



Shotgun Review

Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist

By Vivian Sming *September 17, 2015*

Coco Fusco's performance as Dr. Zira, the esteemed chimp psychologist from the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*, suspended disbelief for the entirety of the evening at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA). The performance, part of YBCA's current exhibition, *Radical Presence*, began with a glitchy Skype introduction from Donna Haraway, and concluded with an open Q&A session with audience members—throughout which Fusco remained impeccably in Dr. Zira's character. By holding the audience in the realm of fiction for the duration of *Observations of Predation in Humans*, Fusco invited a fresh and compelling dialogue on one of the many plights that plague humanity—namely, economic disparity.

Within the imagined future of *Planet of the Apes*, humans are understood to be the evolutionary predecessors of nonhuman primates. As a species, we are warned to be “harbinger[s] of death,” and looked down upon by the ruling apes for our inability to use reason and compassion to ensure the well-being of all members of our species. Despite this, Dr. Zira is an advocate for humankind. Like many of the aliens, mutants, and robots who protect humanity in science-fiction narratives, Dr. Zira is altogether forgiving of human folly. Fusco speaks from her character's benevolent position to initiate a conversation that might otherwise be heavy-handed, and begins Dr. Zira's PowerPoint lecture on human behavior by proclaiming, “I like you...” She is hoping to save us from our self-destruction.

Through the anthropological perspective of Dr. Zira, Fusco employs an unexpected vocabulary of empirical language and dry humor to reveal the cruel and heart-wrenching behavior that has created the current socioeconomic climate. Fusco abandons the all-too-familiar terms of “race,” “gender,” “class,” and “nation,” and instead opts to use terms such as “alpha,” “beta,” “aggression,” and “predation.” Interspersed with slides containing scientific definitions, YouTube clips, images found from the internet, and stills from *Planet of the Apes*, Dr. Zira's lecture underlines the role of symbolic value (non-intrinsic value created by culture) within human predatory behavior, which she distinguishes from aggressive behavior. Through her lecture, Dr. Zira argues that the majority of human predatory behavior is in fact nonphysical; instead, it uses symbolic measures to strategically and stealthily accumulate resources for the very few “alphas.” She's quick to point out that no other group of animals organizes the killing of others on such a massive scale.

Symbolic value, paired with an imaginary threat to one's access to resources, results in the willing creation of and participation in volatile capitalist activities such as playing the lottery, investing in the stock exchange, the incarceration of "undesirables," gentrification (by the kin of "alpha" males), YOLO marketing of products to youth, and so on. Dr. Zira (Fusco) makes a convincing argument that if hoarding is understood as the irrational accumulation of things, the only difference between a hoarder's collection of empty bottles and Paris Hilton's walk-in closet full of shoes lies in the symbolic value of the corresponding resources. In the end, Dr. Zira remains hopeful for humankind's altruistic and revolutionary capacities, and reminds us that power is entirely dependent on cooperation. "No ape is an island," she says. By choosing to embody the simultaneously critical and compassionate character of Dr. Zira, Fusco reveals her shared hopes that social change can indeed happen, and that art can instigate that change.

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Coco Fusco, Observations of Predation in Humans is on view at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, in San Francisco, through August 19, 2015.



Coco Fusco. *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist*, 2013; performance.
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