and the Zoo Director wanted an easier life. The animal left for the United States in 1882 and Barnum made the most of his 'monster', exploiting the massive Jumbo craze that existed in both the United States and United Kingdom for all it was worth. Jumbo was everywhere. His size, weight, strength and magnificence were celebrated in all manner of trade cards of the period. His image was used to advertise anything and everything - oysters, suspenders, boots, photography, baking powder, cotton thread and patent medicine (Walk, Lemmer & Murray, 2011). As Turner (2004) notes, celebrities are developed to make money, to keep the wheels of capitalist consumerism turning, and Barnum knew how to make money and to create events, personalities and attractions that became well known for being well known. Animal and human celebrities then and now are mediated phenomena, are subject to and subjects of 'hype'. For Giles (2000: 20), Barnum turned "hype into something approaching art" and his real show were not his exhibits, freaks or elephants but his performance of the publicity, his creation of celebrity. This expansion across many media enhanced the value of Jumbo and similar celebrities as commodities. Barnum noted in the last version of his autobiography (Barnum, 1888: 330) "I had often looked wistfully on Jumbo, but with no hope of ever getting possession of him". But he did and in the US and Canada Barnum notes that he became a most lucrative draw to his Greatest Show on Earth.

Unfortunately tragedy struck. Jumbo died, hit by a freight train in September 1885, while being led away after having just given a show in the Canadian town of St Thomas, Ontario. According to the *New York Times* of 17th September 1885, before Jumbo could be removed from the railway embankment a number of spectators "clipped souvenirs from the body. Some were satisfied with one of the long stiff hairs which grew in his tail. Others cut off pieces of lacerated hide or feet, and one boy, bolder than the rest, appropriated a piece of his ear". This mutilation, this morbid fascination with the dead beast has undertones of almost religious ecstasy and intensity. As Rojek (2001) notes, a certain shamanistic quality can be detected in the morphology of celebrity presentation and reception. As news of his death penetrated every corner of the globe - thanks to the efficiency of the electronic telegraph - Jumbo swiftly became a legend, entering an animal afterlife that persists to this day. However, for Barnum, a dead Jumbo was still valuable. He wrote (Barnum, 1888: 345)

My first thought was of the many thousands who were counting on seeing the giant beast, the largest living creature in the world.

Fortunately, in the case of Jumbo, science achieved a substantial victory over death. Professor Henry A. Ward, the distinguished head of Ward's Natural Science Establishment at Rochester, N. Y.. was for many months engaged in the labor of preserving Jumbo's form, and also preparing his skeleton for exhibition.

This great work has been successfully concluded, and the public can now look upon Jumbo as majestic and natural as life, while beside him stands the prodigious framework of massive bones which sustained the vast weight of his flesh.

He swiftly purchased Alice, Jumbo's 'widow' from London Zoo, and Alice and the stuffed hide of Jumbo were exhibited side by side being, as Barnum recalled (1888: 345) "among the most interesting features of the show season of 1886". His stuffed hide was later exhibited at PT Barnum Hall at Tufts University until destroyed by fire in 1975, his skeleton was displayed as recently as 1993, and the name 'Jumbo' became both a synonym for 'big' and an alternative nomenclature for 'elephant' itself. In death he became both an aesthetic object and a sign for living nature, perhaps the ultimate human domination of the natural world and the taming of that raw power and spirit that still proves such an attractor to 'civilized' humans. For Fretz (1996), nineteenth century exhibition culture was an ideological mirror reflecting the sometimes contradictory and conflicting values of an economically powerful middle class. Celebrity culture can also be viewed as a means by which human social actors develop and make sense of their own structures of feelings and the passions and anxieties that attend them (Inglis, 2010).

Jumbo's popularity was certainly a product of his physical characteristics as well as his emotional character traits. He was the 'biggest' and his size particularly was a major selling point for both the zoo and for Barnum. Indeed, Barnum made a point of documenting Jumbo's full dimensions in his autobiography and as geographer Jamie Lorimer argues, an animal's primary physical characteristics are of key significance in triggering human emotions, but they are also complemented by other variables such as economic value, practical utility, aesthetic and perhaps tactile beauty (the cuddly cub) or otherwise (the spider). They may also have the capacity to be intellectually interesting or, in some other way, satisfying or fascinating. For Lorimer, the taxonomies of charismatic traits have decided influence on conservation practice, public entertainment, marketing and promotion. The birth of a cuddly furry at a zoo today usually warrants a press release and extensive media coverage. Charismatic megafauna are a staple of blue chip natural history documentaries and funny animal videos make for cheap and long-lasting popular television series that are frequently syndicated and/or franchised (Blewitt, 2010). For conservationists, animal lovers, naturalists and environmental educators, non-human charisma is an extremely important attractor and one not necessarily confined to the iconic species of lions, tigers, giant pandas and meerkats. Non-human charisma is multi-faceted and relational. Lorimer (2007: 915) writes,

Non-human charisma emerges in relation to the parameters of different technologically enabled, but still corporeally constrained, human bodies, inhabiting different cultural contexts. Nonhuman charisma is therefore 'reticulate' (...); it develops and occurs in a network topology and is subject to anthropogenic manipulation.

The original meaning of 'charisma' as Weber (Weber, 1964) pointed out, is 'gift of grace' taken from the lexicon of the early Christian Church. Charisma, as in the 'charismatic authority', referred to a quality, a virtue, that sets apart an individual from the ordinary, the everyday, the profane and the many other lesser mortals whether human or non-human. In juxtaposing the ordinary with the extraordinary, the human with the non-human or the sacred with the profane, we may also be able to probe the mysteries of what it is to *be*. Charismatic homo sapiens and other mammals are often celebrated and through art, ritual, the newspapers, television and the internet become cultural celebrities. Charismatic

megafauna such as pandas and dolphins enjoy considerable public support particularly important when promoting and realizing conservation goals or discussing biophilia (Barney, Mintzes & Yen, 2005) but as Brockington (2009: 7) correctly notes it is a mistake to conflate celebrity, and celebrity legends, with charisma; for “celebrities’ legends are commercially produced and depend on the media, whereas charisma is recognized through direct personal contact”. However, this is to gainsay the fact that those with charismatic authority use the media, or their publicists use the media, to cultivate fame and influence and often make a great deal of money in the process. P T Barnum was both Jumbo’s agent and owner. If charisma is a quality that can only be know when seen or experienced then it is the image, the public imaginary, that conveys the requisite sense-experience. As Jean Baudrillard (1994) wrote in another context, the real is not what it used to be. Mediated animal celebrity helps to order, categorise, licence and construct human social reality. Thus celebrity and charisma, human and non-human, are frequently entwined. If not exactly divine, then celebrity and charisma are arguably twin aspects of symbolic power emerging from something that is a mongrel - a cross between a chimera and a simulcrum. They are both beyond the everyday and, through their cultural pervasiveness, soundly of the everyday ... albeit subject to “anthropogenic manipulation”.

### **Close and Mysterious**

In life and death Guy the Gorilla, another major attraction of London Zoo -- but this time during the 1960s and 1970s -- epitomized what it meant to be a supreme specimen, perhaps victim, of his kind. Guy, a Western lowland gorilla, was born in 1946 and arrived at the zoo on 5th November 1947. He would remain there until his death in 1978. In his prime Guy weighed in at 510 lb and stood at 5’4”. He was frequently described as a ‘gentle giant’ for, it was observed, when sparrows flew into his cage he would carefully pick them up, look at them and then gently set them free. His being and bearing swiftly struck a chord in British popular culture and beyond. Dan Richter who played the apeman in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) modeled the manner of his character on Guy’s meditative conduct. Guy frequently featured on children’s television and influenced both children’s writers such as Lucy Boston (Robbins, 1971) as well as creators of adult fiction such as Angela Carter who was totally horrified by the institution of the zoo. She wrote that Guy’s miserable fate, together with that of the other incarcerated primates, must make them weep at the end of every day (Pollock, 2000). There is a black and white photograph for sale at the Museum of London which seems to confirm this. It is available in four formats - a print, a framed print, a canvas and a framed canvas. It was taken some time around 1955 by the artist and photographer Harry Grant. The images’s caption reads: “Crowds gathering to watch Guy the gorilla through the bars of the cage at London Zoo”. An adolescent Guy sits in the corner of his small metal cage, his hands raised slightly above his head holding on to the bars. The camera lens has been placed inside the cage. Consequently, the viewer seems to be in there too. Head tilted slightly to the left, Guy’s eyes look ahead pass the viewer and towards the roof of the cage. His mouth is firmly closed, his nostrils open and there seems to be fear, helplessness and despair on his face. Behind him, a crowd of hairless apes look into the cage. The sun shines brightly but only the merest sliver of sunlight penetrates the cell. The zoo spectators, clearly visible but slightly out of focus, seem entranced by both the gorilla and the photographer. What are they thinking? What is Guy thinking? What is it like to be a primate in a cage or a member of a troop of hairless primates looking in? Are their subjective experiences comparable? Can they understand what the Other is experiencing? What if the situation was reversed? As Angela Carter wrote in an article for *New Society* “only a whimsical quirk of evolution has separated Guy the gorilla” from us, his situation from ours (quoted in Pollock, 2000:

42). For David Hancocks, author of numerous books on zoos and formerly Director of the Open Range Zoo at Werribee in Australia and the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, Guy was in a prison: he was sentenced to thirty years in a small metal shed. In the Introduction to his book *A Different Nature* (Hancocks, 2001: xiv) he writes,

It wasn't until I was a university student studying architecture that I made a visit to London Zoo (...) I cannot recall what I was expecting from the zoo, though I remember being curious and eager. I was not, however, anticipating the shock of seeing a gorilla. It wasn't his huge form that astonished me so much as the intelligence in his eyes. That, and the bitterly small size of his barren cage. This extraordinary animal, with his regal air, survived in a space no bigger than a garden shed. He was called Guy, and he sat on a concrete floor, soiled with his own excrement, looking out through bars and a glass window at a million people who shuffled past each year to gawk at him in his silent and solitary confinement.

Guy's celebrity was at its peak in the London of the Swinging Sixties and the conditions of Guy's confinement did improve as zoo standards accommodated to growing public criticism of zoo conditions and the institution's whole rationale for existence. He seemed to transcend his predicament, his charisma perhaps a significant factor in the successful campaign to reform zoo practice and, by extension, zoo public relations but this failed to prevent Guy's relatively early death from heart failure brought on by an operation on an infected tooth, caused by visitors constantly feeding him sweets. A bronze statue was soon after erected at London Zoo to commemorate his life and, like so many other live exhibits, he took a trip to the taxidermist. He was publicly exhibited at the Natural History Museum in the 1980s for four years before being taken to the Scientific Collection and away from the public gaze. However, in 2011 he made a comeback appearance in the museum's Sexual Nature Exhibition for, in the words of the exhibition developer Tate Greenhalgh, he was a "great example of a dominant male" (NHM, 2010) echoing that nineteenth/early twentieth century belief that, whether gorilla or elephant, as Haraway (1989: 41) writes in *Primate Visions*,

[P]erfection could only be heard in the male mode. It was a compound of physical and spiritual quality judged truthfully by the artist-scientist in the fullness of direct experience. Perfection was marked by exact quantitative measurement, but even more by virile vitality known by the hunter-scientist from visual communion. Perfection was known by natural kinship: type, kind, and kin mutually and seminally defined each other.

For Haraway, racism, colonialism and patriarchy has coloured primatology and much animal science serving to separate our civilized species from nature whereas it should, and implicitly has, constructed a taxonomic order that includes people. There is some irony here. Guy's life was predominantly with humans. In 1971 he was introduced to Lomie, a potential mate, following his transfer to the new more open Michael Sobell Pavilion. He showed profound disinterest in having sex. He could only truly relate to his keeper, Laurel Smith, for his solitary confinement had in a way cruelly broken down "the arbitrary distinction between man and beast" which Angela Carter so despaired of. But not in the way she would have preferred. So, did Guy, and those charismatic megafauna who have had similar experiences of incarceration and celebrity, 'help' or induce human beings to see the world, themselves and the other creatures who inhabit it, differently or not? Arguably yes, to some extent, but to go further, "we need to make room for animals in our



lives and in our hearts so that we stop wantonly redecorating their homes for our, and not their, benefit” (Bekoff and Bexell, 2010:73). A relational ethics, a worldview that located human beings in nature rather than apart from it, has been a long time coming and is not here for most of the world’s inhabitants yet. Perhaps the mediated nature of animal celebrity contributes to that divide that never seems to be comfortably bridged.

Guy has not been the only captive primate who has prompted deep reflection on the nature of human and non-human relationships. It is probably reasonable to assume some understanding of what it is like to be a Gorilla or a Orangutan or a Chimpanzee as human beings are genetically quite closely related. Some people have even argued that all the higher primates should be categorized as members of a single species though Nagel’s question still lingers and nags. Nicholas Philibert’s 2009 documentary *Nenette* poses some of these difficult and awkward questions through its observational approach to both the captive 40 year old Orangutan and the sometimes reflective, sometimes embarrassed and sometimes banal comments of her visitors. The film displays not only the moral ambiguities of imprisoning a higher primate but also a sense that every human visitor is in some incarcerated in his, or her, own life world. The off-screen voices of the human spectators dominate the soundtrack, making for a running philosophical commentary that accompanies many slow, long or static shots that openly invite the viewer to see, to look, to learn and to think. *Nenette* is just there, just being, just grooming, drinking, yawning, just doing things. We never see a human face; we are just aware of their presence and of ours who are observing, contemplating and meditating too on *Nenette*, on *Nenette* and on ourselves. One group of visitors remark that the ape has very little space in her home, the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes in Paris, where she has spent most of her life, but then Parisian rents are not cheap. There is humour as well as tragedy and reflection. Perhaps we are all *Nenette*. Indeed, Philibert’s *Nenette* is not a polemic against zoos as an institution and the film does not overtly position the viewer to interpret the sound and images in any particular way although the pace, tone, style and colour temperature of the film aims to facilitate quiet contemplation. Philibert’s film is questioning just as is his approach to filmmaking itself. We are invited to see this non human person as both a celebrity attraction, the subject of a documentary, and as a being in-itself. We look into *Nenette*’s eyes and see a reflection of ourselves and our lifeworlds. She is an animal like us, and we are like her - enclosed, urbanised, at home and far away. There is a shift from the immediate to the abstract which to paraphrase both Thomas Nagel gives us the opportunity to ask “what is it like to be an orangutan?” ... in a zoo? Having graduated in Philosophy, the documentarist once stated that he does not not know what his films are actually about. He makes them to find out. He enjoys Q&A sessions after screenings because he can learn more about himself and about what he has created. In other words, perhaps the meanings of his films, and particularly *Nenette*, are essentially relational just as *Nenette*’s actual and mediated celebrity is. So also is our relationship to her, to ourselves and to ‘nature’ more generally. The director told journalist Catherine Shoard (2011),

It wouldn’t be the same if I had filmed a cow. We do not identify with a cow or with a spider. But *Nénette* is at the same time both close and mysterious.

This mystery I wanted. That’s why I didn’t interview scientists. A film is not a scientific book. For me, cinema is about strangeness. I do not make films from knowledge but from my own ignorance. The less I know, the better I feel. *Nénette* is like the Mona Lisa. You can’t help asking many questions. They do not have answers.

What *Nenette*, and Nenette, does is very similar to what Fudge believes emerges from the science of primatology. She writes (Fudge, 2002: 129),

We may not be looking at ourselves in primatology (a paradox, as we are, after all, primates), but what we see comes only through our own eyes, and inevitably tells us as much (if not more) about ourselves as it does about our animal others”.

### **Is this a sheep I see before me?**

Towards the end of the twentieth century a remarkable thing happened. Arguably the biggest animal celebrity of all time wandered on to the world stage. Not many people would have thought that a sheep would have sufficient charisma or magnetism to be such an attractor but Dolly was a little more than ‘one of a kind’. She was a clone nurtured from a cell extracted from the mammary gland of a six year old ewe (hence the name Dolly [Parton]) and created as a result of a long series of scientific experiments taking place at the Roslin Institute in Scotland. Dolly also confirmed a new “post normal science” had arrived (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993). A new age of transbiology and post-humanism was quickly seen as having cultural and political consequences that simultaneously excited and appalled people of all political dispositions. For anthropologist Sarah Franklin (2006: 176),

The transbiological, in which biology is made in order that it be born, like Dolly, whose viability was proof of the success of her making, is fully cyborg in its polymorphic panoply of elements: machine, organism, code, message, human, ovine, natural and re-engineered.

The biologization of human values, as Franklin puts it, is nothing particularly new. Selective breeding in horticulture and animal husbandry has been practiced for centuries but Dolly was different, for she represented the increasing cultural and economic power of biotechnology. Commentators such as Francis Fukuyama (2003) imagined BioTech and Dolly potentially ushering in all the seductive terrors of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. In *Our Post-human Future* he embarked on a latter day Enlightenment search for ‘the essence’ of human nature and human dignity. What is it that distinguishes us from animals and for that matter the future of humanity when the prospect of human cyborgs, clones and computers with emotional states of mind appear to be just around the corner? Strict controls, ethical codes, new regulation and governance institutions, he argues, needed to be devised and these must be based on natural law and a clear understanding of human nature. This new ‘post-normal’ science must not be allowed to ignore the past but must now be brought into an interactive dialogue with it, and the future, and the present. Human beings may need to be saved from themselves, he argued.

The culture of the 1980s and 1990s was replete with cyber punks, zombies, robocops, mutants, aliens, bladerunners, zombies, triffids, Frankenstein foods and tales of fish genes being spliced with those of tomatoes. Popular concern was such, aroused magnificently by media orientated campaigns against GM, that it was not Nature that now needed to be controlled or contained but what Dolly possibly meant and what post-normal science might, or could, do. The media framing of biotechnology issues and Dolly’s celebrity clearly impacted upon public policy and ethical debate but was not out of tune with public opinion (Petersen, 2002). Fears of human cloning, of humans ‘playing god’, of mad scientists, of eugenics and designer babies were powerful issues, ones easy to sensationalize and turn into good copy. The complexities, risks and uncertainties were now such that to avoid

danger a process of democratization, public education and awareness was essential. Dolly's celebrity and charisma became part of this post normal, posthuman debate where human civilization detachment from nature suddenly became truly worrying. Media interest was intense and media coverage throughout the world was extensive possibly misrepresenting the scientific significance of her creation (Holliman, 2004). She quickly became a celebrity with the electronic company Zanussi using her image to sell washing machines, the American composer Steve Reich featuring her in an opera and Scottish nationalists voting for her as their preferred queen. She also became quite fat which was partly caused by genetic problems and partly by being fed plenty of food so she would perform merrily for the cameras. There was an element of the Barnum circus, carnival or freak show here this popular concern about the meaning of life. Dolly, however, slowly faded from the headlines and when she died at the relatively early age of six after a number of health complications, including arthritis, doubts were expressed about the whole viability of cloning complex organisms. Was she six or twelve? Twelve is the usual life expectancy of a sheep. Fukuyama thought twelve. Dolly's death, like that of so many other animal celebrities, was not the end either of biotechnology experimentation or of philosophical ruminations about the meaning of 'Nature' or 'humanity'. However, her animal status was soon normalized, culturally disarmed and tamed. She was stuffed just like Guy and Jumbo and like so many other creatures populating museums throughout the world. She can presently be seen in a rotating perspex box at the Connect Gallery of National Museum of Scotland and although she doesn't have her own entry as 'actor' on the Internet Movie Database like Rin Tin Tin or Uggie, she does have her own page in the BBC's History of the World. Dolly has become part of the specular culture of celebrity, a 21st century "What is it?" exhibition generating the level of publicity that would have been the envy of P. T. Barnum but which nonetheless engaged with wider metaphysical and ontological questions. The real is certainly not what it used to be.

## Conclusion

Animal celebrities are often used to bridge ostensibly 'great divides' between human and non-human others, between nature and culture, the material and the semiotic and the organic and the technological. The mediated non-human charisma tends to blur the boundaries of a modern human subject, opening possibilities for analyzing nonhuman difference "and the vast diversity of agency potentials performed by different organisms" (Lorimer, 2007: 927). There is a sense too that as humans campaign for, empathize with, ask questions of, speak to, or just look at these non human others, these more than human beings tend to respond. Not merely react but respond ... culturally, personally and socially. For Donna Haraway (2008) we must remain curious and respectful. We must look back in order to respond ourselves for, unless we do so, we will not be able to learn what these other creatures are teaching us. We need to learn with them and not just about them. We need to be with them and try, try to understand what it is like to *be* them. We must transcend the barriers and tyrannies of language which, for Derrida at least, has a clear culpability in creating and reproducing that great divide between Us and Them. Some animal celebrities have helped us do this whether their presentation has been quietly meditative or carnivalesque. They may, in the modern period, be a product of hype and an integral element of capitalist consumerism but throughout their various incarnations they tentatively enmesh us or return us to the wider environment that is designated nature. Through the writings of Montaigne, the philosophical speculations of Nagel, the cinematic performances and tail chasing antics of Uggie, the tragedies of Jumbo and Guy, the predictions of Paul, the political acumen of Tian Tian and Yang Guang, the meditation on or perhaps of Nenette and the futuristic

possibilities announced by Dolly, the celebration of animals have genealogical roots extending beyond the financial acumen of P.T. Barnum to those perennial and troubling questions about the human condition. It is not just the seminar room or a place of worship that addresses the big questions. Popular media culture does too through its speculative and seemingly innocent excursions into 'celebratisation', meditations on the life, loves and feelings of non human others even if via discursive allusions to global geopolitics, UK party politics or the World Cup (politics by other means). In looking at animal celebrity we learn a little more about ourselves. As Joanna Bourke (2011) ably demonstrates in her cultural history *What it is to be human?*, there has never been a consensus or a cultural or scientific definition as to what being human actually is. So when we meet the look of the other on the TV screen, in the cinema, at the zoo, in the newspaper, we perhaps need to realize that as Haraway (2008: 88) writes we are perhaps creating a condition "of having to face oneself".

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