"Monkey Planet" with Volker Sommer on BBC Radio 4

27 November 2013

"Archive on 4" will air "Monkey Planet" on Saturday 30 Nov 2013, 20:00-21:00.

Fifty years since Pierre Boulle wrote 'La Planete des Singes' (or 'Monkey Planet' as the English translation was known), Will Self considers where great apes end and human apes begin.

Boulle's novel, which became the basis for the movie 'Planet of the Apes' is a playful inversion for a man whose faith in humanity had been erased by the experiences he described in 'Bridge Over the River Kwai', his other best-seller.

Boulle genuinely wondered whether human beings were any better than apes, placing him in a long line of satirists from Swift onwards who drew parallels between the beast in man and the man in beast.

In the modern era, experiments like Project Nim explored the idea that a chimpanzee infant raised like a human baby could be taught to communicate, and be 'civilized' by its contact with humans. The tragic end of Nim, shipped off to an animal experimentation camp when he, inevitably, became too violent to control in a domestic setting, did not entirely end the human fantasy (see Michael Jackson and Bubbles) that chimps are just like hairy children who will never answer back.

Will Self, whose novel 'Great Apes' portrayed a world in which apes run the show and make as bad a job of it as humans, explores the connection between man and his closest living relative, from Darwin to Nim and King Kong to the PG Tips chimps.

With Volker Sommer, Janet Browne, Kim Bard, Charlotte Macdonald and Frans de Waal.