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Multi-layered self-reflexivity in Will Self's *Great Apes*

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Apes have won the evolutionary race and now occupy humans' very places in society, while the latter are confined to the wilderness or kept behind bars in zoos. However unsettling the ape world might be—what is highly valued by the chimps are uttermost taboos in our world for instance—, it is also uncannily familiar as if Will Self's intention here was to hold a mirror to humanity: in the very differences, similarities paradoxically become more apparent. Indeed through linguistic, parodic and narrative devices, the novel manages to make us see ourselves in a new light by having us observe apes. If in similar fictional attempts like *The Inheritors* by W. Golding for instance man is observed anew through the innocent point of view of the Neanderthals (see Sorlin 2010a), here the denunciation of man's arrogance and blindness is achieved through symmetrical reversal: Simon Dykes, a human artist, waking up in a world of apes after a night of drinks and drugs, experiences what is it like to be a human in a world where humans are regarded as apes are in our world.

Through semiotic transliteration (from human vocal language to ape sign system) and narrative manipulation forcing the reader into a particular subject-position, Will Self compels us to take a distance from our familiar world. The reversal of the ape-man relationship engenders multiple effects of self-reflexivity: not only does the novel provide parodic refractions of the human self but it also exposes the (socially) constructed nature of scientific knowledge as the narrator observes scientists observing Simon. Besides, *Great Apes* is a work that reflects upon its own processes: while denouncing anthropocentrism, Self's novel is a self-reflexive illustration of the impossible breaking away from human conceptions and language.

1. Linguistic-cognitive estrangement

Of course the depiction of a new world calls for new expressions. *Great Apes* is no exception to the rule of the science fiction genre, as lexical novelties reflect the peculiarities of the new context: a "nest" means a home, to laugh is "to toothclack". Members of the same species are "conspecifics". There are no husband and wife but "consorts" who "consort". Friends are "allies"; when they are not too far from each other, they are "within grooming range" for "a session of grooming". There is no such thing as a divorce but a "fission" from your group to "fusion" with another through "alliance" or "coup" in the chimps' highly hierarchical society. However, here, Will Self goes further than merely jotting down a few unusual lexical items: he wants us to enter a

new mode of communication. The reader is indeed brought into a world where “speech” does not exist. Apes “gesticulate”, using sign language, sometimes interrupted by vocalisations like “huu, u-’-u-h, Aaa, Wraaa!, Hooo, H’hoohoo, hee-hee-hee, gru-nnn” that merely serve to punctuate utterances as they “alone were insufficient to convey full meaning, they were merely accent, styling, feel” (163)¹.

As the apes’ sign language cannot be “represented” on the written page, Self modifies English as we know it to have us believe in this silent world where no words are heard, only signs are seen. Thus the familiar sentence “I know because she told me” is translated into a surprising equivalent at first: “I know because she showed me” (105). Similarly “You’ve seen signs of them” must be understood as “You’ve heard of them”. You don’t listen indeed in sign language, you watch: “She’ll watch what you sign” (275). Self was thus confronted with the difficulty of making readers forget vocal language while having them read in their usual human language. The invention of new signs as substitutes for “speaking” and “telling” partly plays the trick: “I suppose what I’m marking is...”, “mark me if I’m wrong”, “what he ascribes a <psycho-physiological> approach”. Speaking or rather “signing” is like writing on the air, like playing an instrument: “the signs glibly flipping from his fingers”. The link with music is made more evident in the use of the verb “conduct” to signify “lecturing”: “clearly he was going to conduct for a while” (375).

Space is not the only backdrop on which signing takes place: apes have a more direct way of communicating. If humans always stand aloof, chimps communicate by touch. Hence the invention of a new transitive verb to account for this possibility that apes have of “signing on themselves”: “he inparted the nape of her neck” (133). Signing by touching provides a proximate means of communication that humans are deprived of, as Simon remarks, discovering for the first time the poetic potency of touch-language: “Simon, becoming aware of the fact of the signing itself, was struck for the first time by the potential for poetry that such a signage might have. Signing of touch—while touching, a dance and a play of fingers, one on another—one *to* another” (249). The proximity of touch and meaning, the simultaneity of signs and their effects, is a characteristic of the apes’ sign language: what is to be understood metaphorically in human language is here to be taken literally as well. Indeed, in the planet of the apes, “to be in touch” means non-metaphorically “touching one another”. The percept and the concept collide as signage is both physical and abstract. “No joking?” in human language becomes “no tickling?” in a mode of communication where touch is meaningful. Likewise in the expression “he produced a ticklecism of sorts”, the association of the process “tickle” with the suffix <-cism> transforming concrete action into a nominalised abstraction conciliates touch and effect (humour or irony) in the very same sign. To be entirely consistent, Self adapts human idiomatic expressions to the apes’ physical faculties: “we see

¹ The page references of the quotations refer to the Bloomsbury edition (Self 1997).

eye to eye” becomes “we see eye to hand”. The new expression “on the other foot” (rather than “on the other hand”) is justified by the remarkable agility of apes’ feet—hence the invention of verbs like “foot me the MRIs” or “[he] began to feetle his way through”.

Thus Will Self succeeds in giving a systematised linguistic rendition of the chimps’ cognitive apprehension of the world. Their signing accommodates their conceptualisation of space, giving new life to the conceptual metaphors our own language is based on, like “TO UNDERSTAND IS TO GRASP”². When grasping is indeed impossible, understanding does not follow: “I can’t put my finger on that” (268). Having nothing to sign/understand is to have nothing to grasp: “but there was nothing really there to get my fingers round” (232). Thinking also requires space to unfold, as it seems predicated on a new conceptual metaphor of the kind “TO THINK IS TO WALK” : “although his thoughts were knuckle-walking in an entirely different direction”. To put in the wrong foot is to make a mistake: “the atypical behaviour wrongfooted the impulse to offer reassurance”.

However creative linguistic-cognitive estrangement is in *Great Apes*, it must be acknowledged that Self did not push linguistic defamiliarization too far, as the syntax remains intact and sign language is alphabetically transcribed for us. Besides, the more we read, the easier it becomes to transliterate one language into another by mere linguistic replacement. Once the code is broken, transposition readily follows. For example “signing” replaces “saying” in “so to sign” (225), “suffice to sign” (vii), “I should sign so” (76). “Chimpunity” (for humanity) possesses all its derivatives: “chimplly, inchimp, chimpmanly, chimpification, camerachimp, stateschimp, showchimpship”. In fact, in *Great Apes*, the language of “the other” merely invites itself inside the familiar language, adopting its structural and systemic constraints. “Suggesture” and “signation” have usurped “suggestion” and “signature”, hosting the new signifiers “gesture” and “sign”. Thus human language is “territorialized” more than the new language “deterritorializes” it, to use Deleuze’s expression³: signage finds its nest in the already existing linguistic patterns without subverting them, just as the novel takes place in a recognizable location—no unfamiliar intergalactic space or unknown utopic topos here—since it is contemporary society as we know it⁴.

Must the limitations of the linguistic-cognitive estrangement in *Great Apes* be perceived as a failure on the part of Will Self? This is in fact the predicament that most writers of science fiction have to deal with when depicting encounters with alien beings, what Will Self elsewhere calls “the

² I am here referring to Lakoff and Johnson’s very well-known study of cognitive metaphors in *Metaphors We Live By*.

³ There is no such thing as rhizomatic uprooting of the linguistic tree here (see Deleuze & Guattari 31). For examples of more extreme cases of linguistic estrangement see Sorlin 2010b.

⁴ The change in inhabitants has provoked a change in scales as the new world is a dwarfed version of the human world. But discrimination is as rampant here as in the world we know. Just as there is an accent bar in English society, there is here a “sign bar”. Apes’ way of signing determines their social position and geographical location: “her fingers making the words with an exaggerated parody of his cod-Oxford accent, every crooked finger a spire, every smoothed palm a dream” (126) and the blacks called or rather “denoted/delineated/demarcated” “bonobos” sign to each other “with the fluent gestures of patois” (217).

Star Trek Problem” where linguistic barriers are usually overcome by making the other speak an improbable standard English⁵. But it seems to me here that Will Self’s intent is not to give a plausible depiction of the chimps’ way of living and communicating. His main goal is parodic self-reflexivity. Just as human language is recognizable under the distortions it is submitted to, Self wants the reader to recognize herself under the guise of the ape. In other words, the linguistic re-territorialisation of our own language has parodic effects that serve Self’s broader self-reflective aim. Parody does not aim at subverting language, transgressing its boundaries: it makes “the same” appear in greater relief under the distortions. This is precisely what science fiction is all about if we follow Darko Suvin’s canonical notion of “cognitive estrangement”, as he takes up Bertold Brecht’s definition: “a representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognise its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (Suvin 374). Destabilization cannot be total if parody is to work. It is to these parodic effects that we shall now turn.

2. Narrative exclusion and parodic metaphorical mode

Cognitive estrangement also works at the narrative level in *Great Apes*. As revealed in the Author’s Note that opens the novel, the writer presents himself as an ape, the simian version of Will Self who has decided to have a human, Simon Dykes, as his main character⁶. To an ape author can but correspond, in this new fictional contract, an ape reader. Humans are de facto excluded from the production and reception contexts of a book that is *fictionally* not addressed to them. The narration is assumed by an omniscient voice, which allows for convenient oscillations between external and internal focalisations: it at times adopts Simon’s point of view observing the strange world of apes that repels him, and at other times completely abandons him, as it sides with the chimp doctors trying to make sense of his delusion. When Simon is locked in a hospital room for treatment for example, the narrator clearly depicts Simon’s “vocalisations” from the point of view of the puzzled apes that have brought him here, as evinced by the use of the signifier “distorted” and the inability to grasp Simon’s words: “interspersed with this baby talk came muted, distorted vocalisations, of the form ‘Geddaway’ and ‘fuckoff’” (159). At other times, the narrator makes use of Free Indirect and Direct Speech, allowing Simon’s voice to be heard, although it remains isolated in italicized paragraphs that are detached from the rest of the narrative (119-120 and 124). At the end of the following passage in Free Indirect Speech, the pronoun “I” suddenly emerges, Simon’s voice

⁵ “In the TV series ‘Star Trek’, the Starship Enterprise journeys to incredibly distant galaxies where the crew encounter bizarre aliens who mysteriously speak standard English. I cannot suspend disbelief or find this credible in any way” (Self 2009, 21). See also Maylis Rospide’s translation and commentary of this essay (Rospide 2011).

⁶ In a self-reflexive note on the reception of his works, W.W.S. indicates: “One final and personal sign concerning the text. In the past my work has been much attacked for its apparent lack of sympathy. Critic after critic has signalled that I treat my protagonists with a diabolic disregard, spraying misfortune and ugliness of character on their fur. In *Great Apes* I have—purely coincidentally—constructed the only possible riposte to these idiotic objections, the fruit of a chronic misunderstanding of the meaning and purpose of satire—I’ve made my protagonist human!” (xi).

“liberating” itself slightly from the narrator⁷:

In the dreams he is always with bodies. Human bodies. And the bodies are beautiful. He almost thinks to himself, half forms the idea. How so that these bodies can be so beautiful, so ethereal? Because on the muzzle of it they aren't. [...] Not beautiful if beauty is extraordinary, but perhaps beauty has always been very ordinary, and it was just that I couldn't see it. (119-120, my emphases)

But the use of expressions like “on the muzzle of it” indicates that the narrator in control of speech is an ape narrator, using vocabulary corresponding to her own world. Simon later expresses himself more directly in a letter (written in bold characters) but here again the addressee Simon constructs⁸ is problematic, throwing his loneliness into relief as he tried to establish a “you” of whom he knows nothing, probably a human ear that could understand his plight as he woke up next to an ugly creature he calls the “thing” after going to sleep with his human partner Sarah:

I don't expect you to believe me. I tried to fend the bloody monkey off, I was screaming for Sarah, crying out for her. But the thing was damnably strong. It beat me. Christ, you have no idea how frightening this was. And it was absolutely real, not dream-like, not drug-like, but real. Really real. Then I don't know, I must have lapsed into unconsciousness. I didn't know what was happening. When I came to again there were more of these apes in the room. They beat me! They did. I can still feel the blows. They attacked me! They had horrible green eyes, and they were so fast! So strong. I could have sworn it was real. And then, thankfully, I blacked out again. (133-134)

If human writer and reader are kept outside the narrative frame, Simon is locked inside it, both observed by the doctors at the hospital and the narrator who also observes the scientists observing Simon. The narrative structure attributes humans the subject position of the excluded (from the narration), leaving them no choice but to observe humanity—embodied by Simon—through the eyes of the apes.

When Zack Busner⁹ finally gets Simon out of hospital, they start on a journey of mutual understanding of their respective species' mores. The apes' values seem at first to be radically antithetical to the humans'. Human taboos are indeed ape virtues in perfect symmetrical reversal¹⁰. A reverend “consorts” a lot because “it does [his] soul good” (147). Monogamy must be avoided as the ultimate sin: “his fingers stumbled over the sign ‘monogamy’, as if fearful of being contaminated” (146). Abusing a daughter means not mating her enough: “Freud, the founding alpha of psychoanalysis [...] has been the first chimp to recognize the destructive emotional effect of a

⁷ As Monique de Mattia-Viviès shows in her analysis of reported speech, if in Free Direct Speech the character seems to emancipate him/herself from the narrator, in Free Indirect Speech, the narrator remains involved. She speaks of the “degrees of grammatical involvement” of the narrator, from the less involved (FDS) to the more implicated (FIS) (see De Mattia-Viviès 215-216).

⁸ As Dominique Maingueneau underlines, “to be an ‘I’, someone only needs to start speaking, whereas to be a ‘you’, the ‘I’ must constitute someone else as a ‘you’” (Maingueneau 16, my translation).

⁹ Zack Busner is a recurrent character in Self's works, evolving from a pretentious student to a wealthy psychologist, with a parallel career as a television star. He then becomes the manager of a health institution in which both patients and doctors are insane, before morphing into an old alpha male chimpanzee in *Great Apes*. As Liorah A. Golomb puts it, “some writers create a world, some a universe. Will Self creates a community”, in which the reader recognizes themes and inhabitants (Golomb 74).

¹⁰ Self seems to be fond of reversals. In his next book, *How the Dead Live* (2000), where the dead live a life very similar to that of the living, death simply replaces life: “I recall the first day of the rest of my death perfectly” (see Ganteau 133).

biological alpha not mating his daughter” (142). The more Catholic you are, the more sex you must get: “They went on for weeks and Jean liked to make the best of them—being a devout Catholic—by including in as much mating as possible” (359). If the eye is the mirror to a true human soul, it is located on the lower hind side of the body in the ape world:

but there’s nothing ugly about the rear end of a chimpanzee, a chimp’s ischial scrag is his or her most beautiful feature. Wasn’t it the ‘chup-chupp’ Immortal Bard who wrote <What’s in a name? That which we denote an arsehole / By any other ascription would smell as sweet> [...] and furthermore, you can, so to sign, know a chimp by his arsehole, divine a chimp’s soul. (225)

Through the very subversion of what is held sacred in our world, *Great Apes* is bound to provoke laughter. But we are in fact laughing at our own expense in Will Self’s self-reflexive satirical parody. Indeed rather than on a mere symmetrical reversal of the type A || A’ that would keep the two species apart on the value spectrum, parody operates in-between the two realities it superimposes. Our sacred values then turn out to be very hypocritical when read in the light of the apes’ cultural habits, especially as regards sexual practices. The conversation between Simon and Busner about monogamy (in occidental human cultures) and polygamy (in the ape world) is the most revealing of humans’ patronising attitude as they consider polygamy the preserve of the more primitive cultures while they do in fact, albeit secretly, practise it in occidental societies. When Busner is told by Simon that humans cheat on one another while being officiously consorting with a single person and that human consortships do not necessarily last a lifetime, he exclaims: “‘But, Simon’ [...] ‘you sign of numerous consortships, and of consistent exogamous mating despite their existence. Mark me if I’m wrong, but it looks to me much the same as what chimpanzees get up to ‘huuu?’ [...] [Simon] had to admit it—the old ape did have a point” (295).

In its resort to animals to ridicule humans, Self’s novel falls in with the tradition of the English satire¹¹ of which Jonathan Swift is one of the earliest representants. In “A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms” of his *Gulliver’s Travels* for instance, the author features a similar subversive reversal in the roles attributed to humans and animals, as the Houyhnhnms have reached the pinnacle of wisdom and reason and preside over humans, called the Yahoos, who turn out to be repelling wretched animals. In the twentieth century, G. Orwell’s *Animal Farms* can be said to be in the same satirical vein : like in medieval fables, animals are “used” as allegories of ideas reaching beyond them. According to M. Rospide, Self “demetaphorises” this tradition by having animals speak “literally” in *Great Apes* (Rospide 2009, 467). However there is a sense in which Self can be said to carry on with the allegorical tradition if we follow Craig Owens’s definition of the postmodern allegory: for him, allegory occurs when “one text is *read through* another, however

¹¹ In his final diagnosis, Busner interprets Simon’s delusion as a “satirical trope”, which is also a self-reflexive comment on the novel as a whole : “it crossed my mind—and I hope you’ll ‘gru-unn’ forgive me for this speculation in advance if you cannot concur—that your conviction that you were human and that the evolutionarily successful primate was the human was more in the manner of a satirical trope ‘huuu?’” (404).

fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be” (Owens 74). Self’s text is indeed a rewriting of preceding “doubles”¹², like Pierre Boulle’s *La Planète des singes* (1963)—which seems to be haunting it—but also its film avatars which are mentioned several times in the novel¹³.

At the end of the book, Simon is confronted with Simon Junior, the human child that Simon believed to be his son and that he has been looking for in the wilderness, for he was sure the child was the only one who could prove his belonging to the human species. The exchange of looks between the two Simons when they finally meet dramatically reveals the unbridgeable gap between them. In the face-to-face confrontation, Simon Junior’s human face remains unreadable, condemning any ethical recognition in Levinasian terms¹⁴:

Simon, squinting in the noonday equatorial glare, stared for a long time into the brutish muzzle of the human infant, who stared back at him. Simon took in the bare little visage, the undershot jaw and slightly goofy teeth, then he turned on all four of his heels, vocalised ‘H’hooo’, and gestured to the rest of the patrol, ‘Well, that’s that then’, and they headed back towards the camps. (403)

In opting out of humanity and back to chimpunity, Simon severs the threads that the human reader had woven with him throughout the novel. We are also betrayed by the author’s false initial announcement about the human nature of his character. This further distancing is the final trick of a narrative that assigns humans the place of the defeated. As we shall now see, this serves to better satirize the subject-positions some humans themselves assign “the other” in their own world, whoever the other is (apes or coloured people). Indeed through the distortions and refractions of this metaphorical mirror, *Great Apes* offers an anthropological critique of the places White Western males have appropriated on the Great Chain of Beings in a most self-centered way.

3. Social construction in science and art

The irretrievable strangeness of the other (Simon junior) seems here to testify to the impossibility of knowing the other and therefore oneself in categories other than our own. As Holquist indicates in his comments on Bakhtine’s dialogism, the other is the only one who can give us a sense of who we are, but the perception of ourselves through the eyes of another is impossible if that other is for instance a Martian:

I cannot choose to model my self as, let us say, a Martian might see me if I have not had experience of Martians. I may, of course, *imagine* what Martians might be like, and then seek to appropriate their image as my own. But even an imaginary Martian will be made up of details provided from previous experience, for in existence that is shared, there can be nothing absolute, including nothing absolutely new. (Holquist 28)

¹² “Allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another” (Owens 52).

¹³ Movies we know in their inverse version of course like *Planet of the Humans* (in its different versions), *Battle for the Planet of the Humans* and *Escape from the Planet of the Humans*.

¹⁴ Indeed for Levinas, the emergence of the other takes place at the sight of a face in a somewhat epiphanic event where the self is interpellated by the other: “the position in front, the opposition *par excellence*, can only be a moral questioning. This movement starts with the Other. The idea of the infinite [...] is concretely produced under the auspices of a relation with the face” (Levinas 28, my translation).

The difficulty of knowing radical alterity (without projecting some of our “previous experience”) receives its most ironic exemplification in the wrong translation the primatologist Ludmilla Rauhschutz gives of the humans’ language. The empirical human reader measures the gap between the language she understands perfectly (the humans saying “fuckkkooooooooooooofff” to one another) and the interpretation the ape scientist gives of the phrase in a most assertive way: “That is the human nesting vocalisation. It’s a tender exhortation by the male humans to the females, saying that the right shelters are prepared and it is time for mating activity to begin” (397). Anthropology/primatology’s claim to truth is here severely satirized, as knowledge is shown to be subjected to interpretation. In *Great Apes*, Self retraces the evolution of the relationship between ape and human, showing how historically contingent knowledge is¹⁵:

The human was held to be the most bestial of animals because it was the most chimp-like. This had been understood and incorporated into descriptions of all simian creatures, even before the discovery of the true anthropoid apes—the orang-utan, the gorilla and the human, in the 16th century. [...] Yet paradoxically, the image of humans retained in contemporary culture was almost always benign, cuddly even. Infants often had stuffed humans as toy. There were also the notorious commercials for P.G.Tips tea, with their absurd use of humans mimicking chimp behaviour, special effects used to convey the impression that they were signing intelligently and enjoying the beverage. Then there was the upsurge in the ethical preoccupation with animal rights to the human, on the grounds that given the genetic profile they were the closest living relative to the chimpanzees, as well as the most intelligent. (186)

In order to better establish themselves as a superior species, white apes have assigned different places to the “other” by first discarding it as evil, which allowed them to be on the side of the angels, before domesticating/colonizing it in order to render it harmless. On the Great Chain of Beings, first comes the white chimp, then the black bonobo, and down below, the human:

Busner had never imagined the relationship between the chimpanzee and the human to have so many submerged implications. Western civilization, it was true, had projected itself towards divinity on the up-escalator of the Chain of Being. And like Disraeli, everyone had wanted to be on the side of the angels. For white-muzzled chimpanzees to be approaching perfection, bogeychimps were needed, distressed versions of the other. It was easy to see how the bonobo, with its disturbing grace and upright gait, had fulfilled this role; but Busner now realised that in the shadow of the bonobo was a more unsettling, more bestial ‘other’—the human”. (273)

The classifiers are indeed likely to classify by establishing themselves as the reference point and by defining who is above or below them in the hierarchy¹⁶, as the fictional author ironically exposes in a footnote: “Darwin of course foresaw everything with his remark, ‘if chimp had not been his own classifier he would never have thought of founding a separate order for his own reception’” (263). On the “Primate Tree” depicting the relationships between species, “the human was upright, loosely arm-in-arm with a gorilla, while off to one side, the chimpanzee sat in splendid isolation” (259). This points to the circularity scientists are condemned to when they look for data reflecting already existing paradigms: “experimenters say it is important for scientific purposes that humans be kept in

¹⁵ Through the evocation of real primatologists like the very famous Jane Goodall at Gombe for instance.

¹⁶ In *La Raison classificatoire*, Patrick Tort speaks of the liberty of the classifier: man is the “master” of his system as regards the order of things in which he “naturally sets himself in a position of hegemony” (Tort 388, my translation).

such conditions, but why exactly? Surely only to conform to scientifically defined paradigms that have their root in just this hard dividing line between our species?" (Author's Note, xi).

In *Great Apes*, Self demonstrates how enmeshed the Primate Order is with man's socio-cultural history, as social advancements are reflected in the way apes/humans have been apprehended. There is a sense in which how we have perceived self and other have indeed always depended on who has been included/excluded in the political and cultural circle. Donna Haraway gives detailed evidence to this in *Primate Visions*: "scientific narratives of human evolution is part of the contest for the citizenship in the body politic" (Haraway 348). Like Haraway, Self shows that the primate body itself, or rather the human body here, is "an intriguing kind of political discourse" (Haraway 10)¹⁷. The cultural filters through which apes and humans have been observed have historically been renewed with a change in the scripts and the categories on which knowledge depends. In *Great Apes*, Busner's whole life as a scientist has been "based on a repudiation of dry functionalist categories" (317) and a redrawing of boundaries. Yet, conversing with Simon, he finds it hard to realign his own mapping to fit Simon's vision, which he considers the distorted one: "Busner tried mentally to realign his schema so as to match his patient's warped view of the natural world" (259). Thus if boundaries can be shaken, they cannot be discarded entirely as they rely on a particular cultural script or "language-game", confirming that we are "self-interpreting beings"¹⁸ that can only be remade by our own speech as Charles B. Guignon puts it in *The Interpretative Turn* drawing on Richard Rorty:

If we know reality under descriptions made available by current language games, then the same is true of our knowledge of ourselves. We have no privileged access to our own nature as humans, no way of gaining self-knowledge by 'reading our own program'. The recognition that we are self-interpreting beings shows us that a human is 'a self-changing being, *capable of remaking himself by remaking her own speech*'. (Guignon 88)

To get out of the circularity mentioned above, Busner has tried to get closer to an aesthetic apprehension of the world: "As you know a great deal of our work relates closely to the kinds of intuition and lateral reasoning employed by artists. We aren't looking for dry, linear or causal

¹⁷ In *Primate Visions*, Haraway very interestingly shows that at different times primates were observed through different filters. In late industrial society for instance where liberal individualism was rampant, "Primates became model yuppies" (128). Similarly when the feminist movement was getting momentum, studies of chimps changed as new things were observed. Although Haraway does not want to establish feminism as the direct cause to the emergence of new theories (that lay greater emphasis on the role of females in the chimp group), she asserts that it should undeniably be taken into account: "several of the women reported personal and cultural affirmation and legitimation for focusing scientifically on females from the atmosphere of feminism in their own societies. Men also reported the same sense of legitimation for taking females more seriously, coming from the emerging scientific explanatory framework, from the data and arguments of women scientific peers, from the prominence of feminist ideas in their culture, and from their experience of friendships with women influenced by feminism. I do not think that it is possible in principle to build a causal argument from these reports, even if everyone testifies to the same thing, but I do think the narrative of the social construction of scientific knowledge is implausible without these dimensions" (Haraway 176).

¹⁸ "What Wittgenstein and Heidegger have taught us is that we are self-interpreting beings who draw our self-understanding from the language games circulating in our culture" (Guignon 87).

explanations” (76). But the artists are no freer from the categories and cultural codes of the episteme to which they belong¹⁹. Will Self’s novel is a self-reflexive illustration of this fact. *Great Apes* reflects upon the necessity of redrawing maps and boundaries by offering a new script of our history through the point of view of the ones we have either excluded or tamed, while showing that this aesthetic attempt is a dead end: by exposing the impossibility of having access to the other in its radical alterity, Will Self fails to offer a renewed mapping of the world, which would tend to show that novelists share the same predicament as scientists (using language-games to make sense of the world) as they cannot write in a language that is not the “familiar” one, locked as they are inside what Fredric Jameson calls “the prison of language” as he points to the aporia of SF or:

the atrophy of what Marcuse has called the *utopian imagination*, the imagination of otherness and radical difference, and to serve as unwitting and even unwilling vehicles for a meditation which, setting forth for the unknown, finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too familiar and thereby unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of its own limits. (Jameson 153)

In the deconstruction it fulfils, postmodernist art runs the risk of continuing “to perform what it denounces as impossible and will, in the end, affirm what it set out to deny” (Owens 78). For Craig Owens however, this error is what takes it up to a higher level: “But this very failure is what raises the discourse, to use de Man’s terminology, from a tropological to an allegorical level” (Owens 78).

Besides, as we have tried to demonstrate, in this self-reflexive parody Self’s aim is precisely to render the frames that shape knowledge visible. Indeed in the reversal of power places imagined here, the primatomorphizing that apes indulge in helps us grasp our own anthropocentric and anthropomorphising attitudes more perceptively as well as the social construction of our own theories. Such self-reflexivity is bound to elicit a response on the part of the readers who will not perceive whites, blacks or apes in the same way after reading *Great Apes*, as they have been forced to occupy the position of the defeated or ostracized on the scientific and socio-political tree. The power of science fiction resides precisely here: it brings us to look at ourselves in the refractions of a mirror, teaching us much about who we think we are as humans.

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¹⁹ Just as scientists should not be perceived as peacefully isolated from society in their lab—they do need allies outside to have their theories accepted (see Bruno Latour’s study of this in his sociology of science, 2005), as illusory is the romantic image of the artist locked in his room, penniless and apart from society, as Self ironically underlines: “They might all have pretended that they found nothing more romantic, or honourable than the idea of the writer as a selfless artist labouring away in a poorly heated tree house, with no hope of readers and remuneration, but the truth was that they had as little time for failure as the rest of chimpanzee” (381).

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