Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Project Nim

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, July 7th, 2011

We most reveal ourselves when we try to help others. The helping hand is a gesture of compassion, and also of arrogance – it is a way to show we are stronger and better. Yet arrogance masks something deeper, more fragile – our insecurity that, perhaps, we are not better after all.

History tells many tales of our attempts to "help" people from other cultures or ways of life, and the tales always end badly. From missionaries' attempts to "civilize heathens" to the US government's forced re-education of Native American children, from Ishi to Kaspar Hauser: sad is the outcome of those taken in by well-meaning folk.

James Marsh's riveting documentary, *Project Nim,* tells the tale from an inter-species perspective. In 1973, a baby chimp was taken from his mother and placed in a human household, where he was raised as one of the family and taught sign language. Could this chimp, named Nim, communicate with humans, learn from us and teach us how he sees the world? While Nim quickly develops a basic signing vocabulary, he also develops into himself as he grows and matures. In time it is clear he cannot cohabit with humans much longer. He is taken away and placed under the care of others – a friendly research center, a frightening laboratory, a well-meaning animal rights activist without a clue.

Marsh, whose previous film was *Man on Wire,* plays out the narrative like a Chekhovian drama. He makes effective and limited use of recreations, and introduces the human interview subjects as static objects, revealed by a camera tracking across the screen: the people become props in Nim's drama. And it is Nim, whose inner life we can only intuit, despite his limited signs, that is the most haunting character.

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