



'Nénette is like the Mona Lisa' ... Philibert, left, and his star. Photograph: Thomas Coex/Getty

## Nicolas Philibert: the future's orange

An elderly orangutan is the star of *Etre et Avoir* director Nicolas Philibert's new documentary. But the real action is going on outside the cage, he tells Catherine Shoard

We're in Paris's Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes, beside the Seine, off the Boulevard St Germain, on a perishing morning. Outside, in pens whose size testifies to the place's age (built in 1794), an ostrich hammers at the frost. A yak snorts. Doleful? Or just cold?

Philibert, 60, smiles and shrugs and hops gently from foot to foot, trying to keep warm, and to coax his star from her shell. The zoo's ape house, unlike the rest of the premises, is built like a ballroom. But while visitors have ample space to run riot, the primates crouch in cages fringing the perimeter.

He suspects the depression we detect from Nénette, the 41-year-old orangutan centre-screen for all 70 minutes of his latest documentary— which shares her name – is a projection of our own emotions. "People think that they'll see monkeys and have fun," he says. "They associate them with acrobats and mischief. But after half a minute here, they stop looking. Because they are struck by something more tragic. They start thinking about the situation of these animals in the wild and about what we are doing with our planet."

The film (low on the eco moralising, by the way) shows us long, semi-hypnotic shots of Nénette, swaddled in a blanket or sucking apples or grooming her son, Tubo. Over these, we hear – but never see, unless in watery reflection – visitors, clamouring behind the glass: excited, indifferent, rude, moved.

A child exclaims at Nénette's advanced age. A woman wonders whether Tubo has a mate (Nénette, incidentally, having outlived four husbands, is now on the pill, lest she and Tubo become too close). A man says she must be homesick. A keeper explains how Nénette, once a great star, was upstaged by younger models, including, crucially, one who could tie knots. Another reports that she found holding Nénette more rewarding than cuddling her own children – the ape gripped tighter.

"I wanted to focus on the opposition between Nénette's inability to talk," says Philibert, in good-humoured, halting English, "and humans talking in a babble – in different languages, with different sort of levels of interventions, both serious and humorous."

Much of Philibert's previous work has also focused on those who have trouble expressing themselves. *In the Land of the Deaf* (1994) shows us a school for the hard of hearing; *Every Little Thing* (1997) chronicles the staging of a play in a mental institution. His best-known movie, 2002's *Etre et Avoir*, which won an Oscar nomination and distribution across 40 countries, comprises scenes from a village school in the Auvergne, the magnificently calm teacher wrangling a dozen children between four and 11.

For *Nénette*, he's upped the stakes: his subject is a mute ape. Or is it? The longer one looks at the film, the less it seems to reveal; the more *Nénette* appears to be just a great, hairy MacGuffin. The real subject – as evidenced by Philibert's editing priorities (human audio first, monkey images to follow) – is us.

So what makes *Nénette* such a revealing mirror? Philibert grins again and gives one of what turns out to be his signature laughs, heavy on the humming, big on twinkles. "It wouldn't be the same if I had filmed a cow. We do not identify with a cow or with a spider. But *Nénette* is at the same time both close and mysterious. "This mystery I wanted. That's why I didn't interview scientists. A film is not a scientific book. For me, cinema is about strangeness. I do not make films from knowledge but from my own ignorance. The less I know, the better I feel. *Nénette* is like the Mona Lisa. You can't help asking many questions. They do not have answers."

And, like that painting, *Nénette* is a destination for repeat visits, a fixed point for people while their life outside mutates. "I saw an old lady come into the ape house and bow in front of *Nénette* as if she was the Queen. It was amazing."

Did he tape her? Philibert looks surprised. His shock of hair seems to rise yet higher. "No, I didn't want to disturb her. She was in a bubble."

What distinguishes Philibert's work – more than its unobtrusive intellect, or its measured aesthetic – is its compassion. Small wonder that in the flesh he's a man with a rare ability to put you at your ease, to be patient and observant. No, he says, he would not dream of troubling others in pursuit of a quote, would never shoot someone unhappy to be on film.

The story, for him, is not worth the upset – indeed it's not really about the story at all. His films are as open-minded as you can imagine. Although *Nénette* can be viewed as an oblique essay on cinema itself, a mediation of voyeurism, Philibert doesn't aspire to journalism in his film-making, nor to the condition of fiction. "Documentary is the recreation of an event that you create through the choices you make when filming and editing. Each time I finish a film, I invite friends and family, and one of my uncles says: 'It's very nice but when will you make a real film?'"

Born in Nancy in 1951, Philibert studied philosophy, then, while teaching film theory in Paris, made a series of quiet documentaries that won him acclaim in his homeland. Wider fame didn't really come until *Etre et Avoir*, and was then complicated by an unsuccessful lawsuit launched by the teacher and some of the parents of the children, keen for a larger cut of the profits.

Such a souring action may, it's tempting to think, have hit him hard. It was five years before he made another film, *Return to Normandy*, in which he revisited the location for a shoot on which he was assistant director in 1976. It was atypically personal: he provided a voiceover, and revealed that part of the reason for the project was to try to unearth lost footage of his late father.

*Nénette*, too, is more of a departure than it might initially appear. Philibert's commitment to making cinema in collaboration with his subjects had to be discarded. "I don't feel guilty not having asked her if I could film. Maybe I would have stopped if she had reacted badly or been frightened, but hundreds of people film her every day, take pictures."

Likewise, the movie unfolds outside a community – in contrast to the hopeful utopia shown in, say, *Every Little Thing* or *In the Land of the Deaf*. "It is encouraging to be with such people. They are fighting and struggling for better lives. We all try to live together and build something together, to share something." *Nénette*, by contrast, offers a much more negative reflection of humanity – one whose pessimism Philibert appears to share. "Human beings," he says, "are archaic and savage." He looks downcast rather than wry, moustache suddenly droopy. "They are able to act much worse, and more wildly, than animals."

It's a strange mix: this sadness, and such a persistent interest in everyday life that one collaborator likened him to a curious child. "I really think that the quality of a film is not linked to the dimension or the exoticism of the subject," he says. "We can be surprised when rewatching our everyday gestures. You can make a film at the next corner. You have stories, futures, present, past, women, men, children, people in love, people suffering, people working hard."

Whether *Nénette* is about the ape behind the glass or the man behind the camera matters, finally, less than the making of it. "To continue to live," says Philibert at one point, "I need to film." For us, too, it's consolation. The star of Nicolas Philibert's new film picks sceptically at her lettuce. From behind lavish lashes, she regards the crowd below, auburn hair flaming in the sunlight. Her director waves and smiles. After a pause, she advances, and, with a poise that bespeaks 38 years in the public eye, slowly runs her tongue, big as bacon, over the glass. Politesse dispensed, it's back to her tyre for a scratch.

## Going Ape

12.21.10



[Nicolas Philibert](#), *Nénette*, 2010, still from a color film, 67 minutes.

A **JOLIE LAIDE** red-haired Parisian of a certain age with four offspring by various mates, Nénette lives with Tubo, her youngest. Her address: Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes, 5ème. Nénette is a forty-year-old orangutan, probably the oldest of her species in captivity or in the wild. With her fertility status unknown, her caretakers have put her on the Pill as a precaution. They do not know whether orangutans observe the incest taboo, and if Nénette should become pregnant again, her health might be endangered. Not to mention that it would look bad for the zoo's breeding program, the rationale for any zoo's existence. With their natural habitats severely diminished, orangutans are an endangered species.

Nénette is the titular subject of an oddball documentary by [Nicolas Philibert](#), who is best known for *To Be and to Have* (2002), a captivating study of a French village grade school and its only teacher. *To Be and to Have* was an unexpected critical and popular success, in part because its empathetic teacher and his energetic young pupils felt like a beacon of hope in troubled times. Sadly, a shadow was cast over the movie when the teacher and some of the students' parents sued Philibert for a piece of the profits, claiming that they had been led to believe that they were participating in an educational film with no commercial value. They lost the suit, the filmmaker's lawyers countering that if their demand was upheld, it would have a chilling effect on documentary moviemaking in general.

It goes without saying that Nénette is in no position to drag Philibert back to court, and since she has spent her entire life as an object of the gaze, one camera more probably doesn't matter to her. Still, *Nénette's* subtext of subject-object relations and its setting—an institution where power and freedom are absolutely entwined—account for the unease it generates along with delight. The issue of zoos is little discussed, although some of Nénette's keepers express grave reservations about keeping wild animals in captivity. The zoo in the Jardin des Plantes was renovated about five years ago, and the indoor cage and slightly more spacious outdoor

enclosure that Nénette and Tubo share with two other orangutans are palatial compared with the “Ape House” in which Nénette lived for thirty years after she was brought from Borneo.

Hardly a candidate for a slot on Animal Planet, *Nénette* is structured by a complete separation of image and sound. A star attraction at the zoo, Nénette is the focus of almost every shot in the movie, some of them sustained for five or more minutes. There are a few cutaways to the three other orangutans, but there are no reverse angles—the only glimpses we have of Nénette’s human visitors and caretakers are as occasional indistinct reflections on the glass of her enclosure. On the sound track, however, we hear nothing except human voices—a collective stream of consciousness that mixes casual spectators, Nénette devotees, various zookeepers, and one or two scientists and philosophers. “They used to kill redheads at birth in Egypt,” says one woman. “She’s going through the stages of her life [in her mind],” opines another, of the diffident Nénette, who seldom interacts with her visitors and spends long periods of time doing nothing or performing household chores—arranging the straw of her mattress, wrapping herself in the bedclothes and then tossing them aside.

Like all great stars, Nénette is an enigma, She is more withdrawn than the other orangutans, perhaps because of her age, as one keeper speculates, or perhaps because she was born free. In the wild, orangutans spend much of their time high in the trees, simply observing the world around them. Nénette replicates this behavior in captivity, watching the people who watch her but without interacting. In this she is the alter ego of Philibert, a maker of observational documentaries. Indeed, the first shot of *Nénette* is an extreme close-up of the star’s rheumy, deep-set eyes; the unseen camera’s electronic eye stares into the animal’s eyes, revealing nothing about Nénette but worlds about our desire to transform perception into knowledge and power.

Late in the movie, we hear a man who seems to be an actor (he is the comedian Pierre Meunier) try to account for our fascination with Nénette. “The quality of her idleness,” he says, “makes me think of an acting exercise: ‘Ladies and gentleman, the space is yours to do whatever you want.’ A difficult exercise,” he continues, “when watched by others.” In the late afternoons, Nénette performs the routine that is most intriguing to her audience: She takes tea. First she unscrews the cover of a small plastic bottle, sips a bit of its contents, and carefully sets it down. Then she opens a container of yogurt, takes a spoonful or two, unscrews a second bottle, samples its contents, pours some of it into the yogurt container, and drinks the mixture. Does this daily ritual—an uncanny mimicry of human behavior—give her pleasure? We hope it does, but who is to know?

— [Amy Taubin](#)

# The New York Times

Movie Review

## *Nénette* (2010)



A scene from *Nénette*, a film about an orangutan at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris.

## A Meditation on Captivity, Featuring an Orangutan

By JEANNETTE CATSOULIS  
2010

Published: December 21,

A child's voice whispers "Nénette!," and immediately we are in the patient and curious world of the French filmmaker Nicolas Philibert. Best known in the United States for *To Be and to Have* — his captivating 2002 portrait of a rural schoolteacher — Mr. Philibert has switched his gaze to a primate with rather less agency: a 40-year-old female orangutan in the zoo at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris.

That gaze never wavers. *Nénette* is a film devoid of human faces, the camera merging with the more than half-million visitors who traipse past the orangutan's cage every year. We hear their voices, these mothers and children and couples, their words revealing the complexity of our relationship to caged wildlife. Is Nénette depressed, they wonder, or just lonely?

Quiet and watchful, the object of their fascination leans on her gnarled knuckles, straw clinging to her mat of ginger hair. She arrived from Borneo in 1972, has survived three mates and produced four offspring. Once she was lively ("*The bane of the place*," says an older zookeeper); now she looks passive and glum, quieted by age and arthritis. Or something else.

Beautiful in its minimalism, *Nénette* is no antizoo rant but a melancholy meditation on captivity. Nénette may be better off than her endangered kin, but as we watch her delicately pour tea into the yogurt container that holds her contraceptive pill (she lives with her son, and the zoo is keen to avoid procreative embarrassment), that knowledge gives us small comfort.

Yet Nénette is loved, with some people stopping by every day. A keeper likens them to those visiting a relative in prison — which, when you come to think of it, is exactly what they are doing. *Nénette* will screen with *Creature Comforts*," Nick Park's delightful animated short film from 1989.

by Joseph Jon Lanthier on December 19, 2010

Even before my conversion to veganism, zoos depressed the hell out of me. It's still not exactly the sad, captive eyes or conduciveness to sadism that haunt me quite so much as the cautionary metaphor to be found in listless creatures occupying artificial habitats; like a grotesquely futurist Tati satire with sprinkles of Sartre, the zoo is a utopia brimming with beings that want for nothing aside from the viciousness of natural order. If harmless voyeurism is, to be diplomatic, the essential motive behind the zoo, then its unexpected lesson might be that we are vitally defined by our private battles for survival—and that we are, ultimately, conditioned to thrive most contently in environments that deprive us of desires. Simply granting us our basic needs and individual whims might be the most pernicious kind of existential cruelty.

The friction between this truth and our curiosity in caged animals is part of what powered Nick Park's Oscar-winning animated short *Creature Comforts*; the grievances of real British tenement dwellers were wittily rendered as those of anthropomorphized turtles, hares, and (most memorably) cougars, all of whom appeared to bemoan the walls that immediately surrounded them. Where that film, however, was an ironist's diatribe, the success of Nicolas Philibert's similarly themed documentary *Nénette* is ponderously literal. For a little over an hour we watch the title character, a 40-year-old orangutan who for decades was the main attraction at Paris's Jardin des Plantes, languidly sprawling about the branches in her exhibit, gnawing and pawing at packages of yogurt and tufts of straw, and (seemingly) accepting the fascination of off-screen visitors with tired contempt. Philibert furthermore widens the gap that Park cultivated between his audio testimony and his illustrations, using the wide-eyed and contemplative testimony of human onlookers and orangutan experts (along with a few distracting flourishes of non-diegetic music) as a soundtrack to *Nénette*'s sleepy exploits. And the documentary becomes, eventually, less a study of a great ape than a quiet reminder of how zoos act as a reflective prism for our livelihood-oriented anxieties.

The film's narrative elliptically presents a series of contexts through which we glean *Nénette*'s rather epic story. Her handlers nostalgically recount her birth in captivity, the difficulties of her feisty adolescence (she couldn't even be touched without sedation until later in life), her inevitable encounters with an adoring global media, and the medical events that catalyzed her decline into docility. Each of these biographical anecdotes is paired with a bystander's monologue that free-associates with her current state: one zoo-goer is reminded that "in [ancient] Egypt, they killed redheads after birth...because of the devil"; another becomes obsessed with *Nénette*'s lack of a mate ("You need someone, even at her age," she whispers). The orangutan's exaggerated humanoid behavior provokes fancy, philosophy, alarm. She becomes a noble mascot of endangerment, an impetus for an argument about gender politics, a slightly shaggy iteration of Shakespeare's paragon of animals, and even, when younger orangutans threaten her Parisian spotlight, an icy if impotent Margo Channing.

Throughout, Philibert breaks from his verité credentials to photograph *Nénette* and her alpha son, Tübo, in a painstakingly varied assortment of camera angles; we see her bulbous lips flapping in close-up, her muscular limbs extending to unknowingly thumb the tip of the frame, and her pendulous breasts pressing into glass partitions just above us. (The film almost jokingly inverts the typical talking head concept into footage that is "all action, no content.") But aside from occasional reflections of gawking school children or nearby ape habitats, we don't get a clear sense of the borders of her world or what lies beyond. This visual isolation ensures our intimacy with *Nénette* and underscores the documentary's most lucid and disconcerting argument—that mankind is the orangutan's border. Our relentless gaze is the entirety of *Nénette*'s contact with the outside world, and our frontal lobe-sporting species is the apogee of the primate order. And yet this realization isn't accompanied by a sensation of responsibility ruefully shirked; we feel instead exposed and vulnerable, stationed at the defiant outskirts of an organic community, waiting to see where nature will take us next.

*Nénette* thankfully doesn't dote on its subject's obvious sadness, though it occasionally yields to an undercurrent of heavy-handed sympathy; in one scene, the orangutan absent-mindedly licks the edge of her cubicle while plaintive mariachi music plays and metal doors in the distance clang with prison-like authority. Elsewhere, however, Philibert uses his pity to fuel a more eloquent if passing observation of the way we minoritize our own. "There's a legend in Borneo," one interviewee claims, "that Orangutans can speak, but remain silent so they won't have to work." The connection, however soft, to the xenophobic stereotyping of any subculture is startlingly undeniable; when another patron rhetorically asks later, "Is it really enviable—having nothing to do?," we can't help but read it as a defensive murmur from a member of the disillusioned, downward looking elite.

*Nénette* isn't quite Malthusian in its outlook, but it clarifies just how grim the view is from the claustrophobic "comfort zone" of the food chain's top—ethnically, economically, environmentally. We might be responsible for our own four walls, but that doesn't mean they don't distribute the same superficial sustenance that *Nénette* receives. As Captain Beefheart passive-aggressively intoned in his kindred spirit of an apostrophe to a zoo creature named Apes-Ma, "Your cage isn't getting any bigger."

## Nénette –

The Être et Avoir director is back with a new film: a beautiful and revealing documentary about a zoo-dwelling ape, says Peter Bradshaw

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It's impossible to watch Nicolas Philibert's new film without a Darwinian frisson of anxiety, and an animal-liberationist spasm of rage. Nénette is a 40-year-old female orangutan in a Parisian zoo: she has been kept here almost all her life. Philibert's camera is trained solely on her, and some other ape companions – humans are not shown, but we hear the chattering voices of zoo visitors and the thoughtful voices of various naturalists and experts. Our gaze is kept on Nénette's face. She is watching us, while we are watching her. Nénette looks clinically depressed. As Philibert shows us a close-up of her eyes, full of sadness and pain, it seems just too obvious to say that Nénette seems human. Perhaps it is that we are ape-like. She looks a lot like those spoof pictures showing the Mona Lisa as a monkey. As if this story did not have enough pathos, Philibert finally reveals an extraordinary fact about the medical precautions being taken with regard to what can only be described as Nénette's domestic situation. This showstopping disclosure completes the nightmare.

Philip French



A still from *Nénette*: 'An absorbing contemplative film.'

This is the latest documentary from the French director best known for *Etre et avoir*, his delicate study of a village school in the Auvergne, and it scrutinises four orangutans through the thick glass that separates them from visitors to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. In particular, it observes the 42-year-old *Nénette*, captured in Borneo and living in the zoo since 1972, during which time she's had three mates and produced four offspring, the last of which continues to live with her. It's an absorbing, contemplative film that compels us to participate rather than just sit back and look.

On the soundtrack, we hear the often inane comments by members of the public as well as more sensitive observations from various keepers. Centrally, we're invited to speculate as to what *Nénette* is thinking, what she makes of us and to ask ourselves what right we have to imprison her and what rights she herself possesses. Perhaps it should be shown in a double bill with *Planet of the Apes*.



## Monkey See: The Life of an Orangutan in *Nenette*

By Melissa Anderson Wednesday, Dec 22 2010

Stare at Borneo native Nénette, a 41-year-old orangutan who's lived at the zoo in Paris's Jardin des Plantes since 1972, long enough, and she begins to resemble another stolid, thick-set immigrant to France: Gertrude Stein. Documentarian Nicolas Philibert, whose long, observational takes made even the conjugation of auxiliary verbs fascinating in his country-school portrait, *To Be and to Have* (2002), invites such projections, his camera trained almost exclusively on the russet-haired simian for 70 minutes (the three other orangutans who share her cage, including her son, receive only cameos). Though shunning anthropomorphic cutes, Philibert's film doesn't always avoid the listlessness shared by his star, who has impassively looked out at spectators from captivity nearly her entire life. Off-screen voices—kids who marvel, "*It looks strangely like a man,*" zoo-keepers who discuss the particulars of Nénette's psychology, an actor who soliloquizes on the toll of her boredom—emphasize our primate ancestry, as does observing Nénette enjoying her daily yogurt break, opposable thumb guiding the spoon before she devours the plastic container. Watching Nénette watch those who gape at her is an intriguing, multi-layered exercise of voyeurism, but one that wanes after our gaze is demanded for too long.