

The Idle Contrarian: King Kong



by James Como

Short of speaking ill of someone's mother, is there a more provocative act than claiming something is the best of its kind? In baseball, Mickey Mantle owned the fifties, Sugar Ray Robinson is the greatest boxer, pound-for-pound, who ever stepped into a ring, James Cagney, the greatest American movie actor in cinematic history, Vivian Leigh, the most beautiful English-speaking actress ever photographed for the screen (though Greer Garson is a close second). Have I stepped on enough nerves?

Not yet. The greatest movie ever to hit the silver screen is the 1933 *King Kong*. Moreover, it is evidently so, at least for those who can check their misbegotten, snobbish, contemporary pre-conceptions at the door.

The first of those is this: that *Kong* is a fantasy. Sure, it falls into the very broad category of Wonder Tale, but within that it is no fantasy but a full-blown Myth, primeval and pagan, sprung from the mists of some pre-lapsarian past. When it seems to be time-bound, in fact it is Kong who brings his timelessness with him: he is unyielding. And so this myth has a great hero – a genuinely tragic one, to boot, rousing all the pity and fear that Aristotle would want – certainly not a monster but neither wholly a beast: untamed but tamable, by eros, that is, though not carnality.

S. Lewis tells us that a true myth can sustain many tellings, no matter their unartfulness. *King Kong* has had, not only sequels (*The Son of Kong* and, in its way, *Mighty Joe Young*) but remakes, one from the seventies (I've repressed its details), another (Peter Jackson's) more recent (not bad: there *he was*. And we've had *Skull Island*).

But none can match the original. Its Dore-inspired settings, primitive, monumental, and somehow hidden, take us . . . Elsewhere . . . the venue of all great myths: the unspoiled grandeur of rock, cathedral-like cave, cliff, chasm, deadly lake, and a forest of giant trunks, roots, branches, and vines. The Hero fights mightily, in real peril, overcoming genuine monsters (prehistoric beasts of land, sea, and air). All either in flight or in pursuit. In the city he encounters other monsters, new to him, men and machines, but he is a match for these, until he isn't. The hive masses against him. Now, I ask, is there anyone who does *not* root for Kong, the dislocated, fiercely brave, utterly committed, finally dethroned *lover*? A sign of his overwhelming presence is our lack of interest in the purely human love-story: I've never really cared. Ah, salvific masculinity.

Preternatural perils amidst a darkening landscape itself monstrous in its challenges; chases, combat, much physical duress, and horrifying deaths; the closest of calls and supernal surprises (Kong's lair is unmatched) together make for excitement to match *The Odyssey*, let alone *Star Wars*, *Gone with the Wind*, or any Bond movie. (Only *Gunga Din* comes close for heroic, consequential bravery in the face of sheer dread – do re-visit Eduardo Cianelli as the Thug guru).

Which brings me to competitors. I am of the tribe whose Ten Best lists over fifty titles, alas. *The Wizard of Oz*, *Shane*, *Stalag 17*, *The Searchers*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Godfather* (I and II), *The Exorcist*, *Jo Jo Rabbit*, *Psycho*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Stagecoach*, *Gunga Din* (1939 was quit a year!), *Raging Bull* . . . a baker's dozen, each meticulous, whole, gripping, and dripping with humanity, wit, heart, economic storytelling, and visual appeal. Yet none display the cosmic ordinance embodied by Kong who, sprung from mystery, was killed by glass, steel, technology, and modern artifice. Killed, but unbroken.

Movies are spectacles, a feature rated high by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: enter Willis O'Brien (creative godfather to Ray Harryhausen, the greatest camera animator of all time.) O'Brien gave us Kong, whole and in parts, in the distance and in close up, still and in action, but also the t-rex, stegosaurus, pterodactyl, giant snake, and brontosaurus, and Kong's battle with most of those, watched from the point-of-view of people, our surrogates.

Accompanying these visual spectacles were aural perfections: pounding music, of course, but also the man's scream as he is chewed by the lake creature and – *no* music, only sound effects, during the epic battle between the t-rex and Kong. Particularly unforgettable is the beast's jaw being cracked open in Kong's *coup de grace* – and Kong's own puzzlement as he plays with the floppy mandible.

Merrian C. Cooper, Edgar Wallace, Ernest B. Schoedsack, Ruth Rose, Carroll Clark, David O. Selznick . . . well, you get the idea.^[1] Grandeur, wonder, romance, surprise, terror, suspense, sympathy – the sheer *dimension* of these together – are unmatched. No story of this magnitude has been better told, more economically told (almost every frame its own story), on film. The range of interpretations (psychological, socio-political, theological) is a tribute to the complex layers of meaning at work in the film. I invite you to see he marvels for yourself.

Some years ago, I spoke with people who, in their teens when the movie opened, proclaimed their awe when they first saw it on the big screen. “Nothing like it before or since” was not an uncommon response. Really, is there, anywhere, more than *that*?

^[1] Amply detailed and illustrated in its explanations is *The Making of King Kong*, by Orville Goldner and George E. Turner. Heartbreaking is to learn what awful and horrifying wonders had to be cut.