Summary

Why Women Like Apes.
A Love Affair in Science and Culture

Western culture is filled with examples of erotic relationships between dark-haired apes and blonde women. Not only do we find this association in many movies and novels; there is also a striking connection between the woman and the ape in the scientific practice of primatology. Many female primatologists have devoted their lives to the study of apes – Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey being the most famous examples. Their life and works have been the subject of many movies, novels, biographies and documentaries. The remarkable relationship between the woman and the ape raises the question why this combination recurs and why it is significant. In this thesis, I analyse a small number of examples taken from short stories to novels, films, documentaries and (popular) scientific books from the twentieth century, in which the relationship between the woman and the ape plays a crucial role. In doing so, I ask whether there are significant changes throughout time and, if so, how can these be explained.

In the first two chapters, I establish a theoretical and methodological framework for reading and interpreting stories about women and apes. The first chapter, ‘The Ambiguous Ape. Thoughts on Otherness’, deals with the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘ape’ in western society. Apes are often considered to be ‘ambiguous’, because they defy clear-cut categories of ‘human’ and ‘animal’. Following Donna Haraway’s critical study of primatology, Primate Visions. Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science (1998), I argue that apes as ‘animal others’ have always played an important role in defining the categories of ‘human’, ‘animal’, ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. Like the ape, the woman has been defined as...
the ‘other’ in western society. In this thesis, I ask what happens when two ‘others’ encounter each other. The attention that Annemarie Mol pays to the dynamic, contextual, local and relational aspects of ‘otherness’, calls for a turn to storytelling, because the story is not a static entity, but capable of catching movement and change. Thus, a step is made from the ape and the woman as the ‘theoretical’ other, to the ape and the woman as constructed in storytelling.

The second chapter, ‘Stories about Women and Apes. The Relationship between Science and Culture’, asks whether and how it is significant that the association between the woman and the ape occurs in the scientific practice of primatology as well as in popular culture. With Donna Haraway, I argue that the distinction often made between ‘culture’ (the domain of fiction) on the one hand, and ‘science’ (the domain of facts) on the other, is blurrier than we might expect. Science is a storytelling practice, and primatology, the scientific discipline providing us with ‘the facts’ about apes, is often more heterogeneous and imaginative than we might think, as it draws on many discourses at once, including science fiction, survival literature, and romantic adventure tales.

Primatology, however, is not only a storytelling practice, as Haraway argues, but also a reading-practice. Unlike Haraway, who reduces films and novels to illustrations of ideological arguments, I emphasise the reader’s role in establishing meaning. The reader may choose to read stories as ideological arguments, or, read them in a more traditional ‘literary’ way, focusing on the ambiguities of texts. I argue for having the best of both worlds, that is to contextualise a particular story, by reading it in relation to other stories and noticing the way it conveys ideological arguments and stereotypes, and, at the same time, focusing on the specificity and ambiguities and alternative readings of an individual text. Reception-studies, which examine how others have interpreted and valued texts, also provide insights in which aspects readers find meaningful, how ‘closure’ of meaning takes place, and how different readings of the same text are possible throughout time.

In the remaining chapters these ideas are put into practice. They are devoted to the analysis, interpretation, reception and contextualisation of a specific short story, novel, film or popular scientific book from twentieth century western culture. In these stories, the relationship between the woman and the ape ‘triggers’ the plot: not
only does it make other characters act and react, but it also troubles the critics.

Chapter three, ‘Why a Man Murders an Ape’, is based on a close reading of Mijn aap schreit. Een korte roman (My ape weeps. A short novel, 1928), written by the Dutch-Surinam novelist Albert Helman. Helman tells the story of a young man who loathes his ape so much that he decides to poison it. I discuss the novel by relating it to three major theories that have proposed models for thinking about the origin and nature of man: Darwinism, Freudian psychoanalysis and Christianity. I argue that the close connection between the female characters and his ape confronts the narrator with life’s largest questions: who am I, where do I come from, and how should I live? Each time the narrator sees his ape with a woman, he compares himself to the ape. He wonders whether he should follow his instincts (Darwinism) or should repress his sexual desires and live a rational and moral life with Christ as a guiding example (Christianity). I argue that by murdering his ape, the narrator tries to end his continuous doubts on the origin of man and the nature of man. Unlike himself, the ape is capable of integrating ‘otherness’ in its identity. Therefore it becomes an ideal figure for the narrator, a Christlike figure. By murdering his ape, the narrator symbolically reinforces the traditional hierarchies between human and animal and man and woman. However, the murder is a tragic one, because the narrator feels ‘estranged’ from everyone else. I conclude the chapter by arguing that critics have symbolically repeated the murder of the ape, by reducing the meaning of the ape to the alter ego of the narrator, without recognising its ambiguity.

In his later work, Helman continued to write on the subject of the woman and the ape, both from a religious point of view as well as from a colonial perspective, using the ape as a symbol for blackness. The ape as Christlike figure and the ape as black other are elaborated further upon in the next chapter, which deals with a movie that provided us with the one of the best known images of the woman and the ape. In chapter four ‘Killer King or Gentle Giant. King Kong between Fact and Fiction’ I discuss the creation, interpretation and reception-history of the film King Kong (1933). The movie tells the story of a gorilla that is hopelessly in love with a blond girl. The construction of the gorilla and the girl can be traced back to debates on the nature of gorilla from the nineteenth century on-
wards. Scientists and artists alike struggled with the gorilla’s ambiguity, referring to it both as a ‘rape-ape’, a danger to women, and as a ‘gentleman’, a girl’s best friend. Through combining different ideas from science and fiction, the directors of King Kong managed to create an ambiguous creature that was divine, animal and human, female and male, gentle and violent. However, as in Mijn aap schreit, the murdering of the gorilla at the movie’s end, serves to reinforce the hierarchies between human and animal, nature and culture, female and male, black and white.

In the reception-history of the film, the struggle with the ambiguous nature of the gorilla once again becomes visible. Because of its ambiguity, King Kong becomes an ideal figure for projecting on to many roles, varying from a ‘killer king’ to a ‘gentle giant’. One the one hand, cultural critics have argued that King Kong is intended to represent a human. They have interpreted the gorilla as a violent black rape-man or as gentle social outcast, a homosexual, Christ, a Jew, a child and an orphan. Scientists, on the other hand, have stated that King Kong is a false representation of an animal, a gorilla. They blamed the Hollywood monster for reinforcing the negative image of the gorilla, which, in part because of films like King Kong, is murdered in real life. They have tried to replace the ‘false’ cultural image with the ‘real’ scientific image, using King Kong as a rhetoric example of a false fictional portrayal of a gorilla. In my interpretation I argue that both the cultural critics, who interpret King Kong as a human being, and the scientists, who see King Kong as a false representation of an animal, neglect to consider King Kongs enormous size. He is neither human nor animal; his size makes him a giant, in the tradition of stories about giants. I conclude that scientists have been very successful in promoting the image of the gorilla as a gentle giant. The important role of Dian Fossey and her female colleagues in establishing the image of the gentle ape, is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter five, ‘Why Female Scientists like Apes. The Image Industry of Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas’ is concerned with the way female primatologists represented themselves and ‘their’ apes, and the way they have been represented by others in movies, films, novels, biographies and documentaries. An analysis of three popular scientific books by Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas, shows how twofold strategies are used to convey
the idea that apes are gentle and humanlike. With their ethnographical fieldwork, placing themselves amongst the animals, they emphasise the apeness of humans. At the same time, the humanity of apes is demonstrated, by researching them as individuals, as if they were human beings. However, it is shown that the term ‘human’ presents the female primatologists with a contradiction. Applied to humans it means something negative, namely ‘cruel’; applied to apes, its connotation is positive, ‘gentle’.

While Goodall, Fossey and Galdikas try to control the images of apes, their own image is controlled by filmmakers, novelists and biographers. Like the apes under examination, they become figures of projection, as they are presented either as beauties or as beasts. Another tension is also present: the female primatologist is represented as a sexy guide or as a mother of apes. I show how authors struggle with the ambiguous position of the white female primatologist in Third World countries, through analysing William Boyds _Brazzaville Beach_ (1990), based on the life and works of Jane Goodall, _Gorillas in the Mist_ (1992), in which Dian Fossey’s life is portrayed, and finally _The Follow_ (1998) and the thriller _Gone Wild_ (1995), based on the life and work of Biruté Galdikas. Unlike Goodall and Fossey, Galdikas tried to influence and control the way she was portrayed. Spalding, for instance, was sued for her ‘false’ portrayal of Galdikas. However, Galdikas could not take action against _Gone Wild_, which also portrays her negatively, because this book was classified ‘fiction’.

At the end of this chapter, I illustrate how the reader can ‘counter-interpret’ stereotypical images of female primatologists, by considering the significance of the fact that some of today’s stories about female primatologists are told from a male point of view. Applying Haraway’s notion of ‘simian orientalism’ to the biographer, I argue that the stories and images reveal us something about the uncertainty of masculinity. The next chapter follows from this: it is devoted to the identity crisis of man in the nineties, which coincides with a debate on the ‘new’ humanity.

In chapter six, ‘Ape: an Ideal Husband. Debating the Great Ape Project’, I analyse the rhetorical strategies used by the Great Ape Project, an international organisation which demands the extension of human rights to apes. On the one hand, the project emphasises that it is based on sound scientific proof. On the other hand, it
continuously points the reader to fiction. Through a close reading of one the novels mentioned in the GAP, Peter Høeg’s *The Woman and the Ape*, I show that the novel explores and exposes the moral consequences of The Great Ape Project in depth by presenting a future scenario. If the boundaries between animal and human are abolished, then ‘inter-species’ relationships become an option, and a new ‘hybrid’ race might be on its way. I argue that this novel, in which a woman leaves her husband and runs off with an ape, can be read as a warning for mankind: if these GAP-like situations are to be prevented, men had better take a serious look at themselves and learn from their ape rival. The representation of the ape as the new masculinity is ambiguous: it is divine, animal, human, feminine, masculine, tender and aggressive at once. By contextualising science, discussing its ideas in a cultural context and vice versa, interpreting fiction in relation to the debate on ‘the new humanity’, I thus show that the discussion about the ‘new humanity’ contains a discussion about masculinity and the position and role of men in society.

Whereas most love stories about the woman and the ape are written by male authors, the nineties have also witnessed an outburst of female authors taking up the subject. Like *The Woman and the Ape*, the satirical-comic novels *Ark Baby* (1998), *The Last Manly Man* (1998) and *Animal Husbandry* (1998) discuss The Great Ape Project and consequently point a critical finger towards men. But how serious are we to take these novels? No longer is the love affair between the woman and the ape told as a tragic tale, like in *King Kong* or *Mijn aap schreit*, but as something hilarious. I show that not only the boundaries between humans and apes and men and women are negotiated, but also those of serious literature and cultfiction, fact and fiction, science and culture. Chapter six ends with a question. What happens if all such boundaries are broken down? How do we, as men, women and authors establish an identity if difference no longer can be made between human and animal, female and male, literature and science, fact and fiction? And how are we as readers supposed to read the ambiguous (‘apelike’) texts?

These questions are taken up in the last chapter, ‘Why Women Like Apes’. In this chapter, I summarise the main arguments of the thesis through a discussion of two texts. The first is a short story by Ian McEwan, ‘Reflections of a Kept Ape’ (1978), in which an ape reflects on his love for a female novelist. The second, *The Ape and the
Sushi Master: Cultural reflections of a Primatologist (2001), contains the reflections of a primatologist, Frans de Waal. Both texts draw attention to the perspective of the ape, in an attempt to destabilise the human point of view. Both also reflect on the definitions of 'text', 'reading', 'nature' and 'culture'. McEwan portrays 'human culture' as ape-like in a negative manner. Plagiarizing is all novelists ('apes of God') are capable of. De Waal, however, interprets 'aping' as a positive aspect of culture. It is through imitating that we reach creativity. I propose to read the two texts as commentaries on each other. In doing so, I show that De Waal's attempts to abolish the nature-culture dichotomy, implies the hierarchical shifts of the dichotomy between the natural sciences and the humanities. This leaves us with another question: are we moving toward a 'cultural primatology', in which cultural critics are most apt to study nature, and natural scientists are most inclined to study cultural artefacts? By focusing on ambiguities in McEwan's story, I show how the ambiguous ape can be interpreted, in a complex manner, as 'the text' itself to be written.

This thesis shows through stories about the woman and the ape that dichotomies are negotiated and refuted over and over again, and that one cannot refute one boundary, e.g. human-animal, without discussing others, for instance the male-female dichotomy. The chronology provides insights on views on gender, race, species, science and nature in the twentieth century changed during the twentieth century. Whereas the first two stories discussed in this thesis, Mijn aap schreit and King Kong, end with murder, chapter six showed how traditional hierarchies were criticised. Women chose to embrace apes, which represent ambiguity, and their sexual relationship with them predicts a future of a new hybrid species. This thesis cannot predict the future, but as has been shown, literature can provide us with 'what if'-stories. And one of them tells us, that the future is like an 'ape' yet to be written.