

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Period \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



**King Kong (1933)**  
**Directed by Merian C. Cooper**  
**Ernest B. Schoedsack**

**Cast**

Fay Wray as Ann Darrow  
Robert Armstrong as Carl Denham  
Bruce Cabot as Jack Driscoll  
Frank Reicher as Captain Englehorn  
Noble Johnson as the Native Chief  
Steve Clemente as the Witch Doctor  
James Flavin as Briggs  
Victor Wong as Charlie the Cook  
Sam Hardy as Charles Weston

**Credits**

Directed by Merian C. Cooper  
Ernest B. Schoedsack  
Produced by David O. Selznick  
Written by James Creelman  
Ruth Rose  
Music by Max Steiner  
Cinematography Eddie Linden  
J.O. Taylor  
Vernon Walker  
Distributed by RKO-Radio Pictures  
Release Date March 2, 1933  
Budget \$672,000  
Box Office \$ 2.8 Million

The greatest and most famous classic adventure-fantasy (and part-horror) film of all time is **King Kong** (1933). Co-producers and directors Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack (both real-life adventurers and film documentarians) conceived of the low-budget story of a beautiful, plucky blonde woman (Fay Wray) and a frightening, gigantic, 50 foot ape-monster as a metaphoric re-telling of the archetypal Beauty and the Beast fable. [Fay Wray mistakenly believed that her RKO film co-star, 'the tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood,' would be Cary Grant rather than the beast. Later in her life, she titled her autobiography "On the Other Hand" in memory of her squirming in Kong's grip.]

The major themes of the film include the struggle for survival on the primitive, fog-enshrouded, tropical Skull Island between the ardent and energetic filmmakers (led by Robert Armstrong), the hero (Bruce Cabot in a part originally offered to Joel McCrea), the voodoo natives, and the forces of nature (the unique Beast creature); unrequited love and the frustration and repression of violent sexual desires. However, the primitive, giant ape must also struggle against the forces of urban civilization and technology when it is exploited for profit and returned for display in New York City during a time of economic oppression.

The following was found on the website *The Film Spectrum*, posted on December 8, 2012 by Jason Fraley. Portions of that article follow to give you an overview of the making of *King Kong*, as well as explore a few themes. To read the entire article, go to :

<http://thefilmspectrum.com/?p=5407> .

## Introduction

In the entire history of movies, only a select few are so famous, so engrained in our culture, that we feel as if we've seen them, even if many of us haven't. *King Kong*, directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, is one of those movies. Perhaps it's because every one of us, somewhere or other, has seen a remake, like Peter Jackson's in 2005, or heard a reference, like Jeff Goldblum's comment as his car approaches the giant gate of *Jurassic Park* (1993): "What do they got in there, *King Kong*?"

There is no greater tribute to *Kong* than the fact that Spielberg paid homage as he rebuilt visual effects in *Jurassic Park* (1993) and Jackson chose it to follow his groundbreaking CGI in *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003). But *Kong* is more than just the origin of special effects; it's a cultural staple and legend of Hollywood; the godfather of blockbusters; the birthplace of movie scores; and the standard bearer of adventure, fantasy, horror and romance. Remove it, and movies veer in a vastly different direction.

"I think as a film, [*Kong*] inspired more people to become filmmakers than any other film ever made," said Peter Jackson, no doubt speaking for himself. "I'm absolutely certain of that fact."

In this light, one can view *Kong* in one of two ways. It opened Pandora's box to a special effects mindset of years of movie magic, but which, left in the wrong hands, has threatened to kill it.

## Origins of Kong

The idea came from a dream Cooper had about a massive gorilla attacking New York City. (A) It stemmed from his obsession with Paul Du Chaillu's book *Equatorial Africa*, about a hunt for a wild gorilla in Africa. Cooper always wanted to be an explorer, and found the next best thing in the Navy. He made his life into an adventure, helping pursue Pancho Villa in Mexico, and eventually became a



fighter pilot in World War I, where he was shot down and reported dead twice, spending 10 months in Moscow concentration camps. During the war, he befriended Schoedsack, who was filming battles for the U.S. Signal Corps and the Red Cross. Sharing a passion for nature and adventure, exactly like *Kong's* Denham, they became the best of friends.

After the war, the duo formed Cooper-Schoedsack Productions and traveled the globe to shoot nature docs like *Grass* (1926) and *Chang* (1927), with Schoedsack as cameraman, facing the dangers of wild animals and the uncertain reception of natives. Some even doubted Cooper's sanity, a regular Howard Hughes in his adventurous eccentricities. But that didn't stop them from landing their first big Hollywood gig, *The Four Feathers* (1929), combining their adventure docs with studio narrative drama. All the while, Cooper kept this idea of a gorilla attack in his head. Then, in 1931, he met the man that would change his life: visual effects pioneer Willis O'Brien.

O'Brien, or "Obie" for short, had started as a cartoonist for the *San Francisco Daily News* before tinkering with a new technique called stop-motion photography. The process was laborious, requiring him to move a miniature puppet an inch, turn the camera on, turn the camera back off, move the puppet another inch, turn the camera back on and off, and do this repeatedly until the images created a sort of live animation. In 1914, O'Brien sold his five-minute film *The Dinosaur and the Missing Link* to Thomas Edison, who gave O'Brien the funds to make 10 more films. His biggest success was *The Lost World* (1925), based off the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle book, which led to a new massive project titled *Creation*, about a shipwrecked crew landing on an island full of dinosaurs. What irony that *Creation* was never created, as RKO head David O. Selznick pulled the plug. It was a blessing in disguise, as Selznick blended the project with one Cooper was working on — his beloved giant gorilla movie.

Known then as *The Beast*, the first script was written by British novelist Edgar Wallace, who died of pneumonia in 1932. Screenwriter James Creelman was brought in for a new draft, retitled *The Eighth Wonder*, but Cooper didn't like what he saw. So, he settled on someone who had never written a script before, Schoedsack's wife, Ruth Rose, who had fallen for Schoedsack aboard a ship, just like the Driscoll-Darrow affair she would write. When it came time for production, Schoedsack and Cooper were busy shooting *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932), from which they borrowed Armstrong, Wray (who appeared in 11 movies that year) and the massive jungle sets, which Selznick later destroyed in *Gone With the Wind's* famous burning of Atlanta. Through it all, O'Brien's contribution remained the most important, because if his visuals failed, nothing else mattered.



“O’Brien was a genius,” Cooper said. “*Kong* is as much his picture as it is mine. There was never anybody in his class as far as special effects went ... and there probably never will be.”

### **The Birth of Visual Effects**

Working with sculptor Marcel Delgado, O’Brien built a life-sized bust of Kong, as well as an over-sized hand and foot for specific scenes. However, the majority of the work would be carried by stop-motion puppets. At 18-inches (for jungle scenes) and 24-inches (for city scenes), the puppets were made of metal, ball-and-socket skeleton armatures, covered with cotton dental dam, latex rubber, then rabbit fur. They were also equipped with wires, to control facial expressions, and an inflatable diaphragm to simulate breathing. When you watch Kong, you’ll see his hair bristling throughout the film, an unintentional side effect to O’Brien moving the puppet around. At first, the studio hated it, but they quickly changed their tune when critics said the tiny detail added to the lifelike experience. The process of animating Kong one frame at a time was a labor intensive venture. At a rate of 10 frames an hour, and 1,440 frames for every minute of film, it could

take animators 150 hours just to get a minute of film. If one frame was off, they'd have to start over. The stop-motion animation was performed in an elaborate set-up of matte paintings shot through different layers of decorated glass to create the illusion of depth (similar to what Disney did on *Snow White*). Several methods were used to combine the stop-motion Kong footage with the live-action shots of the actors, including partial exposures (shooting on the same piece of film twice and exposing different portions of it); traveling mattes (loading two strips of film into the camera at once); optical printers (synchronizing a camera with a projector to combine several strips of film into a composite image); and rear projection (actors literally acting in front of a movie screen, allowing a rear-projected Kong to toss an object out of the top of the frame, and then have a real prop come crashing down in front of the actors).

The stuff was absolutely revolutionary, the special effects equivalent of reinventing the wheel. O'Brien acquired a U.S. patent for his inventions, but sadly never quite received the credit he deserved. The same year *Kong* was released, his estranged wife murdered their two sons. (C) His new children would be the young creative minds who went to see his movie. *King Kong* sparked the imaginations of generations of special effects wizards, namely Ray Harryhausen, who contacted O'Brien after seeing the film at age 13. He would later become his partner on *Mighty Joe Young* (1949), and went on to his own legendary effects work, including *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and that amazing sword fight between a live actor and stop-motion skeletons in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963). If a torch was passed from O'Brien to any one person, it was Harryhausen, who would carry Obie's flame into new era.

"I'm another snowball," said Harryhausen, who had a restaurant named after him in *Monsters, Inc.* (2001). "Willis H. O'Brien started the snowball, then I picked it up, then ILM picked it up and now the computer generation is picking it up. Where it will end, I don't know. Maybe in holography, although I'm not sure I'd like a grotesque monster appearing in 3-D in my living room."

## **The Soul of Stop-Motion**

Now that we've all become accustomed to seeing computerized graphics, there's no getting around the fact that the go-motion of *King Kong* is going to look dated in comparison. After all, the film came out in 1933. By those same standards, even *The Lord of the Rings* will probably look fake by 2076. It's all a matter of technology and human progression. When you first see Kong flash that big, toothy grin, some of you may want to laugh. And when "human" dolls flail in his hand,

you may want to laugh even harder. But try to look at *Kong* with perspective. While I agree that its effects have dated, I also agree with scholar David Thomson that the unrefined quality is part of the film's charm. Thomson writes, "Pedantic schoolchildren are sometimes heard to complain that you can see (and feel) the flickering trickery in *King Kong*. Well, yes, you can; it's the trembling poetry of the magic."

To see such a technique, so ambitiously carried out in its infancy, is like gazing through a window in time. Some of my own fondest childhood memories are of making stop-motion movies with Lego figures, and I can't imagine it being done, on a grand scale, for profit, half a century earlier. After 1933, O'Brien, Harryhausen and others stayed busy perfecting the technique for another sixty



years, until *Jurassic Park* (1993), when effects specialist Stan Winston finally persuaded Spielberg to scrap Phil Tippett's stop-motion and create his dinosaurs entirely with CGI.

"My one precedent for *Jurassic Park* was *King Kong*," Spielberg said. "As a young person, that scene [where Kong fights a T-Rex] had no peer. And I think that was my high-water mark for imagining what it would be like to do a *King Kong* of today. Certainly I don't consider *Jurassic Park* a classic the way *King Kong* is a classic, but I was so inspired by *King Kong* that that was one of the reasons I think I wanted to make *Jurassic Park*."

If you're old enough to have seen *Jurassic Park* upon release, remember how shockingly life-like the dinosaurs looked? Imagine the reaction a '30s audience had to *King Kong*. For the first time, they saw a movie that couldn't be told on stage, realizing the film medium was truly its own beast. They looked up on that screen and saw Kong fighting dinosaurs, disposing of humans, smashing train cars and scaling buildings. Those who saw the 1938 re-release noticed some changes, thanks to the newly-arrived Production Code: Kong no longer peeled off Wray's clothes; he no longer chewed a New Yorker or dropped another from the Empire State; the Brontosaurus now killed only three victims rather than five; and the giant spider scene was gone completely. All these scenes have since been restored, but the fact that censors even bothered to change them shows just how life-like the effects seemed at the time.

"There's something about the way the special effects work in *King Kong* himself, the way he moves, that made him very life-like, and still for me, of course I'm older, but I still prefer that move over the digital moves," Martin Scorsese says. "It gave him a soul."

## Social Commentary

For a film so revolutionary in the making of movies, it's only fitting the film itself be about making a movie. After Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), *King Kong* remains one of the very first "movies about movies," and one of the first looks at the mad filmmaker who will stop at nothing to make the film he envisions, even endangering his crew. As Denham says, "*I'd'a got a swell picture of a charging rhino, but the cameraman got scared. The damned fool. I was right there with a rifle.*" Such stuff was pulled from the filmmakers' own experience, as Schoedsack came face to face with a tiger and kept the camera steady in *Chang*. It's Schoedsack and Cooper's charm that they can take their own adventurous attitudes, fuse them into the character Denham, and keep a sense of humor about it.

In addition to a commentary on filmmaking, *Kong* also lays out a ton of social themes that are easy to overlook. First, we get *Man vs. Nature*. Just as Dr. Frankenstein paid a price for trying to play God, so does Denham for thinking he can harness the wild. This also introduces the theme of *Free vs. Imprisoned*. Seeing as Kong is taken from his native land, placed in chains, and shot out of fear, he becomes the symbol of the oppressed and a warning against the lynchings of blacks taking place even as *Kong* was in theaters. Above all, the most obvious theme is *Modern vs. Primitive*. After all, the tagline reads: "*A Monster of Creation's Dawn Breaks Loose in Our World Today!*" The film begs the question of

whether modernization is always a good thing; if we lose some innate good in the process. *Rolling Stone* critic Peter Travers put it best: “Naked, alone in the big city, in heat for a troubled blonde and brought down by technology, Kong is the definitive wronged male of the cinema century.”

The film is also interesting to consider from the perspective of its Great Depression release. Wray’s character is a poor woman, wandering the streets of ’30s New York and stealing an apple just so she can eat. When she agrees to participate in the film, it’s with the hope that she will not only achieve fame, but also escape her depressed existence. Many ’30s moviegoers followed suit, plopping down money they didn’t even have for tickets to see *Kong* and escape from their own everyday world. Like Wray, they were terrified by the experience, and RKO was thrilled to see them coming through the turnstiles.





## Comprehension Questions

1. In the opening shot, we see a fog-enveloped wharf, and hear the conversation between two men. What mood is evoked in this opening scene, and how is the scene used to set up the main premise and idea of the film's story?
2. This film is set in present day 1933. This is during The Great Depression. Briefly describe people's lives during this time. Keeping this in mind, why do you think Ann stole the apple, and why was she willing to go along on the voyage to make Denham's movie?
3. What is the legend the sailors share about Skull Island? Upon their landing on the island, what do the film crew discover? What is happening?

4. Why do the natives take an interest in Ann? What are they planning to do with her once they capture her?
  
5. Why does Kong fight the dinosaur? Do his motivations have anything to do with Ann? How does the director help us see Kong's feelings for Ann deepen? What scene cements that idea for you?
  
6. During the jungle scene, several of the crew members are killed. Why do you think that their deaths are so quickly forgotten by Denham? How would you describe Denham? How does his character traits propel the further actions that take place in New York City?
  
7. In the theater, Kong is revealed to the audience and the press. What causes Kong to break his chains? What does he think is happening?

8. In the Peter Jackson remake of *King Kong* (2005), Ann is protective of Kong, and even sympathetic to him? Would you say the same is true of the 1933 portrayal of Ann? Why or why not?

9. What does Denham say at the end of the movie? Why does he say that? Do you agree with this? Why?

## Discussion Questions

1. Ann is a rather flat and one-dimensional character. Does her character fulfill the audience's (and your) expectations for a female lead in a horror film? Explain. Does this film meet your overall expectations for the horror genre? What are those expectations?
2. This film could be viewed as a beauty and the beast fairytale. Why and how did beauty kill the beast in the movie? What do the two archetypes of beauty and the beast (an archetype is a type of character with traits that survive over time) tell you about the power and role of the masculine and feminine in society? Is there a beast in all of us? Did the beast need to die? Why or why not?
3. Denham is probably the most well developed character in the film. Write a brief character sketch describing him. List some of his character flaws that contribute to the death of King Kong at the end of the film. How does he view the animal? What was your personal reaction to Mr. Denham?

