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On the making of 'Man-ape Ape-man' Pithecanthropus *in Het Pesthuis, Leiden*

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I. IF WE LIVE IN A WORLD INCREASINGLY DOMINATED BY SCIENCE, knowledge of that world is disseminated by means that are akin to showbusiness. World famous scientists are increasingly media-personalities. Scientific curiosity, inquiry and the desire to know more are tempered by the imperative to put what is known on display: to present, to dress and to wrap things up.

The Dutch National Museum of Natural History (hereafter N.N.M.) in Leiden (in common with many other science museums) is a good example of institutional reorientation from being primarily geared to scientific work, to trying to develop a "clear orientation towards the public", as the Director put it in 1993. Central to that disposition is the development of a new site (adjacent to Het Pesthuis) housing both collections and permanent exhibitions, due to open to the public in 1997.

The temporary exhibition of the *Pithecanthropus* fossils in Het Pesthuis has been described by the N.N.M. director as a blueprint for the exhibitions to come(*). My story thus begins with the problem of what it means to exhibit: to go, as their curator John de Vos did on May 14th of this year, and fetch the fossils from the Vreewijkstraat where they nestle in cottonwool, in boxes, inside a safe, in a locked room, within the labyrinthine box-filled shelves of the depot where *Pithecanthropus* usually lives, and place them inside a bomb – and bullet–proofed vitrine at the very heart of the exhibition that had been built up around it.

(*). Preface' by W.G. van der Weiden to the exhibition catalogue, *Man-ape Ape--man.* Pithecanthropus *in Het Pesthuis, Leiden*, Leiden: Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum, 1993.

It may be difficult to imagine, walking through the exhibition now, the passions unleashed over its sixteen and a half month official gestation period. The creativity, the energy, the anger, the stubbornness and the strategies poured into such an undertaking, are nonetheless reflexes of issues at the heart of the exhibition. The arguments that went on about making the centennial exhibition concerned not only *what* should be properly exhibited alongside *Pithecanthropus*, but with which emphasis (or emphases), warranting how many cubic metres (seven rooms or just one?), what quantity of materials and man days. The fundamental issue underneath all the arguments and budgeting is, of course, who has the right to say how such a sacred object should be exhibited? These are still unresolved matters at the level of practice, whatever general policy lines may state to the contrary. This means that the making of an exhibition is an undeniably complex political process at the institutional level.

II. What did all the activity surrounding the making of such an exhibition mean – given that the whole construction would be dismembered after five and a half months? Similar questions have exercised the imaginations of social anthropologists studying societies from as far away as New Ireland (where *malanggan* memorial rituals conclude with the destruction of creations identified as art in the West) to as close by as Portugal, where the dead are remembered through the upkeep of tombs and such occasions as All Souls' Night.

How would, for example, a Melanesian view the exhibition of *Pithecanthropus erectus* that has been made here in Leiden? How would we explain, in simple terms, the vision of ancestry embodied in evolutionary theory to someone who had never even heard of Darwin? The problem is quite as pertinent for many inhabitants of the Netherlands, where an estimated 200,000 people believe that God quite literally created the Earth in seven days about five thousand years ago, as it would be for Umberto Eco's fictive Mr. Dobu of Dobu (Dobu). The notion that mankind shares a common ancestor with the apes is simply not a serious proposition - even in 1993. Indeed, a foreigner might be forgiven for imagining the Dutch museum-going public as frequently evoked at the N.N.M. as being intellectually remedial and lightly physically handicapped.

Let us turn to an example of the emotions that raged during the making of the exhibition in order further to elucidate its cultural specificity.

III. Two striking engravings of monkeys attired in evening dress were published in the *Illustrated London News* of October 1893, within a fortnight of one another. The first appeared on the 7th October 1893: it depicts what looks like a photograph of a formally attired ape-man, complete with a kind of signature: 'Brookes Won't wash Clothes'. The portrait rests on a delicate piece of foliage next to a visiting card that reads:

Brooke's Soap - Monkey Brand

At Home: Everyday, Everywhere

Underneath is a lengthy extolment of the domestic virtues of Brooke's Monkey Brand Soap:

FOR SCRUBBING KITCHEN TABLES AND FLOORS.

MAKES COPPER LIKE GOLD. MAKES TIN LIKE SILVER. MAKES PAINT LOOK NEW.

MAKES MARBLE WHITE. MAKES BRASS LIKE MIRRORS.

FOR POTS AND PANS. FOR BATHS AND WINDOWS. FOR EVERYTHING.

Removes Rust from Steel and Iron.

SPARKLING GLASSWARE. SHINING POTS AND PANS. POLISHED STAIR RODS. CLEAN HANDS.

The second advertisement depicts the same monkey although this time the full-figure in evening dress, dashing around the globe on a ring inscribed with the words BROOKE'S SOAP. The monkey holds up a gleaming pan (or is it a mirror? or a magnifying glass?), in his left hand. The phrase 'Monkey Brand' is studded in the sky above, while the words 'Won't wash Clothes' float upon the lower hemisphere. The domestic wizardry is more prosaic this time:

FOR CLEANING, SCOURING, SCRUBBING, POLISHING

F L O O R S A N D K I T C H E N T A B L E S,

METALS, MARBLE, PAINT, CUTLERY, CROCKERY, MACHINERY, OIL-CLOTHS, BATHS, STAIR-RODS.

For Steel, Iron, Brass and Copper Vessels, Fire Irons, Mantels, &c.

REMOVES RUST, DIRT, STAINS, TARNISH &c.

The ape-man figure, harnessed to the marketing of household soap in the same year that Eugène Dubois identified his fossil find as *Pithecanthropus erectus*, is a graphic example of the distinctive and nonetheless coeval ways in which the relationship between ape and man has been approached in western scientific thought and in the culture in which it is embedded.

Both the *Illustrated London News* advertisements appear in the first room of the exhibition *Man-ape Ape-man,* Pithecanthropus *in Het Pesthuis,* together with a motley crew including Tarzan, King Kong, Monsters of the Prehistoric Past, the Tamtamkloppers (Suske en Wiske), 2001, Jean Auel, Jane Goodall, Richard Leakey, The Flintstones, and Dubois himself as a figure of fun in Ton van Tast's *Daverende Dingen Deze Dagen.* The 1993 exhibition designer, Isabelle Galy, lifted the dapper Brooke's figure from the 1893 advertisement, recontextualising him in her design for the centennial exhibition poster. The poster showed a map of Java in the upper left hand corner, with footsteps, initially bare, becoming shod as they approach the viewer across the sands of time. The Monkey Brand Soap man was setting off briskly from the point in the lower right-hand corner where those footsteps ended in the direction of the lower left-hand side of the poster.

This design met with such vehement opposition that it had to be modified into an unidentifiable half figure, coat tails flying and only one leg visible, making a hurried exit lower right. The storm in a teacup over the exhibition poster perfectly captures the problem of exhibiting *Homo erectus* one hundred years on, with which this paper is concerned. It gives a taste of the emotional pitch of the proceedings. These emotions belong to the same class of feelings with which news of our apish ancestry has been greeted and accommodated over the past century and a half in western(ised) cultures.

The kinds of reasons cited for rejecting the ape-man figure are instructive. They ranged from fears of insulting animal liberationists, through anxieties over racism (if the monkey were construed as a black person), all the way down the line to authoritarian rejection: "*dat vervelend mannetje moet eraf*" ("that dreadful little man has got to go"). The image touched, in short, upon a raw nerve, a taboo area considered too risky to serve as the public face of the exhibition. The resulting compromise, one leg and the flying coattails of an unidentifiable creature, is arguably more risqué. But how is it risqué?

The impropriety of dressing an animal in clothes and using it to advertise 'monkey soap' or, for that matter, the centennial exhibition of one of the first human fossils, is not self-evident. The *Illustrated London News* monkey illustrates the appropriation of primate proximity for commercial ends on the very eve of Dubois' discovery of concrete proof (as he saw it) for the missing link between apes and mankind heralded by Darwin, Huxley and Haeckel earlier in the nineteenth century. The missing link may well have just been waiting to be found, or constructed, but that discovery did not extinguish popular prejudices about apes and monkeys. Indeed, these discoveries seem to have fuelled further satire that continues right up to the present day. There is still, in the late twentieth century an uneasy cohabitation between science and popular versions of its discoveries - as Nick Downes' *Big Science* amply illustrates.

It is as if, despite all the obvious advances in paleoanthropology over the past century, the myths and preconceptions they are supposed to supplant continue to flourish, multiply and even annex certain elements for their own purposes. What is the significance of this awkward coexistence?

A centennial exhibition must, furthermore, take a position on the creations of previous generations who have seen *Homo erectus* (as we see it now) in other terms. Between *Pithecanthropus erectus* of 1893 and the type specimen of *Homo erectus* of 1993, are a long line of essays in understanding. These essays relativise, as they must, the sense of contemporary knowledge. They are part of our total knowledge; the measure of what we know.

IV. This cameo of the persistence of popular images in a journal (*The Illustrated London News*) otherwise famous for its scientific reports and articles on fossil finds and human evolution neatly summarises the problem I came to perceive as being at the heart of the exhibition. Despite an objective growth in the quantity of human fossil finds since Dubois, which have altered our perception of *Pithecanthropus erectus* into the type specimen of *Homo erectus*, there is nonetheless a persistence of certain themes. The fear of the ape-man figure from the *Illustrated London News* bespeaks anxiety about the unresolved issue of the place of science in the culture in which it is embedded.

The emotional resistance stirred up by the Monkey Brand Soap man was rehearsed in a dozen different forms with respect to a whole list of possible exhibition components. A strictly logical narrative structure was required to overcome these emotions. Fortunately for the concept and for the design of the exhibition, the square form and perfect proportions of the seventeenth century Pesthuis building, lent themselves to the construction of an argument in and through it.

The shape of the argument within the seven available rooms of Het Pesthuis went as follows:

1. Introduction: the problem of cohabitation between scientific and popular cultural views of the ape – man relationship. The first juxtaposition - a maelstrom of visual and sound images – is accompanied by the question why should this be so, to which the final three sections of the exhibition try to provide an answer. Between this introductory section and the second is a small corridor that is used to present a second juxtaposition: The Bible is placed next to Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* – the two creation stories available in nineteenth century western Europe are used to introduce a room entirely dedicated to the nineteenth century.

2. The growth of knowledge (i). Introducing Eugène Dubois and his motivations for going to south-east Asia in search of concrete fossil evidence for the evolution of man. Cuvier, Lamarck, Darwin, Lyell, Haeckel, Huxley, Vogt, De Mortillet, Schmerling and Wallace personify a number of different strands of thinking about man's place in nature. We move from Cuvier's assertion at the beginning of the nineteenth century that no fossil man had yet been found, through morphological, comparative anatomical, embryological and other kinds of evidence adduced to suggest that man was in fact closely related to the great apes. Dubois' originality in seeking material evidence for theoretical assertions in the fossil record is underlined.

3. The growth of knowledge (ii). Introducing Eugène Dubois' fossil collection with, as its centrepiece, *Pithecanthropus erectus* – never before displayed to the general public. Dubois is the hero of the story presented here setting out, like a classic adventure, by boat to Sumatra where he

first looked without success before moving on to Java where he made his discovery. The fossils are displayed at the far end of the room that is lined (like a section through an excavation) with a selection of some two hundred of the twelve thousand fossils that were transported back to the Netherlands in 1896. The *Pithecanthropus* fossils are presented in a bomb- and bullet-proofed vitrine welded to the floor lest some maniac should try to annihilate them. The manuscript showing the famous crossing-out is on view in the vicinity of the *Pithecanthropus*. So too are a selection of the publications that made Dubois famous (and notorious), the decorations he received in recognition of his work, and a photograph of his tombstone with the skull and cross-bones (two!) marking the place where he is buried in unconsecrated ground.

4. The growth of knowledge (iii). This room recontextualises *Pithecanthropus erectus* as the type specimen of *Homo erectus* among the scores of earlier and later hominid fossils discovered elsewhere on Java, in Asia, Africa and Europe. There are casts of the Australopithecine Lucy, and the Laetoli footsteps; of *Homo habilis*, and of the 1.6 million year old *Homo erectus* skeleton from Kenya. These are exhibited inside catacomb-like vitrines, on the outside wall of which run the larger than life-sized reproductions of Jay Matternes' (male) personifications of the great steps in the story of human evolution. There is also a large map of the world showing the findplaces of *Australopithecus, Homo habilis, Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens.* The running men start with *Australopithecus* in the middle of the room, and proceed all the way up the ladder to *Homo sapiens*, heading into the next room of the exhibition.

5. Problematising knowledge(i). The course of human evolution is usually represented in the form of a phylogeny. What is a phylogeny? It is a family tree extended through deep time. The form is borrowed from family trees on a shallow time scale. The tree form in both instances is, furthermore, akin to the mediaeval Christian depiction of Christ's earthly ancestry through mythological time The Tree of Jesse). The family tree thus illustrates how the scientific representation of human evolution, insofar as it adopts the diagrammatic tree form, borrows from cultural conventions for depicting both secular and divine ancestry through historical and mythological time. Although genealogies are

well-known in many non-western cultures, the elevation of the genealogy for scientific purposes is quite specific. This specificity is heightened by confronting it with cultures that do not conceptualise ancestry in genealogical terms at all. This is a first example of the osmosis between science and the culture of which it is a part.

6. Problematising knowledge (ii). Reconstructions of the appearance of prehistoric man combine both scientific knowledge and artistic skills. Reconstructions aim to bring alive scientific information concerning the nature of prehistoric man for the general public. The very act of resuscitation brings into relief two contradictory tendencies: firstly the number of variations possible in the artistic interpretation of the same scientific materials: the 1959 Mexican painting of Dubois' reconstruction of *Pithecanthropus erectus* for the 1900 Paris World Exhibition bears far more resemblance to a crouching Neanderthal than it does to the statue itself. The Belgian Javamens, made during the first world war through cooperation between the artist Mascré and the paleontologist Rutot, is much more hairy and flat-skulled (following Manouvrier's reconstruction of the skull) than Dubois', and carries ferns and an eolith in his arms. The Budapest *Pithecanthropus*, fruit of the collaboration between the artist Haberl and the paleontologist Motl, has more pronounced eyebrows than either of his namesakes. The 1980s *Homo erectus* from Museon in Den Haag reminds many viewers of someone they know.

The second, opposing tendency of such creations is their generic character. Bayard's illustrations for Figuier's *L'Homme Primitif* (1870) could reasonably be compared with Gustave Doré's illustrations for the Bible. This similarity was no accident. Figuier refused to accept the idea that prehistoric man was descended from a common ancestor with the apes. The heroic character of mankind, even allowing for the fact that he had been on earth for thousands of years longer than originally contemplated by Ussher's chronology, is amply reflected in Bayard's engravings. Burian's depictions of prehistoric man dating from 1950s' Czechoslovakia drew upon his earlier work as an illustrator of children's adventure stories while at the same time, perhaps, being inspired by (for example) Dubois' reconstruction of *Pithecanthropus* in his painting of *Homo erectus erectus* of Java and the sabre-toothed tiger. Something of

the hero is combined with a conviction about the truth of evolutionary theory. The Mascré/ Rutot reconstruction of the British Piltdown Man (*Homme de Sussex*) shows the persuasiveness of reconstruction even in the case of a fake!

The reconstructions of prehistoric man provide a second illustration of the way scientific representation inevitably draws upon pre-existing genres, themselves inextricably involved in wider cultural stories. It also illustrates an opposing generative quality producing a series of variations on a theme.

7. Problematising knowledge (iii). The reconstructions of prehistoric man find their complement in the reconstructions of once living apes and monkeys collected during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and reassembled in the very heart of a scientific institution - in this case, the Natural History Museum itself. These reconstructions, which aim to present a true-to-life, immortal version of the animal, to the greater glory of science and for the instruction of the public, also bear the imprint of the cultural tradition to which they were integrated. Eighteenth and nineteenth century natural history tracts present an image of the ape and monkey transmitted across a number of centuries. The taxidermists responsible for putting the skins and bones together again would have consulted these manuals or other collections as source material for the attitude and posture to be given.

This third illustration of the permeable boundary between science and culture, and between man and the primate order, provides a third line of reasoning about the coexistence between science and popular culture.

So much for the abstract structure of the argument. What about the content?

V. The commotion caused by the concept and later by the design of the exhibition was in part due to the retrieval of Eugène Dubois as a prophet of the ecology movement. The theme of the centennial scientific congress was 'Human evolution in its ecological context'. Although the exhibition was opened some six weeks earlier, it was nonetheless billed as one of the attractions of the centennial congress and its accompanying celebrations. Since part of the funding of the exhibition (approximately

one fifth) came from the chief sponsor of the centennial congress (Mobil Oil), there was considerable pressure to make an exhibition that in some way reflected ecological concerns. The exact way in which this might be accomplished was never clear.

Anthropological intuition suggested taking the cue for the exhibition from Dubois' own change of mind about the identity of the being he had found. The manuscript crossing out of *Anthropopithecus* and its replacement with *Pithecanthropus erectus* serve as a motif for the idea that the same object has a plurality of meanings and natures according to the context(s) in which it is placed. *Pithecanthropus* in Het Pesthuis, Leiden, is clearly *out* of context. Why not elaborate upon that dislocation? Why not, in fact, multiply the number of possible contexts within which *Pithecanthropus* might be viewed in accordance with the number of available divisions of the building itself: seven?

I like to think of the resulting multiplication as the poetics of ecology - variations on the theme of ape - man relationships in seven qualitatively different settings. The *kinds* of environment establish the content of the exhibition, and their orchestration through space its composition. Although each setting is quite distinctive, the seven belong sequentially together as a syntagmatic chain.

1. The Movies. A Plato's Cave of a place, with insubstantial shadows on the walls. Film and cartoons form a part of the artificial environment that surrounds us at the end of the twentieth century. The dark, enclosed nature of the place contrasts sharply with the claustrophobic corridor interposed between the Movies and the Library.

2. The Library contrasts with the Movies and the interlude in its light, spaciousness. Selected word and graphic images from Dubois' own library are made to materialise around the walls of the room in a strictly formal disposition. The world of ideas and theories available through books in the nineteenth century formed the environment within which Dubois reached his decision to search for the missing link in south-east Asia.

3. The Fossil Collection. The fossil *Pithecanthropus erectus* belongs to the Dubois Collection, itself part of N.N.M. patrimony. The museum

itself is, of course, the fossil's present context, although we may chose to tell origin stories concerning the other side of the earth. The fossil collection is usually closed to the general public; the centennial celebrations provide an occasion for display. The display of fossils in broad daylight and (in the case of the *Pithecanthropus* fossils) in a raised glass vitrine, emphasises their total dislocation.

4. The Island and the World. The island and the world appear to refer to two natural environments, at last. How did *Homo erectus* reach Java one million years ago? How has the century of fossil finds since Dubois' 1893 discovery modified our view of that discovery? The environment here is that of an almost caricature scientific exhibition, telling the story of human evolution in bite-sized chunks.

5. The Forest is a forest of symbols. It is a darkened room dominated by four, four metre high hanging panels. The story of human evolution told in the Island and the World can be taken in at a glance in the shape of a phylogeny. Phylogenies, genealogies and trees of Jesse together form a cultural forest. Three of the four large hanging panels spaced down the centre of the room like a roll of thunder recapitulate the western scientific account of human evolution, of a family tree (Dubois'), and of the earthly ancestry of Christ; the fourth, containing four rows of Asmat and Sepik ancestral and/ or enemy skulls, confronts these variations on a theme of western thinking on ancestry. Further examples of the various kinds of tree, as well as Asmat bisj-palen and Sepik and Maprik carved figures, line the forest paths in the vicinity of their respective hanging panel. The Forest is a three-dimensional poem that places the story of human evolution in a different light.

6. The Art Gallery is an aestheticised display of a kind of work of art, not usually thought of in terms of beauty. The simple congregation of so many visions and versions of prehistoric man displayed in this way disrupts any kind of natural association between fossil and reconstruction. Here science is indeed subsumed to art.

7. The Depot is a reconstructed display of historical mounted ape and monkey specimens in storage. It is a glimpse behind the scenes of

a museum into the primate order to which we ourselves belong. The eye moves between the spectacle of storage and the reflection of self caught with other members of the primate order, refashioned at the hand of nineteenth century taxidermists into an image of ourselves. The Depot is, in a way, the antithesis of the Fossil Collection where museum pieces usually not on public display are flagrantly exposed to the light of day. The Depot takes the visitor, like some visitor to Hades, behind the scenes into the inner recesses of the museum. The retrieval of specimens for exhibition depends on the generative construction of meaning: a process that is never concluded, but which occurs within already existing parameters.

The story does not, of course, end here. The ending, if such it can be called, is open-ended.

VI. Umberto Eco once wrote an essay called something like 'Sex and repression in north-west Italy', authored by a Mr. Dobu of Dobu (Dobu), with clearly more than passing reference to Malinowski's *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*. I mentioned this Mr. Dobu before when ruminating on how a Melanesian might view the Leiden exhibition. The exercise in thinking about ourselves as others might think of us, turning the very terms we use to study *them* back upon ourselves, can be applied to the *Pithecanthropus* centennial exhibition.

The silent voice at the centennial celebrations was an Indonesian one, which I like to imagine asking: "But why is *Pithecanthropus erectus* kept in Leiden?" In a way, the exhibition itself and its accompanying souvenir text try to address that question – not to answer it. They try to put it on the public agenda simply by problematising the relationship between science (in this case paleoanthropology) and the culture(s) that produced it (Dutch, western European). This simple act could, in my view, be a first step towards mentioning the unmentionable, the taboo area that underlies the whole massive ritual. The physical dislocation of an object from one context to another has been in the name of a science which seeks (in cultural terms) answers to the problem of human origins. The terms of that quest deserve to be scrutinised in the context of a much more localised view of ancestry, perhaps, than the globalising names of the various species of *Homo* might suggest.

NOTE

(1) This paper was presented in Session F, 'Man/ Ape: Changing Views, 1600-2000', convened by Raymond Corbey and Bert Theunissen, at the *Pithecanthropus* Centennial Congress, Leiden, 26 June – 1 July 1993, and will be published under the title 'Exhibiting *Homo erectus* in 1993' in the *Proceedings* (Leiden: R.U.L.).