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Bantam Screening of Film on Chimp Researchers Wanted to Be Human

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By JACK CORAGGIO

LITCHFIELD—As far as chimpanzee experiments go, this may have been one of the more palatable. But even a research trial with the best of intentions can turn out to be beastly.

So it was with the unfortunate case of test subject Nim Chimpsky, the ape born in a cage in 1973, taken from his mother and then raised with people as a “person” in upscale New York. The thought was that he would evolve toward human behavior and capabilities.

When the situation turned predictably hopeless, the project was abandoned and Nim Chimpsky lived for two more decades, lonely and confused. He died of a heart attack at age 26.

This is the subject of James Marsh’s and Simon Chinn’s award-winning documentary “Project Nim,” a 2011 Sundance Film Festival Best Directing for World Documentary recipient that will be shown at the Bantam Cinema next weekend.

If the trial had been a success, perhaps teaching our closest relatives in the animal kingdom to communicate and clearly express themselves could have proven an elucidating endeavor. But the experiment recounted in this cinematic tale turned out to be more “Island of Dr. Moreau” than “Dr. Doolittle.”

Nim Chimpsky did learn to sign 120 words, and could express to humans a few emotions and physiological reactions in rudimentary fashion. But he could barely communicate with, or relate to, his own species.

With a corrupted sense of self-identity, his behavior became increasingly erratic, which was made doubly alarming given his magnified strength. The chimpanzee often reminded those around him that he was not a man, but an animal, and one that would bite and scratch.

In fact, Nim Chimpsky once mauled the face of a female researcher—a precursor to the February 2009 incident in which a male chimp named Travis, who was kept as a pet, attacked a friend of his owner in Stamford, CT.

For a brief time Nim was a celebrity; New York Magazine did a cover story on him when he was 14 months old, not yet with superhuman strength but able to demonstrate some sign language vocabulary.

Though the writer, Stuart Bauer, said the chimp “has star quality,” photographer Harry Benson saw something more ominous in the diapered ape being paraded around like a human toddler.

“He was a cute, wee chimp with a kind little face, but I couldn’t help feeling sorry for him, seeing him in clothes and being turned into a human being,” said Mr. Benson, whose father worked at the Glasgow Zoo. “I knew sufficient stuff about primates to know it would end in a mess. They can only go three years before they turn vicious.”

Not to be confused with Rupert Wyatt’s “Rise of the Planet of the Apes,” a reboot of the classic series that has an army of super-intelligent lab chimps revolt against people and opens nationally this weekend, “Project Nim” airs at Bantam Cinema on Saturday, Aug. 13.

There will be a lecture and question-and-answer session following the 12:30 p.m. showing. It will be moderated by University of Connecticut professor Davyne Verstandig, not MIT professor Noam Chomsky, after whom Nim Chimpsky was named. It will include an appearance by Stephanie and Jennifer Lafarge, from the family that took in Nim Chimpsky.

There will be showings that day at 3:45, 5:45 and 8 p.m., as well as other subsequent times. For more information, see the Web site at www.bantamcinema.com.

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