

Peter Jackson's King Kong

A colossal triviality

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With several worthwhile films coming out of Hollywood this season, such as *Good Night and Good Luck*, *Syriana* and *Munich*, viewers of Peter Jackson's (producer/director of the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy) *King Kong* may admit lesser expectations from this film. That said, one can anticipate some fantastic special effects and so may be willing to forgive a lot. On that score, the viewer isn't disappointed. On the contrary, the effects are so overpowering and bombastic that they become the *raison d'être* of the film.

Since he was nine years old and first saw the original 1933 version of *King Kong*, Peter Jackson was obsessed with making monsters. He is quoted in an Internet interview: "I saw the original Kong on TV when I was nine on a Friday night in New Zealand. That weekend, I grabbed some plasticine and I made a brontosaurus and I got my parents' super eight home movie camera and started to try to animate the plasticine dinosaur. So really it was a moment in time when I just wanted to do special effects and do monsters and creatures and ultimately led to becoming a filmmaker."

So, the recent release of Jackson's *King Kong* could be described as the product of the aspiration of a lifetime—or put another way, the product of a man who has amassed so much power in the movie industry that he can indulge his wildest childhood fantasies without restraint.

Like his *Lord of the Rings* series, *King Kong* is a long film—over three hours—but in adapting Tolkien's trilogy to film, Jackson and his production team had to give significant thought to what to leave out. The opposite is the case in his *King Kong* remake. Rather than paring down the source material, Jackson expanded on it. While maintaining the same basic story line as the original, many scenes were added, with varying degrees of success.

For example, the film's opening scenes provided a historical reference for the storyline—the Great Depression in New York City. Where the original took place in the Hoover-era thirties, the only reference in the early version was a brief sequence leading up to Ann Darrow's (the film's heroine—an impoverished young girl played by Fay Wray) encounter with Carl Denham (the desperate and calculating director in search of a leading lady for his latest adventure film). Jackson opens the film with scenes of the Hoovervilles in Central Park, homeless people in doorways and various street scenes depicting the widespread poverty of the time.

This sequence comes to rest on a vaudeville stage where we get a first glimpse of Ann Darrow (played by Naomi Watts in this production) dancing, juggling and performing slapstick comedy. This is an unexpected and gratifying opening. It unfolds to reveal the context of Ann's character. After the performance, we learn that the actors haven't been paid, and when they leave the theater, it is closed down for good behind them. Ann is left alone and hungry with no way

of supporting herself, like so many others around her. She can't bring herself to take a job in a burlesque joint after being given a contact by a jaded producer who spurns her request to audition for a legitimate role and tells her "a girl with your looks shouldn't starve."

Denham's character (played by Jack Black) is fleshed out as well. A screening-room scene where profit-driven studio "suits" take measure of his adventure footage shows us why Denham is so desperately wily. He announces his fantastical plans for his new film—"Gentlemen, I have come into possession of a map"—and is asked to leave the room while the wealthy backers make their decision. Outside, he empties a drinking glass to use as a listening device against the door, and hears the executives' decision to cut their losses and sell his footage as scrap. He takes pre-emptive action and is already on the lam, with the reels, even before they emerge to give him the bad news.

Jackson made several significant changes from the original. Jack Driscoll in the original was the first mate on the ship, "Venture," and served as the heroine's love interest. Jackson's Driscoll (Adrien Brody) is a playwright who was helping with the screenplay. He only ends up on the voyage because of Denham's connivance. Jackson portrays Denham's relationship to the captain and crew of the Venture as tenuous and often hostile. Characters on the crew are added and developed more fully. Among them are Preston, Denham's assistant and conscience (played by Collin Hanks); Jimmy, the youngest crew member played by Jamie Bell; and Hayes, the first mate, Jimmy's mentor (played by Evan Parke).

Divergences from the original *King Kong* give the viewer the expectation that Jackson has made a more socially conscious and relevant version of the story. For example, Jimmy is reading *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's classic novel, which explores the hypocritical bestiality of "civilized" colonialists in Africa. At one point, Jimmy asks Hayes, "It's not an adventure story is it?" Hayes responds in the negative, and at one point even directly quotes from it. "We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free." During the course of the film—actually, at the point when the expedition arrives on Skull Island—this subtext is totally dropped, overcome with barrage after barrage of monsters and special effects. By the conclusion, the viewer leaves the theater stunned and overwhelmed, as if stepping off a roller coaster. This is hardly a state of mind for thoughtful reflection.

An odd and unfortunate aspect of Jackson's film is the treatment he gives to the natives of Skull Island. To be sure, the original portrays them in a borderline racist manner, yet there is a sense of sympathy for their plight—having to live constantly in fear under the shadow of Kong. At one point they work alongside the crew of the Venture to

prevent the beast from breaking through the gate. Not so in Jackson's version. The Islanders are portrayed as zombies—vicious, unhesitating killers—no different from all the other creatures the crew encounters on the island. So much for empathy with the human condition. Perhaps this is unintentional on Jackson's part, but it expresses an insensitivity which flows from the self-indulgent outlook of the filmmaker.

Much more effort is expended in exploring the human-like emotions of Kong and the beast's affection for Ann. And Ann responds, unlike the 1930's, Fay Wray character, who dutifully screamed every time she was picked up by Kong. Jackson's Ann is so attached to Kong that she climbs up the highest parapet of the Empire State Building so she can somehow put herself in the way of the airplane gunners who are trying to kill him. This is truly over-the-top. While the effects are so realistic, the plausibility of the scene (even given the suspension of disbelief required to watch a movie about a 25-foot ape in the first place) is impossible. We are meant to believe that her feeling for the ape is so strong that she doesn't even notice the nose-bleeding height and the whipping wind.

What is Jackson trying to say here? Why does the ape come across more sympathetically than the people who have lived in fear of him, supposedly for generations?

With the state of society today, even a film such as *King Kong* could be a vehicle for exploring at least some aspect of the world. It certainly could have made a statement about the entertainment industry. One comes away with nothing of the kind. Even the campy 1976 remake of *King Kong* produced by Dino De Laurentiis updated the story and exhibited a somewhat critical view of the original. It portrayed the greed of the oil industry and showed Kong's capture and the ensuing disaster as a product of capital's callous disregard for the natural environment. Conversely, Jackson's version is mawkish in its reverence for the original production by adventurer Merian C. Cooper.

To understand the context of the original film, one must know a bit about Cooper. Descending from a line of wealthy plantation owners, he attended Annapolis Naval Academy until he flunked out. A fervent advocate of aeronautical technology in warfare from early on, he signed up as a bomber pilot at the end of World War I. After being shot down by the Germans, he served a brief time in POW camp, where he became a committed anticommunist, supposedly on hearing stories from other prisoners. Rather than returning home at the end of the war, he joined Kosciuszko's Squadron, the unit of American flyers in Poland committed to defeating the Russian Revolution. Again, he was shot down and presumed dead. He was captured by Cossacks and subsequently served time in a Soviet labor camp. He managed to escape, slitting the throat of a Red Army guard in the process, made his way to Latvia and eventually back to the US. Poland's Marshall Pilsudski decorated him with the country's highest military honor.

On his return to the US, Cooper served a stint as a news reporter before associating himself with Edward A. Salisbury, a well-known explorer from the American Geographic Society and making a reputation for himself as a bold filmmaker of faraway places. Cooper traveled the South Pacific filming primitive tribes and exotic wildlife on remote islands. On one of his trips he recruited newsreel cameraman Ernest B. Schoedsack, after his own cameraman abruptly took off. Schoedsack was a fearless photographer. He and Cooper became lifelong friends and filmmaking partners. In Abyssinia they befriended Ras Tafari (Haile Selassie) who once assembled a 50,000-strong man army in their behalf just for a film shoot. The pair

went on to produce "Grass," a 1925 documentary about the arduous journey of a Bahktiari tribe across the landscape of Persia to find grazing grounds for their cattle, and, in 1927, *Chang*, which was filmed in the jungles of Thailand.

With these films to his credit, Cooper joined RKO Pictures in 1931. He and Schoedsack produced *King Kong* two years later, grossing huge profits for RKO. It turned out to be immensely popular and its special effects laid the groundwork for fantasy films for generations to come.

Jackson described the film as "just a wonderful piece of escapist entertainment." It has become a cult classic. This is a major problem with Jackson's production. He is a longstanding member of the cult. The earmark of the cult is obsession with all the technical details of the production of the original, elevating such triviality over other considerations. For example, all true Kong-ites know about the "lost spider-pit sequence." It was written into the script of the original production, but never made it into the final film. That didn't stop Jackson from producing his own version, including aggressive human-sized insects and giant muck-worms with slimy pink telescoping mouth parts, borrowed directly from *Aliens*—all man-eaters, of course—and inserting it into his film. Any critical viewer at this point is asking himself, "Why do we have to see this?" Even Cooper himself, who died in 1973, wrote that the scene "stopped the story."

Cooper put much of himself into his *King Kong*. He saw the Denham character in the original as a self-portrait—a fearless and intrepid filmmaker who would do his own camerawork rather than be bothered with timid cameramen who would flee at the first sign of real danger. There was more than a little similarity between Cooper and Denham. He makes a cameo appearance in the film, along with co-producer Schoedsack, as the pilot and gunner of the plane that shoots Kong off the Empire State Building. Jackson venerates Cooper so much that he mimics the same cameo in his version.

Yet Jackson's background is nothing like Cooper's. He started out with an obsession for making unreal creations that give the appearance of reality. Whatever Cooper's flaws, his early career as a documentary filmmaker was driven by his penchant to accurately portray real life to his viewers, albeit in its most exotic and unusual manifestations.

Jackson, by virtue of his box office success with *Lord of the Rings*, has achieved all-powerful stature in Hollywood. It goes far beyond control over the final cut. He commands a small army of pre-and-post-production underlings with a virtually unlimited budget and all the latest technology at his disposal to realize his slightest cinematic whim. Too bad, among the multitude of minions, there wasn't someone to provide some better advice on the film's substance.



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