

Primate Figures

Social Darwinism, Anthropology, and Ingagi

In the Robert Yerkes holdings at the Manuscripts and Archives section of Yale's Sterling Memorial Library, there is a folder titled "Fake Film," which contains several correspondences between Yerkes and Will Hays, the head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association in Hollywood.¹ The "fake film" in question is the 1930 William Campbell film *Ingagi*, an ostensible travelogue featuring "authentic" and "exotic" sights of far-off Belgian Congo. Among the film's fakeries are men in gorilla suits, trained animal actors, white actors in blackface playing "natives," footage stolen from other films, and a supposedly new species of animal that is in fact an armadillo with prosthetic wings attached to its back.² In his letters, Yerkes requests that Hays take direct action against this film for being "grossly misleading and misinformative" and a lie "too gross to be tolerated." If Hays does not act, Yerkes threatens to go to the press and "expose what is evidently a brazen fraud and inform properly a credulous public, which in this instance is wholly at the mercy of obviously unscrupulous exploiters." Complaints like his contributed to a Better Business Bureau investigation of the film, done at the behest of the Hays Office, which catalogued *Ingagi's* many inaccuracies and fabrications, resulting in a series of lawsuits and countersuits that concluded with the film's drastic reediting.³

Ingagi was a central flashpoint in the debate over fabrication, or "nature faking," in early wildlife films and has historically been contrasted with the work of actual scientists. This topic is addressed by several important historical studies of the genre. Film historians argue that nature faking was produced by a structural tension between the filmmakers' commercial and economic aims and the films' supposed scientific and educational purposes. Cynthia Chris writes: "If wildlife filmmakers seeking popular distribution dabbled with authenticity . . . commercial success in animal films would depend on the degree to which they

embraced sensationalism.”⁴ In this rendering, truthful representations of nature are contrasted with the excesses of sensationalism, excesses that often took the form of extreme sexism and racism. This was especially the case with *Ingagi*. Chris describes the film as “the most controversial of the era,” describing it as “conflating a set of racist and misogynistic fantasies about the Others who might be objects of the colonial gaze.”⁵ Derek Bousé argues that *Ingagi* is representative of the general period of “decadence” that wildlife films entered into in the 1930s, being, as he describes it, “the worst of the lot.”⁶ Analyzing the pushback to the film by scientists like Yerkes, Gregg Mitman writes that “naturalists feared *Ingagi* might do serious harm by offering moral grounds for the gorilla’s extermination precisely at a time when conservation efforts to save the species from extinction were imperative.”⁷ Mitman also points to the fears of scientists and other nature filmmakers that *Ingagi*’s faked scenes might sully the public’s belief in all nature documentary films. In all of these accounts, scientific voracity is contrasted with the film’s exploitative sensationalism, providing a check on the “degeneracy” of the film’s excesses.

In this chapter, I call this opposition into question. Reconsidering some of the terrain covered by these scholars, I position *Ingagi* and the other nature documentaries of its ilk alongside the politics, history, and aesthetics of laboratory filmmaking. We will see that despite the protestations of Yerkes and his fellow scientists, there were many ways in which the wildlife genre and laboratory filmmaking fed off of each other, playing into the same narratives of resource and knowledge extraction born out of colonialism. The first section of this chapter covers the overlap between Yerkes’s milieu and those of the wildlife filmmakers, detailing the intersecting institutions, theories, and trade routes that produced both scientific specimens and adventure nature films. Despite their extreme spectacle, wildlife films played an important role in supporting and popularizing Yerkes’s scientific program of eugenics, which Chris describes as having “pervaded scientific and political thought and institutions, and crept into the common sense of dominant classes generally.”⁸ The second section turns specifically to the films produced in Yerkes’s laboratories, arguing that the aesthetics, context, and reception of these works framed their primate subjects as images of accelerated evolution as the ape went from a monster in the jungle to a specimen in the lab. Here, the authenticity of the wildlife film matters less than its role of propping up and mutually justifying the laboratory space as a place where humans and animals can be rationally observed and managed. Monstrosity, excess, and exploitation ultimately provided a necessary foil for scientific measurement, assent, and progress.

Analyzing the “nature faking” debates leads to larger methodological questions about the role of fabrication and ideology in the representation of nonhuman subjects. Take for instance Bousé’s use of Baudrillard’s concept of the “simulacrum” as a categorical rubric. Bousé writes that an image of nature does “one of four

things: (1) reflects a basic reality, (2) masks and perverts a basic reality, (3) masks the *absence* of a basic reality, and finally (4) bears no relation to any reality whatever (and is thus pure simulacrum)."⁹ Here, the status of "pure simulacrum" is bestowed on the most clearly formalist of filmmaking, he cites the examples of avant-garde films and music videos, which make no claims to an "external reality." In establishing this schema, Bousé works to dispel the common perception of wildlife films as apolitical and ahistorical, emphasizing their construction and fabrication of images of nature. But this relies on a fundamental misreading of Baudrillard's claims. In fact, the inverse is true. In their very fabrication, nature-faking wildlife films fundamentally preserve the difference between real and false precisely because they are knowingly faked and therefore are *not* simulacra.

To make a forgery, or to consciously lie, as many of these filmmakers did, ultimately means reinscribing and recognizing the difference between natural truths and fabricated constructions. Filmmakers like those behind *Ingagi* were hucksters, duping their audiences into believing that the false was true. Baudrillard is quite clear when he writes of such fabrication that it "leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary.'"¹⁰ Simulation, as Baudrillard describes it here, undermines the *possibility* of making a distinction between real and false and therefore does not imply a critical project of sorting out and cataloguing "perversions" of the truth, nor does it imply that a "faked" nature film is a suitable example of simulacra. Instead, the topic of this book, laboratory films of experimental animals, fits the term much more aptly. Celluloid specimens are neither pristine reflections of nature nor cultural illusions but rather are the product of both ideological desires and material bodies. Such cinematic images make the distinction between cultural fictions and natural truths nearly impossible to discern, as they are clearly mediated and constructed, while also fulfilling even the most rigorous definitions of documentary veracity. As we have already seen, the primate films made at the Yerkes labs did not exist outside of politics, ideology, and desire. Instead, their experimental subjects were forced to embody these structures in their behavior, their anatomy, and their social interactions, as they performed test after test for scientists and their cameras.

Ultimately, it is crucial to make the point that images of animals do not need to be faked in order to be historical or political tools. Science and entertainment may have been seen as essentially different enterprises, pitting contrasting animal images against each other, but neither side's claims of simply relaying a preexisting reality should be taken at face value. Rather than posit scientific objectivity as antithetical to being a political, social, or emotional actor, it is better to understand how each instance of objectivity was defined and used by its practitioners. To my knowledge, Yerkes never knowingly fabricated any of his findings, nor did he purposely misconstrue facts to fit his political aspirations. Instead, these aspirations

explicitly shaped and inspired his definition of objectivity, to which he faithfully adhered. Analyzing his films therefore cannot be limited to separating fact from fiction but rather must focus on how Yerkes generated his facts and to what ends they were used.

Rather than read *Ingagi* and the research films produced in the Yerkes laboratories as having opposite relationships to reality, as Bousé does, I see them as two sides of the same coin, both being products of a form of colonial logic manifested in eugenicist theories of race and evolution. Achille Mbembe describes this colonial logic as a discourse on the animal, which shapes the ways that power is exerted in colonized spaces. Mbembe identifies two traditions in this discourse: those of the strange animal and those of the intimate animal. The strange animal is a beast, a “body-thing,” whose monstrosity justifies any acts of violence to control or contain. Many wildlife films cohere to this image in their exotic depictions of otherness, where people, continents, and animals are all imagined as unwaveringly “savage.” But a second tradition of the colonial animal discourse also holds true, in which the animal becomes a member of the family as a pet. Mbembe writes: “one could, as with an animal, *sympathize* with the colonized, even ‘love’ him or her.”¹¹ This sympathy is based on a specific brand of transformation and performance, “familiarity and domestication,” in which the animal enters rational modernity through servitude and work. Forced labor here becomes a sign of arriving into modern systems of production through a process that collapses the concepts of “ruling,” “taming,” and “civilizing.” In the use of these figures, colonial logic constructs a shroud of reason, what Mbembe calls “the tawdry cloak of humanism,”¹² to mask the underlying arbitrariness of its violence, its foundational sadism and barbarism. Horror and sympathy are both necessary for this logic to function.

While *Ingagi* clearly presents a vision of nature based on the notion of animal savagery, it is out of the latter tradition that the cinematic work of Yerkes emerges. Just as Mbembe describes, his work was hailed as a civilizing process that was produced through a mixture of sympathy and forced labor. Unlike naturalist documentaries, whose “authenticity” was premised on providing untarnished glimpses of animals in a pristine and hostile nature, Yerkes’s cinematic experiments depicted the transformation of his primate subjects into willing specimens. These films derived their scientific authenticity from the technical accouterments of the laboratory setting, which denotes the scientist’s capacity to transform animal behavior, yet they also managed to capture a public fantasy of apes as sympathetic lower lifeforms that could be civilized and put to work. By bringing humanity’s past into the lab through the figure of the anthropoid ape, the “civilizing” power of rational management could be confirmed. These films were not affectless documents of truth or simple recordings of events in the lab but powerful political symbols that evoked widespread colonial desires.

TRUTH “TREMBLING IN THE BALANCE”:
COLONIAL ANTHROPOLOGY, WILDLIFE FILMS,
AND EVOLUTIONARY RHETORIC

An early reviewer of *Ingagi* succinctly described the public's fundamental uncertainty about the film's truthfulness: “there are moments when the authenticity of the film seems to tremble in the balance.”¹³ Indeed, as Will Hays began his campaign to censor *Ingagi* in 1930, the Hollywood reporter Mollie Merrick scoffed at the notion that the public had gullibly accepted the film as factual: “When ‘Ingagi’ was first shown it didn’t seem possible to me that the civilians who argued so frothily really believed that it was the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”¹⁴ And yet, she marveled, here was Hays recalling it on the grounds that “the public swallowed it, lock, stock, and barrel.” Indeed, one paper claimed it was the Hays Office itself, rather than the public, that was “duped” into believing that anyone had actually taken the film seriously.¹⁵ But while Merrick and others were not fooled by the film, there is reason to think many were. One reviewer wrote of being “swamped” with questions about whether the ape in the film was real or not.¹⁶ The press surrounding *Ingagi*'s release spoke of it as a scientific upset. One reviewer claimed that the film “seems to have proved” the evolutionary link between gorillas and humans.¹⁷ An Indianapolis newspaper portrayed *Ingagi* as a suitable follow-up for interested attendees to a recent talk by the lawyer Clarence Darrow, who defended John T. Scopes in the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” Trial, describing it as “the motion picture record of what is said to be new discoveries of interest in the origin of man.”¹⁸ As another paper summarized, the film was “astounding, sensational, and authentic.”¹⁹

The relationship between sensationalism and authenticity shaped the wildlife genre from its very beginnings, existing at the border of science and popular culture. Throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, while Yerkes was shooting and editing his own primate footage, these films proliferated, rising and falling in popularity. Film historians have written extensively about this period, during which wildlife filmmakers were often funded by major scientific organizations who sought, as Cynthia Chris describes, “to raise public interest and funds for research, conservation, and museum projects.”²⁰ Yet this relationship largely collapsed as the films were increasingly recognized as unscientific, staged, or otherwise falsified. An example of such entanglements can be seen in the relationship between famed taxidermist Carl Akeley and the married travelogue filmmakers Osa and Martin Johnson. Akeley was instrumental in the production of many wildlife films in the 1920s. The Akeley motion picture camera—which he invented in 1917 to address the unique demands of naturalist filmmakers in the field—was an industry standard, used by the likes of Robert Flaherty for *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926) and by the Johnsons for *Simba: King of the Beasts* (1928) and *Congorilla* (1932).²¹ Akeley used his position at the American Museum of Natural History, where he oversaw

taxidermy in the Hall of Africa exhibit, to procure funding and sponsorship for the Johnsons.²² Akeley's support for the Johnsons was the product of a shared belief in the logic of conservation and taxidermy, which tied together the deaths of animals and the preservation of their visage. Both parties argued that killing individual animals, whether for an onscreen hunting sequence or for a museum display, was an acceptable sacrifice for a species' image to be saved for posterity, envisioning a time when these animals would be nothing more than ghosts from the past. Taxidermy, photography, and film offered insurance against this seemingly inevitable disappearance in the future.

The support of the American Museum of Natural History lent the Johnsons a new scientific authority, elevating the reputation of Martin Johnson from "vaudeville performer to gentleman naturalist."²³ Indeed, this was just one of many ways that the scientific and wildlife film communities overlapped. From funding institutions, to ideological projects, to actual individual apes, scientists like Yerkes operated largely in the same settings as prominent wildlife filmmakers, even as they produced research for very different audiences and pursued very different goals. Especially throughout the 1910s and 1920s—before Yerkes successfully bred populations of experimental apes in his laboratory colonies—it was extremely difficult to gain access to chimpanzees and gorillas, requiring a catch-as-catch-can approach that included visiting circuses, private collections, zoos, and watching wildlife films. Early on, Yerkes bemoaned the haphazard nature of his dependence on external sources and chance encounters, writing that "knowledge of anthropoid life has grown haltingly, irregularly, uncertainly because of fragmentary, unverified, and often unverifiable observations."²⁴ In an attempt to further his research, he dealt directly with many of the primary players in the wildlife filmmaking world. Beginning in 1922, he exchanged letters with Akeley, inaugurating a correspondence that lasted until Akeley's death in 1926.²⁵ In these letters, Yerkes requested photographs of gorilla family groups in their natural habitat of the then Belgium Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), coordinated preservation efforts for primates in the wild, and exchanged findings about gorilla anatomy. Yerkes also corresponded with Martin Johnson from 1929 to 1931, sending similar requests to those he sent to Akeley, asking to procure specimens and for footage of gorilla social groups.²⁶ In fact, the final breaking point between the Johnsons and the American Museum of Natural History came over Martin Johnson's false claim of working for the museum when attempting to procure a permit for capturing and shipping gorillas, a claim he made while negotiating with Yerkes.

Yerkes's relationship with these filmmakers is indicative not only of their shared institutions and resources but also of their mutual reliance on the colonial ideology of evolutionary progress and its infrastructure of resource extraction. Donna Haraway argues that the American Museum of Natural History's board members largely agreed to fund the Johnsons out of the desire to promote eugenics.²⁷ Akeley's

theory of conservation dovetailed with the eugenicist theories of outspoken white supremacists on the museum's board—such as Madison Grant, author of *The Passing of the Great Race*, a racist manifesto of scientific theories of racial “purity” and “hygiene.” Such figures believed that conservationist narratives confirmed the social Darwinism underlying eugenics by imagining colonized countries and their human and animal inhabitants as part of a past giving way to European civilization.²⁸ The transcontinental transport of films, scientific specimens, and animals existed within colonialism's global market for material products and exotic fantasies. The Johnsons are a prime example: filming their own exploits capturing wild apes in the Congo region, animals that would then be sold to circuses, zoos, and scientists like Yerkes in the US.²⁹ This trade in animal bodies and images was built on long-standing structures of resource removal and human slavery. Indeed, up until the early 1930s, humans as well as nonhumans were transported, sold, and traded through these same circuits of commerce.³⁰ This colonial context ultimately determined how the films functioned as visual spectacles. As Derrida argues in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, presentations of exotic animals, from menageries to zoos, have long been used to demonstrate imperial sovereignty's strength abroad for the locals back home.³¹ According to him, these spaces congregate populations around the image of their nation's power through the display of animals (and often humans) from far-flung countries. Movie theaters and animal laboratories add a modern twist to the operations of the royal or the municipal gardens—testifying to the scope and reach of the industrial and scientific production of images to a broad public at home.

Scientific theories are used within both the wildlife films and the ethnographic films from this time to confirm and authenticate colonial ideologies. As Fatimah Tobing Rony shows, contemporaneous anthropological filmmaking—created for both research and popular science purposes—was motivated by what she describes as a taxidermic impulse toward preservation and display, which was not reserved for animals in the early decades of the twentieth century but also aimed its lens toward allegedly “vanishing” Indigenous groups as well.³² This strain of cinematic visual culture dramatized a theory of geography, civilization, and progress in which racial categories were constructed as evolutionary stages in the movement from animal to human, what Mitman calls a “taxonomic hierarchy of human races.”³³ Drawing from the nineteenth century theories of anatomy discussed in chapter 1, racial differences were tied to supposed structural differences in the body, which were claimed to be self-evidently captured by the film.

In these films, onscreen bodies took on an evidentiary status, but this status also had a grotesque aspect, in which ethnographic subjects were pictured as frighteningly absurd or repellent because of their supposed proximity to animality.³⁴ Animal bodies, specifically primates, played a key role in this noxious fascination. Within what Bousé describes as the “symbolic Darwinism” of the wildlife

film, individual figures were made to stand in for broad biological concepts, illustrating abstract notions of heredity, fitness, and descent in their singular actions and bodies.³⁵ Oliver Gaycken elaborates: "Given how centrally primate images figured in the reception of Darwin's ideas, practically any image of, say, an orangutan produced after 1859 could not help but contain a message about evolution."³⁶ The speechless ape, with its hairy form and hulking figure, was continuously brought into proximity with a broad array of colonized people as a point of comparison. Films such as *Congorilla* were marketed heavily on catching a glimpse of this brute body. The film's promotional material featured giant novelty theater fronts of gorillas locked in heated battle.³⁷ Its iconic posters feature a giant gorilla face, nostrils flared, mouth open, eyes bulging, which seems to scream out at the spectator.

Despite all its gruesome exaggerations and fabrications, *Ingagi* was ultimately more of a caricature than a break from ethnographic filmmaking practices at this time—pushing the genre's dynamics to a farcical extreme. Released three years prior to *King Kong*, the film was an important tipping point for the ethnographic monster movie as it shifted from supposedly educational material to openly fictional horror. It marketed itself by tapping into the widespread popularity of the wildlife film's most sensationalist narratives. *Ingagi*'s posters promise a sensational experience of interspecies sex and hybrid lifeforms, what they called "half-ape half-human creatures," and "queer half breed children." One of the film's most notorious scenes depicts evolution's missing link as a gorilla (actually a man in a gorilla suit) glimpsed stealing away with a topless "native" woman (actually a hired actor in blackface).³⁸ One reviewer wrote of this sequence as "a pictorial revelation" that had "the power, seemingly, of electrifying its audience—which . . . appeared more dead than alive by the time it was over."³⁹ In scenes like these, *Ingagi* functioned as a soft-core fantasy of the colonial imaginary, a pornographic remake of social Darwinist anthropology's defining moment of human separation from animal.

Similar examples of *Ingagi*'s many outright falsehoods—its staged scenes and lurid exploitation of its subjects—can be found piecemeal in other more reputable examples from the genre. But by brazenly bringing these fabrications into one film, *Ingagi* threatened to expose the artifice of the other, supposedly more authentic, entries. As a reviewer of the 1930 travelogue *Africa Speaks!* admitted: "It looks like the real article. I have no way of actually knowing after seeing 'Ingagi.'"⁴⁰ It was precisely this danger of undermining the scientific nature of film that drove the American Society of Mammalogists, of which Yerkes was a member, to unanimously pass a resolution condemning the film for its misrepresentation of nature.⁴¹ In Yerkes's complaint to Hays, he protests that *Ingagi* attempts to "convince the observer that objects are presented with photographic accuracy," which he worries will mislead what he calls a "credulous" public. Ultimately Yerkes and his peers were concerned about science's status within popular culture and film's capacity to relay scientific authority rather than with *Ingagi*'s racism or exploitation.



VIDEO 2. Clip from *Ingagi* (William Campbell, 1930). Courtesy of Kino Lorber Inc.

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Mitman and others have shown that the pushback to *Ingagi* indicated a larger split developing between scientific institutions and the ethnographic filmmakers they had sponsored.⁴² This split contributed to the wildlife film falling into decline throughout the early 1930s. The scientists lodging criticisms of the genre largely saw themselves as pursuing disciplinary defenses of scientific fact, motivated by a desire to protect the truth from charlatans like the *Ingagi* filmmakers. As we have seen, this was undoubtedly how Yerkes understood his own criticisms of the film. But if we simply stop there, we ignore the model of filmmaking practiced by the complainants themselves, which had its own political and disciplinary goals that often were just as invested in realizing racist narratives of human evolution. Wholeheartedly accepting the scientists' position threatens to reconfirm scientists' claims that laboratory filmmaking presented unmediated transparency and access to the truth, thereby erasing the similar assumptions that operated in both instances. Yes, as we saw in the previous chapter, and will see in the next section of this chapter, Yerkes's films look nothing like the exploitative schlock of *Ingagi*. But still, just as Yerkes relied on the same colonial expeditions for procuring his specimens as filmmakers like the Johnsons did for producing their films, so, too, did his laboratory films ultimately complement the degraded images of extreme alterity in the wildlife film.

ENTERING THE LAB: PRIMATE SPECIMENS AND EUGENICIST FUTURISM

In 1916, as Yerkes was instituting the army IQ tests covered in chapter 1, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* ran a two-page article on his work and that of his fellow primatologists titled “If Science Should Develop Apes into Useful Workers.”⁴³ The article asks: “Would a race of highly intelligent ape-laborers have souls, and so be entitled to religious instruction and protection from the degradation of slavery?” In 1919, another article on Yerkes from the *Richmond Times Dispatch* proposes: “If the ape can be taught to THINK he can be taught to WORK. And if he can be made to work he can do the drudgery of the world.”⁴⁴ Such comments followed Yerkes throughout his long career, as his research continued to be greeted in the popular press with similar fantasies. In 1934, for instance, the *Evening Star* newspaper published an article on Yerkes titled “Teaching Apes the Value of Money,” which asked: “Will accumulated ‘money’ come to represent power or prestige in the ape community? Will apes learn to hoard, or will they keep their money in circulation?”⁴⁵ For years, coverage of Yerkes speculated that apes were just a few scientific experiments away from being integrated into society as useful subjects, working and participating in capitalist enterprise (fig. 4).

The fact that these fantasies take the form of an imagined enslavement of primates demonstrates their intimate relationship with colonialist history and social Darwinist theories of ascension. Most recent scholarship focuses on Yerkes’s representation of apes as part of humanity’s evolutionary past. Megan H. Glick argues that his photographs of primates grew out of a commitment to multiorigin evolutionary theory, which spuriously claimed that white people descended from chimpanzees, while Black people descended from gorillas.⁴⁶ While recognizing the possible validity of Glick’s argument, it is also important to acknowledge that Yerkes was not a prominent figure in evolutionary debates, which he saw as primarily settled fact.⁴⁷ The vast majority of his writing makes no reference to these debates. Therefore, a broader analysis of his theories of race and evolution is needed to address the politics operating in the bulk of his work.

Unlike *Ingagi* and other ethnographic wildlife films that were obsessed with picturing a nonhuman past, Yerkes’s primate films were meant to be institutional tools for controlling racial and species categories *in the future*. His research and his films reveal an often-overlooked component of social Darwinist visual culture: imagining an ideal society under scientific management. As a eugenicist and Progressive Era reformer, Yerkes was far more interested in this world to come than in exploring or preserving what had come before.

Though extravagant, the newspaper fantasies about Yerkes’s research were not entirely detached from the actual experiments primatologists performed. Primatologists had taught apes to dig ditches, speak simple phrases, exchange coins for food, cooperate on mental and physical tasks, and even, in one case,



FIGURE 4. This 4" x 5" photographic print, identified as "#300, 1952, Bo (straight legs!!!)," was made by Robert M. Yerkes in 1952. Robert Mearns Yerkes Papers (MS 569), Series V, box 133, folder 2262, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

operate a film camera.⁴⁸ Examples of these useful transformations can be seen in the films produced at the Yerkes laboratories. Take, for instance, a scene near the end of Henry Nissen's *Some Aspects of Social Behavior in Chimpanzee* (1935). As the name suggests, this film spends the majority of its running time cataloguing chimpanzee relationships, including grooming, defense, and friendship, among other elements. The sequence in question begins with a title card: "Cooperation or teamwork. Pairs of young chimpanzees are faced with problem situations which they cannot solve individually, but only by coordinating their efforts." We watch as scientists set up the experiment, loading a heavy box with fruit and then securing and leading two ropes from the box to a cage that will contain the animals. They then introduce the chimps into the experiment, who, over time, adapt themselves to their recently manufactured surroundings. The chimps begin with a series of uncoordinated responses. One pulls at the ropes while another ignores them. But we see through a series of subsequent images that the chimpanzees begin to coordinate their actions, until they are finally pulling in unison and retrieving the fruit as a reward. The title cards detail and explain this transformation in their behavior: "Gradually one animal learns to wait until his partner is working before pulling on his own rope," and "When one of the animals is not hungry or is reluctant to work, the partner may lend encouragement—and sometimes appears to convey its wishes and meanings by gestures." Here, the cage (which focuses and confines the chimps to one action) and the testing apparatus represent a planned incursion into ape behavior, eliciting a dramatic display of coordinated action on the part of these

animals, who become sympathetic coworkers laboring toward common ends. The laboratory setting, which the film takes pains to illustrate, enlists Yerkes's primates into a form of work, seeming to convert wild apes into ideal model citizens.

Years of hard work went into the production of the laboratory backdrop for this film, the realization of a dream Yerkes had long fostered. Fundamental to his research was the transfer of primates out of the jungle and into the lab, both through the transfer of their images and through the shipping of live specimens. Yerkes supplemented the footage he received from wildlife filmmakers by sending his own researchers into the field to bring back recordings specifically made for him. Before his primate colonies were successfully up and running, he directed his assistant, Henry Nissen, to produce specialized cinematic field research into primate social groups.⁴⁹ Armed with an Eyemo 35 mm camera, as well as the equipment to take still photographs, Nissen, an assistant professor in psychology at Yale, went to French Guinea (now the Republic of Guinea) in 1929.⁵⁰ Here, he confronted the many difficulties of recording observations in the field. Nissen complained: "I have thus far found photography of the animals well-nigh impossible, and I do not believe that I will have a great number of such photographs when I am thru."⁵¹ He reported that the gorillas seemed to have an uncanny ability to sense his presence and avoided him even when he and his equipment were elaborately camouflaged. Subsequently, the primates are largely missing from Nissen's actual photographs from these excursions.⁵² They exist as splotches in far-off trees or vague shapes hidden behind thick foliage—lurking shadows rather than measured specimens.

For Yerkes, Nissen's failure to capture useable photographs underscored the need for animals to be contained in the lab, which provided no place for the apes to elude the camera. He designed his New Haven colony precisely to create this ever-present availability: the walls were painted specifically to contrast with the animal bodies for the purposes of filming them, and special enclaves were built to protect the camera equipment and operator while granting the greatest possible access.⁵³ As such, the transformative work of the lab was premised on a visual transformation of the primate, who left the foliage of the jungle to become an isolated figure in the open space of the lab completely available to the scientist's gaze.

Once specimens were rendered fully visible in his lab, Yerkes set about methodically testing and transforming their behavior through his experiments. He writes: "we have believed it important to convert the animal into as nearly ideal a subject for biological research as is practicable."⁵⁴ His request that Nissen specifically film social interactions was rooted in his eugenicist approach to society. Yerkes saw the social sphere as a dynamic field where individual personalities expressed a racial or species identity, which could either be put to productive or destructive ends. In his public speeches to eugenics committees, he imagined the eugenicist as intervening in this haphazard assembly and providing it with structure and order—allowing each group or individual to function more smoothly and efficiently.⁵⁵ Through

what he saw as an enlightened division of labor, the native hierarchies expressed by nature in social Darwinism would be optimized by the cultural hierarchies of a eugenics-run society.⁵⁶ Yerkes's creation of his laboratory colonies was essential for this project, since they not only provided a space for testing individual primates but also gave him access to groups of apes whose social interactions could be studied generation after generation.

His experiments were tied to the eugenics political project of accelerating and guiding human evolution through the interventions of society—a political project that led to some of the most horrifying scientific crimes in American history, including the mass sterilization of prisoners and the mentally disabled from 1909 until the 1940s, but also major progressive public health and economic interventions, such as the promotion of birth control and the regulation of corporate activities.⁵⁷ Yerkes believed that such interventions should be modeled in the lab. He wrote that he hoped his experiments “might serve as an effective demonstration of the possibility of re-creating man himself in the image of a generally accepted idea.”⁵⁸ Within this framework, interventions into primate behavior in the lab were meant to pave the way for modeling and transforming the supposedly inborn nature of human personality. So, while the social Darwinists in anthropology claimed to produce authentic visions of the past through a voyeuristic gaze at Indigenous cultures, Yerkes's research sought to demonstrate a tight control over his subjects by acting directly on them. Here, the truth value and authenticity of the films were *predicated* on the intervention, construction, and alteration of one's material, not detracted by it.

These commitments manifest in Yerkes's films as a desire to visualize and assess the interplay of individual personalities and to demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions into these exchanges. Yerkes argued that film was especially equipped to document elusive interpersonal dynamics, which he listed as “social dominance,” “right by custom,” “privilege,” and “the functioning of the conscience.”⁵⁹ In his understanding of eugenics, these were the very factors that made up the hierarchies of society, thereby positioning film as an ideal tool for documenting experiments into eugenics-based management and control. In lectures given before his screenings, Yerkes would outline his belief in the continuity between race and species, which he provided as a theoretical lens through which viewers were meant to watch these films.⁶⁰ Audiences were encouraged to consider primate behaviors as models for testing and legitimating the techniques of control that Yerkes advocated for in the context of human groups and individuals.⁶¹ Indeed, some of the most consistent purchasers of Yerkes's lab films were teachers' colleges, which had no direct interest in primatology but rather in theories of human development.⁶² Racial and species management was therefore a specter that haunted these images of animal behavior, existing just outside the frame, interjected into the mind of the audience ahead of time, and imbuing each nonhuman action with a future application and significance for human populations.

In the end, films like Nissen's *Some Aspects of Social Behavior in Chimpanzee* were images of labor and work. Just as in Mbembe's description of the colonial imaginary, in which servitude is transformed into civilization, so, too, the image of the laboring chimps conflates production with improvement. The scientific viewers of such films were encouraged to adopt the position of potential managers—seeing the power of scientifically shaped behavior. This is a dramatically different type of spectatorship than that encouraged by “nature faking” wildlife filmmakers. Once placed within the lab, wild primates testified to the extensive reach of modern science and society, which could bring even the most elusive and dangerous creatures into the rational space of scientific observation. As historian of science Robert Kohler writes: “The placelessness of modern labs, like corporate parks and capital cities, advertise the universality and authority of the culture that builds and inhabits them.”⁶³ For Yerkes, this authority rested on presenting primates as specimens, who were constantly available to scientific inspection and intervention.

Analyzing the Third International Congress of Eugenics, held at the American Museum of Natural History in 1932, Devon Stillwell claims that “popular eugenics ideology” operated through a network of opposing images: “representations created meaning in relation to one another, and within a larger system of aesthetic and ideological frameworks including . . . the ‘classical’ and the ‘grotesque,’ and the spectacle and the scientific (or the ‘freak’ and the medical specimen).”⁶⁴ Yerkes's laboratory films create a similar network effect with the wildlife films of the time. An argument for eugenicist management of human society is present in the shifting status of apes as they move from wildlife film to laboratory film, becoming tamed and “civilized” along the way. Both genres confirm one another, as the monstrosity of the ape in one testifies to the transformative effects of scientific intervention in the other. Despite Yerkes's protestations against *Ingagi*, his research occupied the same fantasy space as the film within the public's and the popular press's imagination. From this perspective, the “nature-faking” debates of the time do not simply represent differences of fact and fiction but rather present two modalities for deploying scientific power. The aesthetics of eugenics required both: obscene titillation and rational observation, the terrifying monster and the sympathetic servant, genre spectacle and celluloid specimen.