

# *Planet of the Apes* and the Philosophy of Translation

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## Introduction

There are core but curious differences between the novel *Planet of the Apes* (1963) (originally *La planète des singes* (1963)) and its movie version, *Planet of the Apes* (1968). These differences arise fundamentally from the fact that the laws of translation in the universe in which the novel is set are not the same as those in the universe of the movie. This is because the book, (hereafter *La planète des singes*), operates within the dictates of French continental philosophy whereas the movie (hereafter *Planet of the Apes*) is set in the alternate universe of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Both universes are ultimately structured by how translation operates within them.

## Continental Philosophy and Analytic Philosophy

The basic difference between continental philosophy and analytical philosophy is that continental philosophy centers translation to be a meaning-making mechanism whereas analytical philosophy relegates it to the role of a neutral and invisible meaning-explaining tool.

In continental philosophy, translation is seen as an act that constructs meaning through the interpretation of texts. Translation implies plurality since all readings are socially and historically sited and hence capable of multiple variations. Meaning is *not* relative (since that would make it ‘meaningless’) but neither is it absolute (since in a world of semantic plurality this is impossible). By contrast, the analytical philosophical view is that translation does not create meaning, it merely transmits it. A text has a singular true interpretation and translation works by relaying faithfully and neutrally this interpretation. Meaning is absolute and universal, otherwise it would not be coherent and hence ‘meaningful’.

To make the same point slightly differently, the continental tradition emphasizes the socially embedded semantics of language that grow from the syntactic, whereas the analytic tradition emphasizes the universal logical syntax that grounds the semantic.<sup>1</sup> In summary, for the continentals, philosophy is about finding the semantic in the syntactic, for the analytics, it is about finding the syntactic in the semantic.

Following this, we can surmise that on the *planète des singes* translation is a conscious game played in society that results, not so consciously, in the creation and control of meaning, whereas on the *Planet of the Apes* translation is an invisible and neutral tool facilitating, when permitted, the revelation of shared and universal truths.

### **Planets Plots**

Both *La planète des singes* and *Planet of the Apes* tell the tale of a man (named Ulysse Mérou in the book, George Taylor in the movie) who travels into space to arrive on a planet where apes are the intelligent and dominant animal, and humans are mute and wild. In both stories, the hero (Mérou/Taylor) gets captured in a hunt and held captive in a scientific research institute. The institute is populated by scientist apes, one of whom is a chimpanzee named Zira and another of whom is an orangutan named Dr. Zaius. It is only when Mérou/Taylor first communicates with Zira that the different philosophies operating in each universe, the universe of the book and the universe of the movie, are revealed. In *La Planète Des Singes*, translation is ever present whereas in *Planet of the Apes* it is ever invisible. And with this, and because of this, the two stories completely diverge.

### **When Mérou met Zira**

On the *planète des singes*, Mérou at first simply talks in French (which no ape speaks) to his capturers. He believes that this alone will prove he is intelligent, rational, and not like the other humans on the planet. However, in this universe rationality is not a given, but must be derived from the

successful translation of oneself into the prevailing social discourse. Mérou's talking is, at first, *interpreted* as simple animal mimicry by the ape scientists. It is only when he draws a geometrical diagram on the ground before Zira (the one ape he picks out as being possibly capable of properly interpreting him) that he manages to communicate his rational mind. Of course, this all initially sounds like the analytic universe where mathematical truths are universal and can be translated into diagrams and symbols that can be understood by any rational creature. However, Mérou makes a curious comment that utterly undermines such a reading. He remarks upon the incident as follows:

Mustering my school-day memories, I drew the geometrical figure illustrating the theorem of Pythagoras. It was not at random that I chose this proposition: I remembered reading in my youth a prophetic book in which such a procedure had been used by an old scientist to enter into communication with the spirits of another world. I had even discussed this during the voyage with Professor Antelle, who approved of the method. He had added, I distinctly remembered, *that the Euclidean rules, being completely false, were no doubt for that very reason universal.* (1963a, 121; emphasis added)

This last line, Professor Antelle's comment that Euclidean rules are universal because they are completely false, in every way captures the attitude of the continental (that is, French philosophical) mind towards human language and translation: "...*que les règles d'Euclide, étant complètement fausses, devaient, à cause de cela, être universelles*" (1963b, 88; emphasis added). This is the oft expressed anti-essentialist, post-metaphysical, and post-modern condition of continental philosophy where there are no eternal truths, only constant, consistent, and coherent misunderstanding. We translate the world through our fictional but meaningful mis-presentations of it.<sup>2</sup>

This vision of translation as meaning creation through the manipulation of contingent fictions is further described as the dialogic inter-specie connection between Mérou and Zira blossoms.

We were then speaking French, for, as I have said, she was quicker to learn my language than I hers. At the outset there were some difficulties of interpretation, the words “man” and “ape” not evoking the same creatures for us; but this snag was quickly smoothed out. Each time she said “ape,” I mentally translated “superior being, the height of evolution.” When she spoke about men, I knew she meant bestial creatures endowed with a certain sense of imitation and presenting a few anatomical similarities to apes but of an embryonic psyche and devoid of the power of thought. (1963a, 126)

Here we see how communication is only possible through constant ‘translation’ which is not just a linguistic issue but a discursive one, in the broad sense of the term, that is, in the idea that the same words have completely different conceptual outcomes depending on the wider *épistème* in which the users of these words are embedded.

These scenes of respectful, open, and pluralist dialog between Zira and Mérou may suggest to us that the *ability to translate* is the simple and irrefutable yardstick of mutual inter-specie intelligence. However, the *planète des singes* is the universe of continental philosophy where success and failure in translation depends as much on social power as linguistic comprehension. With Zira, a *rive gauche* chimpanzee, translation works because she is compassionate and tolerant, and, indeed, a maverick social dissident. However, to demonstrate his intelligence to the wider society, to the *énarques* orangutans, Mérou needs to, through disruptive rhetoric, create the prior space of discursive power that will allow for the *énoncé* of his personhood which must precipitate any interpreting of his self-ennunciation. *L’interprétation avant l’interpellation*, as one might say. Mérou has learned the ape language but this is not enough. He must also learn the language game, to say what is appropriate, and simply not what is evidently true. Saying “I can talk” does not demonstrate that you can talk. You must say it with socially appropriate ‘meaning’. Thus one of the most dramatic episodes in the novel is when Mérou, with Zira (and her fiancé Cornelius’s) encouragement, appears before a public forum and declares himself, in the language of the apes, to

be a talking and thinking animal. He has to contend with Dr. Zaius, who still believes him to be a mimicking animal and hence untranslatable. His speech could still lead to rejection. But, in the end, he does succeed and wins his freedom. (After the forum he is told, “There were some who opposed it... but public opinion demanded it and they had to yield” (1963a, 179–180). The *planète des singes* is our modern liberal democracy where marginalization and the refusal to see the full personhood of the other derives mostly from conformist discourse rather than explicit and intentional repression.

### **When Taylor met Zira**

The American analytic *Planet of the Apes* exists in a universe where translation is such a transparent and neutral act that it is effectively invisible. When Taylor arrives he is shocked to find the planet run by apes but is not at all shocked, of course, to find that they all speak English. In this universe, truth is universal and spoken about in one language that all rational beings can equally access.

Taylor’s difficulty in being understood, at first, derives from the fact that he physically cannot talk, having been shot in the throat during the hunt. It is only when he is cured and able to talk again that he can utter, without translation, the delightful words of humanity’s first inter-planetary and inter-specie greeting: “Take your stinking paws off me, you damn dirty ape!” However, this act of talking does not render Taylor free. It is true that in a world without translation, there can be no misunderstandings. That Taylor can speak cannot be refuted. And this does lead to a problem with the plot, in that a society of rational apes must now behave irrationally and ignore the evidence before their eyes.<sup>3</sup> The plot is sustained, however, by showing the apes (more explicitly Dr. Zaius and other orangutans) to be conscious and willful liars. In a closed forum (in contrast to the open forum on the *planète des singes*), Dr. Zaius and the other orangutans refuse to acknowledge Taylor’s obvious ability to speak, and will not recognize him as a rational creature. However, shortly afterwards Taylor is brought to Zaius in private and here Taylor confronts him about his lies.

Taylor: I take it you don't believe the prosecutor's charge, that I'm a monster created by Dr. Zira.

Zaius: Certainly not. You're a mutant.

Shortly after, Taylor says, "That hearing was a farce. What have I done?" To which Zaius replies "You're a menace! A walking pestilence." In short, Taylor is being rejected by ape society, not because of a failure to be translated (as in what almost happened on the *planète des singes*) but because his translatability demonstrates that he is an equal competitor in a them-or-us world in which truth is unmediated and singular, and hence constantly endangered by the non-absorbable alterity that inhabits the threatening margins, which on this Planet is conveniently fenced off in a Forbidden Zone where "mutants" dwell.<sup>4</sup>

### Papa Doll

The analytic (American) Planet shows us a world where truth is knowable and determinable. Language can be universally understood to point at the same empirical evidence to reach the same universally agreeable rational conclusions. On the (French) *planète*, language, because of its particular and contingent nature needs to go through the mediation of translation which undermines its ability to be the final conveyor of truth. This can be seen in the contrasting treatment in the book and the movie of a speaking doll that is found at an archeological dig. The doll's importance is the fact that it demonstrates the theory, postulated by the *avant garde* chimpanzees on both planets, that human civilization predates the simian one, an idea the orangutan scientist overseers reject as unscientific.<sup>5</sup> Here is the section in the French novel where the chimp Cornellius reveals the doll to Mérou. Ulysee narrates:

It is a human doll representing a little girl, a little girl like one on Earth... And this is not all. The toy presents another anomaly, another oddity that makes all the workmen laugh and even provokes a smile from the

solemn orangutan directing the excavations. The doll talks...It uttered one word, one simple word of two syllables: pa-pa. "Papa," the doll repeats as Cornelius picks it up again and turns it round and round in his nimble hands. The word is the same in French and in the simian language, and no doubt in many other languages of this mysterious cosmos, and it has the same meaning. (1963a, 206–207)

However, the orangutan does not interpret the doll's 'words' this way, leading Cornelius to remark that he is a "monstrous imbecile!" To this, Mérou comments:

I know whom he means and I share his indignation. The old orangutan with all his decorations has seen nothing more in it than a simple child ape's toy that an eccentric manufacturer living in the distant past has endowed with speech. It is useless to suggest another explanation to him. (1963a, 207–208)

The sound "pa-pa" can be heard by both the chimpanzee and the orangutan. It is a spoken text from ancient times that has been replayed and needs to be translated, to be understood. In other words what it means must be interpreted. For Mérou and Cornelius it is the universal word in this "mysterious cosmos" for *father*. And hence demonstrates that the maker, in whose human image it must have been made, could speak. But this is a trendy new-age interpretation. For the orangutan, the alternative interpretation is that the doll is merely squeaking, (and in effect this, along with the doll's shape, would no more suggest that a human civilization once existed on this planet than the *dogu* figurines of ancient Japan would suggest that our Earth was once visited by ancient aliens). On the *planète des singes*, where translation is ever imminent, science is all about how you interpret and what you abduce from the evidence.<sup>6</sup>

## Mamma Doll

The equivalent doll-finding episode on the American Planet of the Apes is a sharp contrast to the inter-paradigmatic Kuhnian tensions described on the French planète des singes. The theory of early pre-simian human civilization is under dispute on both planets. On the American Planet of the Apes, such a notion contradicts the dictates of religious doctrine as expressed in the *Sacred Scrolls* which are deemed infallible truth in ape society. But in the case of the American Planet of the Apes, Taylor (aka Mérou), before entering the archeological dig where the doll will be found, is able to get Zaius (aka the orangutan) to openly confirm the objective standards by which scientific truths are to be determined.

TAYLOR: When were the Sacred Scrolls written?

ZAIUS: Twelve hundred years ago.

TAYLOR: Very well. If Zira and Cornelius can prove that those scrolls don't tell the whole truth of your history; if they can show you definite evidence of another culture from an unrecorded past—will you exonerate them?

ZAIUS: Of course.

This is Popperian science at its most ideal.<sup>7</sup> A hypothesis exists (that the *Sacred Scrolls* tell only about ancient simian civilization because that is the only ancient civilization that ever existed). And it can be falsified (by producing evidence found to show that another more ancient non-simian civilization existed) and an alternate hypothesis can then become proven: that that the *Sacred Scrolls* deny ancient human civilization because they are in error. There is no “translation” of the data into priori paradigmatic worldviews. The evidence is either there or it is not.

In the cave, Zaius is at first presented with ancient artifacts that include a pair of spectacles and a pacemaker. However, this evidence is inconclusive and the falsification falters. Zaius remarks “I can give an alternate description for everyone of those objects that's equally as inventive as yours. But it



would be conjecture, not proof.” And then the doll is produced:

*[Nova, Taylor’s human companion] is poking her finger inside the decapitated head of the doll. From it comes a distorted sound.*

DOLL’S HEAD: Mamma! Mamma! Mamma!

*The apes stare at the doll in astonishment. Taylor snatches the doll from Nova, brandishes it at the astonished Zaius.*

TAYLOR: Dr. Zaius! Would an ape make a human doll that talks?

*Zaius looks at him, speechless.*

Zaius is speechless because on this planet of Popperian openness, false views are impossible when objective evidence is presented. The objective evidence is this alternate text to the Ancient Scrolls: “Mamma.” But, we must ask, why is this evidence “objective”? As the movie scripts dictates, and as the viewer can hear, the sound is “distorted.” The sound from the doll could mean anything, it may not even be language, just something like the squeak of a rubber duck. Zaius should easily refute this evidence. But he cannot because on this planet, translation is a neutral instrument. He can no more dispute this translation than one can dispute the 10cm mark on a ruler. When a doll says “Mamma” it can never be interpreted as anything else other than what Taylor, Zaius, and the viewer (supposedly) hear it to mean.

## Conclusion

*Planet of the Apes*, both the novel and the movie, pose the question of what it is to be human, what it is that makes humans different to other animals, and what it is that other animals would have to do to be one of us. How are humans different? The answer on both the French and American planets of the apes is, of course, translation. Humans are uniquely that animal which translates. Until other creatures can do the same, Earth will stay, for good or for ill, the Planet of the Humans.

### Notes

- 1 For instance, Andrew Cutrofello summarizes an important distinction between the continental and analytic traditions as follows: “For the phenomenologist, logic was just the pale distillation of the discourse in which phenomenal givenness was disclosed; while, for their analytic counterparts, givenness was at best another name for logically analyzed truth” (2005, 22).
- 2 In many ways, Professor Antelle represents the quintessential “ironist”, someone who Richard Rorty (1989) has described as one who is aware that their private truth-describing “final vocabulary” is not the final vocabulary and that knowledge advances through ongoing re-descriptions of our reality where new vocabularies play off on the old. Euclid may be wrong but he still makes sense.
- 3 Bernard E. Rollin and John Huss comment on this scene with the observation that the orangutans have confused necessary condition for sufficient condition. To be seen as rational it is sufficient to be an ape using language, as whoever uses language is fulfilling a condition for judging rationality. But now the orangutans have made “ape” using language to be the necessary condition for proving rationality. Rollin likens this to the idea that only those who can express their pain in language can feel pain, an idea apparently, according to Rollin, quite common among many today in science (Rollin and Huss 2013).
- 4 See the sequel *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970).
- 5 Sara Waller comments on the importance of the doll, as follows: “That talking doll, a toy, is of great significance, for play suggest counterfactual reasoning—imagining the world as it is not, and interacting with things that aren’t real” (2013, 22). This is completely true, but it is worth adding that it is the *talking* nature of the doll that demonstrates it is the product of creatures that can reason and imagine counterfactually, for it is possibly only language that can enable and, in turn, prove such abilities.
- 6 Translation, for Thomas Kuhn (the philosopher of science for continentals) could play an important role in bridging the gaps between paradigms. He comments in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*:  
“Briefly put, what the participants in a communication breakdown do is recognize each other as members of a different language communities and then become translators...having isolated...areas of difficulty in scientific communication, they can next resort to their shared everyday vocabularies in an effort further to elucidate their troubles” (2012, 200–201). Unfortunately on the Planète des Singes the “imbecile” orangutans have shut down any possibilities for such cross-paradigm translation moves.

7 Karl Popper in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* mentions “rules of translation” in the falsification processes and clarifies these rules to be ways of classifying utterances in natural speech as being equivalent to the same event or ‘occurrence’ which is to be the subject of testing for falsification. Popper writes: “The purpose of these rules of translation is not to assert that whoever uses, in the realistic mode of speech, the word ‘occurrence’ is thinking of a class of statements; their purpose is merely to give an interpretation of the realistic mode of speech which makes intelligible what is meant by saying, for example, that an occurrence  $P_k$  contradicts a theory  $t$ ” (2002, 69). What is going on here is the removal of translation from the realm of thinking (semantics in the head of a language user) to the realm of logical clarification of event descriptions.

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