

*A love story in culture and science*

Stine Jensen

## Why Women Love Apes

**T**WENTIETH-CENTURY WESTERN CULTURE is full of examples of erotic relationships between dark-haired apes and blonde women: there is a striking connection between woman and ape not only in movies and novels, but also in scientific practice of primatology. In this fascinating study, literary theorist Stine Jensen shows how the roles of ape, woman and man, too, have changed fundamentally throughout the last century.

For example, the famous film classic *King Kong* from 1933, was born of the nineteenth-century obsession with the rape-ape, but at the same time it presented the ape as an ambiguous creature – both malicious and gentle. Thereafter, mostly female researchers, such as Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas, ensured that the image of the primate changed from killer king to gentle giant. In their endeavours to make primates seem milder these women pushed such issues as the killing of younger troop members and other violence within ape society into the background.

The promotion of the ape reached its peak in *The Great Ape Project*, initiated in 1993 by a group of scientists pleading for the generic border between men and primates to be abolished and for human rights to be granted to apes. They stressed both the humanity of the ape, as well as the apeness of humans. In films and books from the end of the twentieth century, the ape was even put forward as the new ideal man. In Peter Hoeg's *The Woman and the Ape*, for example, the main female character prefers an ape over her husband, rejecting the stigmatising men's world.

According to Jensen, this emancipation process of ape and woman has led to an identity crisis amongst men: should they act the cave-man or should they be sensitive? As a result of the advances between women and apes, the hierarchy of the sexes and the species has started to shift and ambiguity has become the ideal for the future. Jensen has written an intriguing, amusing study, in which the interlacing of culture and science, fact and fiction and truth and fantasy plays a major role.



Stine Jensen is a literary theorist and philosopher. She currently works as a university lecturer in television studies at the Arts Department of the Free University of Amsterdam. She is also a literary critic for *NRC Handelsblad*. She also published *The Desire Machine. Women in Pop Music*.

Jensen has written a fascinating, readable book.

*NRC HANDELSBLAD*

Jensen's story is exceptionally accessible as far as the central premise is concerned, the book is extremely convincing.

*DE MORGEN*

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by Stine Jensen

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## **Introduction**

### **The woman and the ape**

*She nodded at the member.*

*'Little willy,' she said.*

*The ape stretched out an arm, placed the back of his hand against her leg and cautiously slid it up under her dress. Madelene felt the warmth of his hand in her lap, but he did not touch her. He looked at her expectantly.*

*'Tickle, tickle,' she said huskily, by way of explanation.*

*Without taking her eyes off the animal, she pulled her dress up, revealing her breasts. Slowly the ape bent forward, bowed his head, as if in a ritual greeting, and took her nipple between his teeth.*

*He straightened up and they looked at each other like no living creatures had ever looked at each other. Then he took hold of her panties, very, very carefully. And with hands that even in the pitch-darkness could distinguish between satin and mercerized cotton, he took them off. Madelene let herself glide backwards, still in slow motion, and the ape followed her.*

The remarkable love scene above appears in *The Woman and the Ape* (1996) by the Danish writer Peter Hoeg. In the novel we are introduced to the behavioural scientist Adam Burden, who is so focused on carving out a career for himself in zoology that he totally neglects his beautiful wife Madelene. She is deeply unhappy and decides to sabotage her husband's scientific experiments by releasing Erasmus, a new and higher species of ape who is the object of his research. Madelene then falls passionately in love with the ape. Erasmus takes her with him to an idyllic forest where she spends the happiest time of her life. It is here that the above love scene takes place. This erotic encounter is highly unusual, almost extraterrestrial: the two look at each other 'like no living creatures have ever looked at each other before.' Madelene's husband is terribly jealous and even considers killing the ape. But ultimately he realizes that his wife

is happier with Erasmus. Madelene, now pregnant by the animal, leaves for the forests of the north, together with Erasmus.

This bizarre petting session piqued my curiosity. What would make a woman prefer an ape to her husband? I soon learned that Madelene is not the only woman in Western literature and film history to find happiness with an ape. At first glance the bestial love-making may seem absurd, but there are a great many other examples of sexual relationships between women and male apes. In the film *King Kong* (1933) we meet a gorilla who is hopelessly in love with a beautiful blonde named Ann. To the sorrow of moviegoers who have come to sympathize with the gorilla, the film ends with his death, but in the remake (1976) Jessica Lange as Ann revels in the attention of the gorilla. She allows him to bathe her under a waterfall and, since there are no hair dryers in the jungle, King Kong gently blows her hair dry.



In the film *Max Mon Amour* (1987) the heroine Margaret takes refuge in the arms of a chimpanzee. Her unfaithful husband Peter is terrified that the chimpanzee is a better lover than he is. But his worst fear is that his wife is interested in more

than just sex, and that she is actually in love with the ape. Clearly, Peter Hoeg's Madelene is by no means unique.

Indeed, we find intimate relationships between women and apes not only in the imagination of authors, but also in contemporary primatology, the field of scientific research devoted to apes, anthropoids and human beings. In comparison with the other physical sciences and the various subdisciplines within biology, an exceptionally large number of women have opted for a career in primatology. Moreover, each ape species seems to boast its own devoted female researcher. Chimpanzees have their Jane Goodall, gorillas owe their protected status to Dian Fossey, and orang-utans are synonymous with the name of Biruté Galdikas, the 'mother of the apes'. Shirley Strum is known as the baboon woman, and Ellen van Krunkelsven has been christened the 'Barbie of the bonobos' by Flemish journalist Dirk Draulans in his book *Tomorrow's Man* (1998). Not only have these women declared their love for apes in both learned journals and works of popular science, they have also been featured in novels, films, documentaries and biographies.

Such meetings between a woman and an ape are open to various interpretations. There may be an erotic charge, as in *King Kong* and *The woman and the Ape*. Or the relation may be that of a researcher and the ape (M/F) who is the object of her research, or even a mother-child relationship, where the female primatologist cares for the apes as if they were indeed her children. The theme of the woman and the ape is the subject of this book, in which I explore the conceptualization of love between woman and ape in a selection of twentieth-century short stories, novels, films and popular science. The key question here is: How are we to interpret this relationship, and what significance can be attributed to the recurring theme of the woman and the ape? In addition, I raise the question of how the theme has been interpreted over the years, and examine the various changes that have taken place in the conceptualization of the theme. For example, do social, cultural and scientific developments play a role and, if so, what is the nature of that role?

In order to find answers to these questions, I explore how the theme of the woman and the ape has taken shape in the various texts and images, as well as the significance which I and others attribute to them. To that end, I have narrowed the scope of my research, focusing on specific examples of relationships between women and apes in Western culture during the twentieth century. The theme of the woman and the ape is, however, much older. In the Orient an erotic tale about a princess and a giant ape was circulating as far back as the first century in the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*. This presumably provided the inspiration for Western stories about relationships between women and apes. In his book *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (1952), the art historian W. H. Janson presents a detailed inventory of the historical roots of erotic representations of women with apes throughout antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Janson believes that the text was translated in the eleventh century, after which it circulated in the West, inspiring works such as Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), in which two women take an ape as a lover.

Although I shall draw on this long tradition where appropriate, for pragmatic reasons I shall confine myself to the twentieth century. This is in itself a lengthy time span, and one which offers a wealth of material. I have opted for a relatively small corpus, since my aim is not to generalize, but rather to focus on the special nature of individual texts. The major examples I shall be discussing are the film *King Kong* (1933), the bond between female primatologists and apes (1960-98), and *The Woman and the Ape* (1996). My intention is not to produce a general and definitive history of the woman and the ape, even if that were possible. I am more interested in demonstrating how the relationship between the woman and the ape is presented in various periods, in the hope that the chronological structure will provide some insight into developments and changes in the representation of that relationship.

The stories come from Denmark, England, Germany, France and the United States. Some of the images, such as the film *King Kong*, are so well known that they have become part of our cultural memory. Others, such as Ian McEwan's

highly original tale ‘Reflections of a Kept Ape’, have been included because they acquire new shades of meaning when seen within the context of our theme. The choice of the various media – novel, short story, motion picture and popular science – is designed to highlight the broader implications of the theme and to examine possible links, such as those between literary and scientific texts.

The stories and films cover the period between 1933, the year in which *King Kong* appeared, and 1996, which saw the publication of *The Woman and the Ape*. *King Kong* was chosen as our starting point because in this famous film the meeting between the woman and the ape gave rise to a debate on the nature of gorillas and human beings: is he a ‘gentle giant’ or a ‘killer king’? By the time *The Woman and the Ape* was published, the gorilla is being presented as the ideal man and lover, which raises the question of what transpired in the intervening years to bring about such a radical change.

My approach to the stories is ideologically critical (how certain conventions are repeated and what the implications are of such repetition), and contextual (how to establish the significance of each text, for example, by linking them to other relevant texts). At the same time, it is important to take note of specifics, such as the ambiguities and nuances of the individual text, which raise questions of interpretation. Not only do the stories reflect and shape changing social concepts, they are also worth examining from a literary standpoint. My reading of the material is rooted in a cross-pollination of the ideas of various thinkers, including the American cultural critic Donna Haraway, the art historian W.H. Janson, and the philosopher Annemarie Mol. Their work is discussed in the first chapter, where I reflect more generally on the relationship between woman and ape. Throughout the book I combine insights from scientific research, philosophy, literary theory and cultural studies.

The first chapter focuses on the question of why it is that the ape is always male and the woman always white. Apes occupy a unique position within the animal kingdom: they are the most like Man, but they are not human. In view of this ambivalent position, it is only logical for humans to project their fears and



dreams onto apes. In our culture, such questions as ‘where does Man come from?’ and ‘What is the nature and status of Man?’ are recurring obsessions, and often they are examined or articulated via the ape. We can learn a great deal from stories about apes – whether they appear in a novel or a scientific text – and they may well tell us more about the person recounting the story than about the apes themselves. Apes also play a considerable role in our views on such concepts as man and animal, male and female, black and white, and nature and culture. And yet it is still not clear why woman invariably play a role in the stories about apes. By means of the concept ‘ambiguity’, I also reflect on the relationship between the ape and the woman, who – like the ape – is seen as ‘the other’.

Chapters Two to Five centre on the analysis, interpretation and historical reception of a number of specific narratives: short story, novel, film, and popular science text. All are drawn from Western culture, and all reserve a starring role for the woman and the ape. Chapter Two focuses on *King Kong* (1933), the most famous film about apes ever made. I analyse stories by and about Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas, the best known of which are William Boyd’s novel *Brazzaville Beach* (1991) and the film *Gorillas in the Mist* (1991). In Chapter Four I return to Peter Hoeg’s *The Woman and the Ape* (1996), which I examine against the background of the Great Ape Project which advocates granting human rights to anthropoids. In the final chapter, the various lines set out in the previous chapters come together in an examination of two texts which reflect on the relationship between human beings and apes. In Ian McEwan’s short story ‘Reflections of a Kept Ape’, which was written in 1978 but did not find its way to a wider audience until it was reprinted in 1997, an ape contemplates his love for a writer. In the second text, *The Ape and the Sushi Master. Cultural Reflections of a Primatologist* (2001), Frans de Waal, a researcher working with apes, reflects on his field of study. While the theme of the woman and the ape does not play a central role in De Waal’s book, it does mark the most important turning point in our scientific thinking about human

beings and apes since the publication of *The Woman and the Ape*: namely, De Waal's assertion that apes have a culture. My reflection on the reflections of De Waal and McEwan's ape brings us to the final pages of the book. We find ourselves in a dizzying hall of mirrors for apes, where one begins to wonder whether there is indeed any difference between 'human' and 'ape', 'black' and 'white', 'man' and 'woman', 'culture' and 'nature', 'fact' and 'fiction', 'literature' and 'science'. While the man asks himself whether there is still hope for human culture, the women and the apes passionately embrace, as they look forward to a future in which ambiguity triumphs.

[excerpt from Chapter Two: The tragic death of King Kong]

#### **4. Kong as the other**

*king kong according to the new york times  
is a metaphor for:  
'the Natural Child, the Last Romantic  
the Noble Savage, the Oppressed Proletarian  
the Black man entering modern history in chains  
the Third World Emissary.'*

*Well  
what i wanna know is  
what about king kong's wife & his kids  
mrs kong & the little kongs  
whatever happened to them after he deathwished & tripped himself right  
outta their lives  
did they have an insurance policy to fall back on  
simian social security?*

Hattie Gossett, excerpt from 'king kong !kingg kongg!! kinggg konggg!!!' (1998)

King Kong may have died on the silver screen, but he lives on in Western culture. Tourists visiting the Empire State Building still giggle as they pose for photos with an inflatable gorilla, and still take home stuffed King Kongs for the kids. King has returned to both 'science' and 'culture' (high as well as low). During the eighties and nineties there was increased interest in popular culture, under the influence of the emerging field of film studies, alongside programmes in gender, black, and cultural studies. Numerous academic interpretations of the film appeared, and culture critics explored the possible significance of the love story between a girl and an ape. Where species and gender are concerned, Kong is

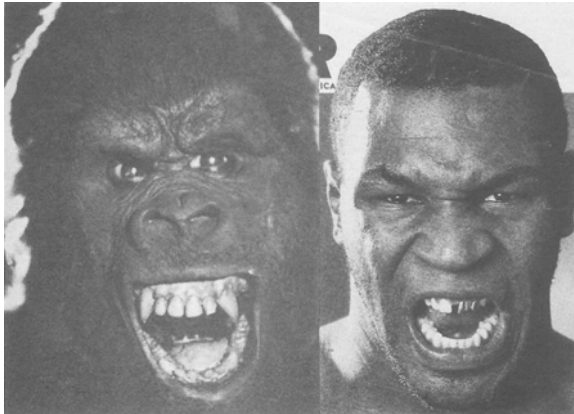
invariably seen as *human* and *male*. Some authors also add race: i.e., he is a *black* man. There is not always agreement on his character: depending on how the relationship with the girl is interpreted, Kong is seen as evil aggressor or gentle victim. In the role of innocent victim, he may even take on divine qualities, becoming a Christ-like figure.

King Kong has often been seen as evil. In fact, the gorilla appears on the list of one hundred all-time manifestations of evil. In 'The King Kong Song' by the Swedish pop group Abba he's 'a mighty black killer', while The Kinks portray him as a Machiavellian figure with a machine gun in the number 'King Kong' (1969): 'I'm King Kong and I'm ten feet long / got a big six gun and everybody is scared / I'm King Kong, got a hydrogen bomb / I can blow up your houses so you better beware.' Where Kong is seen as an evil monster, his relationship with Ann is unequivocal: he is the killer/rape-man and Ann is the victim. Authors as diverse as Jeanette Winterson and Thomas Pynchon refer to the gorilla in their work. In *Written on the Body* (1992) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) respectively, both portray King Kong as a sexual aggressor. Some feminists, such as Marina Warner, see Kong as a symbol for the male rapist, or as a reincarnation of the beast in the stereotypical Beauty-and-the-Beast theme, in which the monster proves highly susceptible to female beauty. According to a Freudian reading of the film in *Men and Apes* (1966) by the husband and wife team of Desmond and Ramona Morris, the choice of the Empire State Building was by no means accidental: 'Skyscrapers are, of course, phallic symbols, and Kong is made to cling to the tallest of them all.'

The most critical interpretation came from the field of black studies. Several culture critics saw the film as racist: Not only was Kong an evil man, he was an evil, homicidal *black* man. Moreover, he symbolized the monstrous black 'other', and formed a threat to Western civilization because he set his sights on a Western white woman. According to the critic James Snead, this turns *King Kong* into a *blaxploitation* film.

There is admittedly good reason for seeing King Kong as the black ‘other’. According to G. Jahoda and Fatima Tobing Rony, the film is part of a colonial iconographic and ethnographic tradition in which black people are represented as apes. Black island-dwellers wear ridiculous costumes that make them look like dressed-up circus apes. The original bride of Kong, a silent and nameless dark woman, is not attractive enough or good enough for Kong, and she is replaced by a fair-skinned blonde. Fatima Tobing Roby recounts in her study *The Third Eye. Race, cinema and ethnographic spectacle* (1996) that even in the nineties she always felt uncomfortable whenever she saw the film: ‘I am watching myself being depicted as Savage. I am the Bride of Kong.’ She regards the film as a visual spectacle in which blacks are depicted as ‘freakish ethnographic specimens’. In his book *White Hero, Black Beast* (1979) Paul Hoch maintains that the white man is able to take on the role of hero because he is protecting the white woman – whom he calls ‘the centre of white Western civilization’ – against the black man, portrayed as a *beast*, a black ape. ‘The threatened assault on the blonde goddess by the black ape seems to have become America’s archetypal nightmare: the monstrous beast running amok among the white virgins at the very core of Western civilization’. Kong must die: ‘By seeking the white goddess he committed the supreme racial sin.’ King Kong symbolizes the black peril, and in this sense his death mark its extinction. Kong is murdered and white heterosexual marriage triumphs.

In short, in the black tradition King Kong became the symbol of racial exploitation. In his play *Dream on a Monkey Mountain* (1970), Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott highlights the interpretation of King Kong as black man when a black criminal is taunted with shouts of ‘King Kong’ and ‘gorilla’. An interesting example of a more positive appropriation of King Kong as a black ‘killer king’ and purveyor of black power is the way the black boxer Mike Tyson was fond of having himself portrayed as King Kong.



But if Kong represents the black monster and the film is indeed racist, why do ‘we’ feel pity and sympathy for the great ape? Why do some interpreters – including Hoch, who refers to King Kong as ‘Othello’ – speak of a *tragic* death? If we endorse the symbolic line of the culture critics, we could say that King Kong is murdered by white men because, as the ‘black other’, he has simply come too close: by having an affair with a white girl, he has broken the taboo on interracial relations, because he is a *good* ‘negro’.

Other interpreters see Kong not as an aggressor, but as a *gentle* hero, an innocent *victim*, and a sympathetic *outsider*. In her study of the reception of King Kong, *Tracking King Kong* (1998), Cynthia Erb shows that not only heterosexuals, but also mainstream, gay, and black men identify with King Kong. The black man who tells a white woman that he feels like King Kong sees the ape as a symbol of the terrifying black other. While in the mainstream reception (i.e., among white males) Kong has been largely sexualized and romanticized, and has also been ‘deracialized’. For heterosexual white men he is a symbol of virility and masculinity, as witness an American commercial in which a popular white actor is portrayed in a King Kong coat. On the other hand, the gorilla was seen as a camp figure during the sixties and seventies, perhaps because of his more gentle, feminine characteristics, ultimately becoming a symbol of the ‘soft’ man, the ostracized white male homosexual.

The ape as homosexual and vice versa is a recurrent motif in popular culture. The novels *The Planet of Apes* (1963) by Pierre Boulle and *God’s Grace* (1982) by Bernard Malamud may be read as homo pastiches. In *The Planet of Apes* the

leading male character Ulysse Mérou refuses to mate with a female ape, whom he finds repulsive. Instead, he seeks contact with the male apes, which may be interpreted as homoerotic. *God's Grace* is a satirical novel in which a scientist named Cohn, the sole survivor of a flood, is washed up on a desert island inhabited by a number of apes. The chimpanzee Buz becomes his pupil: 'Cohn praised him, calling him a bright boy. They put their arms around each other and kissed each other tenderly. Then the ape Buz asks Cohen if he can marry him. Buz stealthily tried to slide his fingers between Cohn's thighs, and while his pappy knew that it was well-meant, he did not consider it right to let the little fellow touch his testicles. Buz crept close to him and before long he was lying on his chest and sucking at his nipple, straight through Dr. Bunder's white silk shirt.'

This ambiguity allows King Kong to take on several different roles, both 'macho' and 'pansy', and in the battle between the sexes he and Ann became a popular source of material for comedy and parodies. A 1976 American commercial for bras show a woman undressing in her bedroom while King Kong peers longingly through the window like some peeping Tom: 'A woman never knows what problems she may encounter. But we make sure her bra isn't one of them.' In the nineties, by contrast, Kong became the innocent party and Ann the aggressor: the ape is manipulated and falls victim to the charms of a femme fatale. In an instalment of the popular TV series *Ally McBeal* (1999), the young and successful lawyer McBeal – who gives as good as she gets – launches into a diatribe against sexist men, calling them 'male chauvinist King Kong pigs'. The castigated men just stand there, looking abashed. And the comic book MAD shows the poor gorilla crying his eyes out because he has been treated badly by the cruel Ann, who shrieks, 'EEK ... EE ... OO ... OI ... Don't touch me, you filthy beast!' The roles of 'beauty' and 'beast' have been reversed under the influence of social and cultural developments, among them the phenomenon of girl power: Ann is portrayed as a 'beast' who fails to recognize the sweetness, the 'beauty' of the man/gorilla.

However, the relationship between the ape and the girl is not always sexualized. In the film version of John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* (2000) King Kong appears as an abandoned orphan and Ann as his mother. Once a week a group of orphans watch *King Kong*, and there is a scene in which Kong inspects Ann, tickling her and pulling at her dress. One of the little boys identifies with the playful, childlike Kong, and cries out 'She's his mom!' In the boy's eyes, Kong is an orphan like him, looking for the ideal mother, i.e., Ann (who in the film is herself the orphan). The boy believes he's unattractive and just not good enough, which is why none of the adoptive parents choose him. He feels like an outcast, just like King Kong.

Sometimes the girl fades into the background, and it's King Kong versus the rest of the world. Popular culture often depicts the gorilla as a black Christ figure. Conversely, there are also portrayals of the black man as King Kong and Christ figure. In the film *The Green Mile* (2000) an enormous black man, played by John Coffey, has been sentenced to death and is being strapped into the electric chair. The man has special gifts and is able to cure people. He represents the forces of good, and in the end he gives a white man a 'gift', the gift of immortality. Even today you can buy bumper stickers saying 'King Kong died for your sins.' Like Christ, King Kong is seen as an innocent victim crucified on the cross. There are also those who believe that his downfall stands for Americans' lack of compassion for Jewish immigrants during the thirties.

How we see the death of King Kong depends in part on how we interpret his relationship with Ann. In gender and black studies the death of King Kong is seen primarily as the solution to the problem of the *white heterosexual man*. The gorilla is killed by white men, eliminating the 'black' monster. Snead adds that for white heterosexual men King Kong functions primarily as a figure onto which they can project their secret rape fantasies. According to the historian Thomas F. Gossett, the fantasy whereby the white man identifies with the black man/beast is quite a common one: 'they wish they could be negroes, at least on Saturday nights.' We find a concrete example of the white male's if-only-I-was-a-virile-



negro fantasy in the person of the film critic K. Bernard, who hides behind a gender-neutral ‘we’ when he writes: ‘We do not want Kong to violate that blonde maiden ... Yet at the same time this is precisely what we do want. We want it to grow big and approach the blonde maiden with bloodshot, lustful eyes ... Tarzan or Kong with erections are unthinkable, but somewhere in the furry depth, beneath that loincloth, they *lurk*, waiting to spring to life at our call.’ He heightens the effect by imagining how, before she is given up to Kong, Fay Wray is examined in order to establish that she is still a virgin: ‘The examination is conducted by the chief, the elders, and the midwives of the tribe. It is even conceivable that it is witnessed by the entire tribe. Fay Wray is stripped and laid bare on a (bamboo?) platform in a fir-lit hut. Her legs are forced apart and black fingers probe, pull and manipulate her.’ Snead says that it is precisely because the white man feels such guilt about his secret rape desires that the ape must die: the death of King Kong brings salvation. In this interpretation, the absence of King Kong’s penis may be seen as the ‘emasculatation’ of the black peril by the white film-maker: the negro has been castrated. After Kong’s death the black viewers and the white woman are left behind, like lost souls. The white woman can always take refuge in white hetero marriage, but the black viewer must watch sorrowfully as Kong, the virile black ‘gentleman’, is swept from the screen.

While the ambiguity of Kong may be difficult to accept, it does make him a flexible object for projection. Because Kong represents so many aspects of ‘otherness’ – he is black, animal, and feminine – almost all viewers identify with him, whether they are black or white, men or women. Which way the pendulum swings – i.e., whether viewers see him as evil or gentle – will depend on their social and ideological views and the historical context in which they see the film. If we look at the historical reception of King Kong over the years, we see that he has become increasingly ‘gentle’. Due to the influence of critical black studies and changing social relations, he is now regarded more as ‘victim’ and ‘outcast’, the projection of a white male fantasy, and even as black man, homo, Jew, Jesus, and even two or more of these at the same time. Kong represents the ‘good’

which is capable of driving out ‘evil’, as witness the illustration which appeared after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. King Kong is standing on top of the Twin Towers, beating off tiny airplanes, while the caption reads: ‘Where was King Kong when we needed him?’ Ann, on the other hand, has come to be seen less as a victim and more as a manipulative femme fatale who deliberately uses her charms to wind the ape around her little finger.



In short, the history of the cultural reception of *King Kong* reveals a struggle with the nature and status of the gorilla. Is he human, or even divine (recalling Christ)? Is he female or male? Is he gentle or evil? The verdict, which depends in part on how the relationship with the girl is seen, will determine whether Kong is regarded as human being, animal, or Christ figure (*species*), as rapist, homo or orphan (*gender/sexuality*), as black rapist or Jewish or black outcast (*race*). Because of this ambiguity, King Kong is seen as both ‘norm’ (the man as rapist) and ‘other’ (the black outcast). The ‘other’ can take many forms, as is clear from the historical reception of *King Kong*, and the various sequels and remakes. Changing social relationships influence the interpretation of Kong, and thanks to

his ambiguity, he can take on many guises. This has enabled him to develop into an object of projection, one which continues to fascinate viewers and readers.

[excerpt from Chapter Five: The ape as ideal man]

## 5. From rape ape to ideal man

*Take an ape, give him a mobile phone, and you have some idea of the man*

Michel Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* (1999)

Why does Madelene love the ape more than her own husband? In *The Woman and the Ape* Madelene chooses the ape because she recognizes herself in his otherness. When he is locked up, she identifies with his loneliness. She used to feel like some half-dead *kulturmensch* whose life was an endless repetition of similar events, but when she is near the ape she feels her vitality and love of life returning, and she herself becomes more ape-like. Thanks to the ape, Madelene is again in touch with her animal nature. Her husband sees the ape purely as an object of study that will further his career, but Madelene values and appreciates the attention which Erasmus bestows on her. She rejects the rational male culture which reduces animals and women to objects. When forced to choose between her husband and the ape, she chooses Erasmus, because ‘when she closes her eyes’ she senses what her husband is: Death. The title, *The woman and the ape*, has something of the scientific study about it, suggesting that the theme of the novel is more general in nature, and that the story is not specifically about Madelene and Erasmus, but rather about every woman and every ape in the whole world. While the author chooses the side of ‘the other’ (both the animal and the woman), he stereotypes that other by presenting it as guileless. In Hoeg’s literary universe, women and apes represent a kind of unspoilt nature, not yet corrupted by the exigencies of contemporary society. They are closer to nature and to their own feelings and emotions. In a sense, this confirms the persistent myth that what is ‘feminine’ and ‘animal’ represents a natural, primeval state (one which, if Hoeg is to be believed, human beings corrupted by culture would do well to draw upon in order to ‘heal themselves’).

Madelene is not the only woman to find happiness in the arms of an ape. As far back as the seventies, but above all in the eighties and nineties, there was a wave of film comedies and books in which the ape made a better showing than the man. As in *The Woman and the Ape*, we see how in the remake of *King Kong* Jessica Lange, in the role of Ann, revels in the attentions of the gorilla. She allows him to bathe her in a waterfall and, since there are no hair dryers in the jungle, he softly blows her hair dry. In *Tarzan, the Apeman* (1981), Bo Derek as Jane rejects all the men vying for her hand, preferring a romp with Tarzan and an enormous orang-utan.



The ape and the apeman take turns tugging at her knickers and trying to climb on top of her. And in Hagisa Oshima's playful film *Max, Mon Amour* (1986) the young housewife Margaret takes revenge on her unfaithful husband Peter by two-timing him with an ape called Max. When Peter finds out that his wife is in the

habit of renting a hotel room, he suspects that she is giving him a taste of his own medicine by taking a lover. When he finds out that that is exactly what she is doing, but that her lover is a chimpanzee, Peter becomes obsessed by the idea. He goes to a great deal of trouble to find out if his wife is actually doing it with the ape. He spies on her through the keyhole and we – the film viewers – look through that same keyhole, holding our breath. Peter is deathly afraid that the chimpanzee is a better lover than he is, and that he is incapable of meeting her sexual expectations. When he visits his own mistress, he tries to imitate Max by beating his chest with both fists and then pouncing on her. He even enlists the services of a prostitute, in order to find out exactly what happens during intercourse between a woman and an ape. But the ape refuses to perform. This appears to confirm Peter's worst fears: his wife's attraction to the ape is not based on sex alone but also on intimacy, and that what she feels for Max is actually love. Despite the conventional narrative structure, in which the camera looks over the man's shoulder, and the fact Margaret is given very few lines and only a modicum of subjectivity, the film manages to rise above Hollywood conventions. Not only are Peter's voyeuristic tendencies – and those of the viewer – constantly frustrated, we also see how the macho Peter, like Adam in *The Woman and the Ape*, gradually becomes more understanding, and in the end is forced to accept his wife's affair.

In short, the ape is transformed from a potential rapist into the ideal man. Donna Haraway calls the ape a subject of projection for Western white man, and the white woman a suitable mediator between nature and culture. Although these ideas are presented largely from a synchronic perspective, which makes Haraway's vocabulary unsuitable for clarifying or describing *changes* in our view of the ape or men or women (since in her view 'the other' does not change), they may help us to understand the reversal in present-day representations. In Haraway's view, there has been a clear change in the role of the ape as a subject of projection. In a general sense, she is right. Throughout the twentieth century there was increased emphasis on the human-ness of the ape and the apeness of

human beings. It is due in part to the contribution made by female primatologists – as described in the previous chapter – that the ape has become more and more a ‘member of the family’, and that we ourselves are much more sympathetic towards our family. Perhaps not least because this allows us to create a more sympathetic image of ourselves.

But the role of the woman has changed as well, due in part to the feminist wave of the seventies. The beautiful but insipid blonde from *King Kong* has been replaced by a modern rebel. Madelene is no longer prepared to tolerate being ignored by her husband. At first she rebels in silence, turning to drink, harming herself in the process. Then her protest takes on other forms: adultery, in search for the man who truly understands her. Her affair with Erasmus has enhanced not only her respect for animals, but also her self-respect.

Haraway sees the woman as the ideal mediator between nature and culture. But on whose behalf is she mediating? It is interesting to note that today it is mainly *men* who think up situations in which they are bested by apes, and in which we are told in considerable detail exactly how women copulate with an ape. The TV biologists Midas Dekkers and Desmond Morris both offer a possible explanation for this phenomenon in their non-fiction work. In his book *Intimate Behaviour* (1971), Morris remarks that people who are disappointed in their fellow man often seek – and find – consolation in animals. In the same way, animals often serve as a substitute for intimacy. Unlike human beings they are innocent, since they raise no issues and ask no questions. From this perspective, you could say that the affairs between women and apes dreamed up by male authors are a means of addressing the whole idea of ‘masculinity’. According to Midas Dekkers, sexual intercourse between a woman and an animal dates from time immemorial, and is above all a fantasy by and for men. In *Dear Pet: On Bestiality* (1992), he demonstrates that almost every bestial fantasy involving a woman and an animal originated in the minds of men. When they want to highlight the virile and aggressive side of their nature, they invariably seize upon animals as a symbol. According to Dekkers, men identify with the active party:

‘He is the stallion, the stud, the bull, the voluptuous monster pumping the most insatiable women full of sperm with his XL organ.’ But in *The Woman and the Ape*, Erasmus is more human than the man: he has a rich emotional life and genuinely respects women. In effect, Erasmus symbolizes precisely what men have lost: contact with nature.

The scenarios, written by men in which women cannot decide between the man and the ape, reflect something which in the past ten years has developed into a true cultural cliché: the male identity crisis. Having witnessed the emancipation of women and animals (notably the ape), it is now the man who is wrestling with *his* role. Peter Hoeg seizes upon this cliché in his satire. What is a man to do when confronted with the absurdity of a woman running away with an ape? Can he remain the person he was? Has he lost something? Is he hunter or carer, a rational or an emotional being, part of culture or nature? This dilemma is explored in the person of the woman and the ape. The male author uses the woman as a kind of test case: Which one will she choose? As we saw in the introduction, the fact that in previous scenarios the ape was killed may be interpreted as an attempt to dispel the ambiguity. The tragic death of the ape at the hands of men marks the triumph of a masculinity defined as civilized, rational, and culturally rich. The man who yearns for a masculinity enriched by such feminine qualities as sensitivity and emotion must awaken the ape inside him. The wife’s adultery can saddle the husband with doubts about his own virility: the ape forces him to face up to his identity crisis. Two examples from the film world come to mind: the comedies *Morgan, a Suitable Case for Treatment* (1966) and *Men* (Doris Dorrie, 1985). In both films the cuckolded husband dons an ape mask or suit in order to attract his wife’s attention. In *Morgan* the woman ultimately opts for the man with a good job and plenty of money, who has everything under control, while in *Men* she chooses the artistic man who is in touch with his feelings and is not afraid to show affection for his wife.





In the comedy *Being John Malkovich* (Charlie Kaufman, 1999), a man locks his wife up in a cage with a chimpanzee in an effort to solve a somewhat unusual problem: he and his wife are in love with the same woman. The wife has turned to the ape for comfort, drawn to him by that unique combination of man and ape which has caused so many feminine hearts to miss a beat: he is gentle and heroic, loving and macho, sensitive and ... a tasty dish. She sees him as part of unspoilt nature, a creature immune to the inhibitions which civilization has inflicted upon Man. He follows his intuition and, where appropriate, he will unashamedly brush away a tear or two. Moreover, his heart is in the right place. He is a champion of the most vulnerable members of society: animals and women. It is inevitable that Madeleine will choose the ape.