

# MULTIMODAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

## Special Review Section on *Jane*

### Jane

Brett Morgen, dir. 90 min. English. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2017.

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Jane Goodall first became a widely known public figure—a persona would be more precise—back in the 1960s. In 1963, *National Geographic* published her dramatic first-person account, “My Life among Wild Chimpanzees,” with photos just as polished and compelling as one would expect. Two years later, there was a second article and, with it, a *National Geographic* television special, “Miss Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees,” with the narrator played by Orson Welles. Goodall started her work with chimpanzees at twenty-six, and was thirty-one when the television special aired across the United States. Some fifty-plus years later, *Jane* provides what is probably the final significant construction and circulation of the Goodall persona during the biographical Goodall’s lifetime.

This new film is crafted from more than one hundred hours of previously unused footage from the 1960s, which the film itself introduces more dramatically as having been “lost” and then recently “rediscovered.” Lacking audio, the footage is combined with recordings from interviews with Goodall by the film’s director, Brett Morgen, along with a Phillip Glass soundtrack. *Jane* also makes spare but powerful use of what the credits call “ephemera”—telegrams, letters, and pages of Goodall’s fieldnotes—without telling us which are historical artifacts and which have been re-created (or made) for the film. A final element is the use of close-up shots, some extreme, of various animals (insects, birds, snakes) to mark section breaks in the narrative—as if to underscore that the wild of nature, where Goodall famously ventured, is wild indeed.

*Jane*’s archival footage was shot by Goodall’s first husband, Hugo van Lawick, and it establishes beyond any question that Hugo was an enormously talented photographer, of both nonhuman animals and the young Goodall; the footage thus makes clear that Hugo was an important factor in the making and triumph of the early Goodall persona.

Morgen, for his part, has skillfully woven *Jane*’s diverse ingredients into an absorbing, compelling whole. Its boldest claim for itself is that it strips away the cheesiness and sexism of *National Geographic*’s 1960s representations of Goodall, thereby providing an unvarnished account of the real “Jane.” This Jane, we learn, was a feminist pathbreaker

in a millennial, gender-bending mold. The very first words we hear in *Jane* are those of Morgen (in voice-over) saying, “I think I read somewhere . . . that when you were a child, you used to dream as a man,” followed by Goodall responding (also in voice-over): “Yeah . . . Because at the time I wanted to do things which men did and women didn’t; you know, going to Africa.”

Along with announcing its distinction from *National Geographic*’s 1960s representations of Goodall, the film partakes significantly and without saying so in numerous now highly conventionalized elements of representations of Goodall and her storied life (Segal 2017). *Jane* gives great prominence, for instance, to the claim—launched by Goodall herself in her 1971 book *In the Shadow of Man*—that Goodall’s early Gombe work resulted in a “redefinition of man” (Van Lawick-Goodall 1971). The story goes that Goodall in the fall of 1960 made the momentous discovery that chimpanzees modify objects to use as “tools”—stripping leaves from twigs in order to use them to extract termites from the depths of their mounds, and this, the story continues, established the near humanness of chimpanzees and upended the existing definition of “man the toolmaker.”

Neither in its self-conscious departures nor its unannounced repetitions is *Jane* particularly probing, however. To start, despite its claim to be revelatory about the sexism the young Goodall faced, *Jane* omits much more than it tells. While repeating the well-known story about Leakey hiring twenty-three-year-old Goodall to be his secretary and then recruiting her to do primate field research, for example, it leaves out that this recruitment by Leakey was embedded in the fifty-three-year-old’s persistent sexual pursuit—harassment, in a word—of Goodall and countless other women so much younger than himself. Goodall’s secretarial predecessor, to note just one case, was similarly both pursued and recruited. This was, in short, Leakey’s *modus operandi*. *Jane*, then, is hardly woke at this #MeToo moment, preferring to sustain the myth that Leakey “selected” Goodall based on his recognition, almost immediately upon meeting her, of her special talents for observing animals in the wild.

As for the story that Goodall’s early observations of leaf-stripping forced “a redefinition of man,” one thing to note is that while this claim has been repeated endlessly in biographical accounts of Goodall that have been produced

since *Shadow*'s publication (as in the title of Dale Peterson's 752-page biography *Jane Goodall: The Woman Who Redefined Man* [2006]), there is nary a trace of this today in either the scientific literature or any textbooks. So too—and consistent with this—*Jane* misleads us when it repeats (from *Shadow*) that the “definition of man” before Goodall hinged on tool making; this claim is, instead, a revisionist account proffered first by Leakey, starting a few months after he learned of Goodall's observations of chimpanzee leaf-stripping, back in 1961. A final difficulty with this much-trafficked tale is that it fails to recognize—as Goodall herself has always failed to recognize—the deep discontinuity between human tools and the chimpanzee-modified objects Goodall identified as tools. In stripping twigs to be able to fish for termites, the chimpanzees were indeed fashioning an effective *means* to an end, but the end—obtaining food—was given to them, as an objective condition of their existence. In the case of human tools, by contrast, what is fashioned or invented by humans are *ends* and not just means. The fork, to give an everyday example, is *not* so much a means for delivering sustenance to the body (the hand does just fine for that) as it is a means to the humanly invented end of eating in a *culturally* appropriate manner. More generally, then, it

is precisely culture that is set aside by Goodall's claim—recirculated by *Jane*—that chimpanzee leaf stripping is a remarkably human-like behavior (Segal 2017, 1218–19).

Also elided by *Jane*, as in the earlier depictions of Goodall at Gombe that the film uncritically follows, is the presence of African persons at Gombe. This, as Donna Haraway argued decades ago in *Primate Visions* (1999), is crucial for retaining the notion of the originality of Goodall's achievement of living “in the wild” at Gombe and observing the chimpanzees there.

When all is said and done, then, for all that *Jane* is a remarkably well-crafted film, it is not a worthwhile one.

#### REFERENCES CITED

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Multimodal Redundancy is where you have signals that represent the same thing in two different sensory mediums. As for Meaning construction, how is that encoded through music and movement? Quite abstractly! As a sidenote, multimodal/intersensory redundancy is actually an example of what Edelman, Gamow, Friston, Price and others would call "degeneracy"™. Share this: [Reddit](#).  
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