

THE MYTH GOES EVER DOWNWARD: THE  
INFANTILIZATION, ELECTRIFICATION,  
MECHANIZATION, AND GENERAL DIMINISHMENT  
OF KING KONG

by  
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“Our culture, it digests events by making lesser and lesser versions of the original. After a ship sinks or a bomb explodes—the Original Tragedy—then we have the news version, the television movie version, the talk radio versions, the blog versions, the video game, the Franklin Mint Commemorative Plate versions, the McDonald’s Happy Meal version, the one-liner reference on *The Simpsons*. Echoes that fade.”

--Chuck Palahniuk, “A Church of Stories.”

Or, As Karl Marx might’ve phrased it, if he’d been born in the middle of the twentieth century instead of at the dawn of the nineteenth, “The first time as tragedy, the second as farce, the third as a Renny Harlin film.”

One of the qualities of a true, potent myth is its susceptibility—nay, its blatant invitation—to misprision and betrayal and even denial by perhaps well-intentioned yet deaf (but unfortunately not dumb), blind and talentless acolytes. I am not talking about works of deliberate satire or parody here, but rather about seriously intentioned sequels and offshoots of the Original Tragedy which fumblingly recast or attempt to extend the material in such

a manner as to rob it of all its archetypical force and resonance.

This inevitable devaluation of the seminal myth is seen in direct proportion, I believe, to the potency of the original. The more affecting and touching and powerful the primal vision, the more likely it is that any subsequent renditions of it will be shallow, dunder-headed and cack-handedly produced. It is almost as if the supernal aura of the original myth, while captivating and astonishing the viewer/auditor and instilling in him or her a feverish desire to replicate the effect, also blinded the watcher and decreased his or her intelligence by half.

Another aspect of this Chinese-whisper-style meme of degradation is perhaps a subconscious desire to undercut any painful truths delivered by the myth. Confronted with harsh yet undeniable judgments on the flawed nature of mankind and the implacable laws of the universe, the average human feels a need to trivialize the message in subsequent retellings.

True, the kernel of every veracious myth is also paradoxically indestructible, and may be successfully transplanted to different soil by a respectful, insightful creator. James Joyce re-fashions Homer's *Odyssey*, and value is added rather than subtracted to the myth of Ulysses's wanderings. It is quite possible for some modern writer meaningfully to restage the tragedy of Oedipus in postmodern suburbia. Thus do myths accrete substance over the millennia.

But unfortunately, in the majority of cases, new handlings of a myth merely diminish its luster.

Nowhere is this process seen more ludicrously and painfully at work than in the case of *King Kong*. (Okay, we already agreed that *Star Wars* was off the table for discussion today, right?)

The original film of *King Kong* (1933) was, and remains, one of the central myths created in the twentieth century. Its core conceits, scenes, imagery and dialogue diffused outward everywhere into the culture, as the essays in this very volume attest. It remains as powerful a viewing experience today, some seventy years after its creation, as it was upon its first release. It's an organic work of genius.

But in between that release and the first remake in 1976 (when the whole cycle I will describe was potentially relaunched), *King Kong* suffered nothing but cinematic indignities, assaults that continued to strip away any clouds of glory that remained from the template. (The misconceived De Laurentiis remake itself, of course, is generally seen as the biggest slap in the face of the original myth, but my self-appointed remit will stop short of examining that film, preferring to concentrate on the less high-minded, cheaper and thereby more revelatory outings that preceded it.)

In other media, of course, Kong almost immediately became a cliché and a shorthand trope for savagery-versus-civilization. The number of one-panel cartoons alone, in *Playboy* and *Mad*, just to mention two venues, which employed Kong for easy laughs is astronomical. But if his reputation could have been salvaged anywhere, it would have been in films, the medium in which Kong was born.

Yet, amazingly, no major screenwriter, director or studio saw fit to capitalize on the classic status of Kong for over forty years. In this opening decade of the twenty-first-century, when intellectual creations are market-tested, branded, accessorized and franchised to the nth degree, it's somewhat startling to us to find that Kong was so underutilized for so long. But this very omission is as telling as the treatment he did receive in those few vehicles to be discussed below. For the very same reasons adduced above, silence regarding a myth can be seen as a tactic of diminishment as well.

According to my best researches, and discounting such faux Kongs as *Mighty Joe Young* (1949), the character of Kong (or his legitimate son) played a major part in only three widely seen films subsequent to the original.

*The Son of Kong* (also 1933).

*King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962)

And *King Kong Escapes!* (1967).

(Two products of Bollywood will crop up in any investigation of Kong sequels: B. Mistry's *King Kong* [1962] and A. Shamsheer's *Tarzan and King Kong* [1965]. A plot description of the former reveals it to be of metaphorical import only: the title of "King Kong" is bestowed on the strongest man in a prince's kingdom. As for the latter, unavailable to me, I strongly suspect that any film which gives second billing to Kong, placing him under a human who dares to style himself "king of the apes," will not privilege or burnish the animal myth at the expense of the human one.)

Each of these films managed to undercut, suborn, transvalue and debase the Kong legend in truly unique and

awesomely bad ways until, finally, the mid-1970s myth-mongers of Hollywood had no recourse other than to attempt to hit the reset button and stage a full retelling of the original. A project not impossible or unworthy of success—this is, after all, what we hope the Peter Jackson version will accomplish—but also a project that cannot be approached in a mercenary or overly revisionary manner without dooming itself.

But before examining just how the lone authorized sequel and two Japanese spinoffs managed to reduce the magnificent, terrifying Eighth Wonder of the World to a laughingstock, it would help us to very briefly itemize just what made the original Kong so great. Identifying the winning archetypical, narrative, structural and stylistic elements in the original will make their lack in the followups all the more apparent.

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The elements that made Kong such a classic are the same ones that contribute to the success of any film.

Writing, acting, pacing, cinematography, thematic coherence, subtext. And the ineffable synergy arising from a combination of all of the individual elements.

The main writing credits for *King Kong* are shared by director Merian C. Cooper and famed pulp novelist Edgar Wallace. Wallace died during 1932, and it's hard to quantify at this remove how much he contributed. But his involvement with the film marks the only time in the Kong canon that a seasoned prose writer—Wallace produced literally scores of books of all types—had a hand in the scripting. It seems likely that Wallace's vast writing

experience and honed dramaturgical sensibilities are directly responsible for the impressive qualities of the script. The dialogue crackles, the plot is logical, and the scene-setting is economical. As always, expert writing proves invaluable.

The two leads—Fay Wray and Robert Armstrong—were both experienced professional actors prior to appearing in *Kong*. Wray had some fifty films to her credit already, while Armstrong boasted nearly thirty. Both inhabit their roles with utter believability, generating immense empathy in the viewer. Their acting is not Shakespearean, but then that is not what's required.

The film—at a mere 105 minutes, in contrast with today's bloated SF and fantasy epics—moves along with the velocity of a streamlined Art Deco railroad engine. And its delaying of Kong's entrance—he doesn't appear until some forty minutes into the story—allows for the buildup of viewer excitement and for identification with the human players.

The technical aspects of *King Kong*, among which I'll naturally include Willis O'Brien's arresting and convincing stop-motion SFX, are outstanding as well. Such episodes as the fog at sea which serves as a liminal barrier to those approaching Kong's island are beautifully filmed. The giant gates cordoning off Kong's sanctum successfully convey an air of Lovecraftian antiquity.

The explicit thematic issues are artfully arranged and objectified. A panoply of opposites forms the backbone of the film. Civilization versus savagery, old versus new, nature versus artifice, masculinity versus femininity, mass culture and mass media versus individual unfiltered

experience, light versus darkness—these are just some of the dichotomies that the film explores. In addition, the heritage of Western colonialism comes in for a probing dissection, as does the global economic system.

Finally, and most critically, a certain vital subtext, obvious to me but perhaps minimized in previous discussions, rears its head most significantly. It is this particular mythological, allegorical aspect of the film which I suggest is most responsible for the subsequent wariness and clumsiness with which creators approached or failed to approach Kong.

*King Kong* is a film about racism. Specifically, the American experience of slavery and its aftermath.

Kong is the black man in America.

Kong's birthplace is Polynesia, not Africa, of course. Yet the natives to whom he is a god are plainly Negroid. One might argue with some justification that this particular racial presentation is merely a consequence of the realities of Hollywood film-making during the 1930s. There were hundreds of blacks easily available as extras, but not hundreds of Samoans. And one would be right, strictly on the most prosaic of levels.

Nonetheless, the visual realities on the screen potently trump any such disclaimer. Kong is worshipped by blacks, and consequently must be seen as their racial avatar and stand-in. His capture and transport in chains to the United States exactly replicates the grim historical realities of the slave trade. His rampage through New York and his execution by the forces of law recapitulate the exact same lynching that would have awaited any uppity Negro who tried to assert himself.

In the year 1910, nearly 90% of American blacks still lived in the South. Then, between 1913 and 1915, the bottom fell out of the cotton market, due to a variety of reasons, depriving Southern blacks of their livelihood. Thus began the great northward migration which eventually transformed cities from Boston to Chicago to New York. By 1920, the American map of racial distribution had been totally redrawn, with attendant cultural and social upheavals.

Why does Kong climb the tallest building in Manhattan, and not some random structure close by the theater from which he escapes? (The film's creators even switched Kong's roost from the originally intended Chrysler building to the Empire State when the latter edifice passed the former in height.) Simply in order to most vividly symbolize that Kong—and the forces and racial population he represents—threaten to dominate the entire white-man-created island, for however short a reign. The wrist shackles he wears in these final moments further cement his identification with an escaped slave.

Some thirteen years after the start of the northward migration and all it entailed, Hollywood had found an objective correlative, a mythic vehicle to encapsulate the national uneasiness with the shifting dynamics between whites and blacks. And the picture the film painted was not a flattering one to the white power structure. Unable to deal with the realities and demands of Kong once he steps outside his role of “entertainer” (Kong as Josephine Baker, as Duke Ellington, as Louis Armstrong), the whites have no plan or strategy other than to kill him.

Kong is a noble giant, his murderers desperate pygmies.

No wonder this pro-African-American myth stirred uneasiness in the audience, at the same time it captivated them.

It was time to back up and recast the tale in a way that would be more flattering to the white audience.

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By all accounts, *The Son of Kong* was a hasty sequel thrown together by the same producer and director and studio to capitalize on the unexpected success of *King Kong*. The tailing-off of mythic resonance, the diminution in talent and the skewing of the original themes were visible from the outset.

First, the lack of Edgar Wallace or some other veteran storyteller as a scripter was dire. Credit for this script goes to Ruth Rose, who had a small hand in *King Kong* and later went on to write *Mighty Joe Young*. Whatever Rose's talents, she was no Edgar Wallace. And in fact, her distinctive womanly perspective on the tale resulted in a curious feminization and infantilization of Kong, to be discussed below.

Second, the replacement of the marvelous Fay Wray by the B-grade substitute Helen Mack as the female lead could not fail to diminish the story's impact.

Third, the lack of Willis O'Brien's genius on special effects (journeyman Harry Redmond steps up to the helm) means fewer and less convincing shots of the hairy protagonist, as well as a generally lackluster supporting cast of monsters.

To step through the movie is to see all of these factors working in harness to produce a pale, revisionist remake that undermines everything the original stood for.

The film opens a month after the events of King Kong. Carl Denham (still vividly portrayed by the zesty Robert Armstrong) is a prisoner in his own apartment. It is notable that he is protected from process-servers and reporters by his landlady. The once world-conquering film-maker and explorer is now reduced to hiding behind a woman's skirts. Masculine virtues and powers are seen as inutile in the civilized world.

Note also that the first image we see of Kong is that of a poster from the ape's abortive public appearance. Kong has literally been rendered two-dimensional, the first step in reducing his legend, his potency.

At his wit's end, Denham seeks out the old skipper, Captain Englehorn (Frank Reicher), who took part in the original capture of Kong. Denham proposes that he become partners with Englehorn, throwing over all his artistic and professional ambitions to become merely a roving bum in the tramp freighter business. This diminishment of Denham parallels that of Kong. The fate of white man and black man, master and servant, is karmically linked.

Such an ironic, degraded fate for Denham might even seem thematically promising at this early point in the film. Continuing the subtext of the original, the film could have been positing a moral retribution against the white man who enslaved Kong. After all, Denham does utter such guilty phrases as "I'm sure paying for what I did to you [Kong]," and "Kong sure was a hoodoo for me." The

hypothetical course of the sequel could have found Denham making moral restitution somehow for his sins against Kong, via Kong's son, in effect acknowledging the guilt of all whites towards all enslaved blacks. But such was not to be the case.

After some minor adventures overseas, Denham ends up with a female companion, Hilda (Helen Mack) and a villainous compatriot named Helstrom (John Marston). Comparison of Hilda and Ann Darrow (Fay Wray) proves enlightening. Ann is unemployed, while Hilda has a job, albeit an insecure one. Ann's actions are dictated entirely by Denham and her lover, and by circumstance, while Hilda is self-motivated (she stows away to join Denham). And most tellingly, Ann has no visible connection to the savage world, being utterly a city girl, while Hilda is already part of the semi-barbaric Polynesian scene and, most tellingly, plays with small monkeys in a mistress-pet fashion. Hilda is aggressive and capable and enterprising, unlike Ann, and while this portrait of a competent woman is psychologically valid and intriguing, it undercuts everything about the Kong-human female dynamics that proved so affecting in the first go-round.

The relationship between Helen and Denham also undoes everything postulated about Denham in the first film. Denham was too much the preoccupied artist/showman to become romantically involved with Ann Darrow. The thrill of conquest was his drug. But in the sequel, he has dropped any such lofty ambitions and become merely a treasure-hunter and lover. Art and science have flown out the window in favor of money and sex.

After a time, Denham, Hilda, Helstrom and Englehorn are marooned on Kong's island. They penetrate to the savage interior with very little trouble and with almost no contact with the natives, thus minimizing both the verisimilitude of Kong's environment and also the Negroes' screen presence and the subsequent allegorical yoking-together of Kong and black man. And what do they find in Kong's ancient domain? A pint-sized, vest-pocket Kong. Not another lone full-sized ape or pack of mature apes which logically might have existed as part of the giant-ape breeding population, but a sourceless juvenile. And the juvenile is not master of his environment, but is stuck in quicksand.

Denham and Hilda rescue the putative Son of Kong, who responds not with the untameable ferocity of his dad, but with an almost simpering kowtowing. The original Kong has not only been reduced in size, but also in independence. When Denham and Hilda manage to wrap a bandage around baby Kong's finger, the viewer can no longer deny that *whatever* the original Kong stood for, this pale protégé represents the antithesis. As Denham literally says (after calling Son of Kong a "baby" several times), "You're not a patch on your old man."

Even the battles with other animals that Son of Kong participates in are farcical shadows of the titantic struggles that the original Kong had with a T. Rex, a snake and a pterodactyl. Son of Kong gets to battle a large bear, and that's about it. And the realistic gruesomeness of the O'Brien SFX (notable in the scene where the T. Rex's jaw is literally ripped off) are replaced by bloodless thumpings.

This Son of Kong has absolutely no lustful chemistry with Hilda, another instance of his undeveloped, immature state. Whereas the first film symbolized the abduction and rape of a helpless white woman by a majestic and threatening male creature of blackness, this sequel portrays the mothering of a harmless pet by a dominant female.

But an even more troubling recasting of man-ape relations awaits. Like Twain's Huck and Jim, Denham and young Kong bond in a mildly homoerotic fashion. The movie concludes with the sinking of Kong's island as the result of an earthquake. Trapped on the highest pinnacle of the island, Son of Kong sacrifices his own life to save Denham's, like some kind of furry Leonardo DiCaprio. (This casual destruction of the "lost world" that gave birth to Kong might also be seen as the willful destruction of Africa.)

The black man has reverted to ball-less servitude, offering up his life for the master's use.

So here we have the official extension/capstone of the Kong mythos: robbed of sexuality and menace, reduced in size and ego, infantilized, feminized and house-broken, the Eighth Wonder of the World has been reduced to a harmless buffoon.

Is it any wonder then, after this derogatory, demeaning defanging and declawing, Kong would be rendered cinematically impotent for over thirty years, until a non-Western culture adapted him for their own uses—uses which were a further betrayal of the original?

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Whatever potential vital mythic significance a giant ape could have represented in the Japanese culture—whatever analogous underclass or outcast group King Kong could have stood for to Japanese eyes—whatever deep meaning a naïve Asian director and scriptwriter might have derived from the figure of an archaic primate survivor from the depths of time—we will never now know. Certainly, Kong would have had to be repurposed for Asian values, the peculiar American institution of slavery being meaningless in a Japanese context.

But it is certainly not the case that either *King Kong Versus Godzilla* or *King Kong Escapes!* chose to utilize the big monkey in anything other than the most superficial of ways. And by randomly accreting incompatible traits and capacities to Kong, these films succeeded in further bastardizing Kong's emblematic meaning.

During the 1950s, SFX master Willis O'Brien tried to revive the Kong franchise by pitching the notion of a film to be titled *King Kong Versus Frankenstein*, with the Frankenstein monster in this case being a chimera of reanimated animal parts, instead of human. O'Brien's project was never to see the light of day, and it's doubtful if such a match-up would have fruitfully enlarged Kong's metaphorical remit. But as matters fell out, producer John Beck offered the idea to Toho Pictures, and Godzilla became Kong's sparring partner.

Kong's potentially mighty stature, however trivialized over the years since *The Son of Kong*, can be seen in the fact that the ape receives top billing over the reptile, and is declared the eventual winner of their contest. Additionally, this third Godzilla film—featuring the first color

appearance of either Kong or Godzilla—would have been the logical early place for Godzilla to meet his most stupendous rival. But despite these heartening tokens of Kong's value, the film goes on only to further diminish and confuse Kong's being.

Perhaps the biggest false step was in making the film a comedy. The sub-Groucho-Marxian stylings of Ichirô Arishima as Mr. Tako bring any drama to a halt as soon as he appears. This tendency to laugh at Kong was evident in *The Son of Kong*, but only reaches full-blown criticality here. The troubling, cathartic, multivalent tragedy of *King Kong* is as far removed from *King Kong Versus Godzilla* as the laughable man in a Kong suit is removed from O'Brien's elegant stop-motion figurines. (It is reported that SFX director Eiji Tsuburaya deliberately made the Kong suit look faintly ridiculous to counterpoint the more frightening look of Godzilla.)

As the film opens, an unholy alliance among advertisers, a publisher and a pharmaceutical firm has drawn two bumbling reporters to Kong's island, where a berry with mysterious narcotic properties has been discovered. But the natives are reluctant to sell their crop to the First World, since they need all their harvest to distill vast quantities of narcotic juice to pacify Kong.

From the outset then, we have a portrait of Kong as an addled drug addict. Rather than a lusty demigod who needs to be propitiated with sacrificial brides, he's nothing more than a sexless rogue elephant who's gotten hooked on the fermenting fodder of the agriculturalists he lives among. And the narcotic does nothing so interesting as drive him into killer rages, but simply causes him to fall

into a stupor.

The natives here are not negroid, but rather Polynesian or Asian in physiognomy. Again, a practical outcome of the national origins of the film, but also an undeniable visual reworking of the original trope. And a wastefully disproportionate amount of screen time is devoted to their frug-style native dances and an attack on the village by a giant octopus, which Kong must battle.

Obviously, continuity with the Kong mythos established by the Radio Pictures films is out the window here, and this jettisoning of Kong's heritage, however debased, can portend no good.

During this introduction to the 1962-era Kong, we also learn that Godzilla, reawakened from glacial cold-storage, has been attacking Japan. When a drugged Kong is brought to Japan, the two creatures meet in a series of battles that reprise Kong's original duel with the T. Rex, but without the elemental Darwinism. (Seeing Godzilla deliver a World-Wrestling-Federation style jump-kick to his opponent renders issues of nobility moot.) Such a mammal-versus-reptile scenario might have preserved the lowest-level thematic values of the original, save for one thing.

Kong is portrayed as deriving his power from electricity.

Yes, incredible as it may seem, this savage token of all that is natural and untechnological, this purely organic beast whose first nemesis was the completely artificial biplanes, is now just some Duracell toy. The sight of Kong literally chewing on high-tension wires in order to get amped up to battle Godzilla is the biggest transvaluation of

the creature in the cinematic canon to this point.

At this juncture, Kong has taken a giant step further toward being co-opted by humanity, his essential primeval character viciously undermined.

Two final observations about this film:

The frame tale of Kong's and Godzilla's exploits involves the United Nations. Kong is no longer strictly an American icon. But globalizing Kong, trying to make him mean everything to everyone on the planet, turns him into a diffuse ghost.

And lastly, a curious image occurs for the first time in this film, and then again in *King Kong Escapes!*. Kong is secured with cables (shades of Gulliver being lashed by the Lilliputians) and airlifted by helicopters.

I would like to offer the notion that this is a Christ reference, deriving specifically from a very influential film of the same vintage: Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960). That classic opens, of course, with the famous image of a giant stature of Christ being flown above the Roman cityscape, an image that would have been fresh in the minds of cinemagoers around the globe. The parallel between Kong's aerial travel and this image is inescapable. But more important for the Christ allusion is the splayed-out, crucified posture which Kong assumes during each airlift. To read Kong as martyred Savior is not a big jump.

Now, Kong as Christ is a further domestication of his original essence. Whatever kind of godling or demigod the original Kong represented, he was certainly not the meek and self-sacrificing Christ, no champion of humanity but rather an antagonistic cosmic force to be placated. But as Kong fights for the salvation of Tokyo, he becomes both an

attack dog and martyr, two roles one-hundred-and-eighty degrees removed from his initial presentation.

Kong as Electric Jesus. Is there any further degradation he can undergo?

Unfortunately, the answer is yes.

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The spy craze was arguably at its height in 1967, the year when *King Kong Escapes!* was released. Thus we find Kong embedded in a second-rate parodic thriller, filling a role that Oddjob or Jaws or even Miss Money Penny might have taken in a James Bond film. Again, all potentially useful continuity with *King Kong Versus Godzilla* was trashed, as the film tried instead to establish a tenuous tie-in with the Rankin/Bass TV series titled *King Kong* (1966).

The megalomaniacal Dr. Huu (Eisei Amamoto), ostensibly a power-mad genius whose plans blow up in his face with surprising frequency, is seeking to mine Element X from beneath his polar hideout, at the behest of Madame Piranha (Mie Hama), representative of some unknown cabal. (What good Element X will do anyone is never explained.) To accomplish this, the Doctor has built the most logically designed digging machine: a robotic version of King Kong, whose favored mining technique is dropping grenades from a utility belt. When this creation proves incapable of securing Element X, the only solution is to capture the real King Kong to do the digging. (What? That's not the first plan that would have leaped into your brain?)

Kong has been interacting, meanwhile, with some

United Nations personnel (continuing the theme of Kong's globalization). The native inhabitants of Kong's island, by the way, have been reduced onscreen to a single individual, further de-linking Kong to any racial subgroup. One of the UN crew is a woman named Lt. Susan Watson (Linda Miller), who acts as a kind of go-go-booted girlfriend to the ape. Susan's relations with Kong are neither those of Ann Darrow nor those of Hilda. She is not a ceremonial bride nor a smothering mother. Rather, she acts with Kong precisely as Marlo Thomas did with her boyfriend Donald in *That Girl* (1966-71): cajoling, cooing, hectoring, chastising. Kong is now a Modern Male and his love-interest a Liberated Woman. So much for eternal archetypes.

Employing various technologies reminiscent of the cheesy Supermarionation wonders of the *Thunderbirds* (1965-6) shows, Lt. Watson and her adoring commander Carl Nelson (Rhodes Reason) eventually forget about Kong and go up against Dr. Huu to save the day.

Kong's role in all this *Get Smart* folderol is minimal. The main thematic usage of Kong seems intended to be to stage a kind of John-Henry-style contest between organic Kong and Mechani-Kong. But when Kong is hypnotized by Dr. Huu and outfitted with a radio-headset and tools, the living ape in effect becomes the very thing he is supposed to stand in opposition to. And while Kong does indeed rebel and break his bondage, the ultimate lingering image of Kong is one of an enslaved and roboticized victim.

During the climax, as Kong and Mechani-Kong battle atop Tokyo Tower, Mechani-Kong holds the symbolic higher ground. Eventually, due to no action whatsoever on

the part of Kong, the tower snaps and Mechani-Kong falls to its doom. At this point, the assembled soldiers and populace blithely stroll off, secure in the knowledge that a thoroughly co-opted organic Kong presents no lingering danger. His emasculation and servitude is comprehensive and unbreakable, a sharp contrast to his original untameable ferocity.

As Kong literally swims off into the sunset, never to reappear until the 1976 remake, he resembles nothing so much as a fur-covered paddle-wheel ship cruising to drydock oblivion.

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From his earliest incarnation as the supreme ruler of a antediluvian jungle—ensnared by the wiles of his inferiors, seduced by miscegenous longings after alien beauty and gunned down by heartless firepower, defiant to the end—King Kong traveled a pitiless road of inartistic cinematic misunderstanding and abuse. Reduced first to an apron-string-tied juvenile, then resurrected as an electrified, roboticized, lobotomized, domesticated “partner” of humanity, King Kong lost all the grandeur and magnificent rebelliousness that characterized his origins.

Is it possible to reinstate the glory that was Kong—with or without any perhaps outmoded racial undertones—when such a bad taste has been left on the collective mental palate by the three films that followed the first?

Myths die hard, if they ever truly die at all.

Kong can live again—if a creator of sufficient vision approaches his story with understanding and empathy and respect.

But please, please, please, don't let his girlfriend have evolved into Paris Hilton.