

## “Getting a Feeling for the Animal”

### *Ape Affects Onscreen*

When viewing the Robert Yerkes collection at the Emory University library, I was unexpectedly struck by a moment in his 1935 film *Maternal Behavior in Chimpanzee*. Cuba—an eight-year-old primate who had just given birth to Peter, the first chimpanzee to be born in a laboratory setting—paused while consuming her placenta and umbilical cord to look directly at the camera.<sup>1</sup> This look seemed to pierce the screen. The moment was brief—a cut in the film and her image skips off to a new activity. But for a few seconds, the filmmaker, the camera, and I all collapsed into a single entity caught by Cuba’s baleful stare. Was Yerkes also startled by this gaze? Was he briefly captured by Cuba’s look as he repeatedly watched, edited, and presented his film to colleagues? Did he ask himself—as Derrida later did when confronted by the returned look of his cat—“What does this bottomless gaze offer my sight?”<sup>2</sup> There is of course no way to tell for sure. But Yerkes was the kind of scientist who would at times ask such questions, reflecting publicly on his own position in relation to his primate subjects, often plumbing the depths of their complex interactions with a frank openness to animal emotions. As we will see, this openness to animal emotions was a key component for his scientific research project, as well as for his political worldview.

Derrida’s encounter with his cat was a thread that, once pulled, began to unravel a massive tangle of philosophical thought separating humans from animals. In Derrida’s telling, his cat’s look demanded he acknowledge the life before him, a life that could never be fully reduced to a complex machine (as Descartes claimed) or an impoverished assemblage of disconnected experiences (as Heidegger claimed). Instead, the animal’s gaze (fig. 3), which addressed him despite its muteness, required Derrida recognize worlds beyond human language and reason, spaces of relation and response that were not defined by philosophical discourse or rational deduction. The film scholar Akira Mizuta Lippit extends the transformative power of animal



FIGURE 3. Photograph titled “40-2.” Robert Mearns Yerkes Papers (MS 569), box 131, folder 2237, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

looks to cinema’s indexical images of them. Like the returned gaze of Derrida’s cat, he argues that film has the potential to disturb language’s coherence and meaning making. Lippit writes that this “anxiety” is caused by film’s “uncanny materiality that drives the spectator outside of language toward an experience of ecstasy, of standing outside, of brief psychosis.”<sup>3</sup> Film thus pulls against signification through its photographic properties, which refuse any single meaning in the face of many possible readings. Its mechanical reproduction of a wealth of material detail alludes to a world outside language’s one-to-one correspondence between sign and referent. It is therefore uniquely suited for, and especially vulnerable to, the powers of the animal gaze, generating moments like the one I experienced while watching Yerkes’s film of Cuba. The indexical images of her stare reproduced the punctum of the animal’s look, initiating an unwieldy process of identification and alienation among spectator, animal, and film, creating a type of image that Lippit calls an “animetaphor.”<sup>4</sup>

Most laboratory scientists engage in forms of knowledge production that diverge dramatically from such cinematic and zoonotic breaks in language. Under the circumstances described by Derrida and Lippit, the distances between observer and observed, human and animal, both collapse. Especially during this early period of comparative psychology, the recognition of animal emotions was largely frowned on. In this chapter, however, we will examine Yerkes’s unique use of film as a tool for animal research, which did not deny the medium’s unsettling potential to generate intense affective relationships between viewers and onscreen subjects. Indeed, Yerkes sought to create this very experience.

A useful lens through which to understand how Yerkes’s research used sympathy is Sara Ahmed’s term *affective economy*, which describes how “the accumulation of affective value” ties together communities through the production of shared

emotional states.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, films and animals were both essential to how Yerkes envisioned the affective economy of animal research, which he believed should be built around a common “feeling for the animal” that would be shared by an elite set of scientific observers. Unlike the white supremacy groups that Ahmed analyzes, early primatologists did not share the common emotion of fear but rather of *sympathy*, which determined who was inside and outside this community based on their access to an understanding of animal emotion. Additionally, though less clearly malignant than fear, sympathy functioned *within* this scientific community in many of the same ways—establishing essential differences between the subject experiencing sympathy and the object of that sympathy, differences expressed in the expansion of one (the sympathizer, who becomes capable of explaining and describing the sympathized) and the restriction of the other (the sympathized, who becomes defined by its status as an object of sympathy).<sup>6</sup> As we will see, this process was made material through the production, distribution, and reception of films that were meant to build a common emotional experience of sympathy with primates. This experience then became the bedrock emotional formation for Yerkes’s eugenics, which sought to apply such sympathy to a broad array of geopolitical differences and conflicts. Despite the fact that sympathy is ostensibly a way of losing oneself through an acknowledgment of others, in this context it actually functioned as a means of defining and empowering privileged groups of people.

I will argue that Yerkes sought to activate, manage, and systematize precisely film’s powerful ability to create sympathy by superseding symbolic language. In the first section of this chapter, I contextualize Yerkes’s films within his approach to laboratory research, which focused directly on the emotional bonds between researchers and primates. I argue that he used film to empirically introduce emotional descriptions into scientific discussions, where this content would otherwise be inadmissible. In the second section, I examine the politics of this pursuit within the platform of Yerkes’s eugenicist beliefs (described extensively in the previous chapter). In this portion of the chapter, I reframe his production of sympathy through the mechanism of film as an exertion of power, one that sought to define the experiences of others and thereby place them within an organizational hierarchy. Ultimately, I conclude that Yerkes’s strategic production of cross-species cinematic sympathy offers a troubling counterexample to the use of film to “decenter the human,” which is so often lionized within critical animal studies.

#### “AS CLEAR AS WORDS”: CAPTURING ANIMAL EMOTIONS ON FILM

Yerkes developed a practice of animal research paralleling his work in intelligence testing. His initial examinations of animals began with comparative analyses of sensitivity in a wide variety of species, including invertebrates, earthworms, mice, and frogs.<sup>7</sup> He started studying great apes during a 1915 trip to Santa Barbara, California, where a small independent lab for primatology had been established.<sup>8</sup> In

1923, Yerkes began constructing a primatology laboratory on the Yale campus in New Haven, Connecticut, and in 1930, he established a second colony in Orange Park, Florida.<sup>9</sup> Throughout this period, Yerkes systematically deployed Bell and Howell's portable Filmo and Eyemo cameras to shoot 16 mm and 35 mm footage of his primate subjects.<sup>10</sup> During his tenure as director of the laboratories (a position from which he stepped down in 1941) more than ninety chimpanzees would live, be experimented on, and be filmed at these facilities. Of the films that exist from Yerkes's tenure as director, only four are currently accessible: *Maternal Behavior in Chimpanzee* (Yerkes, 1935), *Some Aspects of Social Behavior in Chimpanzee* (Nissen & Crawford, 1936), *The Use of Tools by the Chimpanzee in Problem Solutions* (Jackson, 1934), and a portion of *Stylus Maze Experiments with Chimpanzee* (Spragg, 1935). This chapter focuses primarily on the first of these, which Yerkes shot himself. The rest of the films made at the center, which include titles such as *From Infancy to Maturity in Chimpanzee Life* (1932) and *Behavioral Experiments with Congo, a Young Mountain Gorilla* (1933), among nearly forty others, remain, as I stated in the intro to the Yerkes section of the book, unavailable for now. These films were essential tools in Yerkes's research into primate emotions and cognition, as well as in the dissemination of this research.

Yerkes saw nonhuman sensoriums as places where strange alternative modes of cognition existed, which he attempted to describe, quantify, and manage, even as he posited their alterity. In an essay on animal cognition, he asks: "For may we not reasonably believe . . . that the ant with its complex organization, however different from ours, its highly developed and complexly differentiated nervous system, its manifold forms of sensory discrimination, its docility, and its extremely varied social life, possesses a form of consciousness which is comparable in complexity of aspect and change with the human?"<sup>11</sup> For Yerkes, the complex anatomy, reactions, adaptations, and interactions of the ant all point to some form of consciousness, even if this consciousness is unrecognizable in human terms. Throughout his career, he argued that ongoing debates over the existence of consciousness in animals were far too restrictive, criticizing his old teacher Münsterberg for using a system based on "acknowledgment," which limited conscious beings to the organisms that humans recognized as such.<sup>12</sup> Yerkes's own experience, and his reviews of the scientific literature, led him to believe that even the most basic organisms (including single-cell animalcules) had the ability to respond to their environment, to learn, and to change, which were his only criteria for possessing consciousness in some form or another. He contended that research into the varied *types* of consciousness possessed by different animals would be more fruitful than research into whether or not these animals possessed consciousness at all.

His study of animal psychology required new objective techniques that could approach such alien forms of consciousness. As it was generally practiced, psychology had developed a whole language and system of introspection, which Yerkes was loath to reject completely as had many behaviorists.<sup>13</sup> Behaviorism's

reduction of animals to their responses seemed to him to ignore adaptation as a sign of lived experience. Like the prominent ethologist Jakob von Uexküll, whom he read and admired, Yerkes insisted that animals experienced the world around them as subjects do, even if their subjectivities differed radically from those experienced by humans.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the science of introspection relied on an assumption of shared experiences between individual humans, which could be accessed through verbal descriptions. No such common ground could be assumed with animals, nor was there a shared language for bridging these disparate perspectives. Yerkes settled on “inference” as a technique that combined behaviorism’s direct observation and testing with an acknowledgment of the “subjective, individual fact” of consciousness that psychology generally approached through introspection.<sup>15</sup> According to Yerkes, comparative psychology should develop a synthesis of empirical testing and informed sympathy to generate reason-based speculations about the subjective mental states behind individual behaviors—whether human or nonhuman.

Yerkes’s use of inference operated through a type of palpitation, never directly accessing the mental states he sought to study but rather deducing them from their external manifestations in animal behavior. He described this process as predicated on a “serviceable” set of assumptions that were borne out through everyday interactions and relationships between animals and scientists in the lab.<sup>16</sup> Unlike behaviorism’s movement toward a more and more specialized language of stimulus response, behavioral research at Harvard, where Yerkes worked, often used a language of emotion as shorthand to describe animal behavior.<sup>17</sup> His broad use of emotional descriptors was as much a practical concern as a scientific claim. As a practical matter, caring for animals often requires a frank acknowledgment of animal emotional states.<sup>18</sup> Although most scientists only began systematically studying the complex emotional relationships between lab animals and researchers much later, within these early testing animal communities there was an ongoing internal conversation about the management of animal feelings and well-being.<sup>19</sup> Written guidelines, informal advice, and training all directly discussed animal feelings even while most behavioral psychologists patently ignored, downplayed, or erased such feelings in their published papers.<sup>20</sup>

So Yerkes was relatively unique in his inclusion of these behind-the-scenes emotional relationships as central parts of his published work. As the historian Anne C. Rose observes, Yerkes consistently inserted incidental and anecdotal evidence of his primate emotions into his publications.<sup>21</sup> Rather than a theoretical principle or datasheet, he often presents precise descriptions of affectively dense circumstances as his final experimental results. Even when representing his work through statistical tabulation, he is circumspect about the ability for such numbers to reveal the true content of his laboratory experiments.<sup>22</sup> Quantitative tabulation, he argues, simply does not work for behavioral phenomena with these many variables. For him, scientific thinking should rather take the form of intuitive leaps or

insights into animal behavior, which have less to do with deduction than empathy. He writes: “To learn truly about the behavior of an animal one must be able to observe accurately, inclusively, relatedly, and to understand it one must be capable of establishing a sympathetic rapport which assures mutual naturalness of attitude and action. The student of animal behavior who is unsympathetic with his subject, like the artist who lacks feeling for his, is cut off from invaluable aids to insight and creative effort.”<sup>23</sup>

Here we have the experimentalist as artist, one who feels for, rather than simply observes, his animal subject. Insight and sympathy, the openness to being changed by the other, the development of trust between human scientists and animal subjects, are all viable tools within Yerkes’s conception of experimental practice. Psychobiology, as he describes it, requires establishing contact and maintaining relationships. His laboratory was therefore a site of engaged sympathy, of establishing relationships across species lines, where the functions of the mind in their many possible permutations could be revealed through contact and interaction between animal subjects and human scientists.

Yerkes’s approach was dictated by his research topics, including birth and maternity, sexual relationships, and hierarchy and dominance—all of which resisted available forms of reductive experimentation. Behaviorists working in the shadow of Pavlov and his theory of conditioned reflexes were concerned with animal behavior as a set of stimulus responses that could be altered through reinforcement and aversion enforced over many trials.<sup>24</sup> Yerkes was interested in such experiments—indeed, he coauthored the first translation of Pavlov into English and kept up a long running correspondence with him as well—but he also aspired to explain behaviors that were impossible to repeat or easily induce.<sup>25</sup> Take for instance his brief 1915 article, “Maternal Instinct in a Monkey,” in the *Journal of Animal Behavior*, which details the actions of a chimpanzee mother named Gertie after a still-birth pregnancy.<sup>26</sup> Yerkes precisely describes Gertie’s behavior with her deceased child, how she guarded its body for five weeks before he was able to take it from her, her extreme interest in the dead infant’s eyes and eyelids, and her ongoing attention to and physical contact with the body. He provides these detailed descriptions but makes no attempt to theorize or identify causes for these actions other than positing the “persistence of maternal behavior.”<sup>27</sup> Births and parental relationships are not reproducible in the same way that stimulus-response tests are and therefore troubled the regime of data collection built on repeating experiments. Scientists like Yerkes, who would study such a phenomenon, ultimately relied on descriptions of unique circumstances rather than the observation of many repeat performances.

One possible method of repeating such singular occurrences is, of course, film. As Scott Curtis has shown, many scientific fields mobilized the moving image as a replacement for repeat experiments in the early decades of the twentieth century: “The motion picture was the best kind of repeatable experiment: if the record

could function as a substitute, it could be endlessly repeated without the work involved in setting up the actual experiment again and again.”<sup>28</sup> Film can be used to verify one’s observations, or share those observations with other scientists, and thereby reduces the necessity for repeat experiments for the purposes of confirming results or convincing colleagues. This can save scientists labor and cost, but it also fundamentally transformed which experiments are repeatable. With complex and subtle animals like chimpanzees, who each have different personalities and memories, reliable repetition in behavior is hard to come by. Certainly, the impetus for Yerkes to film Cuba’s interactions with Peter in *Maternal Behavior in Chimpanzee* must have been the capacity to reexperience an occurrence that up to that point was completely unique. No chimpanzee had ever given birth in a laboratory colony before, and it was uncertain when this would happen again.<sup>29</sup> Filming Cuba’s behavior moments after this birth offered an opportunity to assess and study a phenomenon that would otherwise have been lost in its fleeting singularity. If film could truly stand as a substitute for the experiment, individual and unique events could take on the properties of replay and reproduction that were necessary within experimental psychology.

But for Yerkes, film reproduced not only the physical details of the experiment but also the affective relationships of his laboratory research at the time the film was created. Moments of sympathy like these could otherwise only be given through subjective descriptions of one’s own feelings. In his written work, Yerkes consistently bemoaned the “crudeness,” “incompleteness,” and “inadequacy” of his own prose and its unacceptable status as scientific findings despite being the most revealing takeaways from his experimental activity.<sup>30</sup> But while written interpretations of animal feelings and motivations were subject to accusations of inaccuracy and sentimentality, film was not. Yerkes believed that cinema could be used to circumnavigate the limits of language to reproduce emotional interactions for scientific spectators. Describing the social interactions and emotions of his primates, Yerkes wrote: “Were motion-picture records of the behavior . . . available, there would be slight need of verbal description or comment.”<sup>31</sup> Yerkes again expresses his frustration with the limits of prose. Film can communicate what language can only approximate. By reproducing all the subtle, indescribable, or unintelligible movements that circulate outside language’s grasp, he argues that social behaviors, conscious states, and primate customs can all be reproduced as clear cinematic facts that observers will glean from the moving image, producing what he describes as a “feeling for the animal” that eludes written and spoken language.<sup>32</sup>

For Yerkes, the psychotechnology of cinema induces an emotional analysis of its content, objectively reproducing not only behaviors but also their interpretations in the minds of viewers. This process necessarily requires an act of reading on the part of spectators, which Yerkes recognizes might be a difficult process to control. He writes that when one watched films of primates’ emotional relationships, “the facts would be clear to every intelligent observer,” but he also acknowledged

that “interpretations differing with the mental background of the observer would be inevitable.”<sup>33</sup> As with his work in IQ testing discussed in the previous chapter, Yerkes attributed different readings of his visual material to differing capacities for scientific sight on the part of the spectator. For him, the truth of the primate’s emotional state was contained within the film, but it required an act of “intelligent observation” based on informed empathy to uncover. The instability of differing responses could thus be explained by Yerkes’s hierarchy of vision: intelligent observers would arrive at the correct reading of a chimp’s mental states, and those who did not come to these same conclusions simply showed the deficiency of their own thinking. Here, film’s multivalence spoke to differences in the audience rather than pointing to a flaw in the medium’s capacity to objectively capture fleeting emotional phenomena.

*Maternal Behavior in Chimpanzee*’s final structure actively encourages exactly the sympathetic rapport and speculation that Yerkes advocated for generally. Yerkes composed the film like one of his laboratory experiments—setting up a moment of complex contact with animals where viewers can engage in speculative sympathy. Beginning with footage of Cuba and her new infant, Peter, approximately forty minutes after birth, the film then moves on to an open-ended experiment where another chimpanzee mother, Dita, has been separated from her infant daughter Rosy for a month and a half and is subsequently presented with an infant who was not her own (Don). The film concludes with a striking sequence that illustrates precisely how Yerkes meant for the medium to generate cross-species sympathy. In it, Dita is finally presented with her daughter Rosy at the end of the six-week separation. Rosy is held just outside of Dita’s cage, where Dita can see but not touch her infant. Title cards ask the audience to “Observe Dita’s facial and gestural expressions as she sees her baby before her just out of reach. As clearly as with words she begs for the youngster.” A long, uninterrupted shot subsequently presents Dita’s response from inside the enclosure. She swings from the ceiling, gesticulates repeatedly with her palms up and fingers curled as if taking an object to her chest; she grasps the fencing of her cage and rocks back and forth violently; she bares her teeth and seems to howl (the film is silent); she hops in place rhythmically flipping her hands to face inwards and then outwards. In one startling performance, she grasps a tire hanging in the middle of the cage and reaches out to the infant as though the tire and not the fencing was what was separating her from Rosy. In another instance, she pauses in her rocking back and forth to inspect a faucet just below the fence separating her from Rosy and then, grasping it, she momentarily incorporates the faucet as an object in her behavior titled “begging.” In the final shot of the scene, which is also the final shot of the film, Dita seems confused, staring down at the faucet again and then up to the offscreen space where the infant Rosy is being held. The sequence abruptly ends here.

This scene functions as a tempered animetaphor, an attempt to harness the instability of both film and animals as a method for generating scientific meaning.

At the profilmic stage, the experiment was already radically open-ended. There was no prescribed action that Dita was being asked to perform, no clear parameters for when the studied behavior began or ended, no apparatus defining or focusing her actions. Indeed, the camera itself can barely keep her in frame, and there is no coherent reason why the shot ends when it does. The uninterrupted length of the shot, and the many divergent behaviors it presents, allows space for a variety of overlapping readings and meanings to be taken from these images. But despite this deep ambivalence, the title cards graft language onto the ambiguous images, producing a general descriptive heading for their multifaceted content. Gestural and facial expression become “as clear as words,” held together under the umbrella of “begging.” Viewers are thus induced into an act of translation—the incoherence of Dita’s behavior and the film itself becomes coherent through viewer participation, through the act of observing, synthesizing, and empathizing with Dita’s motivations as a singular emotional expression. The film is thus meant to document “maternity,” and in this final sequence “begging,” by creating a recognition of these mental states in audiences and not by explaining or illustrating the cause and effect dictating Dita’s movements.

Unlike in Lippitt’s theorization of the animetaphor, Yerkes did not see the instability of cinematic images as calling into question film’s ability to communicate single truths but rather as simply demanding a more discriminating spectator—an “intelligent observer—who could properly define the emotional category or social context within the image’s chaotic multivalence. Yerkes thereby took into account the moments after the animetaphor creates its disruptive empathy, when a spectator returns to language and reason, having gleaned new truths that were previously inaccessible. In the end, he saw this experience not as a rebuke of language but a process of expanding it into new territory. Yerkes thus adapts the written and spoken word to encapsulate animal behavior by pairing title cards with cinematic images of this behavior. On its own, *begging* was an inadequate scientific descriptor of Dita, but when presented as synonymous with the detailed filmic image, the term took on the indexical properties of the camera. “Begging” could therefore become an admissible topic of objective analysis through this use of documentary film.

By showing *Maternal Behavior in Chimpanzee* to his colleagues, Yerkes attempted to distribute inference as an appropriate research modality, pulling the discourse of animal testing towards his particular concerns with mental states. He showed his films in classrooms and conferences, often as an accompaniment to his own lectures, where he would further elaborate how viewers should experience their content.<sup>34</sup> For instance, he concludes a speech on the mind and personality of the chimpanzee given to the American Society of Naturalists: “It is not by oversight that I have neglected to use observations and contented myself with description in general terms, for I count upon the cinema record which you are about to see to lend reality to my subject.”<sup>35</sup> Here, the mind of the primate, its personality

and individuality, which he had spent the entirety of the lecture generally describing, was to become real and concrete for his audience through cinema. Within these spaces the moving image could advocate powerfully for experimentation based on empathy in ways that his written treatises and spoken lectures could not. Filming singular, emotionally complex occurrences allowed him to introduce different social behaviors into comparative psychology's testing regime. Additionally, through the screening of his films, Yerkes sought to create a "feeling for the animal" in other scientists, validating his suppositions about primate cognition and affect and thereby introducing nonhuman subjectivity into the increasingly empirical sphere of experimental psychology.

#### SAVAGE SYMPATHY: A EUGENICIST STRUCTURE OF FEELING

Near the conclusion of Ada and Robert Yerkes's 652-page tome *The Great Apes: A Study of Anthropoid Life*, the authors ask: "Why study anthropoid apes or any other infrahuman primate when so many idle and apparently nearly useless human subjects are at hand?"<sup>36</sup> The phrasing of this question is obviously troubling, promoting as it does the idea of "useless humans" and suggesting that, if only for certain legal protections, scientists might experiment on these idle masses. Instead, the authors go on to argue, psychobiologists must settle for apes, who have similar emotional responses to that of humans and thus are suitable stand-ins. They position primates as an essential tool in the pressing study of human minds, actions, and society. Here, Yerkes's dual commitments to psychobiology's study of animal emotions and to eugenics' categorization of humanity come into contact with one another. But this was not the only such contact; indeed, these two pursuits were intimately linked.

Yerkes consistently prefaced his primatology research as having applications for explaining human emotional behavior. In his appeals for funding and in attempts to elicit a broader interest from the psychologist community, he specifically emphasized the affective similarities between primates and humans.<sup>37</sup> While their ideational behavior—their ability to think—was "inferior in type" to that of humans, Yerkes claimed that their emotions clearly held a (distorted, but nonetheless functional) mirror up to humanity's own affective life.<sup>38</sup> Describing the qualities of "the ape," Yerkes wrote: "That it feels as we do may not be asserted with assurance, but it is clear that under conditions which affect us emotionally it manifests similar expressions."<sup>39</sup> Within Yerkes's comparative framework, primates may lack the complexity in structure that allows humans to reason, but their affective relations provide the raw materials out of which such complex thinking emerges, making them revealing test subjects with broad implications. Primates, like film, brought affect into the precise scientific discourse of the laboratory in ways that the florid language and assumptions of introspective psychology could

not. Their presumed capacity to stand in for human emotions and their status outside the legal protections of human citizens meant that they could introduce complex humanlike emotional behaviors into the experimental setting of the lab, where they could be empirically tracked, tested, and quantified in ways that were prohibited with humans.

Yerkes saw his work with primate affects as a crucial component of his broader political project of eugenics. In a 1915 manifesto titled “Progress and Peace,” he argues that studies of feeling produce a different form of knowledge and political power than the traditional hard sciences of physics and chemistry, drawing a sharp distinction between the impact of the physical and the biological sciences on human progress.<sup>40</sup> For him, this division has global significance. Both strains of research promised pathways to peaceful futures, but the character of these futures varies dramatically. The physical sciences, he writes, are tied to a war machine that envisions the route toward peace as one of increasing control through fear—a fear produced by technological and military might. In the shadow of World War I, he imagines a future society that discovers “some diabolically horrible means of destroying human life,” writing that “the whole world might suddenly be made to bow in terror before the will of the all-powerful nation.”<sup>41</sup> The peace offered in this prognosticated world would be one born out of the direct repression of difference and opposition. Physics offers the national war machine the ability to grip the entire planet under a single nation’s will.

Instead of this approach, Yerkes advocates for an alternate route to peace through the biological sciences. The war machine is premised on a fear of difference—the domination, conversion, and eradication of diversity. Against this, Yerkes positions a science of sympathetic psychobiology, which would operate through “understanding, insight, appreciation.”<sup>42</sup> In an incredible leap, he describes his practice of the life sciences as a model of patronizing empathy that can lead to world peace through scientific management, where the “dignity and worth” granted experimental animals in the psychobiologist’s lab would be similarly granted to other people and countries.<sup>43</sup> He claims that “superior” nations, races, and individuals have been unnecessarily cruel to their “inferiors” owing to a lack of sympathy but that scientific empathy can reorient power away from repression and toward a form of benign management: “To see a savage is to despise or fear him, to know him intimately is to love him. The same law holds of social groups, be they families, tribes, nations or races.”<sup>44</sup> Here, Yerkes extrapolates the empathetic work of the lab to a global scale. In his view, observing scientists do not simply “see” their subjects; rather, they “intimately know” them. He thus theorizes that international relations can replicate the techniques of comparative psychology, including personality evaluations, sensory experiments, behavioral adjustments, and, most crucial, the affective bonds. Empathy in these instances is not meant to erase the power differentials existing in the lab, the experiment, or the national stage. Rather, like intelligence tests, empathy is offered as an organizational tool, one that can transform

fear into love, cruelty into paternalism, enemy into ally. Yerkes articulates the life science lab as an ideal, stable hierarchy, in which differences are managed by an enlightened sympathy and fellow feeling.

As Donna Haraway details in *Primate Visions*, Yerkes's vision of power enacted through judicious management rather than violent oppression was predicated on defining personality types for different demographic groups.<sup>45</sup> Temperamental differences, once identified, were to be capitalized on to best organize society. Yerkes saw the heteronormative family unit as an ideal example of such an organization, in which the division of labor was naturalized according to supposedly biologically determined gender identities.<sup>46</sup> With a variety of experiments—most prominently the food-chute competitions, in which male and female primates competed for a limited supply of food—Yerkes and his researchers described gender as differing emotional and mental capacities.<sup>47</sup> Here, operationalized empathy allowed him to make broader claims than he could have otherwise, attributing to gender not only certain behaviors but also forms of consciousness. Yerkes's interpretations of his findings often fit preconceived notions of female passivity and male dominance, a point Ruth Herschberger made at the time in her 1948 critique of sexism in the natural sciences.<sup>48</sup> Despite his commitment to “intelligent observation,” Yerkes's access to primate mental states, motivations, and personalities was hardly incontestable and often led him to make claims that broadly conformed to preexisting social beliefs. As with the IQ tests, the “truths” that Yerkes used to evaluate the world ended up being less universal than situated, less absolute than ideological.

Again, we can see these same dynamics play out in *Maternal Behavior in Chimpanzee*. Yerkes structures the film to produce insights into primate maternity, but further consideration of these insights suggests that they reproduce essentialized ideological conceptions of motherhood from the mid-1930s rather than being bedrock truths. Operating at the height of what E. Ann Kaplan calls the period of the “high modernist mother,” which lasted throughout the interwar years, Yerkes's film emerged at a time when considerations of maternity were governed by the major narratives of biology, psychology, and the family.<sup>49</sup> These narratives broadly shaped conceptions of motherhood in the United States, operating within both the specialized scientific fields of psychology and medicine, as well as within popular entertainment such as melodrama. In both settings, pathology, biology, morality, and society mixed together to create archetypal characters that defined motherhood. *Maternal Behavior in Chimpanzee* reproduces the common melodrama figures of the “bad mother”—who earns her title through displays of indifference to her child—and the “suffering mother”—who demonstrates her love for her children by evermore demanding and humiliating sacrifices on their behalf.<sup>50</sup> The image of Dita's suffering, her “begging” for her baby, Rosy, seems to offer scientific verification of popular notions of maternal behavior. As in countless melodramas of the time—*Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1937), *Imitation of Life* (Stahl, 1934), etc.—Yerkes uses the separation of Dita and her child to make the “maternal instinct” most

powerfully visible, intervening through the experiment to construct motherhood as a self-evident “biological fact” available onscreen.<sup>51</sup> In its role as a source of scientific corroboration for such “biological facts,” *Maternal Behavior in Chimpanzee* can be read as a unique addition to the discourse of high modernist motherhood, a discourse that spanned the divisions between nontheatrical and popular film.

Alternative to Dita’s “suffering mother” is Cuba, the first mother shown in the film and the chimpanzee whose stare struck me so powerfully at Emory. She is described by the title cards as an example of dysfunctional maternity, rejecting and neglecting her child, Peter. Contemporaneous popular science accounts of Cuba emphasize her awkward alienation from her child, the way she treated Peter “much as she might any strange object which interested, puzzled and annoyed her.”<sup>52</sup> Onscreen, Cuba is presented through a quick succession of jerky, almost impressionistic, shots as she eats her placenta and part of the umbilical cord, cradles the child, and wanders around the pen. These shots are all medium to close-up, often sacrificing any schematic sense of Cuba’s movements for greater detail in her face and gestures. The handheld camera shakes and stutters as it tries to keep her in frame. A persistent curiosity seems to motivate these movements, as the camera peers evermore intently at Cuba, who often is pictured with her back turned, facing a wall as if attempting to escape the gaze of the lens. Her indifference and even resistance to the camera mirrors the charge of indifference to her child, embodying her refusal to *perform* maternity as a naturalized phenomenon of study and of vision. Cuba’s supposed pathological form of maternity is displayed by its absence, by her withdrawal from the governing conceptions of emotion and display defining motherhood in the experiment.

There are many possible explanations for Cuba’s indifference to her child other than those presented by Yerkes. Cuba had a long and difficult history of maternity in the Yerkes laboratories.<sup>53</sup> She was born in 1926 in Havana, the pet of an aristocratic family who donated her to Yerkes after the death of the family’s matriarch, Madame Abreu, in 1931. Cuba gave birth to three children on the laboratory premises: Peter, Cub, and Kola. Peter, who is presented in the film, died two years later when he was given morphine and left unattended for hours in the hot sun. Cub died of a gastrointestinal infection weeks after birth, and Kola was killed during an experiment at the age of one. Cuba herself died during an experimental laparotomy in 1943. Though none of Cuba’s children survived, the birth of Peter was the beginning of primate laboratory colonies, a legacy that led to many generations of captive apes living their entire lives under the eyes and lenses of researchers. How Cuba approached maternity in this context can hardly be laid entirely at the feet of her inborn nature. None of this history is acknowledged in the film.

Within the broader context of Yerkes’s political aspirations, these films take on new stakes. Film, like the walls and cages of the lab, draws a line between viewer and subject, creating a distinction between observer and observed. But it also invites the viewer to forget this barrier, to walk past it or through it—identifying

with the behavior onscreen. Films like *Maternal Behavior in Chimpanzee* offer up moments in the lives of Mona and Cuba as characters with whom scientific audiences were meant to identify. As discussed earlier, Yerkes intended for his films to produce a seemingly objective language of operationalized empathy, which could be repeated and deployed at will—a scientifically verifiable emotion that he believed should be deployed at all levels of governance, from the management of individual households to the running of nations.

Yerkes's use of film to generate and distribute sympathy for his animal subjects should give pause to animal studies scholars generally. As we have already seen in the work of Akira Lippit, experiences of cross-species empathy, fellow-feeling, and even love are often described as pulling against signification and hierarchies of meaning. Furthermore, many animal studies scholars broadly characterize such experiences as nascent political critiques, claiming that by undoing the primary hierarchy between human and animal one will also undo internal hierarchies between groups of humans, thus unraveling divisions of disability, race, class, and gender.<sup>54</sup> But Yerkes's use of film shows that interspecies sympathy does not necessarily lead to the collapse of political hierarchies; in fact, it is a perfectly functional principle for organizing and structuring such hierarchies. Sympathy was a dominant affect in the structure of feeling of eugenics, a prime motivator for Yerkes in the creation of his intelligence tests and his primatology. This sympathy did not prevent him from building large edifices of essentialized differences between groups of people; rather, it was an integral component in making such claims. Yerkes's work thus calls into question the pursuit of "decentering the human" through the simulation of animal experiences onscreen. In and of itself, such a pursuit does not have a single political purpose but rather can be used for many political means depending on the context.

In the end, it is impossible to tell whether Yerkes lingered over the gaze of Cuba with which I began this chapter, let alone to know what his response to such a gaze may have been. It seems possible that he was caught, as I was, by her look, left wondering what might have motivated it, feeling uncertain about the distance stretching out between onscreen primate and human observer. Whether such feelings might have caused him to question the precepts of social Darwinism around which he organized his research and advocacy is also unknown. But his written work shows little signs of such uncertainty, of succumbing to the destructive possibilities of the animetaphoric functions of film. Instead, he seems to have acknowledged film's power, the power to speak of things beyond language, and used it to bring new terrains of thought, behavior, and motivation under the management of psychobiology. Like intelligence testing, film brought the elusive functions of the mind into the hands of the scientists who participated in Yerkes's empathetic framework. Developing a "feeling for the animal" ultimately facilitated these scientists in categorizing, studying, and controlling animals, but it did not lead them to unlock their cages.