PART ONE

A Science of Sympathy

The Films of Robert Mearns Yerkes

ROBERT MEARNS YERKES (1876–1956) concludes a 1905 article on animal psychology for the *Journal of Philosophy* by stating, "Perhaps when we rid ourselves of certain prejudices that physical science fosters we shall agree with those who know the ant and the bee most intimately."[1] By the "prejudices that physical science fosters" Yerkes meant the study of nonhuman animals as machines, without any recourse to interiority. Instead, he pursued an "intimate" knowledge of the minds of animals at a time when the nascent field of behaviorism's technique of mechanized measurements was on the rise. Deeply aware of the social, cultural, and political transformations being enacted by visualizing technologies such as chronophotography, Yerkes articulated an alternative approach to laboratory moving images that emphasized their capacity to capture and frame cross-species emotional relationships. Whether studying the alien bodies and behaviors of insects or the far more familiar activities of primates, he remained convinced that pairing scientifically mediated observations with intuitive interpretations would yield fundamental truths about animal feelings, minds, and personalities. Within this book's genealogy of celluloid specimens, his films are uniquely focused on producing complex representations of animal behavior that were meant to engage audiences in an affective experience of sympathy that combined cross-species identification with a clinical form of surveillance.

Since Yerkes's time, sympathy has become a central concern within the academic field of critical animal studies, especially in relation to their onscreen images. As seen in my introduction, theorists like Anat Pick argue that film can produce an essentially sympathetic rapport between audiences and animals in films.[2] Many have argued that the creation of such moments has a moral imperative, promising

to undo many of the cultural and political divides between human and animal. One scholar of cognitive film theory, Alexa Weik von Mossner, argues that the production of sympathy through film takes on an "ethical dimension" when viewer experiences enhance their "understanding of what it is like to experience the world through a different set of senses," which she claims can lead them "to conclude that conscious, thinking, and feeling beings deserve to be treated with more respect."[3] In these and other accounts, film's capacity to confront viewers with the fact of animal sentience fosters a more ethical relationship with animals in their lives outside the theater. But the political functions of sympathy in Yerkes's films are very different from those described by Pick and von Mossner, leading me to conclude that their approach fails to take into account the ways that empathy for animals can be woven into a *variety* of political projects. In this section, I argue that the "ethical dimensions" of sympathy should not be limited to the question of how an abstract "human" might understand an equally abstract "animal" but must also include the question of which groups of humans are sympathizing with whom and for what purpose? As we will see in the following three chapters, Yerkes's strategic use of film to produce sympathy fueled a racist political project that often mobilized these feelings as a rationale for enacting racist policies.

Yerkes was singularly aware of the emotional effects created by the moving image, which he attempted to use as a tool within his scientific practice. The founder of primatology and a central champion of organized standardized testing, Yerkes is an exceptional, if unexamined, figure in the history of scientific filmmaking. He established and ran massive behavioral testing institutions that were designed for the measurement and categorization of individual identity. These institutions included the American Psychology Association—which Yerkes presided over as president for the pivotal year of 1917—and his primate research centers—including the Primate Laboratory of the Yale Institute of Psychology, established in 1925, and the Anthropoid Experimental Station in Orange Park, Florida, established in 1930. These organizations dramatically shaped empirical studies of behavior in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century. Yerkes's primate labs deployed the moving image on a grand scale, producing more than forty films during the 1930s and 1940s. Stored within their laboratory files are many canisters of celluloid specimens, which were used internally as notes, as illustrations of findings, and as visual aids for conference presentations. These labs also had a contract with Educational Films Incorporated to distribute eight edited films to high schools and colleges across the country.[4]

This section of the book contains three chapters. The first centers on Yerkes's work with IQ testing during the 1910s. I argue that his use of the intelligence test, and its mass application to incoming World War I recruits, relied on a theory of the gaze that linked a subject's identity to their behavior during spectatorship, which he saw as an expression of one's innate intelligence. Heredity, ideation, and temperament were all supposedly relayed through this engagement with visual

media, creating a hierarchy of ways of looking that could be ranked and organized according to the colonial imaginary of social Darwinism. Yerkes's approach to visual culture in these tests also became a structural principle in his primate films, the topic of the second chapter. There, we explore Yerkes's theories of documentary cinema, which he claimed could capture the internal truths of primate cognition by cinematographically indexing their movements. He believed scientific audiences could then infer these truths through an act of affectively engaged film spectatorship. Film was therefore meant to induce a process of empathy in which elite audiences of psychologists could correctly identify the true motivations of onscreen apes that would otherwise elude less specialized observers.

Yerkes deployed film to insert this act of evidence-based empathy into a discourse that was becoming increasingly hostile to any such speculation. In so doing, he greatly expanded the scope of his psychobiological experiments. Rather than being restrained to directly visible physiological and behavioral responses, the lab, for Yerkes, became a space for testing, transforming, and optimizing his laboratory subjects' temperaments, identities, and lived experiences. The final chapter of this section analyzes these ambitious goals within the context of Yerkes's work with eugenics, where film was meant to register the effects of interventions into social structure and personality. I argue that Yerkes used film to depict what he saw as the accelerations of species and racial evolution through management, which one day might be broadly enacted through his political project.

In these various interventions and settings, Yerkes consistently sought to know and sympathize actively with the mind of his subjects, whether apes or humans, for the purposes of ranking, studying, and transforming them. Film was a privileged medium in this procedure. Using the moving image, he defined both the mental processes of his experimental specimens and the experience of scientific observation for his audiences. Perhaps more than any other scientific filmmaker working at this time, Yerkes was aware of the animal research film as an affectively charged technology, a tool for tying together the bodies on- and offscreen through the relays of image and affect. Throughout his scientific career, Yerkes attempted to lay a path for his own particular vision of scientific progress by operationalizing this visual culture, what Hugo Münsterberg titles the "psychotechnology" of screen and audience. The racist underpinnings of his vision of progress, with its past imagined as a racialized "savagery" and its future as an enlightened industrialism, were deeply inscribed into the very form and function of his celluloid specimens.