Spectatorship and capture in *King Kong*: the guilty look*

Although films are not necessarily myths, as is sometimes asserted, certain films have managed to remain repeatedly compelling and thus to assume a permanent, quasi-mythic status in a society’s consciousness. The tireless popularity of such films might be related to Claude Levi-Strauss’s notion of myths as narratives that endure because they give vent to an unspoken component, a repressed content. Their latent plot would resolve contradictions in the public sphere, conflicts that cannot be resolved in any other way than through their transformation into a fictitious narrative.¹ Basing his insights on Marcuse’s notion of ‘surplus repression’, film critic Robin Wood has argued that contemporary society, repressing desires that would otherwise threaten its stability, vents these desires through the figure of the monster. The Hollywood monster film allows, among other things, a safe outlet for such desires in a surrogate form, and a vicarious experience – pleasurable and horrific – of the chaos that such a release would bring about in reality. More specifically, Wood states that society represses: (1) ‘sexual energy itself’; (2) ‘bisexuality’ (which he defines as the arbitrary nature of social norms surrounding masculinity and feminity); and (3) ‘female sexuality/creativity’. A too strictly practised internal repression may end in external oppression – a generalised hostility directed against a societal ‘other’, especially the ‘other’ as women or non-Western peoples.² Especially in a movie such as *King Kong* (1933), which stretches all boundaries – temporal, spatial, and natural – we must specify in Wood’s paradigm areas of racial fear and taboo that certain American myths, both in literature and in film, attempt to manage and transform. Surplus repression is primarily sexual, to be sure, but we must remember that the oppression it spawns is largely political. Indeed, it has been variously argued that some whites oppress blacks on the outside in order to repress elements of ‘blackness’ inside.³ In film portrayals of blacks, the political is never far from the sexual, for it is both as a political and as a sexual threat that the black skin appears on screen. And there are very few instances in the history of Hollywood cinema in which the colour black has been writ so large and intruded so powerfully into the social plane of white normality. Blackness in motion is typically sensed as a threat on screen, and so black movement in film is usually restricted to highly bracketed and containable activities,
such as sports or entertainment. *King Kong* is an exception to this rule: the attempt to contain King Kong fails, and he makes off with not just any woman, but with a *white* woman. *King Kong*, then, is a noteworthy, though perhaps surprising, instance of 'the coded black' – in this case, the carrier of blackness is not a human being but an ape, but we shall see that the difference can easily be bridged.

In their analysis of 'John Ford’s Young Mr. Lincoln', the editors of *Cahiers Du Cinema* say that films often contain 'constituent lacks' or 'structuring absences' . . . the unsaid included in the said and necessary to its constitution'. These absences 'have some connection with the sexual other scene, and that “other scene” which is politics'. Our reading of *King Kong* will attempt to supply some of these constitutive omissions. Through a reading of the sub-plots in *King Kong*, we can see that the film's political aspects are hidden by the emotive nature of the sexual plot's covert build-up and ambiguous release. *King Kong* is able to cloak and leave unresolved a potentially explosive allegory of racial and sexual exploitation by manipulating the codes whereby films typically portray romantic conflict and resolution.

Unravelling the relationship between the sexual and political plots in the film means tracing the surface plot, the political sub-plot, and tracing the transformations of audience perspective implied by each. Few products of the American cinema have made such a rapid and indelible impression as *King Kong*. From its first release in 1933, the film was immensely popular, and it helped RKO at least temporarily survive bankruptcy. In *King Kong*'s wake, the director/producer team of Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper made two sequels, *Son of Kong* (1933) and *Mighty Joe Young* (1949), and others have followed these. Kong, the centre of attention, has joined that group of cultural reference-points and large-scale metaphors that includes Frankenstein, Moby Dick, Santa Claus, and Sherlock Holmes – neither kin nor foreign, neither completely real nor completely fictitious. One can buy postcards of Kong scaling the Empire State Building (recently, an inflated facsimile of Kong was temporarily hung there), or buy bumper stickers stating that 'King Kong died for your sins'.

Kong has become a classic in large part because of his very 'humanness'. As we shall see, the ape's 'humanness' engages, but also conceals, the underlying political point the film illustrates. Early on in the production, there was some debate over just how human Kong should appear. The chief technician and animator, Willis O'Brien, wanted a sympathetic, anthropomorphic Kong, and won out over Cooper's more 'monstrous' conception. In the end, O'Brien's artistic virtuosity helped 'humanise' Kong, giving an eighteen-inch clay model familiar and often endearing gestures and expressions. The humanness of King Kong, the key to *King
Kong's success, also tips us off to the various ways in which the film appeals to its spectators.

**Plot summary**

The plot of *King Kong* is, as its makers continually stressed in interviews, absurd, very much like that of any typical adventure yarn. If we compare it with the plot of Melville's *Moby Dick*, for instance, we find both similarities and differences: a somewhat obsessive leader and his crew journey into unknown seas without their full knowledge of his intentions. The group encounters a terrifying, murderous creature of fantastic dimensions. Yet here Carl Denham returns to New York with King Kong and even lives to make an oration over his corpse, while neither Ahab nor his men (except for Ishmael) return from the encounter with the whale. Another variation is the presence of Ann Darrow (her name almost certainly alludes to Clarence Darrow, defence lawyer in the 1925 Scopes 'monkey' trial), usually referred to simply as 'the girl' – in most cases, such seafaring adventure tales are womanless. These two peculiarities – the importation of the monster into civilised society, and the addition of a woman to the adventure model – are quite pertinent. The film has four main divisions: (1) New York and the discovery of the girl; (2) the voyage; (3) encounter with natives and Kong in the primeval jungle; (4) New York and the death of Kong.

The first shots of the film place us in New York harbour, seen from Hoboken, and the various docks, ships, and cargoes suggest 'trade', 'commerce', and 'transportation'. As in *Moby Dick*, we hear about the expedition's leader before we see him. Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong) is a theatrical producer, ruthless in his pursuit of 'pictures', even under the most dangerous circumstances. He has chartered a ship and its hold, curiously, is full of explosives and gas bombs. Denham wants to get underway, but he has not found what he needs most for his film: 'The public, bless 'em, must have a pretty face to look at . . .' The aggressive Denham searches Depression breadlines for the right woman. In the Bowery he sees Ann Darrow (Fay Wray) reaching for an apple from a fruitstand. The proprietor berates her, but Denham 'rescues' her by paying for the fruit. The girl is well-bred, and has some acting experience, so Denham promises her 'the thrill of a lifetime' if she will come with him, and assures her that he has no improper interest in her. Haltingly, she agrees to sail with his crew.

The second part takes place as the ship (called the *Venture*) is underway.
Ann seems to be enjoying the trip more than the first mate, Jack Driscoll (Bruce Cabot), who is openly hostile to women. In their first encounter, he slaps her accidentally. He apologises to her, but insists that she does not belong on such a dangerous mission: 'Women just can’t help being a bother.' As time goes by, however, their relationship warms. Meanwhile, Denham has told Driscoll and Captain Englehorn (Frank Reicher) about an island west of Sumatra, in uncharted waters, where he has heard there is a huge wall, 'built so long ago the people who live there now have slipped back, forgotten the higher civilization that built it'. The wall is there to keep something out, 'something neither beast nor man . . . monstrous, all-powerful, still living, still holding that island in a grip of deadly fear . . . I tell you there’s something on that island that no white man has ever seen . . . if it’s there, you bet I’ll photograph it.' He gives Ann Darrow a screen test on the ship deck, coaching her to react in fear to an invisible assailant.

In part three, the ship reaches what they now call 'Skull Island'. Through the dense fog, the crew hears the sound of drums. At daybreak, a party lands on the island, and sees the wall: ' . . . it might almost be Egyptian . . . Who do you suppose could have built it?' Denham exclaims: 'What a chance! What a picture!' Soon, they see a group of blacks dancing in a rite that seems to centre on a young girl with garlands around her neck. Denham shouts out: 'Holy mackerel! What a show!' Ann shouts, 'I want to see,' and pushes forward from the protective men around her. Denham says, 'If I could only get a picture of that before they see us . . . .' Soon the Chief (Noble Johnson) stops the dancing. The witchdoctor (Steve Clemento) has complained that the Americans' presence has spoiled the ceremony. The Captain, who by chance knows their dialect, tries to placate the Chief, who is now demanding Ann as the sacrificial object, to be exchanged for six black women. To this offer, Denham says, 'Yeah, blondes are pretty scarce around here,' and signals a slow retreat to the boats.

Ann and Jack declare their love for each other that night: 'I’m scared for you' – Jack says – 'I sort of guess I’m scared of you, too.' Reluctantly, they kiss. Soon afterwards, two blacks abduct Ann from the ship. Jack, discovering her absence, organises a rescue party armed with guns. Meanwhile, the blacks have substituted Ann for the girl in the rite. Now decked with garlands, Ann has been strapped to a high altar beyond the wall and abandoned there. Watching from the wall’s ramparts and gates, the Chief hits a giant gong, invoking Kong, who approaches the stone columns to which Ann has been tied. She screams, in earnest now, as Kong takes her into the primeval jungle.

The rescue party forces its way past the gates into a realm of prehistoric
creatures. Denham says, 'If I could only bring back one of these alive.' Some of his men are eaten by a plesiosaurus, others fall into a deep ravine as Kong shakes them off a tree trunk they have been using as a bridge. Soon Kong is taking Ann to his cliffside lair. Jack follows him there, arranging that Denham should return to the ship for help.

Jack, by lucky timing, rescues Ann from Kong's dwelling. They swim back to the beach, pursued by Kong, who devastates the village in his wake. Denham shouts, 'We came here to get a moving picture, and we've found something worth more than all the movies in the world . . . If we can capture him alive.' Finally, Denham is able to immobilise the ape with gas bombs. He stands over the fallen ape's hulk and says, 'Why the whole world will pay to see this . . . We'll give him more than chains. He's always been king of his world, but we'll teach him fear . . . We're millionaires, boys.'

In the fourth part, Denham is seen backstage at a Broadway theatre with Ann and Jack, telling reporters about the 'eighth wonder of the world' he is about to unveil. He tells the first-night audience: 'I'm going to show you the greatest thing your eyes have ever beheld. He was king and a god in the world he knew. But now he comes to civilization, merely a captive, a show, to gratify your curiosity . . .'. The curtain rises, and the terrified crowd sees Kong standing on a huge platform, restrained by a halter around his neck and chained to steel crossbars by the wrists.

Denham tells the photographers to take the first pictures of Kong in captivity, but as the flashbulbs go off, Kong stirs, thinking they are harming Ann. He breaks free and searches New York for Ann, causing death and havoc. He finds her in an upper-storey hotel room and takes her from Jack while he is still unconscious. Perhaps mistaking it for a tree, he climbs the Empire State Building with Ann in his hand. Jack suggests that the police try to shoot him down. Kong, now at the top of the building, puts Ann on a ledge and fights off the planes, but in vain. Six fighters attack him repeatedly with machine guns, he falls off the building and dies. Jack climbs to embrace Ann while Denham stands over the fallen ape's corpse delivering the final lines: 'It wasn't the airplanes. It was beauty killed the beast.'

Supplying the omitted plots

One of the more interesting aspects of this synopsis is that it betrays immediately the contradictions and instabilities of the presumably 'happy' ending. Whose story is it? Certainly for Ann Darrow the narrative ends happily: she has gone from a solitary Bowery existence to her lover's arms
atop the Empire State Building, and has achieved no small degree of fame in the process. Similarly, the lure of beauty has taken Jack from the sea and promised him a blissful domesticity. But in the end, the relationship between Ann and Jack survives only at the cost of an execution. The narrative pleasure of seeing the (white) male–female bond re-established at the end tends to screen out the full meaning of the final shot: the accidental (black) intruder lies bloody and dead on the ground, his epitaph given glibly by the very person who has trapped him. Kong’s plot has the least happy ending of all. As can be seen in Birth of a Nation, a desired political end (the erasure of the black/savage from white/civilised society) has been represented in a plot that gives it a justification that seems necessary for narrative reasons (the reconciliation of the white marriage unit). For whose sins, then, did King Kong die?

The story of King Kong becomes comprehensible only if we replace what has been left unsaid, and refuse to be diverted by the familiar mechanics of the ‘love plot’. It is no accident that Denham is the keenest proponent of the ‘love angle’ on the events he has brought about. From the beginning, he has explained Ann’s presence by the need for there to be a ‘beauty’ if there is to be a ‘beast’, and at every juncture until Kong’s death, he underlines the ‘beauty and the beast’ notion. His interpretation is supported by the opening titles, with their relation of ‘an Arab proverb’ which claims that once the beast disarms himself in the face of beauty, he is as good as dead. The opening moments of the film, then, predispose the spectator to accept Denham’s platitudinous reading of the film. But, as we learn during the film, Denham is anything but a reliable and disinterested commentator. An alternative reading would suggest that the film is not about Jack and Ann, or about Kong’s actions, but really more about the motives and effects of Carl Denham’s deeds – all the more so, since he is the only character who remains unchanged from the beginning to the end, and is throughout the tale the driving force behind the plot’s events. What, then, is the deeper nature of his ‘venture’?

On a purely film historical level, we could call King Kong an autobiographical, self-referential film, and not be too far from the mark. Cooper and Schoedsack met under trying circumstances in a foreign country, and seemed bent on repeating that initial experience on film. Their early film careers took them on dangerous expeditions to bring back, not animal skins or precious artefacts, but pictures of exotic subjects. Their joint ventures Grass (1925) and Chang (1927), filmed respectively in Iran and Thailand, still count as milestones in the ethnographic film tradition. While Grass, almost in spite of its makers’ efforts, ended up as a more or less straight ethnographical document, in Chang, Cooper and Schoedsack
manage to integrate a preconceived plot with location shooting (to the detriment of the film’s ethnographic value). While on another expedition in Africa, they came up with the idea of a film involving many of the elements of King Kong, although their first idea was – incredibly – to make the film in Africa without the use of any special photography. Many incidents in the film, including the ‘discovery’ of Ann Darrow in the Bowery, were based on actual events. According to one source, Cooper told the scriptwriter, Ruth Schoedsack (his collaborator’s wife): ‘Put us in it . . . Give it the spirit of a real Cooper-Schoedsack expedition.’ Moreover, Cooper and Schoedsack used the same secrecy and tantalising advertising about King Kong the film that the fictional Denham uses to promote King Kong, ‘the eighth wonder of the world’, and the creature also makes a rather striking début on the stage of a large Broadway theatre. In fact, one of Cooper’s publicity gambits involved placing large cannons at the entrances to the theatres where King Kong was showing, with placards reading ‘this theater is armed to defy King Kong’. Possibly, then, Denham’s coup fulfilis the imaginary desire of the Cooper-Schoedsack type of moviemaker, and also the imaginary fear of the horror-movie audience: instead of bringing back pictures, Denham brings back the real thing.

Plot one: Blackness captured

On a more deeply historical level, we discern the first stage of what I called earlier ‘the political plot’. Let us rewrite the plot in the form of a question: what happens when an entrepreneur engages on a ‘venture’ to capture certain views of what he calls a ‘lower’ civilisation? Denham’s adventure resembles any one of a number of forays by Europeans to non-European nations in search of animals, minerals, artefacts, photographs – and even human beings. The moral of the tale might concern what happens when ‘savages’ are brought back into ‘civilisation’ for profit. Recall that although at the beginning of the film, Denham’s explicit purpose is only to take pictures, it is not long until he begins to think of taking things, and soon after, he gets what he wants, as a merely natural continuation of visual forms of capture. A sort of optical colonisation precedes and prepares for an actual one. King Kong cleverly distorts the metaphorical connection between Denham’s journey and the European-American trade in African slaves by setting the story in the Pacific, ‘west of Sumatra’, and yet portraying the islanders not as Malays, but as ‘Oceanic Negroids’. As an allegory of the slave trade, then, and of various other forms of exploitation and despoilment, Denham’s journey might be expected to resemble what we already
know about Europe’s encounters with traditional (and in this case, African) peoples.

The ambitions of the Venture’s crew and leader evoke ideals at the heart of the West’s economic success and psychological self-esteem. The ship, as we learn in the first few minutes, is leaving with dangerous ‘cargo’ (dynamite, guns, and bombs), and will likely return with tamed ‘cargo’ (in the event, black cargo). This transaction is the very definition of ‘trade’, and no less of the slave trade. Hence, Denham’s expedition, eccentric on the surface, is intimately linked (as in the establishing shots of New York harbour) with the centres of world trade, and the very authority of American commerce and enterprise. He has an inherent right to go to other cultures and interfere in their affairs, as long as his plans work out. He is just trying to make an honest return on his backers’ venture capital.

The assumption about the white male’s ‘other’ – other races, women – is that they will remain passive means to Denham’s ends. The venturers make a clear separation between ‘lower cultures’ and ‘higher cultures’, and jump to the racist conclusion that the island’s great wall could not possibly have been built by ‘the [black] people who live there’. Despite their sense of separateness from the ‘native’ population, the Venture crew enlists its aid when it is expedient (when, for example, Kong storms the walls looking for Ann): ‘Good work!’; Captain Englehorn shouts at the blacks. Yet the arrogance of the crew towards these ‘ethnics’, then, is more than just a reprehensible attitude. Historically (in slavery and colonialism) as in this film, such attitudes culminate in the often successful attempt to humble, humiliate, or even annihilate the victim. Recall Denham’s words just after Kong has succumbed to the gas grenades: ‘He’s always been the king of his world, but we’ll teach him fear.’ Reading Kong as a captive, Denham’s pleasure in showing Kong off on a stage platform (in every sense, an ‘auction block’) takes on a certain historical pungency.

Women, similarly to blacks, appear not as people or potential partners, but as objects of others’ stakes, a sort of visual capital. Remember that, despite Ann’s early fears, Carl Denham’s interest in her is not even remotely sexual. In fact, his contempt for women in the film is only matched by Jack Driscoll’s. The non-sexual, homocentric impulses of the leading men, left unchecked, will eventually destroy the fabric of society as certainly as King Kong would destroy its exterior. Carl is obsessed with money, is orally aggressive and visually avaricious (greedy for things to see and photograph); Jack mistrusts women and desires solitude or at best all-male companionship. Carl’s interest in Ann is purely economic, not personal – her blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin qualify her for his preconceived ‘beauty and the beast’ scenario. Soon, one sees that the
misogyny of the males (Jack and Carl) threatens the continuance of a potential white marital bond more surely than King Kong’s infatuation with Ann.

The visual design of the film itself encourages a strict separation and hierarchy of blacks and whites: the black ‘natives’ receive the kind of cinematic marking of ‘jungle blacks’ that we are familiar with, and which films like King Kong and Tarzan the Ape Man (made the year before, in 1932) helped to canonise. We already know what can be expected from the Skull Islanders, as they are coded in advance for their later demise. Blacks’ function here is literally that of ‘props’ (derived from ‘stage properties’): figuratively owned by the whites’ appropriating ‘look’; soon to be literally owned through various modes of exploitation. They are well ‘directed’ in the film, and provide the ‘jungle film’ – no less than the grass huts or the wall or the palm trees – with its indispensable and unchanging background. The first marking is an auditory one: drums. Since the Venture’s crew arrives with the island in fog, they actually hear the island and its blacks before they see it. King Kong’s score (composed by Max Steiner) is a virtual handbook for aural coding, managing to convey in Wagnerian-style leitmotifs the semantics of particular scenes. Cooper was not exaggerating when he claimed that as much as a quarter of the film’s overall effectiveness came from Steiner’s music. The creatures’ horrific growlings and the orchestral climaxes vie with each other in trying to convey in sound the extreme transgressions of normality on the screen. Steiner’s coding of blackness by ‘the drum’ founds (in the relatively youthful art of synchronized movie sound) a longstanding cinematic device – though it was seldom used as subtly as it is here.

Later, we see the blacks in their ritual dance. For a 1933 screen audience, black skin was a code for limited narrative range. Blackness in such a context could not but mean ‘the primitive’, ‘the elemental’, as well as ‘the marginal’, the ‘unproductive’. So the blackness of the South Pacific islanders serves a semiotic function, introducing us, as it were, to the most primitive human beings before we later encounter the most primitive flora and fauna (foremost of these fauna, Kong himself!). The islanders’ facial paint, shields, spears, headdresses, and lack of clothing are physical markings that restrict their potential for narrative action: we suspect that, like Kong, they are futureless: they will either disappear and perish or be forced to serve or entertain those who have ‘rescued’ them.

The filmic marking of the islanders as small-scale surrogates for Kong – whose mass seems to have absorbed the conglomerate blackness of his worshippers – becomes even clearer when one notes that some of the blacks in the ritual have made themselves up in Kong-like skins. In Western
culture, the literary and historical tendency to identify blacks with ape-like creatures is quite clear and has been well-documented. A willed misreading of Linnaean classification and Darwinian evolution helped buttress an older European conception (tracing from as early as the sixteenth century) that blacks and apes, kindred denizens of the 'jungle', are phylogenetically closer and sexually more compatible than blacks and whites: ‘the Negro-ape connection served as sufficiently indirect means by which the white man could express his dim awareness of the sexual animal within himself.’

Merian Cooper’s actual words to Fay Wray take on a new meaning against this background. She asked him for some information about who her leading man in his new project (Cooper was being, much like Carl Denham, quite secretive) would be. Cooper could only promise her that she would be playing opposite ‘the tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood.’

Indeed, in the film, Carl Denham’s description of Kong as ‘neither beast nor man’ might serve as a racist’s description of the black person.

In light of the issues discussed above, one might read King Kong as a way of dealing with the question: what is the worst that can happen now that the monster-savage has come into civilisation? America, in the midst of the Great Depression in the early thirties, was already undergoing profound traumas, and several have suggested that King Kong’s rampage through the streets of Manhattan ‘served to release the pent-up anger and frustration and fear of the millions who had been pitched headlong into the Great Depression . . . a rampaging gorilla . . . scales [the] bastion of capitalism, the Empire State Building’. There were racial, as well as economic tensions in the North, however. Black migration from the South to the North doubled between 1920 and 1930 as compared to the previous decade. The race riots of the early twenties (many of them in the North) still hovered in the collective memory, their recurrence an ever-present possibility. In divergent but equally insistent ways, the Harlem renaissance and the first Scottsboro trial (1931) kept the unsolved question of race at the forefront of white attention, even as whites often attempted to ignore the presence of the black. So for audiences in 1933, and presumably ever since, the image of an amorous black ape running amock in New York City with a white woman he has abducted must indeed have addressed on some profound level the question of how to deal with the ‘cargo’ that the twin imperatives of trade and greed have caused to be imported from the non-Western world.

**Plot two: Endangered women**

A second and related political plot involves the use of the figure of the
woman as a justification for various kinds of subterfuge and violence. As we have seen, King Kong diverges from typical adventure plots both by including a woman on the voyage and by bringing the monster back. Both variations allow related ideological propositions to be advanced. Ann Darrow ('the girl') has more in common with King Kong than it seems at first. If Kong is objectified blackness ('beastliness' in the white aesthetic), then the girl is objectified beauty – both are 'freed' from a lowly state, but must then 'serve' Denham's design. They only exist to satisfy the male viewer's active and erotic look. Denham's wish to see what 'no white man has ever seen' testifies to a peculiar sort of cross-racial voyeurism, ostensibly shared by the spectator he serves, particularly given the way in which he plans to excite the black ape by teasing his appetites with the 'bait' of the girl (the film's German title of the film, King Kong und die Weisse Frau, 'King Kong and the White Woman', conveys what is at stake with greater explicitness than the English). Just as Kong and the natives are coded for their blackness ('primitiveness', 'earthiness'), the woman is 'coded for strong visual impact so that [she] can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness'.

For Denham, the value of the beast and the girl lies only in their juxtaposition, a combination based upon pre-existing sexual and visual conventions in Western iconography – a positioning that for most of the film threatens to destroy the girl, and that does (as the opening titles already reveal) finally annihilate Kong.

But the coding of Ann's body goes even further. She is not just 'beauty', but also 'endangered beauty'. Freud might locate a certain sadomasochistic nucleus in Denham's desire to see the 'girl' molested or at least scared out of her wits by a black ape representing remorseless phallic potency. But these drives are not confined to Denham's case: instances of the endangered woman pervade the history of Hollywood film. In Birth of a Nation and in countless other films, the agents threatening the woman are often, if not always black, then coded as representatives of darkness. If the covert result of endangered beauty is to furnish the spectator with a certain illicit titillation, the overt result, as here, is to elicit the attention – and usually, the violent retribution – of the white male. It is only a violent abduction of the girl by two blacks (small-scale surrogates for Kong, who abducts her himself later) can shock Jack out of his male-centred fancies and into an active concern for the heterosexual bond.

The girl has several other functions on this particular voyage. As we have seen, the film uses her as the centre of erotic energy, thereby diverting both visual and intellectual attention from the purposes of Denham's trip. For the audience at least, she offers a secondary rationalisation for Denham's theft of Kong. The reasoning would be: the blacks (and later,
Kong) have stolen the girl, and therefore Denham is justified in stealing Kong (and anything else he wants to take) in return. True to form, Denham does not even use this justification, because he sees the removal of Kong not as theft, but as a good business proposition. In any case, the viewer’s attention focuses on the danger that the girl seems to be in, while overlooking the actual dangers to which Kong (blacks) are being exposed. As opposed to the graphic display of the blacks’ acts of theft, the film’s discourse completely ignores the ‘removal’ of Kong to New York. The film leaves out, as it were, the entire slave trade, the voyage, and the 200 years of slavery in the New World. It goes straight from the African ‘discovery’ to the American ‘insurrection’.

The silencing of the plots sketched out above takes place on the level of filmic diegesis. One simply refuses to notice these concerns, swept along by the techniques of smooth closure and suture at which film practice had, by 1933, become very adept.¹²

**Plot transformations: Spreading the guilt**

I would like to outline three ways in which the political plots are transformed, and suggest why these transformations are so effective. The first transformation, as we have seen, subsumes all sense of political reality beneath the ‘love plot’. The second engages the spectator in a series of fantasised visual exchanges which loosen the initially heavily coded oppositions of black/white, female/male, savage/civilised, beast/human. This temporary suspension of racial and sexual fixity only makes them seem even more necessary once the viewer returns to more ordinary reality. The third transformation makes the narrative of Denham’s conquests into a story about seeing, and thereby draws us into a necessary complicity with its imperatives.

The rhetorical problem of the monster-film is to elicit the spectator’s guilty participation in a number of normally repressed fantasies, and to project the viewer’s sense of guilt onto the otherness that the monster represents. The manipulation of the spectator occurs through the usage of the coding measures outlined above, but at key moments, film also manipulates point of view as a way of suggesting identifications that will have an ideological effect later. Part of the pleasure of the cinema, after all, is the sense it gives us of spatial ubiquity and authority (a sense that Lacan, at least, would term ‘imaginary’). At times, as in a novel, the spectator is placed in the film by an omniscient point of view, at times by a character, at times by both, and at times steps completely out of the filmic point of view (the spectator
then realises he or she is in a theatre, watching a film. The spectator’s place ‘is a construction of the text which is ultimately the product of the narrator’s disposition towards the tale’. It is not true that we identify only with those in a film whose race or sex we share. Rather, the filmic space is subversive in allowing an almost polymorphically perverse oscillation between possible roles, creating a radically broadened freedom of identification. But this freedom only increases the guilt that comes from looking at that which should remain hidden.

For the white male viewer, the forceful and successful Carl Denham and perhaps even the ‘love interest’ Jack Driscoll are obvious locations of identification. Black male viewers might identify in an alienated way with Denham’s authority, experiencing their identification with his authority almost as a compensation for their submission in real life to similar authorities. Women viewers might not find Ann as ‘ideal’ a ‘model’ as Denham does. Her sniffling timidity and incessant screaming grate on one’s sensibilities, yet they are only extreme versions of behavioural codes that here and elsewhere connote female weakness. The weakness of the female, as we have seen, provides the chance for males to test and confirm the range of their strength.

Ann’s terror, if not her reactions to her terror, is believable enough. Through her, white male and female viewers experience fear and passivity vicariously, although for a black spectator, her position – being terrorised by blackness – could only be shared with the greatest psychic conflict.

If Robin Wood’s paradigm is correct, then *King Kong* would allow the white male to vent a variety of repressed sexual fantasies: the hidden desire of seeing himself as an omnipotent, phallic black male; the desire to abduct the white woman; or the combined fantasy: to abduct a white woman in the disguise of a phallic black male. Barthes suggests that bourgeois society’s initial response to otherness is either to ignore it, to deny it, or to assimilate its privileges and trappings, albeit at a safe distance. But that assimilation of otherness, particularly if it releases repressed desires, is brief, and comes at the cost of increased guilt, a guilt that is often discharged in the oppression of the other. Kong’s ultimate punishment (public execution by firing squad) seems an expression of this dynamic. The ending, then, would have different effects on different viewers. A white male viewer might sense in Kong’s death a cleansing of his previous identification with the beast. A black viewer might not only reject the price Kong pays for his own ‘guilt’, but also would wonder why there is no price to be paid by Kong’s exploiters.

As we have seen, there is a tenderness about the ape, which would imply that it has absorbed all aspects of otherness: not only the black male,
but also the female. The black spectator, while free to assume any position in the film, would need to contain temporarily a wrenching ambivalence about its white-centred discourse – one that connects exclusionary or debasing signifieds to the black’s chief signifier of skin colour – since it is from this discourse that the narrative pleasures of the film derive. Identifying with Kong would bring similar pleasures to black audiences as to white viewers, but it would be less easy for a black viewer, in most cases, to shrug off Kong’s demise and death and to replace it with the image of the happily unified white couple.

The camera’s visual rhetoric facilitates an almost promiscuous violation of social roles and limits: monster/human; woman/male; savage/civilised; black/white. By various exchanges of glances, looks, and camera angles, a space of mixed identity soon arises, exchanging and connecting our (here, the camera’s) ‘look’ with the viewpoints of normally discrete subjects. For example, the film tends to pose threats to the girl from the left-hand side of the frame, with the girl on the right. And the film’s (as well as the publicity posters’) basic black-white confrontations involve blackness threatening whites from the left: the first landing; Ann’s kidnapping from the boat; King Kong’s first approach to her on the sacrificial altar. Yet during the screen test on the boat, whites threaten Ann in the same way: Denham, on the left, photographs Ann, on the right. The series of shots that follows (close-up of Denham; Ann sends a mock scream in the direction of Denham’s camera, and us) exactly anticipates the sequence that occurs when Kong later approaches her (close-up of Kong; Ann sends a real scream in Kong’s direction). Rather than providing us in both cases with a distanced spectatorial set-up, the camera shuttles us between subjective points of view, even those of the monster: Denham’s, and Kong’s. The ubiquitous camera has no scruples, it seems, about class, race, or even species: the need to see is more important, as the film progresses, than the need to separate or the need to repress.

There is one telling exception to this rule: the camera never assumes the subjective point of view of the blacks on the island (although a ‘third-person’ view reports certain events that the white crew cannot have witnessed). Given their absurd behaviour and witless manner, identification with them would require an emotional generosity that most white spectators simply could not muster (perhaps a few black spectators would be able to separate the actual black actors from the degraded roles they assume).

Perhaps the most difficult transformation to resist is our gradual implication in Denham’s optical colonialism. Even a viewer repulsed by Denham’s many negative qualities would have difficulty escaping the pull
of his powerful voyeurism, or the way in which his obsessive need to look at spectacles – to see things immobilised on stage or on screen – imposes upon its objects not a neutral mechanical process, but a deleterious form of framing. The ‘capture’, applicable to photography as well as the hunt, well expresses the dual aspect of framing otherness. The political ideology of the film soon becomes inextricable from the pleasure we take in the very act of seeing. The power of staging a ‘show’ (watching a ‘girl’ scream or ‘natives’ dancing) is no longer Denham’s alone. King Kong, by a rather devious movement, makes us cheer him on. Indeed, Denham frequently justifies his most ruthless wants by calling them ours: ‘the public, bless ‘em, must have a pretty face to look at . . .’

The ideology that the public represents would only be able to use blacks and women as something singing, dancing, or otherwise ‘to be looked at’. We never question Denham’s right to ‘pick up’ the girl, or to interrupt and photograph the island rite, or to abduct Kong, because it is precisely the act of photographing that defines his (and our) feeling of mastery over what we see. And only through photography have we been able to satisfy our own ‘need-to-see’. Yet it becomes clear that for Denham, the line between importing a ‘show’ and importing a ‘captive’ has blurred. Recall that he introduces Kong to the New York audience as ‘merely a captive, a show, to gratify your curiosity’. His usage of the same word, ‘show’, for his first sight of the blacks’ ritual recalls the slavery plot again: ‘Holy mackrel, what a show!’ Black captivity is not far away.

Denham not only transforms the political plot into a plot of seeing, but he also continually changes his own definition of what seeing entails. At the beginning, he claims that he only needs a picture of ‘beauty’, but in fact he does not photograph Ann but takes her (as he later takes Kong) into his physical possession. In a sense he has already reached his stated goal at the start of the plot: he can have both the picture of ‘beauty’ and the real thing (Ann) herself without even leaving New York. But what he really wants (although he does not say this) is the girl’s meaning as an ideological code. His picture must show her in danger, thus eliciting a display of ‘manly’ protectiveness and supporting the connection between ‘female weakness’ and ‘male strength’. So Denham needs a photograph of the girl being threatened by King Kong. In this sense, Kong is both a part of his goal and a potential pitfall for his design.

In the event, Kong not only threatens Ann, but abducts her as well, seeming to undermine the quest for the perfect film, but in fact hastening its production. For Kong’s actual abduction of the girl incites the male response better than a mere picture could. It also brings the threat itself into Denham’s physical possession: now he has not only got his pictures,
but he has at least two subjects – the girl and Kong – that others will pay to see and photograph, especially as a pair. Denham’s obsession with seeing licenses unlimited ventures, but it can never be satiated, particularly in its specific form as the wish to see (and later possess) what ‘no white man has ever seen’.

The momentum of the plot transforms the viewer’s question ‘what will Carl Denham’s venture exploit or destroy next?’ into the question ‘what will I see next?’ a question that seems more harmless than the first one until one considers the close linkage between seeing, capturing, and killing that Denham’s actions and the film establish. The photographers that Denham invites to Kong’s ‘showing’ threaten to restart the ‘seeing-capturing’ cycle, and so it is no accident that at this point Kong intervenes to stop the vicious visual cycles.

‘An ethnographic film may be regarded as any film which seeks to reveal one society to another,’ but King Kong, however unflatteringly, is an ethnographic film that reveals one society to itself, or perhaps more exactly, reveals to its spectators the diversity and ambivalence of spectatorship. King Kong teaches us that the viewer’s need for spectacle and vicarious enjoyment may issue from deeper needs that many people are willing to pay, steal, and even kill in order to satisfy. Denham, although his obsession is particular, would stage public fantasies about generally repressed sexual, political, and historical violations. Hence, King Kong dies for everyone’s sins, not just for Denham’s. The general guilt inheres in the general gaze.

* © George Snead

Notes

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7 Goldner and Turner, p. 38.
8 Jordan, p. 491.
9 Goldner and Turner, p. 68.
11 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975).
15 David MacDougall, 'Prospects of the Ethnographic Film', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Winter 1969–70).