PATRIARCHAL-INDUSTRIAL ANXIETY AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED (ECO-CRITICAL) SIMIAN MONSTER

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Abstract

Apocalyptic monkey monsters just keep coming back. Many of the stories have been subject to numerous remakes that date from the early-mid twentieth century, into the new millennium with myriad recurring visions of the simian monster, including Murders in the Rue Morgue *(1917, 1932, 1986),* King Kong *(1933, 1976, 2005),* Planet of the Apes *(1968, 2001, 2011), and "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" (1963, 1983) to name just a few. And in the new millennium, Peter Jackson's* Kong *(2005) participates in a rejuvenation of the giant monster movie cycles. In* Living in the End Times *(2011), Slavoj Žižek states "one of the best ways to detect shifts in the ideological constellation is to compare consecutive remakes of the same story" (Žižek,* End Times*, 61). By doing so, and in conjunction with his articulation of the socio-psychological mechanics of fantasy, Žižek introduces an analytical framework through which to examine the intermittent return of the simian monster to popular cinema. As suggested here, the simian monster recurs not only because it is an effective uncanny receptacle for capitalist Othering, but also because it represents a larger patriarchal anxiety regarding the monstrous threat of nature and its conquest. Jackson's* Kong*, for example, seems to have less to do with the atomic fear of the 1950s giant monster movie cycle with which it participates than with eco-disaster anxieties. Following the trajectory of both the films and their surrounding discourse, this article seeks to demonstrate that these films can be read as the evolution of nearly a century of eco-anxieties signified by cinematic simian monsters into increasingly explicit fantasies of redemption from the fear of ecological disaster that is embedded in the repressed contradictions of an aggressively industrial and patriarchal capitalist culture.*

Monkey monsters just keep coming back. Since Darwin made the claim in 1871 that "There can ... hardly be a doubt that man is an off-shoot from the Old World Simian stem,"[1] Western narrative fantasies have been replete with simian monsters.[2] Myriad recurring visions of the simian monster have been subject to numerous remakes dating from the early-mid twentieth century, into the new millennium, including *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1917, 1932, 1986), *King Kong* (1933, 1976, 2005), *Planet of the Apes* (1968, 2001, 2011), and *Nightmare at 20,000 Feet* (1963, 1983) to name just a few. In "Several Exceptional Forms of Primates," Rebecca Bishop observes this phenomenon and states that "It is ... useful to ask why these representations of apes, the subject of both a television series and a twenty-first century remake, have been so popular."[3] In this article, I will trace the evolution of psychoanalytical theories of cinema analysis as applied to recurrent manifestations of the simian monster to demonstrate how these theories have proven inadequate in explaining its abiding return, which is better interpreted as a recurrent phenomenon of eco-anxiety. As Freud points out, contemporary civilization

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[1] Charles R. Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1874), http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/published/1874_Descent_F944/1874_Descent_F944.html, 153 (accessed 15 July 2015).

[2] Even pre-dating Darwin's claim is Edgar Allan Poe's orangutan monster in his *Murders in the Rue Morgue*. Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan*, with its proto-human primates, first appeared in text 1912 and was followed by a litany of cinematic realizations of its premise.

[3] Rebecca Bishop, "'Several Exceptional Forms of Primates': Simian Cinema," *Science Fiction Studies* (2008): 244.

is particularly patriarchal,[4] and it is the immanence of patriarchy with industrial capitalism, in concert with the revelations of psychoanalytic analysis of cinematic simian monsters, that indicate a particularly eco-critical vein underpinning the recurrence of their narratives. Under the conditions of patriarchal culture and increasingly globalized industrial capitalism, while both Marx and Freud have focused on the alienation of independent human subjects, there resides an undercurrent of ecological destruction replete with patriarchal tensions that more subtly informs these narrative constructions from their earliest incarnation.

Through the application of theory articulated by Savoj Žižek, I will demonstrate how Peter Jackson's *King Kong* can be read as the realization of nearly a century of increasingly explicit eco-anxieties signified by cinematic simian monsters. The simian monster recurs not only because it is an effective uncanny receptacle for capitalist-cultural Othering, but because it represents a larger patriarchal anxiety regarding the monstrous threat of nature to its industrial monoliths. The simian monster as a symbol of eco-catastrophe allows for a fantasy of its conquest that, according to Slavoj Žižek, works to obfuscate the true horror of the situation and narratively alleviate an audience's anxieties regarding their participation with the economic machine that produced the currently imminent conditions of eco-catastrophe. Overall, I will argue that Žižek's radical theoretical contributions call for a particular re-examination of the simian monster as both an example of a long-standing eco-anxiety regarding capitalist-industrial desecration of the global ecology and of the patriarchal cultural constructs in which this anxi-

[4] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. A. A. Brill (La Vergne, Tennessee: Lightning Source, 1996), 130-1.

ety is embedded. This contribution effectively works to elucidate at least one clear explanation for the abiding return of the simian monster.

Theoretical Framework:

In order to facilitate this analysis, this paper will be organized into three sections. The first will indicate the various bodies of psychoanalytical and cultural theory to which the analyses of both the critical discourse and the film narratives will be subjected. The second section will survey the critical discourse regarding cinematic simian monsters to investigate the extent to which a largely psychoanalytical approach has considered eco-anxiety in any way. The final section will add a Žižekian approach to eco-criticism to these analyses in order to demonstrate the ways Žižek's contribution to cinema theory might be used to analyze these films as manifestations of a culturally recurrent eco-anxiety. This last section will take Žižek's understanding of the ideological revelation available in analyses of cinematic remakes as its point of departure, and his articulation of the socio-psychological workings of fantasy as its governing theoretical paradigm. Indeed, as I will show, following Fabio Vighi's articulation of Žižek's Lacanian-Hegelian dialectical approach, both simian monster movies and Žižekian analyses seem to mutually implicate each other and indicate a valid retroactive recoding of their dominant interpretations.

In *Living in the End Times*, Žižek states that "the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. Its 'four riders of the apocalypse' are comprised [in part] by ecological crises."[5] He then offers an effective lens through which to examine the intermittent return of the simian

[5] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2011), x.

monster to popular fantasy cinema, noting that: "one of the best ways to detect shifts in the ideological constellation is to compare consecutive remakes of the same story."[6] However, just as important as *changes* between remakes of the same story are, certain conventional underpinnings remain constant. In *Dreadful Pleasures*, for instance, James Twitchell insists that such recurrence is critically paramount. "You *search for what is stable and repeated* [my emphasis]; you neglect what is 'artistic' and 'original.'"[7] Adopting this lens, the "critic's first job in explaining the fascination of horror is not to fix the images at their every appearance but [to] try to understand why they have been crucial enough to pass along."[8]

Building upon Žižek's analytical methodology, Fabio Vighi adds a psychoanalytical understanding that lends itself to a retroactive eco-critical interpretation of simian monsters. "When watching [a] film, all of a sudden we perceive a detail of the story that 'sticks out,' thus triggering in our heads a 'signifying chain,' seamlessly (re)arranging the meaning of the story."[9] Even more topically, invoking both Marxist theory and a Darwinian evolution, Žižek claims "that history has to be read retroactively: the anatomy of man offers the key to the anatomy of ape, as Marx puts it."[10] With the ex-

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[6] Ibid., 61

[7] James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 84

[8] Ibid.

[9] Fabio Vighi, "Contingent Encounters and Retroactive Signification: Zooming in on the Dialectical Core of Žižek's Film Criticism," in *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader*, eds. Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 135-6.

[10] Slavoj Žižek, "From Courtly Love to *The Crying Game*," *New Left Review* 1 (1993): 95.

ample of simian monsters, this always-already present signifying chain is deeply informed by an anxiety regarding the industrial destruction of the natural environment, which, in turn, calls for a Žižekian fantasy that allows us to simultaneously stabilize and vanquish its horror.

According to Žižek, fantasy works as a socio-psychological mechanism.[11] As he states, "fantasy conceals [the] horror [of reality], yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference."[12] Žižek further explains the mechanics of his theory of the way two types of mutually inter-dependent fantasy interact in the process of ideological construction.

> Fantasy 1 and fantasy 2, symbolic fiction and a spectral apparition, are thus two sides of the same coin: insofar as a community experiences its reality as regulated or structured by fantasy 1, it has to disavow its inherent impossibility, the antagonism at its very heart—and fantasy 2 gives body to this disavowal. In short, the success of fantasy 1 in maintaining its hold depends on the effectiveness of fantasy 2.[13]

Vighi's application of these modes of fantasy brings his analysis directly into the province of simian monsters as eco-catastrophe: "In relation to how Zižek reads disaster movies, we can bring back the two fantasies previously introduced: the fantasy about disasters, which of course is contextually true

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[11] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 7.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 685-6.

(it is embedded in our fragile life-world), is framed by an uncanny fantasmatic symptom, which is Real in that it defies interpretation."[14] Here, Vighi uses the word "fantasmatic" in the Žižekian sense to indicate a socially shared "lie" that "covers up a certain gap in [the] consistency" of reality.[15] In the context of simian monster films, Fantasy 1 is two-tiered; it manifests as an apocalyptic denial[16] of the Real of catastrophic climate change in the form of a critical focus on an Oedipal narrative. This intrusion of the Real, described as a symptom, can be read as the recurrent eco-catastrophic theme inherent to simian monster narratives in which the monster blurs the boundary between humanity and nature. Fantasy 2, the spectral apparition presented by the films themselves, provides a vision of the conquest of nature by patriarchal-industrial civilization to support Fantasy 1. The fantasies embodied in Kong films are simultaneously built around notions of the patriarchy, as well as dealing with themes of eco-trauma and redemption. The *Kong* narratives in particular depend upon a strict division of nature and civilization that recurs visually and thematically in all the movies in a process whereby the repression of otherwise natural human desire is displaced onto external nature to be blamed and destroyed. Ironically, Žižek makes an otherwise bewildering contention in the middle of *End Times* that seems counter-intuitive. He contradicts "those critics of patriarchy who attack it as

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[14] Vighi, "Contingent Encounters," 143.

[15] Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fiennes (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2012), DVD.

[16] Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, xi-xii. Following Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's "famous scheme of the five stages of grief," comprised of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, Zizek insists that "One can discern the same five figures in the way our social consciousness attempts to deal with the forthcoming apocalypse. The first reaction is one of ideological denial: there is no fundamental disorder."

if it were still a hegemonic position."[17] However, it is important to note that this seemingly reactionary contradiction is presented as the failings of an extant system, not an extinct one. "In other words, *the critical claim that patriarchal ideology continues to be the hegemonic ideology* is the form of *the hegemonic ideology of our times* – its function is to enable us to evade the deadlock of the hedonistic permissiveness which is actually hegemonic."[18] Under the duress of its own threatened extinction, it is not surprising that the patriarchal anxieties embedded in industrial capitalism would find expression in cinematic fantasy.

In addition to Žižek's theory of the socio-psychological workings of cinematic fantasy, two theoretical concepts of paramount importance to both this notion of fantasy and to this analysis include the return of notions of repression and the uncanny, concepts which are deeply embedded in Žižek's analyses, especially in *The Plague of Fantasies*. The concepts of repression and the return of the repressed have undergone myriad interpretation since their earliest articulations by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Moses and Monotheism* respectively. Perhaps most salient for our discussion are the formulations afforded by horror cinema theorists Vivian Sobchack and Robin Wood. Sobchack reports that "Repression is the psychoanalytic term for the 'active process of keeping out and ejecting, banishing from consciousness, ideas or impulses that are unacceptable to it'. An attempt is made to push the entire painful and emotionally charged idea—the whole being called an 'instinct-presentation'—into the realm of the

[17] Ibid., 49.

[18] Ibid., 50

unconscious."[19] Building on the psychoanalytic revisions of Gad Horowitz, Robin Wood describes how "Surplus repression ... is specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture."[20] Such communal repression results in a form of Othering in which otherwise undesirable identities are rendered monstrous to the ego, while still running rampant as forms of first-person identity within the id.[21] The excessive nature of this repression precludes healthy cathexis in the process of sublimation and results in its return, although projected outward and made monstrous, by the psychic mechanism of the censor between the id and the ego, in the form of artistic, frequently uncanny, narrative representation. Unsurprisingly, Freud describes the uncanny in a Darwinian language of animal instinct, through which he also articulates its repetitious aspect: "it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses."[22] Inadvertently anticipating the abiding return of the simian monster, he concludes that "there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through

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[19] Vivian Sobchack, "The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film," in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1990), 109.

[20] Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Planks of Reason*, eds. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Lanham, ML: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 108.

[21] Ibid., 113.

[22] Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 942.

several consecutive generations."[23] And since, further, "the class of the uncanny which proceeds from repressed complexes is the more resistant,"[24] the uncanny double-entendre of the simian monster as both human nature (patriarchal/self-destructive) and sublime nature (elemental/destructive) explains its abiding return as the return of the repressed self-destructive patriarchal authority: the return of the return of the repressed.

According to Vighi, these are the very elements within Žižek's work that encourage an eco-critical reading of these films, "since the initial symbolization is always-already coincidental with the final act of interpretive recalibration; in other words, the meaning of every film is decided retroactively. The only point to add is that symbolization (and, with it, repression) comes first, simply because the substantial 'excess qua lack' is given to us only as a disruptive 'return of the repressed'—as a symptom."[25] Symptomatic evidence mounts up in these simian monster movies, which virtually insist upon a retroactive eco-critical read of the films, partially demonstrated through Freud's psychoanalytical premises (that were contemporary with the earliest incarnations of the cinematic simian monster) which inform Žižek's work.

Regression and its Discontents:

Because of the simian monster's biological proximity to primate humans, it becomes a particularly unsettling uncanny Other, transgressing the

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[23] Ibid., 940.

[24] Ibid., 952.

[25] Vighi, "Contingent," 138.

taboo boundary between human and animal more effectively than any other non-humanoid horror film monster, while simultaneously locating humanity as both part of the nature so ravaged, and the very monster that has produced the threat. Freud foregrounds an anxiety based on the concept of the return of the repressed that specifically references repressed animal instincts, which he describes as a view "that everything survives in some way or other, and is capable under certain conditions of being brought to light again, as, for instance, when regression extends back far enough."[26] In the Darwinian terms Freud frequently invokes, if regression extends far enough into our phylogenetic instincts, human subjectivity comes into direct contact with its simian origins. Žižek states that "what is unbearable in my encounter with the object[-monster] is that in it, I see myself in the guise of suffering object that reduces me to a fascinated passive observer in the scene of *myself* passively enduring it."[27] In his lucid exploration of the specular effects of suture in *Kong* (1933), J. P. Telotte repeatedly notes the duality of nature that is present in the film.[28] As he states, "Heller ... reads [the 1933 incarnation of Kong] doubly as both a menacing other *and* the repressed self,"[29] and "What we hardly expect is to see ourselves, our own experience mirrored there. We are doubles ...; the horrors we relish are there within us.

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[26] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (Mansfield Center, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010), 15.

[27] Žižek, *Plague*, 151.

[28] "Specular" is used here as a term that invokes Lacan's mirror stage, a process through which subjectivity is initiated through the visual perception of another representation of the same species. Its inevitable result in cinema is the process of "suture," whereby a spectator takes on an emotional identity with particular characters.

[29] J. P. Telotte, "The Movies as Monster: Seeing in *King Kong*," *The Georgia Review* (1988): 390.

And because of that, there really is no secure place."[30] In other words, by intimating the humanity within the monster, Kong generates the very anxiety it seeks to repress.

Such was the level of social anxiety regarding this potential regression that it was not until 1980 that any popular cinematic depiction explicitly represented it. Then, in *Altered States* (1980), a film that remains unique in its manifestation of the simian monster, Dr. Eddie Jessup, played by William Hurt, experiments on himself with hallucinogenic drugs and isolation tanks, bringing about a physical regression to a feral simian state. The simian monster does not appear until some 44 minutes into the film, but the psychoanalytical regression theme is in fact introduced much earlier. During a drunken separation party, Jessup exclaims how, "since the death of God, psycho-sciences have become preoccupied with the search for an inner human self," a pursuit he has fervidly taken up. Patriarchal anxieties are explicitly implicated in this narrative construction. Freud, and to a lesser extent Žižek, indicate the Christian God as an inevitable paradigm of patriarchal culture and the patriarchal family as its most abiding interpersonal construct.[31] In *Totem and Taboo*, for example, Freud contends that the assassination of the primal (simian) father by his oppressed sons directly results in patriarchal religion. Freud explains that

> the change in relation to the father was not restricted to religion but logically extended to the other side of human life influenced by the removal of the father, namely, the social organization. With the insti-

[30] Ibid., 395.

[31] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 130-1; Zizek, *End Times*, 116-7, 401.

> tution of paternal deities the fatherless society gradually changed into a patriarchal one. The family was a reconstruction of the former primal horde and also restored a great part of their family rights to the fathers. ... [T]he social order produces godlike kings who transfer the patriarchal system to the state. It must be said that the revenge of the deposed and reinstated father has been very cruel; it culminated in the dominance of authority. ... [I]t would be erroneous to believe that in this period of renewed patriarchal authority the hostile impulses which belong to the father complex had entirely subsided. On the contrary, the first phase is in the domination of the two new substitutive formations for the father, those of gods and kings, plainly show the most energetic expression of that ambivalence which is characteristic of religion.[32]

Jessup's reference to the death of God indicates a first-stage patriarchal anxiety immediately followed by the threat to the integrity of the patriarchal family unit which plays as an allegory for psychoanalytic regression. Following the dissolution of his marriage and family, he begins to regress into a feral simian. During an isolation tank experiment in which Jessup uses himself as a subject, he begins to hallucinate about his regression in a state of primeval nature. He describes his vision of "a proto-human, the first, and the original truly human form, ... completely furred, chimp-like but erect, no knuckle walking. Shorter arms. ... I'm becoming one of them. I'm no longer observing. I'm one of them, ... killing something ... I'm killing." Fol-

[32] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 130-1.

lowing this harrowing experience, and, in case there had been any confusion on the part of the viewer, Jessup clearly articulates that he "obviously regressed ... to some quasi-simian creature." When his post-experimental x-rays are examined by an expert radiologist, he also frankly exclaims, "This guy's a fucking gorilla." Shortly thereafter, following a sexual interlude with a student, Jessup begins a more tangible transformation into a simian monster, either real or hallucinated (a distinction that is never made explicitly clear), beginning with a muscular aberration in his forearms, followed by a protruding supraorbital ridge, and a shower scene in which his feet become hirsute and develop opposable digits, although these transformations are in fact all transient. These transformations serve a double purpose in terms of fantasy; they are the simultaneous representation of the simian as a monstrous horror while a comforting fantasy of the residency of conventionally masculinist characteristics such as body hair and physical aggression. At least the stereotypically masculinist side of patriarchy remains secure in its repressed regression.

In his next self-subjected experiment, Jessup emerges from the tank in a fully monstrous simian state. Of course, as part of the simian Othering inherent to all of these films, this regressive state coincides with the beginning of his violent behaviour.[33] Simian Jessup begins by running amok in the boiler room basement of the university building where he is conducting his experiments and bludgeons a security guard nearly to death. Subsequently, he infiltrates a local zoo (a clear symbol of nature within the ur-

[33] Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An imaginary Abjection," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975), 50. Barbara Creed observes that "The primal scene is represented as violent and monstrous."

ban—conquered, controlled, and caged by patriarchal civilization) to feed in a state of feral frenzy. Jessup concludes that "We may have demonstrated a whole new force in nature," obviously a clear articulation of an anxiety regarding the forces of external nature brought on by the psycho-social capacities of internal human nature.

Earlier incarnations of the simian monster are unsurprisingly less explicit in their apocalyptic eco-concerns, and coincide more with patriarchal social anxieties that attended early industrialism rather than anxieties specifically comprised by its inherent ecological destruction. These films realize Žižek's description of a socio-psychological stage of apocalyptic denial by refusing (rather than vilifying) simian regression. Movies such as *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932) are more concerned with the disavowal of any sort of evolutionary kinship with simian ancestors. In *Rue Morgue*'s narrative, when human blood and animal blood (a division that is uncomfortably blurred through simian monsters), are physically mixed, the result is not a horrific regression, but rather a horrific taboo of inter-species miscegenation. Bela Lugosi's Dr. Mirakle dispatches unfortunate young women by infecting them with simian blood in an effort to discover an inter-special genetic compatibility. The one iteration of this process depicted on-screen shows a hapless beauty tied upright in a crucifix position while Mirakle assaults her before her lifeless corpse is unceremoniously dropped into the sewers beneath the sacrificial altar.

At the film's narrative closure, in his attempt to abscond with the kidnapped heroine, Erik the Ape falls from the Victorian rooftops and plummets to his death (an episode that occurs nowhere in the Poe story that

is its namesake and ostensible inspiration). There is no question that this film inspired the 1933 *Kong* of only a year later. In both films, this plummet might be read as a metaphor of the fall (from Eden) for the would-be natural interloper into civilization, the privileged and exclusive province of humanity (Image 1a and 1b).

Image 1a: *Murders in the Rue Morgue* [film still] (1932). Retrieved from URL http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_3Q1_n7jtCJ8/TTJnPCjoQoI/AAAAAAAAAfc/SF-LEvauXv8/s1600/rue%2Bmorgue%2Brooftops.jpg

Image 1b: *King Kong* [film still] (1933). Retrieved from URL http://images2.fanpop.com/images/photos/2800000/King-Kong-1933-king-kong-2814496-2400-1891.jpg

The patriarchal underpinnings of the biblical Eden myth, complete with Eve's subsidiary construction by God from Adam's ribs as a mere adjunct to/for him and as the receptacle of blame for their subsequent expulsion, needs little further elucidation here. This inclusion of the fall, unnecessary to the narrative resolutions of either of the films as the simian beasts had already been dispatched with some form of ballistic technology in both, remains a conventional mainstay in all of the direct *Kong* remakes and replaces Adam and Eve in the mythology of the Fall with a simian Other,

thereby retroactively restoring humanity to the patriarchal idyll of the Garden of Eden.

Nature vs. Culture, Patriarchal Anxiety, and Oedipal Immanence:

As horror films, all of the *Kong* narratives foreground the tenuous nature of the boundary between ape and human, a theme I will take up in more detail below, but that they are just as concerned with re-establishing this boundary in a process of Othering, frequently accomplished through the symbolism of gendered bodily coordinates.[34] For example, Barbara Creed concludes that "What is common to all of these images of horror is the voracious maw, *the mysterious black hole that signifies female genitalia as a monstrous sign* threatening to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path."[emphasis mine][35] Kong's gaping maw is the most abiding image in the promotional composite stills for all three versions of *Kong*. One of the most famous promotional posters for the 1933 original features Kong prostrate in the posture of jumping between buildings, facing the viewer over a miniaturized New York cityscape (Image 2). His mouth is centred and gaping, his elongated

[34] Ibid., 46. Like so many horror film critics, Barbara Creed notes the fundamental anxiety generated by a confusion of the boundary between human and animal. "[T]he horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human."

[35] Ibid., 56.

Image 2: *King Kong* [composite film still promotional image] (1933). Retrieved from URL http://photos.bravenet.com/272/478/925/3/10DBA0DC41.jpg

cuspids thrusting forward in a threatening image of simian aggression. Similarly, the 1976 promotional poster portrays Kong straddling the two towers of the World Trade Center, with an otherwise unnecessarily gaping maw heightening his horrific aspect (Image 3).

Image 3: *King Kong* [promotional poster] (1976). Retreived from URL https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/59/92/b0/5992b0ad7e63710173fe51e571ddf94a.jpg

Image 4: *King Kong* [promotional poster] (2005). Retreived from URL https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/e9/ca/83/e9-ca830eeef4e9504fc91a5a29d2502c.jpg

The promotional image for the 2005 remake also displays an exaggerated gaping maw (Image 4). In this last iteration, Kong stands above a demure Darrow as she strides confidently through the foliage, while baring his fangs in what appears to be a defensive posture to protect her. This is the only of the three promotional images that locates Kong in nature, and his threat to

civilization is aimed more directly at the viewer, rather than merely the city. Kong's eyes are fixed directly at the camera, boring into the viewer's psychological connection to the image, and locating the viewer as the perceived threat to Kong, his female prize, and his natural habitat. In such a threatening posture, the animal within must be projected outward and disowned, and the nature/culture binary to which Freud variously refers in *Civilization and its Discontents* constructs an obvious scapegoat. It is important to take note of the context in which Freud deploys the word "civilization." His explication of the Oedipal complex unambiguously implicates any culture in which it emerges as pre-eminently patriarchal. Thus, in *Civilization*, the culture he describes as increasingly untenably repressed is not merely capitalist, but specifically patriarchal, especially in its inherent desire to conquer and control civilization's industrially-contrived antithesis, nature. All of the *Kong* narratives revolve around "forcing [the monstrous nature of Kong as the repressed id of humanity] to obey human will under the guidance of science [the ego]."[36] And in all of the movies, Kong (again, as monstrous nature) is vanquished in a fantasy of the survival of patriarchal civilization. Following Darwin's theory of human evolution, the simian becomes human nature's specific regressive scapegoat, and *Kong* becomes the specific focus of numerous critical analyses of horror or fantasy film.

Most early analyses of *Kong* have focused almost exclusively on the 1933 film; they are highly tendentious and reduce their readings to a limited Oedipal narrative at the expense of all other interpretations. In "*King Kong*: The Beast in the Boudoir—or, 'You Can't Marry That Girl, You're a Goril-

[36] Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 8.

la!,'" for example, Harvey Roy Greenberg claims that "Under the Oedipal rubric, monster (teenager) wants girlfriend (mother) of hero (father) all to himself."[37] Greenberg also observes that "It is integral to the exuberant racism of *King Kong* that the Negro should be portrayed as the degraded repository of the white man's forbidden impulses."[38] This appears to be the point of departure for Joshua Bellin's analysis in *Framing Monsters*. According to Bellin, sexual miscegenation (rather than adolescence) is the primary alienating theme of the 1933 *Kong*.[39] The narrative of the 1976 remake of *Kong* preconceives Bellin's understanding of the 1933 Kong as representative of white, male anxieties regarding the rape of 'their' white women by black men. A dialogue between the ship's captain and Jack Prescott (the 1976 *Kong*'s version of Jack Driscoll) about their efforts to rescue the oddly named "Dwan," (the 1976 *Kong*'s version of Ann Darrow) awkwardly reveals the thinly-coded sexual allusion of the giant black predator massacring the poor girl in the exercise of a nasty and ill-conceived rape fantasy.

Greenberg also indirectly introduces the concept of Kong as a metaphor for external nature, and man's repressed natural desires, but does not extend this trajectory of analysis to its logical conclusion. While recognizing the repressed human nature represented by Kong, and the oppressive urban setting that gives rise to it, Greenberg does not explore the part of the

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[37] Harvey Roy Greenberg, "King Kong: The Beast in the Boudoir—or, 'You Can't Marry That Girl, You're a Gorilla!,'" in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, 340.

[38] Ibid., 344.

[39] Joshua Bellin, *Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 6, 23, 27.

narrative in which Kong rampages through the city in any detail. Greenberg reduces this part of the narrative to his limited thesis. "[T]he remainder of the film is essentially a prolonged acting out of the rescue fantasy central to the adolescent's asexual relationship with an idealized beloved."[40] Once in the city, however, the *Kong* narrative also begins to play out a fantasy of the capitalist domination of unwieldy nature that resolves with the narrative closure and the death of Kong. Ultimately, Kong is captured, commoditized, and killed. Greenberg at least challenges the referential, but somewhat suspect, theme of *Kong* that "it was beauty killed the beast" (ironically congruent with his own thesis) by explaining that it was really Denham that killed him by placing him within an urban setting. In "*King Kong*: Ape and Essence," Noel Carroll anticipates this function of the narrative's second half that is overlooked by Greenberg. According to Carroll, "[t]he basis of much of the doubling in *Kong* is the idea of transporting a prehistoric creature to civilization where it escapes."[41] He compares Kong's displacement to the narratives of contemporary gangster films that warn "about the danger of leaving one's place in society for the sake of ambition."[42] However, such an analysis ignores the fact that Kong was unwillingly transported to the urban setting. Carroll's understanding might better be applied to the Ann Darrow character. Having been delivered of "her economic distress,"[43]

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[40] Ibid., 347.

[41] Noel Carroll, "*King Kong*: Ape and Essence," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, eds. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 236.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Robert Torrey, "'You Can't Look Away': Spectacle and Transgression in King Kong," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 49.4 (1993): 63.

she is transported into a horrific nightmare of beastly abduction and rape. Carroll proceeds, however, to foreground the broader theme that is at work in the film. "[O]nce Kong leaves his domain and penetrates the gate, the boundary between nature and culture, he is out of his element and therefore doomed."[44] But the ideological underpinnings that ensure his doom are not clearly stipulated. Although perhaps more referentially and explicitly (than the implicitly adolescent and misogynist aspects of the narrative), Kong is also an urban disaster narrative.

Carroll does, however, introduce at least one aspect of the narrative that might be held up to comparative scrutiny. As he points out,

> Kong seems to be a race of one, which effectively makes that race ... entirely male. *Son of Kong* (1933), ... may, in part, seem misconceived because it tampers with the implied myth of the earlier film—that King Kong is absolutely singular and unique [and therefore asexually adolescent], the only one of his kind, profoundly alone, and ultimately a fit object of pathos for that reason.[45]

Peter Jackson's 2005 remake in fact recodes this pathos into one of loss that explicitly demonstrates Kong was not a race of one, effectively refuting Carroll's Oedipal interpretation of the 1933 Kong. His lofty mountain domicile is littered with the skulls of what was once obviously a flourishing population of his kin. Some (possibly ecological) disaster has befallen the populace

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[44] Carroll, "*King Kong*: Ape and Essence," 236.

[45] Ibid., 219.

and decimated them. Kong is the last of his kind, and having appropriated the natural forces that annihilated his family, becomes the natural force that will visit revenge upon civilization.

As compelling as the Oedipal model is, it is an analysis that tends to preclude the allegory of natural disaster. In academic jargon, it causes other discursive registers to be ignored. Like Caroll and Greenberg, J. P. Telotte and Robert Torry also allude to, but summarily overlook, the larger nature vs. civilization allegory, perhaps because it seems too obvious, unsophisticated. In doing so, they lose sight of the unifying thematic that interacts with individual repression resulting in a repetition of the compelling simian beast. Viewing Kong exclusively as a projected 'self' rather than an allegory of vengeful nature dilutes the fantasy in which monstrous nature is a threat to the industrial urban idyll. It only works as a metaphor for the ways in which individual irresponsibility, participant with industrialism, has prompted nature to unleash its vengeance. However, Kong's "Oedipal rage"[46] can be read as having a larger resonance. Mother Nature is symbolized in the maternal sympathy of Darrow; she too is out of place in a patriarchal urban nightmare, unable to secure any viable economic security from powerful male entertainment executives. Thus, as the "Mother" has been snatched from Kong (the impetuous repressed Oedipal child realized as a monstrous manifestation), Kong turns upon the patriarchal culture in a destructive rage, only to be castrated by the father he attempts to ravage. In the Oedipal structure of Kong as an allegory for eco-disaster, Driscoll plays the patriarch, winning the love of the mother object, Ann. Just as Ann is a synec-

[46] Torry, "You Can't Look," 66.

doche for Mother Nature, Jack becomes a symbol for patriarchal urban society, and a fantasy of its ability, and romantically altruistic responsibility, to vanquish the monstrous offspring of nature. Ultimately, Torry agrees with Carroll's depiction of Kong as an "ultimate warning about the 'dangers of the infantile world view.'"[47] In an Oedipal framework in which Mother Nature is the object of desire of her monstrous offspring, a conflation of repressed simian humanity and destructive external natural forces, the world view which fails to understand its own destructive participation with ecodisaster is infantile, in that environmental catastrophe may manifest before humanity outgrows its capitalist-industrial cultural immaturity.

Patriarchal anxiety is most explicitly presented in these narratives in the inherent misogyny of the Fall allegory. In these painfully patriarchal societies, the hyper-masculine simian beast systemically meets his demise at the hands of the covert, albeit unwitting, treachery of the female: "'twas beauty killed the beast," and thus the status of emasculated victim of feminine wiles is conveniently displaced onto a simian Other in these narrative fantasies. However, under the threat of industrial crisis, patriarchal anxiety reaches an apex in the 1977 *Kong*, with a further division/displacement that differentiates the good patriarchal hero from the bad. In this economy of patriarchal anxiety, Jeff Bridges' version of the Driscoll character, named Jack Prescott, most fully realizes the allegorical urban-disaster Oedipal fantasy. He is part of an urban patriarchy, but an ostensibly benign part—a university researcher bent on a morally responsible behaviour towards a natural world struggling in the face of global industrial interests. In the

[47] Ibid.

opening scene, Prescott/Driscoll swings into the frame on a rope (like a monkey) to stow away on the ship. Likening Prescott to a simian himself plays up his metaphoric conflation with Kong, at odds with both the Denham character, named Fred Wilson in this version, and his opportunistic designs to harvest oil from the island. In this role, Prescott represents a patriarchal fantasy of protection and responsibility, only necessarily vanquishing Kong to protect Ann. The negative aspects of patriarchy are displaced exclusively onto greedy capitalist oil interests (contemporary with the oil and energy crises of the 1970s), leaving Prescott to play the role of patriarchal hero—a delineation of good patriarchy against bad, blaming the latter for unleashing the destructive forces of nature, while valorizing the former as the steward of our humanitarianism.

Explicit Eco-Criticism and Imminent Apocalypse:

In perhaps the most explicit eco-critical exposition in all of the Kong films, the motivation of the Karl Denham/Fred Wilson character in the 1977 *Kong* is transposed from filmmaking in the original to oil, a suitable recoding considering the economic anxiety surrounding oil at the time of the film's release. Kong is initially perceived as merely a deterrent to Wilson's designs on discovering new oil reserves. All would have run smoothly, following the rapid, almost insignificant conquest of the local natives with gunshot fire, if poor Dwan had not been kidnapped. Eventually it is revealed that there is no valuable oil on the island and the narrative moves in a direction whereby Kong is used as a commodity to compensate for lost oil revenues. Following Dwan's kidnapping, Wilson initially appears concerned with her safety until one of the senior crewmen opines that Kong would

"make a hell of a commercial, wouldn't he? You know, 'the battles we at Petrox fight to fill your gas tank.'" In the reference to television commercials, the 1976 remake maintains a hint of the original Denham's cinematographic motive, but it is with the sale of oil that Wilson is primarily concerned. This re-coding places the motivation to capture Kong in the service of selling oil, already recognized as a major global pollutant, but not yet at the perceived crisis levels present in the twenty-first century.

The narrative closure expresses a cinematic double-entendre: the domination and control of wild nature, but the comforting suture of a masculine hero with which to identify a renewed, if frustrated, heroic champion for the nature that threatens us all—a hierarchical coding of masculine heroism over monstrous nature, both protector and patriarch, but necessarily emasculated in his efforts to champion nature, which must inevitably be destroyed. The scientific hero Jack Prescott is preoccupied with ensuring Kong's security, and maintains a fantasy of returning him to the island until the end. Unlike the Jacks in the original and the 2005 remake, both of whom seem exclusively concerned with Ann Darrow, Jack Prescott represents the naive naturalist idealist whose humanitarian efforts on Kong's behalf cannot be but disappointed. Such a characterization offers a fantasy of masculine heroism in the face of oil interests raping the environment for profit and spectacle—a displacement of the anxiety generated by the capitalist need to continue harvesting oil into a masculinist fantasy of heroism. Prescott's sensibilities seem contradictory to capitalist needs, which is ultimately why his heroism is rendered fundamentally useless. During the final aerial scene, Dwan's screams begging Kong not to let her go, closely associates the misogynist depiction of female emotional fury with the fury of

monstrous nature, and Jack can do little more than gaze and grimace as Kong is executed by military helicopter fire. The narrative concludes with the sound of Kong's waning heartbeat, and his wracked body fallen from the economic pillar of the Twin Towers, prostrate in the streets of New York. The relentless urban crowd rushes in on his monstrous corpse, reduced to a mere spectacle in which the urban populace can revel. Dwan refuses the aid of the plutocrats that betrayed their promise to Jack to live-capture Kong, and instead rushes towards Jack's benevolent masculinity. Like Kong, however, she is unable to enjoy the reward of his heroism, unable to reach him through the urban throng, and in spite of Prescott's efforts, Kong is vanquished.

Such a patriarchal fantasy of industrial-economic puissance would need dire recoding following the reduction of the Twin Towers themselves to rubble. The myth of their economic power, and its control of monstrous nature required a new myth. Peter Jackson delivered. Jackson's 2005 *Kong* rides hot on the heels of the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks, almost as though Kong's iconic status required an immediate redirecting away from the 1976 version in which Kong climbs the towers—an effort to ensure the iconic mythology of Kong remains separate from the World Trade Center's now historical iconography, as well as to ensure Kong remained a natural monster to be vanquished rather than becoming associated with an ambiguous Middle-Eastern terrorist threat. As part of this mandate, Jackson's *Kong* presents itself as the most parodically reflexive in regards to patriarchal stereotypes. It parodies all of the male identities with which patriarchy is associated: the drunken opportunist (Denham), the simple but misunderstood young ruffian outcast à la James Dean (Jimmy), the irrationally altruis-

tic black father figure to said ruffian (Hayes), the hopelessly romantic and irrationally heroic poet (Driscoll), and the cowardly but handsome ersatz heroic leading male (Bruce Baxter). However, the reflexivity that seems to parody patriarchal archetypes merely masks the underlying celebration of the urban culture that has spawned them. There is no significant challenge to the myth of urban plenitude[48] in the film, Depression Era notwithstanding, and the parody of patriarchy is localized and limited to individualized caricature identities. The production executives in the film almost entirely fall out of the narrative following the introductory scene in which their depiction is not conventionally parodic.

Moreover, Jackson's latest manifestation of *Kong* (2005) emerged in a time of industrially-driven catastrophic climate change during the period in which Al Gore was doing his lecture circuit for his eco-warning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* when the revenge of nature thematic had become even more publicly palpable. In "Imagining the End Times … ," a Žižekian reading of the contemporary disaster film *Contagion*, Matthew Beaumont states that recent "Hollywood disaster movies [are] generally shaped by a pious, politically cheap ecological message, ... but the agent of destruction tends to be a tsunami or a twister rather than corporate capitalism itself. According to the logic of sublimation, economic crisis is in this context still displaced onto ecological crisis."[49] His analysis is explicitly eco-critical: "It is in familiar incarnations of this kind that [the forces of sublime nature] take

[48] Patricia Yaeger, "Dreaming of Infrastructure," *PMLA* 122.1 (2007): 13. In "Dreaming of Infrastructure," Patricia Yaeger proposes that "shelter ... along with food, energy, health care, and water make up the mythos and ethos of the nurturing city."

[49] Matthew Beaumont, "Imagining the End Times: Ideology, the Contemporary Disaster Movie, *Contagion*," in *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader*, 80-1.

revenge for humanity's thoughtless erosion of the earth's resources."[50] In light of these comments, Kong might well be viewed as a metaphor for the gigantic forces of nature that threaten humanity in the twenty-first century, a sentiment already recognized in Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Freud himself noted, "[h]uman life in communities only becomes possible when a large number of men unite together in strength superior to any single individual and remain united against all single individuals."[51] Such an understanding explains why Kong needed to be a *giant* monster; he must represent a formidable single individual against which united patriarchal civilization must struggle in order to fulfill the capitalist fantasy of urban strength and superiority.

Such an understanding of Jackson's Kong would similarly explain the recent new millennium rejuvenation of gigantic-monster movie cycles that have imagined the threat of nature as a grotesquely oversized individual creature, with such films as *Cloverfield* (2008), *Pacific Rim* (2013), and two *Godzilla*'s (1998, 2014), amongst others. In one of her many analyses of fantasy cinema, Vivian Sobchack had already observed that "the Rhedosaurus in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* ... signifies primeval origins, the primal sink and slime from which life first emerged. It also signifies atomic force and destruction and extinction (it was aroused by an atomic blast), and the fear of avenging nature which has been disturbed by technology,"[52] although these

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[50] Ibid., 81.

[51] Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 59.

[52] Vivian Sobchack, "The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film," in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1990), 111.

films certainly seem less concerned with the atomic fear of the 1950s than with specifically eco-disaster anxieties. Notwithstanding the repressed desire to spectacularize the reduction of urban monoliths to rubble following 9/11, most of these monsters have closer kinships with nature than with man-made technology. In fact, technology, specifically aircraft and ballistic weaponry in the *Kong* movies, is usually put in the service of vanquishing the beasts, placing industrial technology, along with the patriarchal 'civilization' that produced it, in competitive opposition to nature.

Jackson's *Kong* also introduces a new sense of urgency to its apocalyptic revenge-of-nature underpinnings. The opening montage provides an unambiguous visual representation of the threat of nature, focusing on the visages of such threatening zoo animals as a snarling tiger. However, the film's thematic of patriarchal-industrial domination is also contained in the scene. Reminiscent of the zoo images in *Altered States*, these animals are marooned in the desolate urban setting of depression-era New York City. Into this hierarchy, Jackson interjects a series of metaphoric narrative barometers rising. In the throes of the Depression, Darrow offers empty encouragement to a fellow entertainer, asserting, "[I]t'll pick up. It always does." While her words prove incorrect, they intimate a sense of acceleration in the pace of developments. Similarly, following an unsuccessful pitch to his movie producers, Denham races away in a taxi, desperate to get his cinematic production (an absolute icon of technology) under way before it can be quashed. Time is running out for Denham, just as the invasive destruction of nature becomes increasingly inevitable for the viewing audience, and it must be commodified in cinema before it is *too late*. According to Žižek, the subjective displacement that occurs in such phenomena as cinematic suture also

accelerates an ideological displacement and allows the viewer to "drift along while retaining an inner distance and indifference toward the mad dance of this accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all the social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances."[53] At the narrative beginning, Denham meta-cinematically explains both the movie and his movie within it in this light, noting that "the story has changed. The script has been rewritten. Life intervened." As they near Skull Island, Denham and Driscoll articulate the inevitable resolution to eco-disaster with an apocalyptic tenor. Denham commiserates, "It's over for me, Jack. I'm finished," and a heroic Driscoll, placed in romantic opposition to Denham's capitalist opportunism (in very much the same fashion as in the 1976 version of *Kong*) replies with a portentous question: "How'd you think this would end, Karl?" In all of the *Kong*s' typically misogynist styles, such a conversation reduces a universal apocalypse to the cynically patriarchal professional aspirations of two men, evacuating the voice of the 'damsel' whom Denham unabashedly sacrifices to his cause.

The apocalyptic polarization of patriarchal civilization and feminized nature has long been a mainstay of psychoanalytically-based criticisms of cinema, represented through metaphorical manifestations of borders, gaps, and cracks. In "The Monstrous-Feminine," Barbara Creed invokes Julia Kristeva's understanding of such a border as the location of abjection: "the monstrous is produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* [1931, 1941], *Creature from the*

[53] Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 13.

Black Lagoon [1954], *King Kong* [1933])."[54] In fact, she concludes in a conflation of Kristevan and Lacanian language that "the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from field to field, the function of the monstrous remains the same: to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability."[55] It is at this theoretical juncture that Žižek makes perhaps his most significant contribution to a discussion of simian monster narratives as eco-critical. One reading of this border invokes Žižek's description of "the ontological 'crack' upon whose repression the illusory notions of subjectivity and objectivity are constructed."[56] Transgressing this crack in the border, variously coded as horrific by numerous critics, is at the very heart of an ideology that attempts to maintain a nature vs. civilization polarity.

Jackson's *Kong* foregrounds the barrier between nature and civilization through the metaphor of the great wall, perhaps even more so than the two previous iterations. Lumpy, the ship's cook, Hayes, and Jimmy, three of the more disenfranchised male members of the patriarchal culture the movie depicts, demonstrate their investment in maintaining its symbolic integrity. In another unambiguously male-only conversation, they variously discuss the legendary wall, behind which resides "a creature neither beast not man: something monstrous living behind that wall." The cook is played

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[54] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 40.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Vighi, "Contingent," 132.

by celebrated 'mo-cap' performer Andy Sirkis who also performs Kong (proffering an extra-diegetic inversion of the simian repressed within the human—Sirkis *is* the human 'repressed' within the computer-generated image [CGI] Kong). The cook meets his demise at the hands of the monstrous insects on the island, part of a pathos-evacuated nature with which Kong is associated, which will be discussed in more detail below. As the ship nears running aground at Skull Island, Jimmy shouts from the crow's nest, "Wall! There's a wall ahead!" The island vista viewed from the ship reveals a bony undulating wall across the horizon (complete with gaps and cracks)—a distinctly simian spinal column prostrate across the entire frame of the screen (Image 5). In concert with the gorilla head crags, the island

Image 5: *King Kong* [film still] (2005). Retrieved from URL http://vignette4.wikia.nocookie.net/kingkong/images/a/a1/Screen_shot_2011-11-27_at_8.29.04_PM.png/revision/latest?cb=20111128013021&path-prefix=en

itself becomes a gigantic, but fallen, simian monster and the line between civilization and nature is drawn on its back. Breaching the barrier is violent. The ship is tossed at the hands of an unremitting sea and the craggy shore.

As they penetrate the bowels of the island on the cavernous shore, they encounter a wasteland of human skulls.

The border between nature and civilization is also provided a cinematic meta-phenomenon in all of the *Kong* movies: the screen between the monstrous spectacle and its viewer. Cinema in general, because of its visual index of the apparent reality it records, fully realizes Freud's understanding of the aspect of uncanny fear generated through the uncertainty as to whether a representation is real or artificial.[57] Following a Žižekian application of Lacan, Vighi takes this meta-phenomenon a step further by inverting its meaning-making trajectory, noting "[t]his is what Lacan's symbolic castration amounts to: an invisible cut through which we 'miraculously' organize the chaos of reality into a medium, a symbolically-consistent world — consistent enough to support our existence."[58] That is to say we create our own necessary uncertainty by imposing a mediated unity onto a chaotic Real. Rather than progressively dissolving this boundary, Jackson's *Kong*, in particular, is cinematically reflexive and paranoid, relentlessly reminding the

[57] Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 937.

[58] Vighi, "Contingent," 139.

viewer that the entire spectacle is fantasy.[59] The CGI is only the most obvious effect in Jackson's *Kong* through which the viewer is ceaselessly reminded of the artificiality of the representation.

Jackson's *Kong* also problematizes suture by destabilizing traditional character-driven identifications. Freud had already articulated the uncanny effects of a destabilized narrative suture. He claims that the uncanny "is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self."[60] At the beginning of the narrative, the viewer is invited to identify with Ann. This identification is horrifically revisited during Ann's initial abduction. Her helpless visage is blurred in the progression of rapid jump-cut scenes, swinging violently in Kong's hand through the foliage. This semi-omniscient viewing perspective is interlaced with scenes from her point of view of the gigantic simian monster that has abducted her. Such cinematography would seem to challenge Laura Mulvey's description of the

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[59] Hugh S. Manon. "Žižek and Cinema - Qui Perd Gagne: Failure and Cinematic Seduction," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1.3 (2016): 21; Telotte, "The Movies as Monster," 392. Ironically, much of this effect of reflexivity is accomplished through the alienating suture effected by the CGI in Jackson's *Kong*, the only of the *Kong* films to use such extensive technological imaging. In "Žižek and Cinema - Qui Perd Gagne: Failure and Cinematic Seduction," Hugh Manon succinctly states that such effects are "'perfect, too perfect,' having erased not only the evidence that a deception has taken place, but also all the 'normal' imperfections that viewers equate with cinema as a representational form." In a specific discussion of Jackon's *Kong* (2005) he states, "What the viewer wants ... is some trace of the fingerprints of Kong's creators—which is what we literally get in the rippling fur of the giant ape in the 1933 version: traces of stop-motion animators' fingertips as they repositioned the 18-inch scale model of Kong between each frame." Telotte focuses on the effects of such questionable suture in implicating the viewer in *Kong*'s horror, "reminding us that much of the danger ... is movie related."

[60] Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 940.

misogynist convention of cinematic framing that rarely provides a direct eyeline match with any female character's point of view; the viewer is definitely experiencing the terror from Ann's perspective, and the horror is palpable. At other points, viewer identification resides with Denham, incorporates identification with Driscoll, and interjects identifications with Jimmy, Hayes, and others. Eventually, identification resolves with Kong in a pathos formula that inevitably involves his destruction. In another Žižekian reading, along the same lines, Tamas Nagypal understands the effect of CGI as one in which the viewer's emotions, perhaps for the destruction of the natural world, can be directly displaced onto Kong. "[T]he addition of CGI can be seen as an alternative to the social space of cinema, with computer-animated characters ... serving as a new 'candid' fetish-audience. The anxiety in their eyes and ridiculous repetitiveness of their gestures expresses our own former cinematic condition and external reflection."[61] However, Jackson's relentless reminders "that much of the danger ... is movie related"[62] has a displacement effect that locates the ravages of monstrous nature not as a self at all (as opposed to earlier Oedipal readings), but as merely a spectacular illusion.

The cinematic mechanism, thus, completes the displacement, by prompting the viewer to "think of the film apparatus as sitting on a border of disturbance, confronting us with images of our world and the self [;] it can also manipulate and disguise both: taking us on a roller-coaster ride of

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[61] Tamas Nagypal, "From Interpassive to Interactive Cinema: A Genealogy of the Moving Image of Cynicism," in *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader*, 182.

[62] Telotte, "The Movies as Monster," 392.

special effects, ideologically resolving any distress we might feel."[63] For the human viewer, there is no escape from the simian horror because of the failings of the diegetic border within the film and the meta-cinematic border of the screen. According to Telotte, "Just as Kong breaks through those massive gates on his island, or bursts his chains and moves the audience gathered for his premiere in New York, so does the movie disconcertingly come into our midst, forcing us to complete its horrific pattern."[64] However, Barbara Creed claims that "What Kristeva terms 'abjection,' [is] that which does not respect 'borders, positions, rules,' that which 'disturbs identity, system, order."[65] Kristeva also claims that "the loathsome is that which disobeys classification rules peculiar to the given symbolic system."[66] Kong disobeys the symbolic system by traversing the border between nature and civilization, even against his will. Kong thus provides a loathsome metaphor of nature, affording the audience the satisfaction of an illusory maintenance of the nature/civilization binary.

Recent remakes of *Planet of the Apes* perhaps most effectively invert the trajectory of traversal movement across this structural boundary. In both Tim Burton's 2001 one-off, and the 2011 reboot, the simian threat is initially secure under the authority of scientific industry. Only once the apes escape *into* nature, where they can realize their true monstrous potential,

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[63] Ibid., 393.

[64] Ibid., 397.

[65] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 36.

[66] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 92.

does humanity face an apocalyptic threat. The displacement here is one in which the psychology of the repressed 'I' in the simian is fully externalized as an escapist fantasy. In these narratives, human science is directly implicated as the cause of apocalypse that manifests as a monstrous simian uprising in opposition to human industrial culture in all regards. *Planet of the Apes* is progressive in that the fantasy does not resolve into a vanquished beast but remains an unremitting apocalypse that humanity must face. However, ideologically it still works as a displacement mechanism that valorizes industrial civilization. Splitting human nature from its repressed evolutionary origins and its threat to the survival of modern civilization, the threat is completely relegated to the simian monster now free in nature to wreak its havoc and its revenge. This division may be the most conservative of them all, physically splitting the repressed bestial simian evolutionary monster from the human individual and literally projecting it outward onto the screen and into the visual representation of a monstrous Other. The division, however, may also be why the simian threat is never completely vanquished in the *Planet of the Apes* movies. As an inherent part of the human psychology, rather than an exclusively external natural force, its destruction would represent the destruction of the human mind (made even more explicit by the apes' foregrounded ability to talk, a characteristic that both Gayatri Spivak and Kyle Bishop claim to be fundamental to *human* subjectivity.[67] Lacan also recognizes linguistic ability as fundamental to entry into the symbolic order in his tripartite understanding of a *human* psyche comprised of the Real, the

[67] Kyle William Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: the Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 2010), 289, 297.

Imaginary, and the Symbolic.[68] In other words, the destruction of the speaking apes would represent a repressed anxiety perhaps too Real for visual signification.

Apocalyptic Eco-Anxiety and the Displacement Fantasy:

To counter the apocalyptic eco-anxiety these films evoke (the horror of a reality simultaneously defined and called forth by the fantasy), Jackson's *Kong* ultimately encodes urban civilization as a beautiful manifestation that can survive and conquer nature. From Kong's mountain peak vantage point on Skull Island, Ann Darrow uses the image of a sunset to help Kong understand the idea of "beautiful." However, as the sun sets on nature, it rises over the urban vista. Following Kong's urban rampage, and his iconic climb to the pinnacle of the Empire State Building, the sun begins to rise over New York City. Just prior to Kong's death, as they await the inevitable aircraft, Darrow uses the solar metaphor again to refer to Kong as beautiful, but the images are ambiguous. Looking across the urban vista to the sunrise, Ann might well be referring to the cityscape itself as beautiful. In this context, Denham's concluding words in both Jackson's 2005 *Kong* and the 1933 original that repeat the sentiment "It was beauty killed the beast" take on a different resonance; it is the beauty of an urban civilization that succeeds in vanquishing the pathetic simian threat.

Admittedly, the pathos of Kong represents a contradictory problem in narratives that use the monster as a metaphor for an unmitigated natural evil. The pathos of the monsters may represent a repressed recognition that humanity will need to reconcile with nature, and its own nature, if it is to

[68] Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 118-20, 280.

survive. However, an eco-critical reading suggests that all of these giant monsters, as sympathetic as they may be, must ultimately be feared and conquered rather than welcomed and integrated. In Jackson's *Kong*, for example, the pathos of the beast is carefully mitigated. One interesting addition in Jackson's *Kong* is his giant insects. Disgusting, violently aggressive, and void of any sort of humanity, the insects effectively evacuate the pathos from nature.

As this article suggests, in all of their symbolic significances, the *Kong* narratives are highly conservative: rather than embracing nature, these narratives continue to reproduce a nature/civilization dichotomy in which the sublime forces of nature are deemed perpetually threatening, unambiguously impossible to incorporate, and comfortingly vanquishable with the patriarchal tools of industrial weaponry. In his role as the fantasy receptacle for human guilt regarding eco-catastrophe, Kong was unsurprisingly given the appellative "King." In *Totem and Taboo*, a text that concludes with the introduction of Freud's garishly patriarchal "primal horde" origin myth, Freud is clear that:

> the primal sovereign ... exists only for his subjects: his life is only valuable so long as he discharges the duties of this position by ordering the course of nature for his people's benefit. So soon as he fails to do so, the care, the devotion, the religious homage which they had hitherto lavished on him cease and are changed into hatred and contempt; he is ignominiously dismissed and may be thankful if he escapes with his life.[69]

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[69] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 45.

Once displaced from his natural surroundings to the 'civilized' locale of New York, where he inevitably wreaks destructive havoc, his role of "ordering the course of nature" is interrupted, and he is summarily executed. Psychoanalytically, as an uncanny double, the fear of nature is confounded by a fear of the self, projected outward onto the poor simian to be hated and destroyed, allowing patriarchal civilization and capitalist culture, the real sources of eco-disaster, to continue on their merry way in futile debate.

Conclusion:

This collective expression of Kong as a metaphor of ecological disaster may have been subsidiary to more predominant social anxieties revealed by the simian monster in its earlier incarnations, but it was nevertheless present, at least as a symptom of patriarchal anxiety. As a harbinger of monstrous nature poised to visit apocalyptic havoc upon urban centres, Kong, in every manifestation, was astoundingly prescient, imagining an eco-disaster that has still not fully occurred. As indicated in this essay, the *Kong* remakes do not exclusively show us changes in the ideological constellation, but rather they express the long-term maintenance of more universal post-industrial concerns and the different ways in which they have been repressed or displaced. The progressive critical focus in horror cinema theory that increasingly negated universalizing understandings of its cultural work, and focused on its specific historical and cultural context, has atomized its purpose, and the more universal post-industrial fears that it might address. Our simian monsters reveal this weakness. According to Telotte, "Neither wall nor modern edifice, neither the screen nor the home to which we usu-

ally go after the movie ... seems proof against the giant ape and his kind ... [There is] no escape from his grasp, no escape from its monstrous aspect, ... at least not until it returns to its perch on the boundary between our world and the fantastic."[70] While the simian monster may seem to have been finally vanquished by the always valorized industrial forces of patriarchal capitalism in many of its cinematic incarnations, one thing at least is highly likely: like the irritating echo of an evolving ecological nightmare that just won't go away, and the terrifying spectre of a human nature repressed within us all that brought it about, the simian monster is sure to be back.

[70] Telotte, "The Movies as Monster," 398.

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Appendix A:

Date:	**Movie:**	**History:**
1914 - 1918		World War I
1917	*Murders in the Rue Morgue*	
1930 - 1939		The Great Depression
1932	***Murders in the Rue Morgue***	
1933	***King Kong***	
	The Son of Kong	
	Betty Boop's Halloween Party	
1939 - 1945		World War II
1939	gargoyles in *The Wizard of Oz*	
1940	*The Ape* (with Boris Karloff)	
	Ape Man (with Bela Lugosi)	
1943	*Captive Wild Woman*	
1947 - 1991		The Cold War
1949	*Mighty Joe Young*	
1951	*Bride of the Gorilla*	
1952	*Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla*	
1955 - 1975		Vietnam War
1962		Cuban Missile Crisis
1963	*Nightmare at 20000 Feet*	

1967	Patterson-Gimlin film of Bigfoot	
1968	*Planet of the Apes*	
	Star Trek episode "A Private Little War"	
	The Great Apeman of Terror	
1970 - 1973	four *Planet of the Apes* sequels	
1973		oil crisis
1974		Nixon resigns
1976	***King Kong***	
1979		energy crisis
1980	***Altered States***	
1981	*Donkey Kong*	
1981 - 1989		Ronald Reagan - nuclear arms race
1983	*Nightmare at 20000 Feet*	
1986	*Murders in the Rue Morgue*	
	King Kong Lives	
1988	*Monkey Shines*	
1995	*Twelve Monkeys*	
1996		rise of the internet
2001	***Planet of the Apes***	World Trade Centre Attacks
2001-2003	simian Orcs in Lord of the Rings	
2004	***Darwin's Nightmare***	

2005	***King Kong***	
2006	***An Inconvenient Truth***	
2011 / 2014	***Planet of the Apes***	