

THE MOVING PICTURE SHIP

By

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In the essay that follows, I use *King Kong* to examine some foundational issues in the history of film and film studies. *Kong's* canonical status makes it an important film for understanding how Hollywood functioned and why we find its aesthetic practices so appealing. *King Kong* is one of only a few dozen movies from the Classical Hollywood era that continues to resonate with contemporary pop culture. *Kong* can also help us understand how Hollywood functioned.

This paper is structured around ten evocative images from *King Kong*. The structure relates to the way *King Kong* works: less as whole and more as a collection of several powerful, dynamic moments. The images are used as a method to confront the value of *Kong* directly. Contemporary academic writing on film typically traffics in moral and political ideas, rather than in the sensations of the film going experience. This thesis is interested less in *King Kong's* ideas than its aesthetic force. The images are intended to anchor the writing to the cinematic experience of *Kong* as a means of confronting the problem of aesthetics. Each picture from *King Kong* inspires a short

divagation that says something about what's uniquely powerful about the movies, particularly Hollywood movies. Each divagation tries to examine fundamental issues about the aesthetics of the cinematic experience, thereby raising the stakes of film criticism.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows all about *King Kong*, even without seeing it. The film has achieved an instant cultural currency through the single image of a giant gorilla perched atop the Empire State Building, holding a pretty, screaming blonde. The afterlife of Classical Hollywood Cinema usually occurs like this: a single image, a stray line of dialogue, an actor's peculiar mannerisms, a melody, a glance, a gesture, a single shaft of light. In the disconnected bits of cinematic detritus that litter contemporary popular culture, Classical Hollywood Cinema survives the way most history survives in the post-modern era – as flotsam half glimpsed and half understood amidst the cacophony of mediated experiences. The persistence of *King Kong* within the faltering cultural underlining instead of boldfacing. You must be consistent with your subheading format. Therefore if you choose boldfacing for your first-level subheadings, you must boldface memory signals something unusual about the way canonical images work. Understanding *Kong* means understanding something vital about the movies.

In the observations that follow, I want to use *King Kong* to examine some foundational issues in the history of film and film studies. I admit that this essay originated less from the desire to answer specific research questions about film history in general or *Kong* in particular, and more from simply the desire to write about *King Kong*, a film I find immensely pleasurable. I will own up the accusation that much of what

follows has an essentialist character in terms of seeking to understand what is essentially “cinematic” about the movies. *Kong*’s canonical status makes it an important film for understanding the relationship between Hollywood and history. *King Kong* is one of only a few dozen movies from the Classical Hollywood era that continues to resonate with contemporary pop culture. *Kong*, while striking me as exceptional in many important ways, can also be used to understand how Hollywood functioned more generally. *King Kong* represents Hollywood filmmaking at its most powerfully mythic.

I have structured this paper around ten evocative images connected to *King Kong*. Each image was selected in part for its ability to inspire the act of writing. I also want to use the images as a method to confront the value of *Kong* directly, and as a way to eschew the usual hermeneutic travails that count as criticism in the modern Academy. Contemporary academic writing on film typically traffics in moral and political ideas, rather than in the sensations of the film going experience. I am interested less in *King Kong*’s ideas than its aesthetic force. The images are intended to anchor the writing to the cinematic experience of *Kong* as a means of confronting the problem of aesthetics. Moral and political decisions help determine aesthetic judgment, and scholarship based in aesthetic considerations must consider those dimensions. But the specific problem of value involves something else, a surplus left over after the conventional work of hermeneutics is over. In *S/Z*, Barthes confronted the problem of aesthetic value when he wrote:

How then posit the value of a text? ... The primary evaluation of all texts can come neither from science, for science does not evaluate, nor from ideology, for the ideological value of a text (moral, aesthetic, political, alethiological) is a value of representation, not of production (ideology “reflects,” it does not do work). Our

evaluation can be linked only to a practice, and this practice is that of writing. (4)

In my case, each picture from *King Kong* is meant to inspire a practice of writing that says something about what's uniquely powerful about the movies, particularly Hollywood movies. I want to propose asking the fundamental questions about the movies, the "essential" questions, thereby raising the stakes of film criticism.

CHAPTER 2 KONG ON TOP OF THE WORLD



Figure 2-1. Kong stands atop the Empire State Building. (Source: [http://de.encarta.msn.com/media_121618561_761567568_1_1/King_Kong_\(1933\).html](http://de.encarta.msn.com/media_121618561_761567568_1_1/King_Kong_(1933).html) , Last accessed April 1, 2005.)

Andrew Sarris once observed that *Kong* doesn't really get good until the last fifteen minutes, and doesn't get great until the last five, specifically once Kong gets atop the Empire State Building (Sarris, *You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet* 97) . I don't entirely agree, but Sarris's observation points out that *Kong* works best in fleeting moments, not simply at the end, but intermittently throughout the film. The movie derives its appeal from just a few primal images. The least effective moments of *Kong* are acceptable because they motivate moments of wonder.

Kong's aesthetic strategy evokes that of Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, a book that consists of a series of mysterious images, accompanied only

by titles and brief pieces of text. The book begins with a preface that creates a fictional context for the illustrations: each image comes from a story by a man named Harris Burdick, who delivered the images to an editor, then disappeared. Each image inspires the mystery of the possible stories they once illustrated. *Kong* seems aesthetically motivated by a half dozen or so such images: a “moving picture ship” docked in a fog shrouded harbor; a woman staring directly into the camera and then staring into the off-screen distance while screaming hysterically; a small island dominated by a huge mountain shaped like a skull; a giant gorilla fighting a Tyrannosaurus Rex; and of course, the climatic image of a girl in the hands of a giant gorilla atop the Empire State Building.

Some of *King Kong*'s cryptic images began life as sketches conceived by Willis O'Brien. Merian C. Cooper recalled asking O'Brien to develop a series of sketches inspired by nothing but the idea of a giant gorilla. According to Cooper, O'Brien returned with the following:

The very first sketch showed King Kong on top of the Empire State Building, clutching the girl in his hand and being machine-gunned by the planes. The second showed Kong in the jungle, shaking the tee-trunk in order to throw off the sailors. Then in the third, Kong was beating his breast and defying the sun, with the girl at his feet. There were twelve sketches in all. During shooting, eleven of them were meticulously reproduced in live action sequences (cited by Ollier, 187).

King Kong's mysterious images posed the same problem as Harris Burdick's: how do you turn these images into a story? Fortunately, Hollywood had invented a method for solving Burdick mysteries: the continuity system. The continuity system functions like this: the filmmaker shoots a scene in one place at one time, and he edits it together with another image, shot in a different space at a different time. The result produces an apparent continuity between times and places. Conceptually, the continuity systems

resembles the common avant-garde practice of juxtaposing images from wildly disparate contexts in order to produce a new, mysterious, and often jarring effect. Hollywood struggled to avoid the jarring part.

King Kong seems different. Whereas most Classical Hollywood filmmaking strove to obscure the fact there had ever been a mystery in the first place, *King Kong* leaves the artifice strangely apparent. In Derridean terms, we can spot the trace of the trace.

Cooper's story suggests that Kong derives from a single image of a gorilla atop a skyscraper. The problem of film narration often comes down to a single problem: how to motivate particular images. The problem of *Kong* was how to motivate the creation of that climatic image. Some filmmakers resolve the problem by simply making sure the actors are interesting: hence the importance of stars. But *Kong* is not motivated by stars, and the actors, with the possible exception of Fay Wray, are not all that interesting. As any writer knows, one way out of a writing block is to make the work of writing itself the subject of the writing, and the self-referential quality that often characterizes the dialogue in *King Kong* seems born out of that kind of impasse. How do you make a movie about a giant gorilla? By making a movie about filmmakers trying to figure out how to make a movie about a giant gorilla.

CHAPTER 3 KONG THE MIRAGE

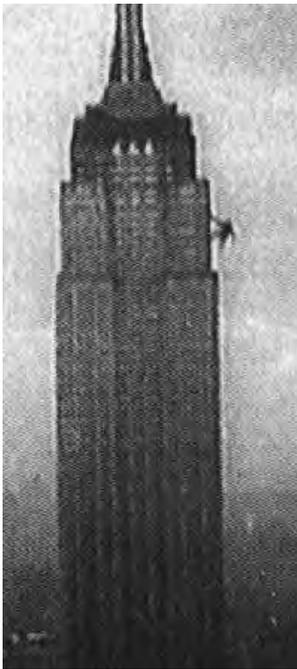


Figure 3-1. Kong seen from a distance. (Source: <http://www.16-9.dk/2004-09/side05/02.jpg> , Last accessed April 1, 2005)

Roland Barthes described a phenomenon that happens in language when it becomes sumptuous and musical. Language retains meaning, but meaning becomes a backdrop. He called it “the rustle of language.” Like the rustle of language, this image of Kong climbing the Empire State Building places meaning “in the distance, like a mirage” (Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* 78).

Cooper's and Schoedsack's intent in composing the shot seems clear. Kong and the Empire State Building comment on one another, as the symbol of the New World's hubris and modernity dwarfs the Old World's God. The shot exemplifies the film's pretentiousness, which isn't, however, offensive in the manner of a late George Stevens film. Perhaps the audacity of the conceit backs up the ideas, or perhaps the sheer strangeness of the shot makes the ideas irrelevant. *King Kong* isn't interesting because of its ideas, but its ideas enable the production of certain kinds of images. Hollywood is not usually good at analyzing concepts, but it is good at communicating the sensation of them. Traditionally, the problem with film criticism is its focus on ideas, when what really matter are sensations. Approaches to film that lump the movies with the traditional arts become insensitive to the sensation of cinema. The history of film studies illustrates this tendency.

Film studies became an accepted discipline in Anglo-American academic circles at the same time that cinema began to look like literature. Art house directors like Bergman and Fellini, Andrew Sarris's *The American Cinema*, and Robin Wood's pioneering monographs on Hitchcock, Hawks, and Bergman all made film history look like literary history. Film history was the story of exceptional men producing profound works of art. Wood's *Hitchcock's Films* was especially symptomatic, filled with comparisons to Shakespeare and Mozart that enabled him to place Hitchcock in the pantheon of history's great artists. While Mozart and Shakespeare do occasionally illuminate Hitchcock, they also obscure him. Thus, Wood's approach always seemed somewhat ashamed of actually talking about movies.

The movies have only a tenuous relationship with what has traditionally been thought of as “art.” Robert Warshow observed that if film is to be accepted as an art, “it will be a changed house-hold of art that receives it” (Warshow, *The Immediate Experience* xli). Robin Wood’s approach, for all that’s interesting and even inspiring about it, seems fundamentally unsound because he fails to take stock of the change Warshow perceived. Caliban and Kong may be cousins, but relations are strained.

Formalist aesthetics traditionally defines greatness in terms of completeness, a sense of a perfect whole in which everything hangs together. But *Kong* consists of a series of privileged moments perfunctorily strung together from fairy tale clichés and colonialist fantasies. The narrative invites comparison with the stories of The Brothers Grimm and *The Arabian Nights*, as well as the writings of Doyle, Haggard, and Melville, but any comparisons make it clear that *King Kong* is ersatz art.

In *Tracking King Kong*, Cynthia Erb connects Kong’s pastiche quality to Umberto Eco’s famous essay on *Casablanca*. What Eco wrote about *Casablanca* seems even truer about *King Kong* – “we sense dimly that the clichés are talking *among themselves*, and celebrating a reunion. Just as the height of pain may encounter sensual pleasure, and the height of perversion border on mystical energy, so too the height of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the sublime. Something has spoken in place of the director. If nothing else, it is a phenomenon worthy of awe” (264). *King Kong* represents Hollywood at its most mercenary, pillaging from Robert Flaherty, Arthur Conan Doyle, *Trader Horn*, and the Universal Studios horror film cycle. Everything’s second-or-third-hand, and the movie as a whole borders on kitsch.

Kitsch was a concept dear to the heart of Clement Greenberg, who used it to attack the art community for over half a decade. Applying the concept of kitsch to Hollywood is always problematic, at least in Greenbergian terms. Greenberg understood kitsch precisely in terms of ersatz art, as attempted art created by people who didn't understand the tradition they were working in or the medium they worked through. In Hollywood, nearly everything was ersatz, and often the result was a movie like *King Kong*, where authenticity was besides the point. The kitsch sensibilities that degrade high art often proved essential to making movies.

Cooper's account of *Kong's* production history suggests that everything leading up to the climatic image is gratuitous, in the way kitsch usually is. In fact, *Kong* consists of a series of gratuitous gestures, indicative of the tendency Salvador Dalí called "concrete irrationality, that delirious, pessimistic aspiration towards gratuitousness" (65). Why should something so gratuitous seem not only pleasurable, but essential? Oscar Wilde insisted that art was worthless, that, in effect, all artistic expression amounted to gratuitous gestures. Film critics like Robin Wood, however, represent the humanist tradition that insists on a moral, utilitarian purpose to art. Thus, part of his confusion about the movies was the difficulty of connecting the pleasures of Hollywood to any useful end. For the humanists, art wasn't superfluous, but pop culture was. The Surrealists indicated a third way, by which the very gratuitousness of the movies proved their importance as moral and political examples. The humanist tradition in criticism sought a kind of art that pointed history in the right direction. Breton valued film precisely because of "its power to disorient." By Breton's measure, *Kong* is one of the most "valuable" films ever made.

Kong is profoundly disorienting partly because it is stuck between three filmmaking traditions – classicism, naturalism, and modernism. In *The Material Ghost*, Giberto Perez suggests that the history of cinema can be understood by tracing the influence of these three conventions of representation. Hollywood cinema was, as Bazin famously said, a classical art. But as Bazin had also argued, in “The Myth of Total Cinema,” film emerged from the naturalistic traditions of the late 19th century. Even Hollywood classicism, with its love of artifice and convention, betrays the residual influence of the naturalist inclination by relying heavily on the star system, which depends on audiences being interested on the physical presence of real people. In *King Kong*, the influence was more than residual. *King Kong* was promoted heavily as the film of two documentary filmmakers, and the audience was familiar with the film’s generic connections to shot-on-location jungle spectacles of the era (Erb 34). The promotion campaign connected *Kong* to the excitement of nature documentaries. Yet, the central character, King Kong, makes the movie completely unnaturalistic, and by making Kong such an awesome spectacle that he overwhelms narrative conventions, the film violated classical norms. Like modernist art, *Kong* makes the audience aware of the means of medium itself, an effect common to the science-fiction and horror film, and probably one making them marginal genres during the classical Hollywood period.

King Kong’s relative amorality also marks its modernity. The film counts on audiences getting a thrill out of seeing African villagers, and then New York denizens, being stomped and crushed by King Kong. Carl Denham, the human most responsible for Kong’s rampage, never gets his comeuppance, nor does the film ever really make him out to be a heavy. But the most relevant point from a modernist perspective is that the

problem of means in *Kong* was not about finding the means to represent nature, or the truth, but to achieve the climatic image. In other words, the problem of means in *Kong* was how do you represent a dream?

In Hollywood, the means for representing the impossible came by *mixing* the conventions of classicism, naturalism, and modernism. Thus, as an accidental expression of Surrealist aesthetics, *Kong* differs greatly from the avant-garde films produced by the Surrealists themselves, like Man Ray and Salvador Dalí, in which the naturalistic conventions of filmmaking were ruthlessly sabotaged and classical conventions didn't exist. Giberto Perez argues that post-modernism is an American phenomenon, and constitutes in part an American reaction against the elitism of the modernist avant-garde theories (277). By embracing, without guilt or affectation, the spectacular and the conventional in a single instance, American post-modernism gave popular expression to modernist energies. Postmodernism is usually dated as a phenomenon that began in the 1960s, but *King Kong*, and to some extent Hollywood as a whole, is one of the precursors of a postmodern sensibility.

While many modernist artists themselves remained committed to political and ethical ends (particularly Surrealists), the critics who developed modernist aesthetics, such as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and Clement Greenberg, considered questions of ethical value more or less irrelevant to questions of aesthetic value. Art no longer needed to express the moral good in order to be considered successful. Modernist criticism thus established the conditions for a post-humanist approach to aesthetics. It is not coincidental that these theories emerge after photography. Just as photography freed art from needing to represent reality, it also freed criticism from believing that beauty must

coincide with moral truth. Photography thus made possible the intellectual conditions that would enable it to enter what Robert Warshow would call the “changed household of art,” because, as Susan Sontag noted in *On Photography*, photographs don’t possess an intrinsic moral value. Photographs are absolutely amoral, and they make clear that the act of representing reality doesn’t need to have an intrinsically moral purpose. By viscerally demonstrating that the beautiful can lie, photography freed art from moral constraints.

David Thomson has complained that film is basically a shallow art form, and while I don’t entirely agree, it’s certainly true *King Kong* is a shallow film. Yet, it’s surely art, in part because the movies have created the conditions that allow art to be shallow and frivolous. All a movie needs to achieve greatness is a few fleeting shadows of the spectacular, the mysterious, and the sublime.

King Kong, like many films, is shallow in as much as it is not intellectually or morally meaningful in a direct way, as the classical conception of great art demands. But the aesthetic *effect* of *Kong*’s imagery is meaningful. Like the rustle of language, the images of *Kong*, such as the wavering, hallucinatory quality of a giant gorilla seen from a distance climbing a skyscraper, have the effect of producing the experience of utopia. There is also a rustle of images.

CHAPTER 4 KONG HOLDS ANN



Figure 4-1. Kong holds Ann over New York. (Source: <http://www.shillpages.com/faywray/wrayfq06.jpg>, Last accessed April 1, 2005)

Imagine for a moment that the above still was all that existed of *King Kong*. In “The Art of Not Seeing Movies,” André Bazin claimed that a single still is usually enough to decide if a movie is worth seeing or not. A single still usually communicates the quality of the filmmakers’ imagination, taste, intelligence, and skill. A single still communicates much of what makes *King Kong* exciting – the juxtapositions between the possible and impossible, the absurd clashes in scale, and the moments of perverse sexuality. The single still above explains why *King Kong* is more interesting than *The Lost World*, *Son of Kong*, or *Mighty Joe Young*. Any given still from *King Kong* should tell us everything we need to know about the movie.

Kong's rampage through New York harks back to an earlier film O'Brien worked on, *The Lost World*, which climaxes with a rampage by a Brontosaurus through the streets of London. The Brontosaurus eventually dies when London Bridge collapses under its weight, plunging the dinosaur into the Thames. The image from *The Lost World* lacks the powerful iconicity of *King Kong's* final sequence, partly because a Brontosaurus on a bridge isn't as graphically dynamic as a gorilla atop a skyscraper, but more importantly because there's no girl in the sequence. Carl Denham was right; the public must have a pretty face.

In his review of *The Quatermass Experiment*, François Truffaut observed that in a scene where a woman "runs off yelling, we don't feel sorry for her because she isn't pretty" (Dixon 79). Robert Ray has noted that however rude Truffaut's comment may be, it communicates something vitally true about the way the movies must function. Movies should, above all, show us something interesting. That's an obvious enough statement I suppose, but it gets directly at what counts as cinematic. For all sorts of technical reasons, Charlie Chaplin's movies have long been understood to be "uncinematic," yet at their best, Chaplin's movies are genuinely great movies, not because they work in spite of Chaplin's lack of understanding about cinema, but because Chaplin himself, as a body and person, was cinematic. The quality of movies isn't entirely defined by how the spectacle is staged, but also by the content of the spectacle itself. In the movies, the most important stylistic choice will almost always be the literal content of the frame.

The Impressionist theory of *Photogénie* suggested that certain physical forms were more cinematic than others. The cinematic moments worth fetishizing expressed the hallucinatory power of certain kinds of objects. In his famous essay, "The Face of

Garbo,” Roland Barthes demonstrated how fetishism could become a proper means of criticism. Barthes wrote that “the face of Garbo is an Idea” (*Mythologies*, 591). I would add that her face was specifically an idea about cinema, given perfect expression. Garbo expresses the intense appeal of a human presence that wavers between the ethereal and deeply sensual.

King Kong represents the expression of yet another idea of cinema. *King Kong* plays with the juxtaposition between the naturalistic presence of the flesh (Fay Wray) and the fantastic presence of the magical (King Kong). Individually, neither Kong nor Fay Wray are as fascinating as when they are together. Together, King Kong and Fay Wray express a radical kind of *amour fou*, between shadow and substance, magic and reality, and the dreamer and the dream.

CHAPTER 5 KONG LOOKS IN



Figure 5-1. Kong finds Ann. (Source: <http://www.shillpages.com/faywray/wrayfp94.jpg>, Last accessed April 1, 2005.)

When we watch Bruce Cabot and Fay Wray sitting on a bed, we can say that was what Cabot and Wray looked like, sitting on a bed in a movie set in 1933. But what about Kong peering into reality from the outside? Yes, that was what a posed model looked like for a split second in 1933. Yet, Kong isn't interesting as a testament to a real model that existed in reality in 1933. He's interesting as a being that never actually existed – King Kong, the Eighth Wonder of the World. Movie Stars can be interesting both for themselves and for the characters they portray. But “movie stars” like Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, or King Kong can only be interesting in their immediate presence within the movies themselves, because they have no literal being outside of their moment

of representation within the medium. The appeal of movies stars is ontologically based; for cartoon characters, the appeal is tautological.

Animation radically complicates the realist conception of film. One way to solve the problem of animation would be to consider film and animation two different mediums. But since CGI technology erases the visible distinction between live action and animation, animation can't be cleaved from film history. *King Kong* fuses live-action filmmaking to animation techniques in a manner that prefigures current film practice.

Of course, animation can easily be assimilated into the mainstream of film history as long as it's understood to represent a kind of editing practice. And the classical distinction between editing and *mise-en-scène* itself refers back to the origins of film, and the divergent historical paths laid out by Pierre and Auguste Lumière and George Méliès. By taking the possibilities of camera trickery circa 1933 about as far as they would go, *King Kong* represents the apotheosis of the Méliès tradition. Godard noted that the Lumière Brothers represent documentary while Méliès represented fiction. *King Kong* emerges as much from the documentary tradition as those of animation and abstract filmmaking. By bringing together Schoedsack and Cooper (who began as documentary filmmakers) on the one hand and Willis O'Brien on the other, *King Kong* represents a collaborative effort between the heirs of Lumière and Méliès. *King Kong* demonstrates what these two traditions say about one another.

Live-action filmmaking and animation longed for each other from the beginning. Animation, beginning with Disney's work, sought the technological means to make cartoons behave like typical Hollywood movies. Animation did not need to be mimetic, as the work of Oskar Fischinger demonstrates. With *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*,

however, mimesis became animation's destiny, a historical trajectory culminating with computer animated works like *Final Fantasy* that seemingly model themselves after the appearance of live-action photography. Animation increasing seems to strive towards the impression of reality that the Lumière brothers achieved in 1895.

Filmmakers in the live-action tradition often grasped for animation's freedom from mimesis. Méliès was the first filmmaker who rejected filmmaking's mimetic capabilities. He wanted to find a way to make movies out of dreams, rather than reality. Later, Eisenstein sought the same thing. He used montage to represent his dreams of violence and political revolution. Editing became filmmakers' tool for getting around the mimetic conditions of photography. CGI has greatly amplified the movies' ability to deform reality. The ontological conditions of photography are increasingly an optional component of the cinematic apparatus.

King Kong feels like an intersection point of these two criss-crossing traditions. *Kong* used stop motion animation, which was usually directly mimetic. *Kong's* interactions with the real world aren't seamless. His movements betray the conditions of his production. The bristling fur testifies to the hands of O'Brien and his assistants. What's more, *Kong* is not fully integrated into the photographic image. When *Kong* stares through the window, looking at Fay Wray and Bruce Cabot, he appears pasted into the frame. *Kong* often looks like a movie image projected into the movie. The multi-plane process used for the movie, a precursor of the blue screen process, amounts to doing just that. The effect isn't nearly as "clean" as contemporary special effects. *King Kong* has to contend with the ontological conditions of photographic reality, and the relative limitations of film technology in 1933.

Kong often looks like an absurd interpolation into the image, almost like a Situationist stunt. Although stop-motion moves further in the direction of mimesis than standard, 2-D animation techniques of the era, the constantly bristling hairs and the herky-jerky quality of Kong's movements make him strange and unreal. But *Kong's* apparent technical limitations are inseparable from the appeal of much of *Kong's* imagery. If Kong's face at Fay Wray's window looked as if it belonged there, it wouldn't be as interesting. The images in *Kong* appear estranged from one another, the way we often feel estranged from reality when we are suddenly awakened from a dream. Dreams and reality have different textures. CGI often effaces the dreamlike quality of film imagery because it usually tries to make the fantastic look like a homogeneous element of reality. *Kong's* technical limitations preserve a radical heterogeneity between dream and reality, and between Méliès and Lumière.

CHAPTER 6 KONG ON DISPLAY



Figure 6-1. Kong makes his debut. (Source: http://www.affiches.org/schoedsack01eb/caratulas_de_ernest_b_schoedsack_01.htm, Last accessed March 25, 2005)

Kong's Broadway debut ends in disaster, as the giant ape breaks free of his chains and destroys the theatre. The film becomes pure spectacle from here on out, as Kong wreaks havoc in New York City. Immediately before the rampage begins, Denham says Kong is getting enraged because he thinks the photographers are attacking Ann. But Denham's explanation doesn't really make sense. Ann is standing away from the photographers, next to Denham. A lot of the movie doesn't make sense. How do they transport Kong to New York? Why does Kong constantly change size? Of course, the nonsense doesn't matter. Good storytelling is only essential when the *mise-en-scène* is routine. *King Kong's* *mise-en-scène* is phenomenal.

As with *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, *King Kong*'s hypnotic strangeness comes from the way the images exceed the confines of narrative determinism. *King Kong*'s greatness only makes sense if you can develop an aesthetic that privileges intensity and sensation over subtlety and coherence. *King Kong* is the ultimate movie-movie, and it is the ideal specimen for anyone interested in understanding what's essentially cinematic about cinema.

Unlike the canon developed by Wood and Sarris, *King Kong* wasn't directed by an *auteur* figure. It lacks a strong star, besides Kong himself. Unlike the Western or *Film Noir*, *Kong* belongs to a genre (Fantasy-Horror) traditionally out of favor with the Anglo-American critical establishment. Yet, *King Kong* clearly sits squarely in the canon. Gilbert Adair once called *King Kong* everyone's 11th favorite movie (221). And it might be the greatest horror movie of all time. But unlike other contenders for that title, like *Bride of Frankenstein* or *Psycho*, *Kong* was directed by two men, Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper, whose *oeuvre* doesn't really have recurring themes and ideas, except colonialist fantasies derived from Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard. In other words, whatever *King Kong* may be, it's clearly not an intellectual achievement. Having emerged from English departments, film studies often contented itself with thematic analysis. But while *King Kong* doesn't lack for "thematic content," none of it is intrinsically interesting. Most of the writing on *Kong* has focused on the way the movie functions as a colonialist fantasy, but any number of films (*The Four Feathers*, *Trader Horn*, *She*) traffic in similar ideas, while lacking *Kong*'s cultural currency. One clue: while on a thematic level, Haggard and Kipling are comparable, on an aesthetic level, Kipling is infinitely more fascinating than Haggard.

In addition to the thematic school, a formal tradition in film studies has emphasized the development of cinematic technique, focusing on the industrial and technological developments that have dictated the course of film history. But dimensions of cinematic technique may not fully account for a viewer's experience. Noël Carroll and others have derided any attempt to go seeking after that holy grail of film studies, the essentialist theory that would define the "cinematic." The issue comes down to a question of aesthetics, a question of what has worked best in film history and why. The value of film theories dismissed by cultural studies and formalism lies in the way they have tried to raise the question of value. Hence, the importance of writers such as Jean Epstein, Ado Kyrrou, Robert Warshow, and André Bazin. In the case of *King Kong*, in particular, an alternate approach to criticism historically forced the issue of value in a highly complicated and deeply problematic manner.

At the same time that the Academic tradition of film criticism was developing, an alternate tradition came to prominence: Camp. Perhaps best deployed by Pauline Kael, but best described by Susan Sontag in her classic essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" Camp often prized intensity and sensation above all. Camp originated in the sensibilities of gay subcultures, but in its popularized form, as epitomized by Pauline Kael (who never labeled her approach Camp, and would probably have recoiled at the connection, but how else to describe the sensibility behind "Trash and Art"?), Camp became a weapon used by upwardly mobile urbanites against high culture's aristocratic demands. Obviously, academia has made attempts to appropriate forms of Camp for its own purposes (every perverse reading of a text has some relation to Camp), but academia has generally been too academic to embrace a genuinely camp sensibility. Whereas Camp "converts the

serious into the frivolous,” Academia can’t help converting the frivolous into the serious (Sontag, 276). Yet journalists have appropriated Camp, many under the direct influence of Kael herself.

For all the limitations of Camp as a *style* of interpretation, its attitudes and preferences get closer to what makes *King Kong* vital and exciting than *auteurist* approaches. In her essay “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag listed *King Kong* as one of the key works in the Camp canon. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the cinematic apotheosis of Camp, directly refers to *Kong* several times. And Andy Warhol, whose pop aesthetics represented an expression of and commentary on Camp sensibilities, staged a screening (in the Empire State Building) of his epic *Empire* (in which he filmed the Empire State Building continuously for eight hours) on a double bill with *King Kong*. While the *auteurist*-academic tradition has trouble accounting for the pleasure of *Kong*, the Camp tradition practically founds its canon on it.

Yet Camp can also be a trap. The 1976 remake of *King Kong* seems infused by a self-consciously Camp attitude towards its predecessor, and the result is a film nearly everyone regards with disdain. (Although Pauline Kael was a notable exception: she loved the remake.) While Camp speaks to us powerfully about the pleasure of watching *Kong*, it remains mute on another of its effects: awe. Camp suggests the kind of sensibility necessary to understand why *Kong* works, but sensibility isn’t enough.

CHAPTER 7
ANN EXPOSED



Figure 7-1. Ann looks up at Kong. (Source: <http://www.shillpages.com/faywray/wrayfp56.jpg>, Last accessed April 1, 2005.)

In *Kong Kong*, the camera watches attentively as Fay Wray gets caught in various states of undress. Clearly, Cooper and Schoedsack understood the exploitive potential of showing a giant gorilla pulling the clothes off Fay Wray. King Kong gets to do things no human character could get away with. The scene where Kong undresses Ann Darrow isn't at all distressing, at least not for me, a male viewer. It's intensely amusing, for any number of reasons. If a human male character were doing the undressing, it would be genuinely distressing. Laura Mulvey argued that classical cinema

typically attributes the active, desiring gaze to a film's (human) male protagonist.

Throughout much of *Kong*, the desiring gaze belongs to King Kong. The fact that the gaze belongs essentially to an animated cartoon character and a cartoon gorilla at that, makes watching Fay Wray getting undressed by a sexual aggressor seem innocent.

The sexual energy in *Kong* makes it of a piece with many pre-Code Hollywood films. The film's narrative drive depends directly on Fay Wray's sex appeal. *King Kong* is superior to its follow-ups, *Son of Kong* and *Mighty Joe Young*, precisely because of its eroticism. In *Son of Kong* and *Mighty Joe Young*, the gorillas have been neutered; they appear childlike and sweet. Kong may be noble, but he also seems genuinely dangerous, and the pre-Code print of the film, in which Kong fondles his captive, leaves no doubt that his interest in Fay Wray is directly sexual.

In his essay "Marginal Notes on *Eroticism in the Cinema*," André Bazin wrote that for the cinema, eroticism is "a major, a specific, and even perhaps an essential [ingredient]" (Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol 2* 170). Film scholarship hasn't really found a way to talk about how important sexuality is in the pleasure of movies. Most analysis of the importance of eroticism in the appeal of the movies has come from feminist criticism, which has generally censured it. It is difficult to write approvingly of film's erotic appeal without degenerating into the kind of sexist platitudes that characterize fanzine writing or much of Truffaut's early criticism. Film studies has discovered pornography, and the result has been all kinds of articles examining porn in terms of "intensities" and Deleuzian concepts. But pornography is not the same as eroticism, a claim that makes sense in aesthetic terms even if it is hard to defend in precise theoretical terms.

The pleasure of watching Fay Wray being undressed is categorically different from experiencing an erotic passage in a novel. In *King Kong*, the flesh we are looking at really is Fay Wray's flesh, a fact that can be incredibly thrilling. We can get a glimpse of what her body looked like in 1933. The pleasure derived from that sensation isn't simply sexual. Eroticism viscerally communicates what is so uncanny about the photographic image. One can, in 2005, actively desire a body that existed in 1933, a self-evident effect of the cinema, but an effect that erotic longing makes terribly powerful. The erotic desire a person has now for Fay Wray directly mirrors King Kong's desire for her; a desire that is physically impossible and utterly mad.

CHAPTER 8
KONG VERSUS THE DINOSAUR



Figure 8-1. Kong fights a Tyrannosaurus Rex. (Source: http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/03/29/king_kong.html, Last accessed April 1, 2005)

The moment when Ann Darrow watches Kong fight a Tyrannosaurus Rex creates contrasting layers of reality and surreality. Despite being the work of two documentary filmmakers, *King Kong* eschews any sense of naturalism privileging spectacle above everything. Yet, the movie's power derives from the way the spectacle of the real was juxtaposed with the spectacle of the impossible, as when Ann watches Kong battle the dinosaur.

The spectacles created by Willis O'Brien constitute cases of *montage-en-scène*. Claude Ollier called it "in-depth montage," and likened the effect to watching a character stand in the frame watching his nightmare being projected onto a screen (192). The use

of traveling mattes and rear projection constitutes a strange instance of deep staging. As in Renoir's *Rules of the Game*, the use of deep space enables us to see "characters" inhabit the same world. Like *Rules of the Game*, *King Kong* encourages us to feel awe, terror, and pity as radically different and mutually uncomprehending worlds appear next to each other. By staging some of their most incredible spectacles in congruent spaces, Schoedsack and Cooper exploit the viewer's faith in the photographic image.

King Kong purposefully minimizes cut-aways, which inevitably betray the artifice. We know, for example, that when *Born Free* cuts from a lion pouncing to the reaction shot of a terrified woman, that the person and the tiger never inhabited the same space. Indeed, one of the technological challenges in film history has been to devise a means of showing the lion and person in the same shot without hurting anyone. By meeting this technological challenge, Schoedsack and Cooper preserved the integrity of the shot, and thus the impression of temporal and spatial continuity between the possible and the impossible. In other words, *King Kong* constitutes a step in fulfilling the myth of total cinema.

In "The Life and Death of Superimposition," Bazin wrote, "What in fact appeals to the audience about the fantastic in the cinema is its realism – I mean, the contradiction between the irrefutable objectivity of the photographic image and the unbelievable nature of the events it depicts" (73). By appealing to the *experience* of an objective reality to which a photograph testifies, *King Kong* partially confirms the Bazinian account of cinema's development. Bazin's argument was always phenomenological. Semiotic criteria proved inadequate to his ideas (so that Bazinian realism corresponds to the concept of idexicality) because they downplay the extent to which the appeal of an image

is always in its potential to *exceed* language, to function as something inhuman. Bazin wrote very little about “fantastic” cinema partly because he seemed to view it as a redundancy. Bazin recognized something morbid and paranormal in the way the movies’ automatism worked. Every actor we see walking and talking in *King Kong* is now dead.

Where film excited the Surrealists because it seemed to be a vision of the future; for Bazin, part of the interest stemmed from the way film seemed to be a vision of the afterlife. Descriptions of Bazin’s philosophy that describe it as naively idealistic often elide the degree to which his descriptions of film and photography rely on images of death. Bazin described film as a death mask, as the shroud of Turin, as time embalmed. All movies, as long as they represent some form of the natural world, either visually or aurally, represent the world caught in the act of dying.

Of course, Kong himself, like all animation, is the exception to that rule. Film catches Kong in the act of being constantly reborn. He only ever existed within the unfolding of time within the film itself. Kong enters into “being” with the exhibition of the movie. The film’s spectacles juxtapose the living with the dead. Kong and the Tyrannosaurus Rex are living beings, fighting for primacy in a world populated by ghosts.

CHAPTER 9 SKULL ISLAND



Figure 9-1. Skull Island is spotted. (Source: <http://207.136.67.23/film/dvdcompare/kingkong2/BW1.JPG> , Last viewed April 1, 2005)

From a distance, one might mistake the giant gates of Skull Island for the gates of a movie studio. The gates, and even the island, look hallucinatory. The viewer can project all his desires onto the other side of those gates. As the Surrealists did.

In contending that *Kong* says something fundamental about the movies, I am harking back to its privileged position in the Surrealist canon. Like Camp, Surrealism was intensely interested in the strange incongruities that characterized both *Kong* and the cinema itself. *King Kong's* privileged position in both the Camp and Surrealist traditions suggests that these two “movements” might have something interesting to say about each

other. At the least, *Kong's* aesthetic amounts to a kind of passionate vulgarity, meaningful to the Surrealists and entertaining to Camp audiences.

Surrealism's important position in film history derives from its status as one of the first intellectual movements to become intensely interested in cinema. For the Surrealists, film foretells a new kind of human consciousness, and thus the possibility of a new kind of human reality. Films of the fantastic held a privileged position in the Surrealist canon precisely because they projected the impossible in terms of the possible. The Surrealist project was revolutionary, grounded in the radical fervor of the Twenties and Thirties. Like other political radicals, such as the Bolsheviks and Nazis, the Surrealists saw film as the ultimate mass communications device, which in the right hands could mass-produce a new kind of spectator-citizen. Films of the fantastic enabled the waking and dream worlds to appear together, a vision surrealists hoped the Revolution would transform into the political practice of the everyday. The gates on Skull Island were like the threshold to the dreams of the future.

The Surrealists came as close as anyone to explaining *King Kong*. Jean Ferry wrote, "what gives this film value...is not at all the work of the producers and directors (they aimed only at a grandiose fairground attraction), but what flows naturally from the involuntary liberation of elements in themselves heavy with oneiric power, with strangeness, and with the horrible" (161). Like Camp audiences, the Surrealists were struck by *Kong's* absurdity, ostentation and hyperbole. Yet Surrealist fascination with *Kong* covers the gaps left by the Camp readings. Surrealism helps explain why the gates of Skull Island inspire wonderment.

Unlike Camp, Surrealism amounts to considerably more than sensibility. Sontag emphasized that Camp was a depoliticized aesthetic. As such it contrasts strongly with Surrealism, which exists in tandem with the wave of politically revolutionary intellectually movements of the inter-war era. Surrealist interest in film stemmed from the perception, common among both right- and left- wing avant-gardes, that the cinema represented a new kind of art for a new kind of human. *Kong's* oneiric qualities suggested a powerful dream logic that could transform the individual's consciousness of his surroundings. Ferry praised *Kong* for the ability of the movie's "automata and trickery" to produce "the feeling of unheimlich, of disquieting strangeness" (164). For the Surrealists, unheimlich was a sensation inseparable from the "poetic." As Walter Benjamin observed in "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," the Surrealist project involved promoting the idea of living life "poetically":

...at the time when it broke over its founders as an inspiring dream wave, it seemed the most integral, conclusive, absolute of movements. Everything with which it came into contact was integrated. Life only seemed worth living where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as by the steps of multitudinous images flooding back and forth, language only seemed itself where sound and image, image and sound interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called "meaning." (178-179)

For the Surrealists, *Kong's* poetic quality produced the sensation of Utopia. Surrealism, for all its sophistication, was a movement predicated on what we now recognize as a kind of political innocence. Surrealism strives to raise the stakes, to make everything matter. *King Kong's* powerful mythic sincerity relies on a similar faith that its myths matter. Camp sensibilities involve finding the passionate intensity of the meaningless touching. Camp often comes across as nothing more than affable nihilism.

Sontag asserted that “Nothing in nature can be campy,” indicating one of the most violent disjunctions between Camp and Surrealism. Surrealism presumed film revealed the fundamentally irrational nature of the universe itself. For the Surrealists, reality was constructed from dreams. Camp hides from reality, often out of fear and intimidation, while Surrealism tries to transform reality. For the former, Skull Island’s gates are amusing as shallow artifice; for the latter, they imply access to a new world.

CHAPTER 10 ANN'S SCREEN TEST



Figure 10-1. Ann does a screen test. (Source: <http://www.shillpages.com/faywray/wrayfo77.jpg> , Last accessed April 1, 2005)

During the voyage to Skull Island, Carl Denham wants to take some screen tests of Ann. The next scene is one of King Kong's aesthetic hot spots. Carl Denham directs Ann to scream. We see Denham point the camera at us, and then the film cuts to Ann as she stares directly into the camera. The scene recreates the conditions of filmmaking, albeit in an absurd context. Cynthia Erb claims that other than the final scene, this scene is the one most written about (153). It's easy to see why. The scene suggests a multitude of meanings. From a feminist standpoint, it says something essential about how the movies portray women, with Carl Denham, the obsessive director, prodding Ann to

scream in terror. Like many parts of the movie, the scene seems to be about moviemaking itself.

Stanley Cavell described *King Kong* as “an artless confession of film: film-makers on location discover that a thing of nature is more wondrous than any film; and when they trap this nature and bring it back, it is displayed crucified” (152). *King Kong* does seem strangely Borgesian in the way it often plays like an acting out of its own creation. To some extent, the movie is an autobiography of its directors.

King Kong is about Cooper and Schoedsack. Both men were adventurers, having fought with the Polish Army against the invading Bolsheviks in the aftermath of the First World War. They met each other amidst the chaos of post-War Europe. Schoedsack was a combat photographer, and chronicles of his misadventures in Eastern Europe involve stories of the amazing shots he got of the devastation he witnessed. After their experiences in Europe, Schoedsack teamed with Cooper to make a series of documentaries. *Nanook of the North* had an enormous influence on both men. Their first film, *Grass*, clearly emerges from the same Romantic aesthetic that had influenced Flaherty. The key difference, however, is the extent to which the documentary isn't simply about its subject, Bakhtari tribesman making a long trek across the desert to good land, but about the ordeal of filming the event. In other words, Schoedsack and Cooper's innovation upon Flaherty was to make themselves the subject of the documentary.

Hollywood as a whole flirted with the Flaherty aesthetic in the late 20s and early 30s. Woody Van Dyke had the most success with it, having risen to prominence at MGM by directing Flaherty's aborted project, *White Shadows of the South Seas*. He had two big hits in a row, *Trader Horn* and *Tarzan the Ape Man*, which again demonstrated the

influence of Flaherty, although by 1931, that influence had been considerably corrupted. *King Kong* represents the last gasp of the Flaherty aesthetic in Hollywood filmmaking. For years to come, many location shots from exotic locales would actually consist of stock footage recycled from either Van Dyke's films, or Schoedsack's and Cooper's. Once Hollywood obtained what it desired from Flaherty's way of filmmaking, it discarded it and exploited the profits.

King Kong may represent the culmination of Flaherty's influence in Hollywood, but it also represents the ultimate corruption of that influence. The set-up of *Kong* suggests one of Schoedsack's and Cooper's own documentaries, but the film eschews any natural element. Schoedsack and Cooper turned their backs on the spectacles of war and nature and instead focused on a kind of spectacle only possible in the movies.

Jean-Luc Godard argued that the films of George Méliès constitute documentaries of the dream-life of *fin-de-siècle* Paris. Like the Surrealists, Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper had confronted the horrors of the first World War, and over time they turned their backs on reality in order to investigate the dreamscape of imagination. Throughout their careers, in films like *Son of Kong*, *Dr. Cyclops*, and *Mighty Joe Young*, Schoedsack and Cooper would make films that recorded the fantastic, the marvelous, and the impossible. Schoedsack's and Cooper's *oeuvre*, like much of Hollywood's, constitutes a confirmation of the imagination's ability to make sense of the world through dreams. By moving their attention away from reality and history, and towards artifice, Schoedsack and Cooper represent the trajectory of film history.

CHAPTER 11 MANHATTAN ISLAND



Figure 11-1. The *Venture* leaves New York.

In *Kong*, we have to wait over ten minutes before the *Venture*, “the moving picture ship,” leaves the New Jersey harbor. And we have to have another ten minutes before the *Venture* reaches Skull Island. Many critics object to *Kong*’s opening stretch because that’s where we most obviously see its age. Structurally, the opening helps create the sense that we are slowly descending into a dream, but the opening is also important to making the film work precisely *because* we see its age. The scene where Denham goes out into the New York streets and sees destitute women lining up for shelter anchors the film in the realities of the Thirties. It also reminds a viewer today that *King Kong* was made for an audience looking for distractions from the despair of the Depression.

A recurring theme in the history of film criticism has been the connection between the cinema’s basically lower-class heritage and its aesthetic vitality. For Pauline Kael, the

essentially disreputable origins of film were part of its appeal, and for Noel Burch, the proletarian heritage of cinema was the ultimate political justification for being a cinephile. A major part of *Kong's* appeal lies in its fluency in the pop argot of Depression-era America. By committing itself so passionately to exploiting the dream-life of the common man, *King Kong* may very well tell us something more important about America in 1933 than John Steinbeck, Walker Evans, or any other New Deal aesthete.

The look of the opening is important. The hazy, foggy images of the New York skyline, and the sometimes luminous quality of the images on the deck of the *Venture*, look like examples of poetic realism. Parts of the opening resemble Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*. From the start, the movie *looks* poetic and dreamlike.

In spite of its virtues, the opening does feel too long. The acting has the creaky lack of rhythm often associated with early talkies, although *Kong* was actually made rather too late (1933) to count as an "early talkie." (Most other films of note from 1933, such as *Duck Soup*, *Bombshell*, *I'm No Angel*, and *Red Dust*, suggest Hollywood had adjusted to sound.) And the actors are either too stiff (Bruce Cabot) or too expressive (Robert Armstrong and Fay Wray). The movie became a favorite of the Camp crowd precisely because of the disjunction between the mysterious atmosphere and the awkward performances.

But the opening accomplishes what it has to, particularly in terms of mood and characterization. The most dynamic character by far is Carl Denham, who is given all of the best lines. His dialogue is both earnest and arch, a sensibility very much in vogue in the Thirties. With Denham, *Kong* expresses the wry, off-hand cynicism of the New York

stage of this era. Carl Denham is of a piece with the kind of sarcastic, streetwise hustler found in the works of Hecht and MacArthur. The film's sequel, *Son of Kong*, plays up this aspect of Denham's persona, with the result that the film resembles a screwball comedy. *King Kong* is itself a kind of screwball spectacle, like *Bringing Up Baby* gone ape – with Kong in the Katherine Hepburn role and Fay Wray in the Cary Grant part. Like that film, *Kong* actively embraces chaos and madness over order and reason. By moving from civilization shown in a state of decline to the adventure and spectacle of Skull Island, *Kong* expresses the desire to escape modernity. The movies often catered to that desire.

One of Modernism's histories involves the saga of men going primitive, either by seeking the common tongue of the working class, or the primordial tongue of exotic cultures. Intellectual interest in the cinema during the first part of the twentieth century often had the condescending, dilettantish quality of men and women slumming for authenticity. Many of the movies produced by such men and women, like Jean Epstein and Germaine Dullac, play like photographed things pretending to be movies rather than actual movies. Film fascinated the Modernists, but for the most part Modernists did not make very good films themselves. Claims have been made for various Hollywood *auteur* figures as Modernists, from Buster Keaton to Alfred Hitchcock. But a more truthful history should see Modernism as the shadow image of Hollywood, and vice versa. *King Kong* produced the effects many modernists, particularly the Surrealists, were after, but Modernist films were defined more by affect than effect.

King Kong, in its insanity and complete lack of interest in being art, achieves precisely the kind of natural spontaneity that many of the modernist avant-gardes sought

to express. Surrealism and Dadaism were reactions against the culture that produced the War, and a move against the entire tradition of positivism that had motivated Western culture since the Enlightenment. The Surrealists, and particularly the Dadaists, wanted to be King Kong, behemoths that would bring civilization smashing down around them. Greil Marcus wrote of the Dadaists, “All they shared was the conviction that the world that they were asked to accept was false” (241). Marcus’ description of Dadaism characterizes virtually all avant-gardes to one degree or another. It might also characterize the viewpoint of the average American facing the Depression in 1933. The spontaneity of a pop cultural artifact like *King Kong* demonstrated the method for expressing the madness of modernity.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Paul Anthony Johnson is a graduate student enrolled in the English Department's film studies program at the University of Florida. He was born on August 4th, 1980, in Jacksonville, Florida. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of North Florida in the Spring of 2002. After taking a year off from Academic studies, he enrolled in the University of Florida and began pursuing his MA in the Fall of 2003. He is interested in Hollywood film and canonicity, and hopes to continue exploring that topic through the UF English department's PhD program.