

[Project Nim](#) at [Cornerhouse](#)



Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) August 2011

Directed by James Marsh; **Produced by** BBC Films, Red Box Films, and Passion Films.

Project Nim is most definitely a film for and of our time - self-consciously demarcating itself from the 1970's, yet unable to explain what was different then, what we've gained and lost, just stating where we are now as though we've always been here. The 1970's may have been tripping man, with concept albums spanning a couple of LPs, but telling a story was still important, with proper connections and context were a normal part of a narrative.

Today we live in an age where technique in the arts can be of a high technical character yet the

narrative is profoundly disjointed, a right old bag of mix and match, with a totally a historic approach to events that starts with a therapists couch and slots events from the past in to construct a story that justifies our present state of mind.



I'm a child of the 1970's and remember the hilarious Brooke Bond PG Tips adverts with chimps, like this Mr Shifter one (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgzeBLa3PPk>), and have seen such adverts removed from our screens because of the way they demean animals, though in truth they objectify the working class more than they do any chimps. What a contradictory time of scientific advance symbolised by going to the moon, political excitement and decay symbolised by widespread industrial militancy and the person is political counter-culture. Ecological sensitivities are also being given some wider airing, though still something of a niche market then, symbolised by Jacques Cousteau and Gerald Durrell.

In the midst of this era of scientific progress, political debates of whether nature or society determine our sociology and psychology, and increasing focus on the effect of ecology on evolutionary trends, research of great apes and chimpanzees increased. This research involved observing them in the wild, to testing them in the laboratory, including the testing of reactions to chemicals ahead of humans being exposed to them.

Trying to better understand the nature vs nurture debate regarding the development of

language, inevitably led to conducting some experiments on other animals including chimpanzees to see if they could be trained to use some form of language. Pigeons for example had been conditioned to respond to stimuli in ways determined by human experimenters, so being able to train some animals to develop language skills was a great scientific challenge, and chimpanzees were considered one of the closest matches to humans genetically.



Project Nim was an experiment organised by Columbia University, led by Professor Herbert Terrace - behavioural psychologist and specialist in primate cognitive abilities at New York's Columbia University. Using a chimpanzee named Nim Chimpsky, given his name as a pun on Noam Chomsky, the foremost theorist of human language structure and generative grammar at the time, the study aimed to refute Noam Chomsky's thesis that language is inherent only in humans. The nub of the experiment was to raise a chimp like a child and try and teach it fragments of [American Sign Language](#) so it could make himself understood.

Project Nim followed a similar study by R. Allen and Beatrix Gardner called [Project Washoe](#), in which another chimpanzee, named Washoe, was raised like a human child, given affection and

participated in everyday social activity with her adoptive family. Her ability to communicate was far more developed than Nim's, though notably Terrace is cited as disputing many of their findings, along with the findings in Project Nim retrospectively.

The film, though promoted as a documentary and using some very fine techniques from the documentary style, starts the story with no context, and very much along the lines of the promotional blurb of its official website:

'November 1973: A baby chimpanzee is born in a cage at a primary research center in Oklahoma. A few days later, his mother is knocked down by a tranquilizer dart, her screaming baby seized from her and placed into the waiting arms of his new human "mother", a graduate student of psychology with three children of her own.'



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