



Project Nim Discussion Guide

Director: James Marsh

Year: 2011

Time: 93 min

You might know this director from:

Theory of Everything (2015)

Shadow Dancer (2012)

Man on Wire (2008)

FILM SUMMARY

PROJECT NIM is the compelling and tragic story of Nim Chimpsky, a chimpanzee who was the subject of a 1970's experiment that aimed to teach a chimp sign language in order to communicate with him and discover his thoughts. Behavioral psychologist and Columbia professor, Herbert Terrace, initiated the project as part of his research on animal language acquisition.

Only 6 days old, Nim was taken from his mother and put in a New York home to be raised by a human mother as if he were her human child. Just as sudden, he was moved to a new home where he learned American Sign Language at an astonishing rate. As the experiment progressed and adapted over time, Nim was moved from place to place, with different people acting as teachers and caretakers. Throughout his tumultuous life, Nim acquired a vocabulary of over a hundred words. But as Nim grew older, his chimp nature emerged, revealing his innate impulses, both violent and sexual. When Nim grew stronger and more aggressive, the project was halted, and Nim was moved to yet another facility. The film tracks Nim's peripatetic life and fate after the experiment, how he transformed those around him, and how a project aimed at understanding a chimpanzee's thoughts ended up teaching us more about humans than chimps.

Nim's fascinating story is told through moving interviews of the people involved in his life, as they reflect on their memories with bittersweet nostalgia and with the sorrow and regret that comes with hindsight. At turns disturbing and profound, PROJECT NIM shows how an experiment that supposes scientific objectivity over an animal reveals instead the turgid mess of human emotions, amplified by ego, desire, ambition, and power.

FILM THEMES

PROJECT NIM tracks Nim's life story, but ends up revealing more about humans, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to animals.

SOCIALIZATION

Nim's caretakers tried to socialize Nim as a human by teaching him human behaviors and treating him as a human child. Since people are social animals, many of our behaviors are shaped by specific cultures, a certain time and place, and by people who teach and enforce behaviors, such as parents or peers. We are constantly being socialized throughout our lives, through peers, new environments, and cultures that change over time. Thought socialization teaches us how to interact with others, it can also restrict us as individuals and suppress what is unique. For Nim, a human understanding of socialization was imposed on him without considering the innate impulses and needs of a chimp.

NATURE VS. NURTURE

Nim's chimp nature overcame the nurture of his human environment. For humans, genetic and environmental influences are impossible to disentangle. Across disciplines, in the humanities and sciences, it is understood that both genetics and environment are complicated forces that interact with each other throughout a person's life. Behavioral geneticists have studied the development of twins and adopted persons, but these studies are not conclusive because the factors that shape us are too complicated to reduce into a simple binary opposition. Still, it is worthwhile for us to examine how our genes and environment have shaped us, and how we've reacted to such forces.

ANIMAL TESTING

The ethics of animal research are complicated because animal testing is a broad term encompassing various kinds of research. Supporters argue that enormous advances in medicine have been made with animal testing, and that regulations are put in place to monitor the use of animals and prevent animal cruelty in experiments. This argument presupposes that human life is valued over animal life. Opponents argue that animal testing is poorly regulated, that the results cannot be applied to humans, that the animal's suffering cannot be ascertained, and that animal life should not be subordinate to human life.

LANGUAGE

"Nim Chimpsky" was named after linguist and cognitive scientist Noam Chomsky who believed that language was innate to humans and only humans. Terrace wanted to challenge this by teaching Nim to sign and thereby learn what the chimp was thinking. By the project's end, Terrace concluded that Nim was using signs for begging or as a trained response, instead of using language as humans do, to express themselves creatively with grammar and syntax. The film explores our notions of communication, and challenges us to think about languages other than our own.

"It's an insult to chimpanzee intelligence to consider this their means of communication. It's rather as if humans were taught to mimic some aspects of the waggle dance of bees and researchers were to say 'Wow we've taught humans how to communicate.'"

Noam Chomsky

"He was less with language than he was with his unique self."

Stephanie Laforge

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Several interview subjects reference the culture of the 70's in explaining behaviors and attitudes of those involved in the project. To what extent is PROJECT NIM a tragedy of the past? How much of it is relevant for today?
2. What are your thoughts on animal testing. Did your opinion change after seeing PROJECT NIM?
3. Currently, all chemicals and pharmaceuticals are required by law to be tested on animals. Critics say the results are questionable, while supporters say that animal testing has helped to advance medicine and science. Where do you draw the line? What are the alternatives?
4. How can we determine the value of a life? What makes one person more valuable than another? Is human life more valuable than animal life? Are chimps more valuable than "lab mice," which are bred for the purpose of science experimentation?
5. Stephanie Laforge said that she immediately fell in love with Nim just as she had fallen in love with her own newborn children. Did you find this strange, or normal, or believable? Is there a difference in how humans love their biological children versus adopted children versus their pets?
6. Think of the ways you have been socialized to fit certain roles and fulfill certain expectations. What did you gain in the socialization process? What parts of you were lost?
7. In regards to "nature vs. nurture," which force has been more influential for you—the environment in which you were raised and the people who nurtured you, or the traits that you believe to be biologically determined? How have the two forces interacted?
8. What was your impression of Nim's use of language? How would you define communication and language?
9. Do you believe we have anything to learn from animals? How can we obtain that knowledge without expecting animals to behave and communicate as humans do?
10. How do the dramatic re-enactments, sometimes with a human actor in a chimp suit, impact your engagement with the film? What are your ethical concerns, if any, about the use of such stylized scenes, especially those of violence or trauma, in a documentary?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- The film PROJECT NIM is based on Elizabeth Hess' book, "Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp Who Would Be Human."
- A chimpanzee's natural habitat is in western and central Africa—in humid forests, mixed savanna, or deciduous woodland—6500 feet above sea level. Chimps construct a vegetation nest high in trees for sleeping; they're one of only a few mammals that use tools.
- There are 625 primate species and subspecies. 25% of primates are now at risk of extinction. Their primary threats are human-related activities such as deforestation, commercial hunting, and illegal animal trade.
- Wild chimpanzees were recognized as an endangered species in the late 1980s, but the U.S. bio-medical community successfully lobbied to prevent captive chimpanzees from receiving that same protection.
- On June 12, 2013, the U.S. announced its proposal to classify captive chimpanzees in the United States as endangered, affording them the same protection under the Endangered Species Act as their wild counterparts.
- An estimated 100 million vertebrates are used annually in experiments around the world. Regulation varies across species and across countries in the world.
- In the U.S., 90% of the animals used in research are mice and rats. An estimated 20 million are used each year. Many more invertebrates, such as fruit flies and worms, are used than vertebrates, but the use of invertebrates in animal testing is mostly unregulated.
- A human genome is 99.9% similar to another human's, 98% similar to a chimpanzee's, 70% similar to a slug, and 50% similar to a banana.
- Bob Ingersoll, a psychology graduate who often visited Nim at the Black Beauty Ranch, remains a passionate advocate for chimps in captivity. He now runs Mindy's Memory, a sanctuary in Oklahoma for recovering research monkeys.
- The phrase "nature versus nurture" was coined by Francis Galton, who was a 19th century polymath and half-cousin of Charles Darwin.
- All primates, even in the wild, use hand gestures to beg for food.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to learn from Nim's story.
2. Support the filmmaker, James Marsh, as he continues to bring other stories to life.
3. Protest against animal experimentation. For example, [PETA](#) and [Dumb Friends League](#) run ongoing campaigns. You can connect with local organizations in your city or country. Purchasing cruelty-free items is another way to protest against animal injustices.
4. Learn more about chimpanzees and other animals. The more you understand them, the more you will know how to help them.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.