Exterminating the Brute

Sexism and Racism in ›King Kong‹

Stefanie Affeldt

Abstract: Since its first screening in 1933, ›King Kong‹ has been interpreted from a multitude of perspectives. Based on the original movie, this analysis is focussed on the superimposition and conjunction of racism and sexism in the narration and integrates its socio-historical contextualization into the investigation. This makes obvious that the film is far from being a ›Beauty and the Beast‹ fairy tale but launches a double attack on emancipation and self-determination. The movie sacrifices a ›new woman‹ to an old stereotype, the simianized exaggeration of a black man. This is a direct answer to the liberation and civil rights movements of the time, and also one which propagates existing counter-strategies as well. By the sexualisation of the plot, it connects the story to the eugenically shaped racial hysteria and the politics of lynching. By embedding the story in a history of discovery, it also links the narrative to the history of imperialism and colonial oppression. In view of this twofold threat, it suggests a solution that had already found its literary phrasing: ›Exterminate all the brutes‹.

Even though not everyone has seen the movie, the story of ›King Kong‹ is familiar to almost everybody: a giant ape takes possession of a white woman, runs amok in New York City, climbs the Empire State Building, and, after being attacked by airplanes, eventually topples to his death.[1]

Mind you, the plot of the original 1933 picture has more depth to offer. The narration takes the audience to a depression-plagued 1932 New York, where film director Carl Denham has hired a ship and crew

[1] There are innumerable variations of the Kong motif – not least the sequels made by the original Kong makers (Son of Kong, 1933; Mighty Joe Young, 1949) – that confront Kong with Godzilla and other monsters, are animated films, musicals or theatrical pieces, put him into other contexts or into video games, dime novels or songs. This essay takes for its main focus only the ›Kong trilogy‹, consisting of Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's original ›King Kong‹ of 1933 and its two remakes by Dino de Laurentiis and John Guillermin in 1976 and by Peter Jackson in 2015. For the exact information regarding the respective copies of the film, see the literature.

In: Simianization. Apes, Gender, Class, and Race,
ed. by Wulf D. Hund, Charles W. Mills, Silvia Sebastiani.
Berlin [et al.]: Lit 2015, pp. 139-169.

to ›discover‹, and cinematically colonize, an unknown island. Searching the streets for an actress, he runs into a blonde white woman, Ann Darrow, and recruits her for the lead role, promising her »money, and adventure, and fame«.[2] This is actually the opposite of the classical repertoire of female stereotypes. It indicates already, at the beginning of the narration, that the film deals with a representative of the ›new women‹, who confused the male world because they chose to shape their own lives.[3]

The role intended for her amounts to one of the innumerable variations of ›taming of the shrew‹. This is hinted at during the sea voyage when she falls in love with the first mate, John Driscoll. It also becomes obvious that the previously announced adventures will demand a great deal of her. For a start, the director tells her about his plans to shoot a movie addressing the topic of ›Beauty and the Beast‹ and prompts his ›star‹ for the test takes to scream at her highest pitch. In the real-case scenario, this very scream will be aimed at a substantial menace – as the audience knows even before the actress. The ship has on board ammunition, explosives, and several of »these new gas-bombs powerful enough to knock out an elephant«.[4]

Eventually, the mysterious island is sighted and turns out to be an ideological manifestation of the racist ›knowledge‹ of the world that has been accumulated during the European ›history of discovery‹. According to this knowledge, large parts of the world were inhabited by people who had never left the state of ›savagery‹; or they showed indications of culture, but their ›development‹ had either come to a standstill or had even retrogressed. On the newly discovered ›Skull Island‹, these strands are not only united but also completed by a prehistoric jungle born from the mind of Joseph Conrad. An enormous wall, so »[c]olossal« that »it might almost be Egyptian«, separates the jungle from the living space of the island population, depicted as primitive dark-skinned savages.[5] These natives have no inkling as to where the wall originated from and are incapable of bringing nature under their control. Instead, they are dominated by it, trying to appease it with human sacrifices, which – in the film's sexist-racist linkage – are

2 ›King Kong‹ (1933), 08:48-08:49.
3 Cf. i.a. Jean V. Matthews: The Rise of the New Woman.
4 ›King Kong‹ (1933), 3:21-3:23.
5 ›King Kong‹ (1933), 23:50-23:53.

orchestrated as female sacrifices offered to a giant ape. The inevitable happens: the savages see a valuable potential sacrifice in the white woman, kidnap her and offer her to the apish monster. Kong disappears into the jungle with Ann Darrow to deal with her at his leisure. Driscoll follows and eventually rescues her. The giant ape is furious because of his loss of the white woman, pursues the escaping couple, but finally succumbs to the American crew's superior weapons. They take him on board the ship and back to New York, where he is exhibited as the ›eighth wonder of the world‹.

When Kong breaks free from his chains, once again kidnaps the blonde actress, and begins to devastate New York, the cinematic audience needs no tutoring in discriminatory images to easily recognize the distinctive iconography of the racism of the period. The climate of lynchings, in particular, made inevitable a reading of a film about ›Beauty and the Beast‹ which connected it to the »black beast rapist discourse« that »rationalized white lynchings of black men as a moral duty to protect white womanhood«.[6] When Kong is eventually killed by machine gun fire, Ann Darrow sinks helplessly into the arms of her lover Driscoll.

As one would expect of a film that has attained classic status, ›King Kong‹ offers numerous starting points for analysis. It is therefore no surprise that since its premiere in 1933 ›King Kong‹ has been interpreted from a multitude of angles and approaches, which fall roughly into five main categories.

The first approach sees the film as narrating a romance and a »brilliant cinematic fairy tale about a monstrous giant gorilla found on a prehistoric island who falls in love with a beautiful young woman«.[7] It »invites consideration as a retelling of Marie Laprince de Beaumont's ›Beauty and the Beast‹ (1756)« since »Kong is like the Beast in that he also reveals himself to be a kindly soul at heart, inviting sympathy because of his genuine affection for Ann Darrow and his gentle treatment of her«, but »[u]nfortunately, this fairy tale has an unhappy ending«.[8] This reading also flounders on the fact that Kong can hardly be seen as a handsome prince inside an ugly outside but is constructed as a human-like being with sinister intentions.

6 Karlos Hill: Resisting Lynching, p. 90.
7 Ray Morton: King Kong, p. 1.
8 Rick Klaw: King Kong, p. 1123.

Secondly, the movie's self-referentiality is not far to seek – two filmmakers making a film about a filmmaker. Here, the movie is »about seeing«, and, in drawing the attention to the process of making things seen, tends to point the camera to itself and its history of production.[9] The film also refers to the film historical ›gun/camera‹ trope,[10] in particular by having Denham explain how on a previous cinematic safari he took over both the control of the rifle and the camera.

Thirdly, the story has been read as a tale about civilization's intervention into nature and its treatment of ›untouched‹ fauna and flora. On this interpretation, the film provides an insight into »the animal as a Darwinian being« with emotions and communicative abilities. Kong »presents a critique of civilization, animal captivity, zoos and exhibitions«.[11] In particular the second film of 1976 caters to this reading by having the expedition party, led by a representative of an oil company, search for oil deposits at an uncharted location in the midst of the Indian Ocean and by presenting Kong ›instrumentalized‹ as a means for promoting the company's advertising event.

Fourthly, Kong has been identified as a metaphor for the US-American working class. The 1933 film poster, showing Kong on top of the Empire State Building, reminds »both in form and content« of the draft for the Stalin-influenced Palace of the Soviets. Moreover, »Lenin has in common with King Kong the fact that both are symbols *of* the masses, displayed as spectacles *for* the masses«.[12] The »verticalized landscape furnished the setting for a fantasy of class rise«, and Kong's rampage is seen as symbolizing the »national resentment against New York City« as the »scene« of the Great Depression.[13]

Lastly, a variety of psychosocial approaches exist. Despite its location as part of the horror genre and as founder of the ›great monster‹ subgenre, these analyses represent ›King Kong‹ as appealing to children.[14] Its viewing has also encouraged an interpretation of Kong as

9 Jay P. Telotte: The Movies as Monsters, p. 390. See also Rick Klaw: Thirty-Three.

10 Cf. Cynthia M. Erb: Tracking King Kong, pp. 65 ff.

11 See Barbara Creed: What Do Animals Dream Of, in particular pp. 60 (›Darwinian‹), 62 (›captivity‹). See also Terry L. Maple, Bonnie M. Perdue: Zoo Animal Welfare, p. 91.

12 Susan Buck-Morss: Dreamworld and Catastrophe, pp. 174 (›form‹), 176 (›masses‹, emphasis in original).

13 Cynthia M. Erb: Another World or the World of an Other, p. 58.

14 See Adam Roberts: Why Does my Daughter Love King Kong So Much, p. 136; the author also wants »the film to be more than a racist libel« and therefore renounces the »most common critical interpretation« as being »about the racial anxiety

a representative of Freudian theory or the claim that »Kong is us«.[15] The movie is said to narrate stories about the »struggle for survival on the primitive, fog-enshrouded, tropical Skull Island« between the Americans, the Islanders and the insular fauna, about »unrequited love and the frustration and repression of violent sexual desires«, and about a »giant ape« struggling against »the forces of urban civilization and technology«.[16]

Undoubtedly, however, the story of Kong is also about the interrelations of race and gender. This becomes increasingly apparent over the course of the whole movie and is carried to the extreme, in the truest sense of the word, in its final scenes. The (black) gorilla – representative of natural savagery – has risen up against (white) civilization and eventually has to be hunted down by its (war) technology. The woman – representative of a new type of women striving for their autonomy – lies prostrated on the floor and will in the near future irreversibly disappear into the arms of her manly (white) saviour.

This ending symbolizes two decisive defeats – Kong's revolt ends with death, Ann Darrow's insurrection ends with marriage – that constitute the respective closures to the discursive strands of racism and sexism which are running like red threads through the entire film. The real-world diegetic reference is the latent threat to society posed by rebellious non-whites inside the country (former slaves and recent immigrants) as well as outside the country (global uprisings at the colonial periphery) and the newly emerged movement of progressive women demanding their share in self-determination and autonomy.

This essay considers the intersectional connections of racism and sexism in the narration of ›King Kong‹. Its first section unmasks the offering of the white woman to the ape as a sexist-racist sacrificial ritual in which a ›new woman‹ is victimized by the directors who draw on allegedly close associations between ›the woman and the ape‹. The following section considers ›Skull Island's‹ topography of racism and identifies Kong and the Conradian jungle as signifiers of ›savagery‹ while making the connection to the staging of ›black menaces‹. The

of white America of the 1930s«. Though, in his eyes, »this reading« may have been »plausible« at the time of its creation, »it has much less purchase today« since »only the most moronic racists would actually insist upon the identification of ›black man‹ and ›ape‹« – ibid., p. 138.

15 Richard A. Lupoff: Kong is Us. For an analysis of Skull Island as a cerebral metaphor see Joseph D. Miller: Darwin, Freud and King Kong.

16 Tim Dirks: King Kong (1933).

Fig. 1: ... seducing apes

last section analyses how the black Kong, as a metaphor for the global colonized and subjugated, revolts against ›white society‹ and, in the staged race war, must therefore be punished by annihilation.

›Pretty Soon Now You Be Same Sailor‹

Ann Darrow is a complex character. Her depiction is not just stereotypic since it unites classic ascriptions of femininity with elements of a

new feminist self-confidence. In the course of the plot, the former are being denounced, while the latter are held up to ridicule. It thus seems too simplistic to see the movie as merely »reflect[ing] the social stereotypes of the time: the woman as helpless object« or as depicting one of the common »female-in-distress roles«.[17] Such a one-dimensional view understates the act of de-emancipation in her being saved. Her rescue by her white lover from her black companion is justified as a protection from both Kong and herself.

She has to be protected from herself in two respects: as a ›classical‹ woman, from her unbridled urges, and as a ›new‹ woman, from her unlimited self-confidence. Hence, it is far too facile to understand the dichotomy of Ann Darrow's character as »serv[ing] a contradictory racial function«, being both »an icon of white womanhood« and »a partner to [...] jungle creatures«.[18] Her relationship to Kong is indeed more-dimensional but actually also functions completely without a racist dimension. The thereby indicated trope of ›the woman and the ape‹ has a history that reaches far back and imputes a sex life to the women that dangerously transgressed the boundaries of the human.[19]

At the time of the Enlightenment, Voltaire still related the story with sexist delight. In ›Candide‹, the protagonist and his valet witness two women being chased by apes – a scene which was engraved with chosen lewdness by Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune (fig. 1). To save the women, Candide fires his gun and kills the apes. His self-praise stops dead when he notices »these two girls tenderly embrace the two apes, melt into tears as they held their bodies, and heard them fill the air with the most heart-rending cries«. His valet then informs him that he has »killed [...] the women's lovers«.[20]

Racially biased movies of the story had been shown before the production of ›King Kong‹. One is Renoir's film about the Charleston that tied in with Josephine Baker's success in France.[21] It shows a war-ravaged France in which a white woman amuses herself with a big ape. One day, the two are visited by an African traveller, who approach-

17 Karen Haber: Kong Transcendent, p. 20; Christopher Priest: Fay Wray, the Pulp Tradition, and the Moral Minority, p. 47.
18 Rhona J. Berenstein: White Heroines and Hearts of Darkness, p. 315.
19 For further information, see the contribution by Wulf D. Hund in this volume.
20 Voltaire: Candide and Related Texts, pp. 32 f. (›embrace‹, ›lovers‹). See Mary L. Bellhouse: Candide Shoots the Monkey Lovers, pp. 741 ff.
21 Cf. Jean Renoir: Sur un air de Charleston (the film can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3ap6haM0ds).

Fig. 2a: ... almost naked

Fig. 2b: ... biased shower

Fig. 2c: ... romantic aura

es them in a futuristic flying object. That he is played by an African American actor in blackface is anything but comical in the light of the further course of action. The wild white woman takes pleasure in the interaction with the civilized African man and successfully enchants him with her exotic dance. As a consequence, the two waft away to Africa, and the frustrated ape tearfully remains behind.

A year before ›King Kong‹, Joseph von Sternberg's ›Blonde Venus‹ was screened. The ape that appears in this scene is actually a white woman – namely one who, during a performance in the cabaret and after having peeled off her ape costume, lets her ›inner ape‹ run free. Surrounded by wild female dancers in blackface, she sings: »Hot voodoo, I'm aflame, | I'm really not to blame: | That African tempo | Is meaner than mean. | Hot voodoo makes me brave, | I want to misbehave, | I'm beginning to feel like an African queen! | Those drums bring out the devil inside me«.[22]

As even the contemporaneous cinema shows, the story of ›the woman and the ape‹ needs no brutal protagonist. This is definitely insinuated in ›King Kong‹. On board the ship to ›Skull Island‹ is also a little capuchin ape named ›Iggy‹, who is shown winning Ann Darrow's affections. She, petting the monkey, rejoices that »Iggy is nice to me«.[23] When faced with Kong, such dalliance turns into panicked terror; the directors of the 1933 version graciously let her pass out while the giant ape performs a strip search – which, following the demands of the film's screenplay, does not stop until »the girl is almost naked«; this, at the very least, turned out to be so thorough that, in a short time, it fell victim to the board of censors and was not reinserted until the reissue of 1971 (fig. 2 a).[24]

The 1976 ›King Kong‹ (shot in the age of sexual libertinage) is more explicit in its sexual undercurrent. Not only does it replace the unconscious female protagonist with one allowing Kong to give her a shower under a waterfall (fig. 2 b), but the degree to which she voluntarily and increasingly favourably interacts with Kong is much more pronounced. Darrow's agency is already indicated here. The 2005 version carries this one step further: arriving in Kong's lair, a well-nigh fearless Darrow fends for her survival and deflects his alleged murderousness by entertaining him with the performance of a vaudevillian interlude – a ›blonde Venus‹ of the 21st century. After these advances, the film depicts the two in a romantic perspective as a couple in a contre-jour shot (fig. 2 c).

Were it only about the intimidation and rebuke of a ›new woman‹, this sexist plot would have been totally sufficient. Without a doubt, this

22 For the video, see https://vimeo.com/24008320.
23 ›King Kong‹ (1933), 13:13-13:18 (›Iggy‹).
24 Screenplay of ›King Kong‹; cf. Ray Morton: King Kong, p. 84; Joshua D. Bellin: Framing Monsters, p. 21.

is also one of the dimensions of her role.[25] She is living on her own and able to »get by in good clothes«. She has no family and claims not to fear anything.[26] On board the ship, she shows steadfastness and adapts so much to the life at sea – even learning how to do sailor's knots – that the Chinese cook Charley tells her: »Pretty soon now you be same sailor«.[27] This, sure enough, is a deceitful compliment because it is voiced by a racistly labelled figure in a corrupt language. It is thus conveyed to the audience that they are seeing a representative of the very self-confident ›new women‹, who advocated their electoral rights, as well as their right to work, and were rather sceptical towards the traditional ›three Ks‹ (Kinder, Küche, Kirche – children, kitchen, church).[28] Because she is lauded for this by a feminized Chinese cook, the audience can be sure that with this attitude the heroine will not succeed.

She must not do that, if only because the movie is concerned with decisively more than the discrediting of the ›new woman‹. For she is also a representative of the ›white woman‹ and the potential mothers of the ›white race‹. Their endangerment points to what is – from a racist perspective – a eugenic threat. Against this ideological backdrop, ›Skull Island‹ proves to be a symbolic setting of an epochal confrontation. Taking the island as stage, the Islanders as culprits, and Kong as executive, it seems that it is the ›savages‹ of an ›uncivilized‹ island who sacrifice the ›white woman‹ in favour of their apish god. A close reading of the movie, however, debunks this as a pretence. With the movie »undoubtedly [being] a drama that operates on the ›dangerous‹ border of miscegenation«,[29] the role of Ann Darrow as a ›white victim‹ becomes crucial.

Of course, this status is neither assigned to her by the ›savages‹ nor imposed on her by the ape. In the same manner as the latter is a product of animation techniques, the former are the creation of costume design and both originate from the fantasy of the filmmakers Coop-

25 Cf. Cynthia M. Erb: Tracking King Kong, p. 14.

26 In response to Denham's question whether she is »the sort of city gal who screams at a mouse and faints at a snake«, she self-confidently answers: »I killed a snake ... once« – Delos W. Lovelace: King Kong, p. 15. The novelization of ›King Kong‹ follows the plot very closely but further fleshes out the dialogues and intentions of the character. It was published before the premier of the movie. These lines are also part of the pre-recording screenplay – cf. screenplay of ›King Kong‹.

27 ›King Kong‹ (1933), 11:32-11:33.

28 Cf. Mary Todd: Women and Lutheranism, p. 311.

29 Cynthia M. Erb: Tracking King Kong, p. 89.

Fig. 3: ... propaganda of race hate

er and Schoedsack. They are the ones who throw their white female protagonist to the ape and, in doing so, prove to be the high priests of a sexist-racist sacrificial ritual. The thus celebrated ritual is not new to the community of cinemagoers. The knowledge they bring to the cinematic ceremony has been fed by copious contemporaneous sourc-

es. They include, amongst others, the racial anti-miscegenation law in many states of the USA and the international campaign against the so-called ›black horror‹.

At the time of the production of ›King Kong‹, the alleged rape of white women by black men was a familiar issue. Its racist insinuations found expression in publicly presented lynchings as well as scandalous verdicts of the judiciary. Dehumanization is part of the ideological tools of the trade, which included the ape stereotype. The connection between this and ›King Kong‹ was obvious, needing no analytical subtlety. In the language of the images, this is shown immediately after the premiere of the movie in a volume with linocuts dealing with the arrest and conviction of the ›Scottsboro Boys‹.[30]

Eight of the nine young men who were accused of the rape of two white women were sentenced to death in the first trial (though in the end none were executed).[31] The pictorial story locates the judicial crime in the history of slavery, racial oppression, and the system of lynching; it comments on the campaign with, inter alia, an image letting rise out of the fog of racist propaganda an apish black monster – obviously inspired by Kong – that drags with it a defenceless white woman (see fig. 3). The image is placed over an article depicting ›the fiends‹ under the heading ›Guilty Rape‹.

In the same way as this depiction critically drew on ›King Kong‹, the movie offered an extensive reservoir of pejorative images depicting African Americans as rapists or associating them with apes. A ›classic‹ of this genre is ›Birth of a Nation‹, which introduced the motive of racist female sacrifice into cinematography. In this case, the death of the white woman was an integral part of the plot and legitimated the ideology of there being worthless human races as well as the establishing of racist organisations, like the Ku Klux Klan, masked as necessary resistance to the black threat. The southern beauty, who had to lose her young life for this cause, gives herself to death in the full knowledge that, according to the rules of racism and sexism, she would have been deemed socially dead anyway after having had sexual contact with a man of a ›lower race‹.

30 Cf. Lin Shi Khan, Tony Perez: Scottsboro Alabama; see Dora Apel: Imagery of Lynching, esp. chap. 2 (›Scottsboro, the Communist Party, and the NAACP‹).

31 For the further course of the proceedings and its legal significance, see James A. Miller: Remembering Scottsboro; James R. Acker: Scottsboro and Its Legacy.

Fig. 4: ... most sensational

Apart from that, a movie shot shortly before ›King Kong‹ added to Hollywood's record of reproducing in the world of film what racist science and art had conceived. In ›Africa‹, the genuine victims of apish assaults were said to be, naturally, black women. Presented as a documentary film, a pornotropic movie titled ›Ingagi‹ transposed this fantasy into moving imagery. The story, set in the ›Congo‹, was produced by a company that cynically called itself ›Congo Pictures Ltd‹. It deals with a white scientist saving a black woman who has been sacrificed by her ›tribe‹ to a gorilla in order to appease the latter. The film poster unembarrassedly shows what the audience should attune to, and the advertisement did its bit, promising »Gorillas! Wild Woman! Apparently Half Ape! Half Human!« (fig. 4).[32] The transgression here

[32] Quoted in Gregg Mitman: Reel Nature, p. 51.

addressed was put into pictures at the end of the movie when it depicted the perceived ramifications. A »semi-nude woman emerges from the jungle thicket holding a human baby – but its skin is covered in fur. The infant is described as ›a strange-looking child, seemingly more ape than human‹«.[33]

The audience heading off to see ›King Kong‹ was thus manifestly prepared to understand that this movie was not merely a horror film version of ›Beauty and the Beast‹. They were easily able to relate images of a white woman being threatened by an ape to the discriminatory discourses of their racial society. This was by no means a mere discursive atrocity. In the year of the premier of ›King Kong‹, the banner ›A man was lynched yesterday‹ – displayed at the headquarters of the ›National Association for the Advancement of Colored People‹ in New York each time another news story of someone being lynched arrived – had been shown sixteen times.[34]

›The Darkest Man in Hollywood‹

At the end of 1931, when Edgar Wallace started work on the screenplay of ›King Kong‹, Hannah Arendt toyed with the thought of emigration. Shortly after, she had to flee from the Nazis, leaving Germany to go to France and then, a few years after, to the USA. Here she began work on a project she called »Elements of Shame: Antisemitism – Imperialism – Racism«.[35] The book that eventually resulted from it explained to its readers that the race concept originated in the experiences of Europeans in the »Dark Continent«: »Race was the emergency explanation of human beings whom no European or civilized man could understand and whose humanity so frightened and humiliated the immigrants that they no longer cared to belong to the same human species«.[36] The author also provided a historico-philosophical explanation for this thesis: »The word ›race‹ has a precise meaning only when and where peoples are confronted with such tribes [...] which do not know any history of their own. [...] What made them different from other human beings

33 Robin R. Means Coleman: Horror Noire, p. 39.
34 For the banner see Ashraf H. A. Rushdy: American Lynching, p. 75; for 1933 see the ›A NAACP Crisis Timeline: 1909-1954‹, in: The Crisis, 106, 1999, 4, p. 40c-40f.
35 Cf. Margaret Canovan: Hannah Arendt, p. 28.
36 Hannah Arendt: The Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 185; for the following quotes see ibid., pp. 192 (›race‹), 194 (›horror‹).

was not at all the colour of their skin but the fact that they behaved like a part of nature, that they treated nature as their undisputed master«.

For illustration, Arendt repeatedly drew on references to the ›Heart of Darkness‹ and eventually also used the term with which Conrad's protagonist sums up his experiences in Africa: ›the horror‹. In her writing, this became the »great horror which had seized European men at their first confrontation with [...] human beings who apparently were as much a part of nature as wild animals«. Difficult not to notice, this judgment was anything but a critical rejection of the intellectual assumptions of race theory. Instead, the latter was embedded in the very philosophy of history that was employed by the Enlightenment to justify the message of the relation between human progress and the hierarchy of races.

Arendt could also have found such a message in ›King Kong‹ – albeit literarily reduced from the literary heights of ›Heart of Darkness‹ to a Hollywood level. Nevertheless, the links between the two remain obvious enough. In the original version, these connections have not only found expression in the name of the monster but also in Kong unambiguously being a gigantified gorilla. As such he is native to a region approximately located in the Congo, though the film island is located somewhere »way west of Sumatra« in the Indian Ocean.[37] In the third instalment of ›King Kong‹, the »night of first ages« – including the hint that »there you could look at a thing monstrous and free« – are directly quoted from the ›Heart of Darkness‹.[38]

While Conrad's Congo at least pretends to have an actual geographic location, the journey to Kong's island is an altogether imagined travel, leading directly into the racist fantasies of a world designed by whites and shaped by colonialism and imperialism.

It is a journey to an ideological location in which the racist knowledge accumulated during European expansionism is put into action. The setting is either pre-historic or its history is forgotten. The people inhabiting it have seemingly never left the stage of ›savagery‹. Over the course of the ›King Kong‹ remakes, this impression is additionally amplified by having the natives forfeit their communicational skills.

37 ›King Kong‹ (1933), 14:57-14:58; for the name see the rumour that Merian C. Cooper came up with the name ›Kong‹ »as a result of having unconsciously internalized stories [...] about the exploration of the Congo«, Clifford T. Manlove: An Image of Africa, p. 127

38 ›King Kong‹ (2005), 54:47-55:20. Cf. Joseph Conrad: Heart of Darkness, p. 35.

While the original film allows for a relatively verbose and unambiguous conversation between the Islanders and the ship's captain, the second instalment at least has the Islanders converse with the expedition crew via gestures. The third movie, however, permits no mediation between the natives and the ›whites‹; moreover, the abundance of human skulls on the way into the village leaves hardly any doubt that the inhabitants of ›Skull Island‹ are both sanguinary and cannibalistic. In 1933, the audience had to add this message to the filmic images with the help of their own racist knowledge or by referring to the cartoon that was produced to promote the movie.[39]

Travelling to ›Skull Island‹ thus also becomes travelling back to the alleged ›lower stages‹ of the human race. Its population might have once been a culture capable of architecture. This is emphasized by the giant wall that bisects the island. It was »built so long ago that the people who lived there have slipped back, forgotten the higher civilization that built it«. Its comparison with »Angkor« which is »bigger than this one, and nobody knows who built it«,[40] constructs the current Islanders as more than mere stand-ins for ›primitives‹ – it locates them in a broader racist discourse of socio-historical development between savagery, stagnation and regress that denied the possibility of higher culture outside of Europe.

Kong's island is shaped by the topography of racism; its variations have contributed diverse components. This includes – besides notions of savagery and degeneration or progress and whiteness – the reversal of the human-nature relation that is thought to be a relationship of dominance. ›King Kong‹, in contrast to ›Heart of Darkness‹, gives the interconnection a definite reversal. The latter allegorizes power and the temptation of the »immense wilderness« by the »wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman«, who, »like the wilderness itself«, glances at the intruders.[41]

In ›King Kong‹, the eyes of wilderness glance at a woman still linked to it by her sex but at the same time far removed from it by her whiteness. This holds true also for the eyes of the film-savages as well as their apish emperor: they are focussed, as desirous as tragic, on

39 See the middle image on the cover and the information in the editorial.

40 ›King Kong‹ (1933), 16:08-16:13 (›slipped back‹), 23:59-24:04 (›nobody knows‹); for ›Angkor‹ see Charles Higham: The Civilization of Angor.

41 Joseph Conrad: Heart of Darkness, pp. 60 (›apparition‹, immense‹), 61 (›wilderness‹).

humanness that is denied them due to their ascribed primitiveness and animality.

The actual wall in ›King Kong‹ – the movie leaves no doubt about this – divides ›white civilization‹ and ›dark savagery‹. This is no retroactive interpretation but a deliberate intention: the film's screenplay describes the members of the expedition party (with the exception of the Chinese cook) as whites,[42] while the casting made sure that the ›natives‹ of the movie were represented as a sort of universalized non-whites. The two leading figures of the ›savages‹, the chief and the witch doctor, were played by an African-American (Noble Johnson) and a Mexican-American of Yaqui origin (Steve Clemente).[43] Other ›natives‹ were also cast with African Americans; in this process, actors with »dark complexion, big lips, and kinky hair« were sought after.[44] Since the movie, at the same time, purported that its island was located somewhere near Sumatra, its ›savages‹ were multilaterally compatible in the colonialist-imperialist context.

In the context of the USA, this holds true for the dimensions of the ›white man's burden‹ in Latin America, the Caribbean and the Philippines, but it could also be applied with regard to the African Americans within the country. James Snead has described it as part of the »political plot« of the »coded black« and points out the ambiguity of the answer Cooper gives his white female protagonist when questioned about her partner: it was the »tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood«. Hence, the film's characterization of »Kong as ›neither beast nor man‹ might serve as a racist's description of a black person«.[45] As an »overdetermined racist cultural fantasy«, Kong was the simianized apotheosis of a long tradition of stereotyped associations, or even equations, of black people with apes.[46]

An especially vicious campaign operating intensively with these visual tools occurred in the not too distant past of the shooting of ›King Kong‹. It was directed against the deployment of colonial troops dur-

42 See Screenplay of ›King Kong‹.

43 Cf. Fatimah Tobing Rony: The Third Eye, p. 177. See also Orville Goldner, George E. Turner: The Making of King Kong, p. 84.

44 Robin R. Means Coleman: Horror Noire, p. 42 (›dark complexion‹). One of the black actresses, Sul-Te-Wan, had already acted in ›Birth of a Nation‹, see the chapter on ›Madame Sul-Te-Wan‹ in Charlene Regester: African American Actresses, pp. 19 ff.

45 James Snead: White Screens, Black Images, pp. 17 (›plot‹), 8 (›coded black‹), 20 (Cooper's answer, ›description‹).

46 Elisabeth Young: Here Comes the Bride, pp. 128-142, p. 140.

ing the first world war in Europe and the subsequent occupation of German territories in France. In the context of attempts to discredit the

Fig. 5: ... ›freely adapted from Frémiet‹

so-called ›black shame‹, the ape stereotype had been widely utilised.[47] One of the illustrations shows a large, dark ape, marked as a colonial

47 Cf. Iris Wigger: Die Schwarze Schmach. The campaign was also launched internationally, for example in the USA, where it not only found white supporters, it also had to face ›black‹ critique (see Jonathan Wipplinger: Germany), though the dissemination of racist pictures could not be prevented.

soldier by the French military cap, carrying away a naked white woman who is desperately defending herself (see fig. 5).[48]

In this campaign, sexism and racism are multiplicatively interlocked. Certainly, the main focus was the denunciation of ›black‹ sexuality and the dehumanization of French colonial soldiers, who were simultaneously marked as beasts, carriers of diseases, and a danger for the German ›racial body‹. But the latter definitely also seems endangered by those white women who forgot their ›racial honour‹ and spent their time with African soldiers, had babies with them, or even married them. At the same time, racist agitation was not only nationally oriented, it also aimed at the mobilizing of international solidarity by portraying the deployment of colonial troops in Germany as a problem for the whole ›white race‹. After all, the soldiers' affiliation with the occupying power would give the impression that they were capable of exercising domination over whites.

With this in mind, the ›Notbund gegen die Schwarze Schmach‹ (›Emergency Association for the Combat of the Black Shame‹) warned the German Reich Chancellor of the impending ›race war‹ which would be advanced by »installing coloureds as masters of whites« and »virtually educating them to impertinent disdain of the whites«.[49] In this context, they referred to the »Ethiopian movement« and Marcus Garvey, who reclaimed »Africa for the Africans«. The campaign was thus given a geopolitical dimension, and it was made clear to potential sympathizers that an attack against the whole (›white‹) civilization was taking place. It was not least because of this that the white woman, appropriated by the simianized colonial soldier, became a symbol of the defeated Germany and the degradation inflicted on it. In the racist discourse of the time, they represented the menace to the ›white world‹ in general.

The message of ›King Kong‹ takes up this racist agitation not just iconographically. By setting the film not only in a prehistoric, as well as wild, ›Heart of Darkness‹, but by also having a second, likewise important, location in the ›Heart of Civilization‹ – in which Kong ele-

48 See Simplicissimus, 9.6.1920, p. 168. With the addendum ›Frei nach Frémiet‹ (›freely adapted from Frémiet‹), the artist has furthermore noted from where he took the inspiration for his malice – cf. the paper by Wulf D. Hund in this volume and the corresponding fig. 1 (above right). See also Ted Gott: Clutch of the Beast.

49 Quoted in Iris Wigger: Die Schwarze Schmach, p. 142; there also the following quote.

vates himself even above its highest building – the film unmistakably puts into the limelight the endangerment of ›white supremacy‹, conveyed by the endangerment of the white woman.

›Gas Bombs Bring Down Anything‹

The narrative of ›King Kong‹ connects two extreme spaces – Kong's arrival in New York puts the imperial metropolis in direct contact with the colonial periphery. Formerly, those living in the colonies were the ›savages‹ who were yet to be (discovered and) civilized. In contrast, those who had already arrived in the metropolis (as slaves, migrants or the like) had been violently assimilated to civilization but were still under suspicion of latent ›savagery‹.

The contemporaneous discourse, however, makes obvious that the parameters presupposed in this construction – the racist optimism of the Enlightenment and the racist pessimism of Social Darwinism – could no longer be sustained. When the original ›King Kong‹ was shot, day-to-day politics were informed by uprisings of anti-colonial movements in the colonies and internal dislocations in terms of class, ›race‹, and gender caused by, inter alia, the ›Red Scare‹ after the October Revolution in Russia and the emancipation movements of both the ›New Woman‹ and the ›New Negro‹.[50]

After the movie has already solved, in a chauvinistic manner, the women's issue, its second part deals with the race question. This is made especially obvious by having black Kong arrive in an entirely ›white‹ city. The film metropolis has no African American people roaming the streets, riding the train, or attending the exhibition of Kong. By this exclusion, blackness is not just emphasized as a marker of savagery (and thus constructed as the opposite of civilization), it also represents the banishing of all non-whites to the outskirts of the colonial empire, placing them outside of an allegedly purely ›white‹ American society. The narration thus seems to provide a »fantastic way to talk about white fears« and depicts »a comforting Manichean reality for colonial/racist fantasists«.[51]

50 Cf. Amber Harris Leichner: Harlem and the New Woman; Charlotte J. Rich: Transcending the New Woman; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gene Andrew Jarrett (eds.): The New Negro; Theodore Kornweibel Jr.: Seeing Red.

51 Marianna Torgovnick: Gone Primitive, p. 53.

As the sole black entity in New York, Kong is explicitly marked as the intruder that brings a diametrically alien and highly violent threat into white society.[52] An exchange between two members of the Kong audience is indicative of the actual intentions behind this pointed representation. Asked by his female seatmate what they will see on stage tonight, the man answers: »I hear it's a kind of a gorilla«. The woman grumbles in return: »Gee, haven't we got enough of them in New York?«[53] The ›King Kong‹ audience, too, was well aware that the film city was a racially sanitized utopian space, highlighting the alleged racial threat of the present situation.

In the year of the movie's premiere, the percentage of the African American inhabitants of New York had increased almost ninefold.[54] The ›Great Migration‹ from the South to the North had commenced in the mid-1910s and went along with continued segregation, increasing racism and lynching campaigns as well as lack of job opportunities. Nonetheless, the perceived chances for upward social mobility, education, and political activity were welcomed as »a decisive step toward personal autonomy« and encouraged African Americans to move to the urban areas of the North.[55] The numerical growth of the black population fostered demands for ›white preference‹ in employment and housing segregation to counteract white fears of being overrun by the new urbanites.[56] In this racistly charged atmosphere, the movie caters to the fantasy of an exclusionary urban landscape that offers distraction from the Great Depression.

Other than the actual ethnographic films of the time that were shown in cinemas, Kong is presented to a rather restricted audience. His exhibition is, nonetheless, evocative of the presentation of ›real natives‹ in artificially erected villages, the so-called human zoos, that, like freak shows, continued to be an ongoing event in the USA and

52 Following the successes of the civil rights movements, the two remakes of ›King Kong‹ did not perpetuate this segregation and furthermore included one ›black‹ member in the respective expedition parties. The 1976 ›King Kong‹ shows African-Americans partaking in the normal life and events on the streets, riding the train, attending both Kong's premier and demise; the third film presents both white and African-American victims of the Great Depression, showing them as performers and passersby (though none can be spotted in the theatre).

53 ›King Kong‹ (1933), 1:18:02-1:18:09.

54 Alan Rice: Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic, p. 194 f.

55 Joe William Trotter Jr.: Black Migration in Historical Perspective, p. 6.

56 See Leonard S. Rubinowitz, James E. Rosenbaum: Crossing the Class and Color Lines, p. 19.

were visited by people from all social milieus. The year of the premier of ›King Kong‹, for instance, saw Chicago hosting a world's fair with the motto ›A Century of Progress‹.[57] Its guests could, besides enjoying all the technological sensations, still visit ›native villages‹ and a ›Darkest Africa‹ show.

More than being an allusion to these events – and maybe also allowing for some brief reflection on the iniquitousness of uprooting someone from their original life circumstances – Kong's coming to New York is discussed by many current interpretations in the light of the ›middle passage‹ from Africa to the ›New World‹. In this reading, the gorilla becomes an explicit reminder of the injustice done to those brought as slaves to the Americas. The tale of ›King Kong‹ is then understood as »an allegory of the slave trade«: comprised of a ship »leaving with dangerous ›cargo‹« that returns »with tamed ›cargo‹«;[58] his being exhibited to the public, shackled and manacled on a platform, is consequently seen as »a symbol of American slavery«.[59] Though in this reading the narration might be considered a ›guilty plea‹ that acknowledges the repercussions of the colonialist and imperialist cause, the subsequent fate of Kong is, in actuality, not a liberation story but emphasizes the threat caused by the unleashing of those brought into the country against their will.

With the movie's careful composition of Kong as being not only a metaphor for the ›black man‹ but also a representative of all ›non-white‹ people, he comes to embody the revenge of the colonized and subjugated: the racialized antagonist to ›white‹ civilization. ›King Kong‹ »takes literally« the »implicitly monstrous character« of an »indigenous person who does not remain in his or her proper place«[60] and turns an abstract political danger into an, if only visually, immediately graspable experience. With Kong continuing his rampage despite having already retrieved what he wants, the film convinces its audience that the ›black threat‹ does not stop with the appropriation of the white women – rather, the ›beast‹ aims at the total destruction of society.

57 Cf. Robert W. Rydell: World of Fairs; Cheryl R. Ganz: The 1933 Chicago World's Fair; Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch, Nanette Jacomijn Snoep: Human Zoos.

58 James Snead: White Screens, Black Images, p. 17; see also id.: Spectatorship and Capture in King Kong, pp. 64, 67.

59 Alan Rice: Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic, p. 190. See also Steven Rubio: Not the Movie, p. 33; David N. Rosen: King Kong.

60 Fatimah Tobing Rony: The Third Eye, p. 155.

Kong thus becomes »the projection of Anglo-America's worst nightmare, the race riot«.[61]

Such developments seemed not too implausible, given that the contemporary political climate at the time of ›King Kong‹ was informed by both uprisings in ›colonial‹ settings as well as civil right movements on the northern US-American doorstep.

All over the world, European colonizers and settlers found themselves confronted with challenges to their claim to supremacy. The victory of Japan over Russia in the battle of Tsushima in 1905 had already challenged the allegedly decisive ›white superiority‹ and »galvanised colonised people everywhere, from Africa, to Asia, to the Americas«.[62] Scholars like Charles H. Pearson, Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant warned against the ›rising of the coloured tide‹ and the waning of ›white supremacy‹.[63] Grant, in particular, would have been quite well suited as a co-director of ›King Kong‹. A passionate big game hunter, he would have been the ideal comrade in the jungle of ›Skull Island‹. As the co-founder and president of the Zoological Society, he had already gained experience with racist simianization and human zoos: in his Bronx Zoo, Ota Benga had been exhibited as ›African Pygmy‹ in a monkey cage – along with an orang-utan, a parrot, and suggestively scattered bones. As a member of several eugenic societies, he represented the fears about the endangerment of the ›white race‹ (not least by the ›white woman‹), which he also disseminated through his alarmist book about the ›coloured peril‹.[64]

The actual global developments of the time seemed to further substantiate Grant's and Stoddard's ›warnings‹. The first decades of the 20th century were ripe with examples of anti-colonial uprisings and fights for independence. Amongst others, commencing in 1919, the ›Great Arab‹ insurrection fought against colonialism and ended eight years later with the independence of Iraq. The 1920s, too, saw waves of anti-colonial resistance in the Western Pacific (Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Nauru), and in the Rif War of Moroccans attempting to free themselves of Spanish colonial rule. At the time of the shooting of ›King Kong‹,

61 Alan Rice: Radial Narratives of the Black Atlantic, pp. 194 f. See also James Snead: White Screens, Black Images, p. 196.
62 Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds: Drawing the Global Colour Line, p. 2.
63 Cf. Charles Pearson: National Life and Character; Lothrop Stoddard: The Rising Tide of Colour; Madison Grant: The Passing of the Great Race.
64 Cf. Jonathan Peter Spiro: Defending the Master Race.

the Saya San Rebellion in British Burma had just ended.[65] The dissatisfaction with the status quo, in addition to the shared »identity born out of a common experience of Western domination«, »transcended the confines of a single colony«, and its occasional paroxysms had »sufficient force to be of concern to the colonial powers«.[66]

Besides these struggles in the colonies, the contemporary US political landscape was informed by news and national discussions concerning the South-North migration of African Americans, civil rights movements in favour of African-American equality, and questions of eugenics pertaining not only to immigration but also to the population already in the USA. An uprising of African Americans was the ultimate ›white‹ nightmare, bringing up memories of past slave insurrections and contemporary fears of a ›black urban revolt‹. Fresh in the mind of the ›King Kong‹ audience was the memory of black involvement in the ›national hunger marches‹ of 1931 and 1932 that were lauded as »interracial solidarity‹ by the Communist Party.[67] The number of black colleges surged in the early 1930s and gave further pressure to the demand for equalization, also supported by sections of the labour movement.[68]

Moreover, the threat of eradication was substantiated by the continuation of lynching campaigns against Blacks. One case was still in the process of unfolding its full significance when ›King Kong‹ was shot and screened. In August 1930, a lynch mob abducted three African American men who had been arrested, inter alia, on charge of the rape of a white woman. Two of them, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, after having been violently beaten, were hanged from a tree. The photograph of their lynching was widely circulated as an act of celebration; but this inspired Abel Meeropol, a communist and union-linked Jewish teacher from New York, to write a critical poem that later became a famous song: ›Strange Fruit‹ performed by Billie Holiday.[69]

65 Cf. Barrie Macdonald: Britain, p. 173 (Western Pacific); Spencer D. Segalla: The Moroccan Soul, pp. 172 f.; Sunil S. Amrith: Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia, p. 94 f. (Saya San).

66 Frank Füredi: Colonial Wars and the Politics of the Third World Nationalism, pp. 22 f.

67 Mark Solomon: The Cry Was Unity, p. 153.

68 Cf. Doug McAdam: Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, pp. 100 f.

69 Cf. Dora Apel, Shawn Michelle Smith: Lynching Photographs, pp. 39, 45; Wulf D. Hund: Negative Vergesellschaftung, p. 7.

In this context, Kong in New York is a rather worrisome depiction of the arrival of the ›black danger‹ in the ›white‹ metropolis. But before Kong can be put on display in New York, he had to be hunted down on his island. For this, the expedition party utilizes gas. Its impact has previously been tested by them when combating the dinosaurs on the island, and the expedition leader assures his team: »I told you those gas bombs would bring down anything«.[70] This weapon is also deployed against Kong and enables them to capture him alive.

This scene had a significant allusion. After the experience with chemical weapons in World War I, the ›Geneva Gas Protocol‹ of 1925 banned the first use of asphyxiating, poisonous, or other gases. Nevertheless, in colonial contexts, Great Britain dropped gas grenades on rebelling Afghans and Iraqis, Spain used chemical weapons during the Rif War in Morocco, and Italy utilized gas against the Libyans in the 1920s. Winston Churchill, serving as Great Britain's Secretary of State for War at that time, laconically noted: »I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poison gas against uncivilised tribes«.[71]

The bringing of Kong to the metropolis is therefore precisely not a sign of a civilizing mission; rather, it lays the foundation for the annihilation of the beast. The alleged necessity to take down the ape is, of course, a highly exterminist message – the inevitability of which is blamed on the uncontrollability of the ›beast‹ itself. Kong is a »monstrous rampaging other«, who could only be subdued »by the utilization of Western knowledge and weapons technology«.[72] In the end, Kong climbs the (at the time only recently finished) Empire State Building to rebel one last time. The gas bombs were sufficient to take down Kong in order to ship him to New York. But his presence in the midst of ›civilization‹ and his demonstration of uncontrollable violence require the deployment of heavier artillery – the war against the ›apish terror‹ eventually becomes a national matter.

The film's final showdown makes more obvious than ever before that the directors' insinuation that ›Beauty killed the Beast‹ is a menda-

70 ›King Kong‹ (1933), 46:02-46:03.
71 Quoted in Dominik J. Schaller: Genocide and Mass Violence in the ›Heart of Darkness‹.
72 Alan Rice: Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic, p. 189.

cious attempt of justification.[73] Cooper and Schoedsack – who were the ones initiating the whole journey into the ›Heart of Darkness‹, including the subsequent threat to ›white‹ civilization by a ferocious black monster – are now taking care of the problem they have stylized as a race war. Its first battle against the ›savages‹ of ›Skull Island‹, they had left to celluloid creatures; the final battle against the black beast in rebellion, they tackle in person.

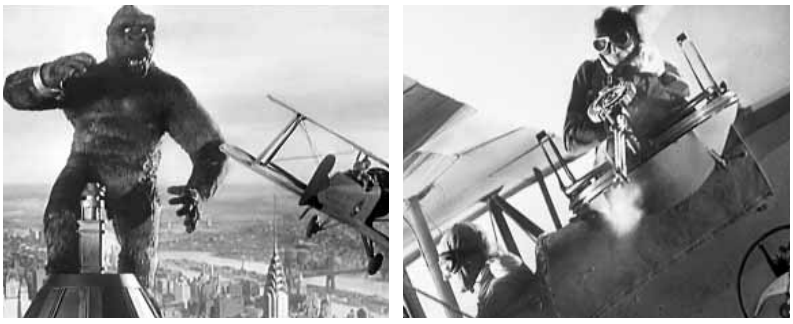

Fig. 6: ... exterminating the brute

In this process, their action is by no means second to Kurtz's famous injunction »Exterminate all the brutes«.[74] For its realization, the directors literally put themselves into the picture – specifically into the fighter plane – to take down Kong: Cooper acts as pilot, Schoedsack mans the machine gun (fig. 6).[75] Here, only the stubbornest of minds can miss hearing the voice resonating from the archives of colonialism. It comes, once again, from Winston Churchill and celebrates the colonial deployment of the machine gun as »the most signal triumph ever gained by the arms of science over barbarians«.[76]

73 Nonetheless, this statement has been repeatedly maintained without being questioned in numerous interpretations – see, for example, Dagmar C. G. Lorenz: Transatlantic Perspectives on Men, Women, and Other Primates, p. 162; John C. Wright: 'Twas Beauty Killed the Beast, p. 205; Mike Phillips: Sex with Black Men, p. 936; Adam Roberts: Why Does My Daughter Love King Kong So Much, p. 136; David N. Rosen: King Kong.

74 For the broader significance of this quotation of Kurtz's, see Sven Lindqvist: Exterminate all the Brutes. For the following quotation by Winston Churchill and its historical context, see Berny Sèbe: Justifying ›New Imperialism‹, p. 62.

75 See Ray Morton: King Kong, pp. 6 f., 33.

76 I should like to thank Wulf D. Hund for his critical comments on my draft and his precious input regarding gas bombs, and Charles W. Mills for his careful reading of the manuscript and his generous improvements.

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