## **INTRODUCTION** Monsters of Our Making

Monstrosity actualizes the tendency of all persecutors to project the monstrous results of some calamity or public or private misfortune onto some poor unfortunate who, by being infirm or a foreigner, suggests a certain affinity to the monstrous. Instead of bearing certain faintly monstrous characteristics, the victim is hard to recognize as a victim because he is totally monstrous.—René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (1982)

My favorite movie of all time is *King Kong*. (The 1933 *King Kong*, that is; as a devotee of the original, I obstinately refuse to see any merit in the 1976 remake.) Some of my earliest visual memories are of the great gorilla's many indelible moments: sitting astride a tyrannosaur, wrenching its jaws apart (and then comically flopping the shattered jaw to assure himself of victory); roaring and swatting at sailors and islanders as the village gates come crashing down; standing pilloried on the exhibition stage, shaking his chains frenziedly as flashbulbs explode around him; and, in a particularly haunting image, reeling atop the Empire State Building, limply gripping the zeppelin mooring tower, just moments before his fatal fall. As a child, I decorated my room with posters and plastic models of Kong; I sought out any screening of the film, no matter how obscure, like the one the local natural history museum held (presumably because of the prehistoric angle); I drew countless images of Kong and of the "original"—barely distinguishable—giant apes I planned to put on-screen. When the 1976 version came out, I sat, appalled and seething, through the numbing parade of bad jokes and worse makeup; when my first VCR, a present from my parents, arrived in graduate school, there was no doubt what my first video would be. A while ago, at a dinner party, the subject of favorite movies came up; and while everyone else named "adult" titles like *Rear Window* (1954) and *The Seven Samurai* (1956), I named *King Kong*. Proudly.

I state my love of *Kong* at the start of this study because, in no time at all, I will launch a discussion of the film that seems anything but the fond reflections of a fan. I will term *Kong* an expression of the violent racism of Depression-era America; I will describe my favorite film as one that participated in an urgent early-twentieth-century project of defining and defending the prerogatives of the white race, a project that enlisted as one of its most fearful agencies the ritualized slaughter of the supposed black defiler of white womanhood. Nor, I will assert, is *Kong* the only fantasy film that takes part in the processes of ensuring the authority of dominant social groups by demonizing the outcast and disempowered. Quite the contrary, I will argue that *Kong* is the exemplar, if not the prototype, of a long-standing (and ongoing) tradition in fantasy film that identifies marginalized social groups as monstrous threats to the dominant social order. Thus, as this study develops, *Kong*, which served as a benchmark in the fantasy film tradition, will similarly function as a touchstone for the many films I consider: *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which I will argue expresses Depression-era fears of lower-class revolution; Ray Harryhausen's Sinbad trilogy, which I will read in light of postwar America's vilification of the Middle East; *Jurassic Park* (1993), which I will suggest joins in the late-twentieth-century attack on the women's rights movement; *12 Monkeys* (1996), which I will critique for its role in furthering the image of the homeless mentally ill as dangerous deviants. What I will illustrate through readings of *Kong* and the many films, past and present, that followed in its wake is that this germinal fantasy film's racism, far from being an exception or an aberration, is in fact a particularly dramatic exhibition of alienating social practices that are prevalent in, and that may even be definitive of, the fantasy film tradition as a whole.

At the simplest, then, I announce my love of *Kong* at the beginning of this study to clarify my position toward it and toward the other films I will discuss. To state this position succinctly: I am not out to bad-mouth or belittle films that others love and in so doing to set myself above those who love them. To be sure, I write from a critical standpoint in this study; I seek not, in the manner of illustrated surveys of the genre,[1] to celebrate fantasy films for their many and undeniable delights but to demonstrate that, far from being "timeless" or "pure" entertainment, they play a vital role in circulating and validating pernicious cultural beliefs embedded within specific social settings. Indeed, my argument depends precisely on questioning the putative "purity" of fantasy films—on showing that it is those cultural places that seem most benign or innocuous that must be most closely scrutinized for their part in harboring widespread, malignant social attitudes. But for me, as I suspect for many critics of fantasy film, fandom not only gave birth to but continues to motivate criticism; it is *because* I was (and

am) a fan of fantasy films that my inquiry into them is as compelling, personal, and—if short of reverent—committed as it is. For me, that is, the exploration of fantasy film is driven by a question that troubles both the enthusiast and the skeptic in me: how is it that one can so love films that are in significant respects so hateful?

As this study progresses, such intimate questions will recede, replaced by more narrowly critical questions about the form, features, and functions of fantasy film. But since this question is the one that brought me to the study of fantasy film, it seems fitting to use the question as a means of broaching the other issues I will address. Moreover, it seems to me that this question is neither solely personal nor purely arbitrary. Rather, the paradoxical nature of fantasy films, their lovable hatefulness, seems to me pertinent to the other issues I will take on. Thus I begin by considering the love/hate question because I believe that this question will lead not only to answers about any particular film, such as *Kong*, but to insights into the ways in which fantasy films operate, the reasons for their popularity since the earliest days of the cinema, and the properties of these films as a genre.

To begin to unravel the love/hate paradox, it is first important to consider the approach to fantasy film that has been most widely adopted in critical studies to date—an approach according to which the love/hate question would be mystifying, if not wholly stupefying. For most critics of fantasy film, what matters most about these artworks is not their social contexts, features, or functions; if they possess any such characteristics, these are considered wholly subordinate to the works' embodiment of "universal" elements and themes: mythological master-narratives and archetypes, developmental or psychoanalytical dramas, and so on. The 1970s, an era that saw an intense interest in fantasy (and particularly horror) film, proved definitive for the universalizing approach to the genre: "Sociological explanations of [monster films] fail to recognize the historical fact that there has always been a spontaneous human taste for monsters," Lawrence Alloway warned (124), while Walter Evans announced that such films are so "concerned with certain fundamental and identifiable features of human experience" (53) that cultural contexts are "superficial" or "non-essential" to them (62 n. 10). Even Robin Wood's influential "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s" (1975), which seemed to hint at the social contexts of fantasy film in its claim that "the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror" (75), ultimately reinvigorated the dominant paradigm by minimizing the historical nature of monstrosity: "The Monster is, of course, much more protean [than the normal], changing from period to period as society's basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately ac-

cessible garments—rather as dreams use material from recent memory to express conflicts or desires that may go back to early childhood" (79). In the case of *Kong*, such postulates have spawned a variety of readings: the film is termed a waking dream by Helmut Färber; labeled a retelling of the Perseus/Andromeda myth by Joseph Andriano (45–52) and of the Cupid/Psyche myth by Harry Geduld and Ronald Gottesman (19); judged a parable of adolescent sexuality by Noel Carroll and by Harvey Roy Greenberg ("*King Kong*"); dubbed a modern version of the "wild man" legend by John Seelye; and deemed a classical love triangle by Anthony Ambrogio. By these terms, the love/hate question simply makes no sense; by these terms, love of fantasy films is uncomplicated, precisely what one would expect from artworks that claim such a deep, global, and all-embracing hold on the human soul.

In recent years, to be sure, this model has been subjected to reevaluation; scholars have argued, as Annette Kuhn does in her collection of essays on science fiction film, that there is "a relationship of some sort between [these] texts and the 'real' world" (Introduction to Part III 147).[2] Investigation of these furtive relationships has yielded intriguing theses, including Cyndy Hendershot's twin volumes on sci-fi and horror film during the McCarthy era, Mark Jancovich's comparable study of horror in the 1950s, Eric Greene's explication of the *Planet of the Apes* series in light of the civil rights struggle, and Daniel Leonard Bernardi's consideration of the *Star Trek* juggernaut in respect to current racial politics. Significantly, however, the bulk of such revisionary work has been performed on *sci-fi* film, a genre that is typically thought to diverge from the fantasy mainstream in being overtly linked to real-world contexts. In the meantime, considerable resistance remains to historicizing films that appear to elude or resist the sci-fi label, films such as *The Wizard of Oz*, the "fairy-tale" fantasia of Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), or Peter Jackson's screen adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's epic swords-and-sorcery trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003). In the case of such films, writes Barry Keith Grant, universalizing approaches continue to be seen as "the most profitable" (Introduction 4). So pervasive is this commonplace that when, in 1995, Brian Attebery delivered the keynote address to the Twelfth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, both the title of his talk—"The Politics (If Any) of Fantasy"—and its tone indicated his sense that he was broaching a subject quite unprecedented, even heretical, to the majority of his listeners: "The politics of fantasy—what a peculiar thing to talk about! It's not hard to see a connection between fantasy and archetypes, or fantasy and ethics, or fantasy as an expression of metaphysics, but what has politics got to do with it?" (1). I will return to the implications that the ostensible contrast between sci-fi and fantasy films has for the definition of the genre; for the

moment, it is sufficient to note the longevity and vigor of the paradigm by which films strongly identified with otherworldliness, innocence, or spectacle are denied a historical genesis or function.

Needless to say, this study depends upon challenging that paradigm. In doing so, however, I do not mean to suggest that universalizing approaches to fantasy film possess no validity, or that they may not work together with a historicizing approach to ground an assessment of fantasy film's cultural work. Fantasy films, as I will discuss at greater length shortly, are indeed protean works; there is little to be gained in reducing them exclusively to vehicles of social alienation. Nor, among the possible readings of fantasy film that one might propose, is it surprising that universalizing readings should have gained the ascendancy; indeed, if one accepts the commonsense definition of *fantasy* as that which "could never have been, cannot be, and can never be within the actual, social, cultural, and intellectual milieu of its creation" (Schlobin xxvi), then the proposition that a film about a giant gorilla-god is deeply, necessarily (rather than fortuitously or tangentially) affiliated with the specific cultural issue of 1930s racially motivated violence against African Americans would automatically be ruled out.

I would argue, however, that it is precisely *because* of the counterintuitive nature of such a proposition that it needs to be entertained. For as I hinted at the outset, I believe that the move to unmoor fantasy films from their social contexts—to dismiss (or laud) them as pure, innocent diversions—is fundamental to these films' social power; any social production that can so readily be denied *as* a social production can perform (or in the denial *has* performed) injurious social work. If, therefore, universalizing approaches are allowed to form a protective cocoon around films such as *Kong*, legitimizing popular and commercial opposition to recognizing the films' often corrosive cultural work, I believe that such approaches do a disservice not only to the films but to the culture that bred them and the audiences that view them. By contrast, universalizing approaches that help to explicate the dimensions of the love/hate paradox are deeply productive for this study—as, for instance, when psychoanalytic theory in the hands of feminist scholars assists us in understanding the truly staggering abhorrence of female sexuality that marks some monstrous-woman films such as *Alien* (1979). At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that the particular shape such unreasoning hatred takes—and the particular popularity of the films in which it appears—cannot be explicated solely through universalizing approaches; it is necessary to situate the films in history to appreciate that their strategies for demonizing women, however they may be fueled by psychosexual anxieties, take forms that are unique to their time and place. The same holds for *Kong*: if myths and archetypes of the dragon and the wild man help explain the brute threat of

his rampage through New York, the particularities of that threat are fully realized, materialized, only through the cultural practices and codes that 1930s America mobilized in its assault on African American rights, livelihoods, and lives. In making these assertions, I follow the important distinction proffered by Ismene Lada-Richards in her consideration of "mythic" monsters:

> Despite [their] haunting permanence, the beings or natural phenomena that people of all lands and ages have termed *monstra* possess no fixed, secure, inherent attributes which can attract or justify such a denomination. If we were to look for one single element of constancy within the ever-changing borders of "monstrosity," this would almost certainly be the relativity of the "monster" as a humanly constructed concept, that is to say, the simple truth that its prerogatives and its essence are powerfully interlocked with the perennial dialectic of "Otherness" with respect to "Norm." And, as norms are culturally determined, "monsters" too become inevitably culture-specific products. (46)

As Lada-Richards notes, though the human proclivity to fantasize monstrous threats to the norm may indeed be universal, the specific threats that societies fantasize correlate to the specific norms these societies fear may be threatened. In this sense, if it is unsatisfactory to focus on the universal qualities of fantasy films to the exclusion of all else, this is because the mythic resonances or psychosexual energies of a cultural production such as *Kong* do not exist apart from, or even alongside, its culturally coded anxieties concerning interracial union but, quite the contrary, play a part in conducting (and by the same token are conducted by) its historically specific racist discourse. My decision to place the historical character of fantasy films squarely at the center of my analysis, then, represents an attempt to account for the films in their entirety: to view the "universality" of fantasy films not apart from but within the context of their social-historical grounds. And in this respect, my approach represents as well an attempt to credit the more disquieting elements of the films' fascination, the sense in which films of fantasy may be so entrancing as to stifle criticism of their noxious qualities—not least because those qualities may be accepted as the real, the necessary, the right by the majority of the films' viewers.

It is for this reason as well that I am mistrustful of a common move whereby the hateful nature of fantasy film is, if not wholly denied, then displaced or mitigated—a move that acknowledges the socially alienating character of fantasy films yet seeks to salvage their lovable character by preserving a pure space untouched by social forces. According to such a division, what one loves and what is hate-

ful in fantasy films are two separate things: a film's story or style, say, can be set in opposition to its cultural strategies, such that a well-plotted or well-executed film can be admired, even loved, by those who firmly reject its racist discourse and practice. Andriano, for example, proposes such a distinction when he writes that *Kong* "remains a powerful, stirring, even sublime experience, in spite of its racism" (49). As with the complete partition of fantasy film from social reality, however, this distinction between *parts* of a film cannot be sustained absolutely. Indeed, the distinction Andriano draws exemplifies the riskiness of this approach, inasmuch as it ultimately leads back to the utter separation of fantasy film from history; that is, he is able to find *Kong* "sublime" despite its racism because he is able to identify aspects of the film that remain untainted by the historically based racism that presumably operates at a more superficial level or at a different place in the film. Such a distinction between a film's pure cinematic qualities—its narrative or stylistic virtuosity—and its ideologically suspect substance ignores the fundamental tenet of film criticism that a film's substance *is* its story and style; a film's meanings do not survive independently of its narrative or stylistic elements but exist as such through the operation and interrelation of those elements. Indeed, in the case of fantasy film, such a separation of style or story from substance may be even more unsupportable than it is for other types of film; given that incredible narratives and equally incredible stylistic (special) effects have constituted fantasy film's raison d'être from its beginnings, I will argue throughout this study that to isolate narrative or style from the total system of the film is particularly hazardous when dealing with the fantasy genre. If one loves *Kong*, one loves *Kong*; one cannot draw a clean line between abjuring its message and adoring its medium.

What the foregoing suggests, in fact, is that it is futile to attempt any explanation of the love/hate paradox that depends on establishing an opposition between the "fantastic"—a film's putatively pure qualities—and the "real"—the film's embeddedness in social discourse and practice. Rather, I would argue, an analysis of the love/hate question must *start* from the premise that one should *not* separate what one loves in fantasy films from what is hateful. Quite the contrary, one should view the lovable fantasy and the hateful reality as interrelated and mutually sustaining, such that the fantasy of a movie like *Kong* is integral to the racial discourse, and the racial discourse integral to the fantasy. (Even to phrase it in these terms is to suggest a division between the fantasy and the discourse that I find problematic.) The love/hate paradox, according to this line of reasoning, is far from incidental or whimsical. Rather, according to this line of reasoning, fantasy films function precisely to enable the paradox of *loving what one under other circumstances might recognize to be hateful.* Like all commercial, narrative

films, but in particularly potent ways due to the apparent unreality of their far-fetched stories and virtuoso effects, fantasy films enable ugly wishes, beliefs, and fears to take their most naked, extreme, but at the same time seemingly pure (and therefore presumably harmless) forms. As Eric Greene phrases this argument:

> One of the characteristics of fiction is the ability to extract controversial problems from their social circumstances and reinscribe them onto fictional, even outlandish, contexts. The acceptability of introducing new worlds and even new forms of life in science fiction and fantasy may make these genres especially flexible in this regard. Difficult issues can be located safely distant, even light years away, from the real ground of conflict and thereby rendered less obvious and less psychologically or politically threatening. Science fiction's distance provides deniability for both the filmmakers and the audience. (18)

In her analysis of the racial contexts of *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), like *Kong* one of the most enduring of classic monster movies, Elizabeth Young advances a similar argument: "In the logic of racial representation, the very explicitness" of the image of the black rapist "seems enabled by the film's extreme distance from mimesis, its adherence to the safely nonrealist fantasy of science fiction" ("Here" 325). Wood, attempting to balance the social and psychological aspects of his analysis, dubs such films "collective nightmares" (78); I would prefer to call them *dominant social fantasies*, alternate yet intimate realities that serve definite and definable functions within the historical/cultural grounds from which they spring. The real of fantasy film, then, represents the culture's real in a particularly emphatic, if ironic, sense: for a social real according to which certain individuals and groups pose monstrous threats to the norm is, in reality, a fantasy.

But if this is so, one further point must be made. For the real of the dominant social imagination does not exist "before" film, to which it then gives birth; the dominant social imagination is itself constituted, in part, through artistic conventions and productions, including those of film. Thus, to say that fantasy films are social constructs is not solely to say that they are constructed *by* their social contexts. It is, at the same time, to say that they are constructive *of* their social contexts: that they both *produce* and *reproduce* social discourse and practice. Such an assertion moves one beyond the static and outmoded notion that art "reflects" cultural systems, passively, to a dynamic view of art and cultural systems reciprocally and actively shaping and determining one another. In this respect, however tempting it might be to argue that the relationship between fantasy films and social reality is an inverse one—to say, that is, that fantasy films "distort" or "misrepresent" social reality—such a position is ultimately no more

tenable than the blunt separation of fantasy and reality. Accordingly, the verb I would use to describe the ways in which fantasy films relate to social reality—a verb that has given me the title to this study—is that fantasy films *frame* social reality: they provoke a perspective, provide a context, produce a way of seeing. As such, if these films function as mass-cultural rituals that give image to historically determinate anxieties, wishes, and needs, they simultaneously function by stimulating, endorsing, and broadcasting the very anxieties, wishes, and needs to which they give image. It becomes the purpose of this study, then, to make visible these interrelations between cultural belief and cinematic practice, to uncover the processes by which historically conditioned social fantasy and historically conditioned monstrous antagonists mutually generate and reinforce one another.

The reader who has followed the discussion this far will, I hope, grant the general point that a relationship exists between fantasy film and social reality, and that it is, accordingly, impossible to separate the fantasy one loves from the reality, however hateful, of which one is a part. Yet to move beyond this general point to an analysis of the specific ways in which fantasy films sustain—and seek to manage—the love/hate paradox, it is necessary to subject my initial premise to closer scrutiny. For to insist that fantasy films articulate and validate the social fantasies of their time and place does not necessarily warrant my contention that a *particular* set of discourses and practices—for example, those of racism—is formative for a particular film—for example, *King Kong*. Many arguments could be leveled against such a contention, but two in particular strike me as pertinent. The first would be that since fantasy films do not relate in any obvious way to their social realities, it is possible to find virtually any meaning one likes in them. The second, to some extent dependent on the first, would be that since fantasy films are so semantically open and hence liable to misreading, the critical act involves wading through a host of *possible* interpretations to arrive at the *precise* interpretation intended by the films' creators. The former argument, what one might call the argument for polysemy, is expressed by Noel Carroll:

> *King Kong* . . . abounds with interpretations. These come in many shapes and sizes—Kong as Christ, Kong as Black, Kong as commodity, Kong as rapist, Kong enraptured by *L'amour fou*, Kong as Third World, Kong as dream, Kong as myth, Kong according to Freud, according to Jung, and even according to Lacan. . . . [P]art of the fascination of the [film is] its openness to interpretive play. (215–16)

The latter argument, what one might call the argument for intent, appears in the following remarks by Orville Gardner and George E. Turner:

> Many writers have tried to justify the public's love affair with a gigantic, ugly ape by reading into the film a great deal more *significance* than was intended by its creators. . . . Such notions are firmly denied by the persons behind the film. . . . *King Kong* is exactly what it was meant to be: a highly entertaining, shrewdly conceived work of pure cinema. (9)

Rudy Behlmer cites one such denial from a central figure in the film's creation:

> [Director Merian C.] Cooper became irate when we discussed those who attached "symbolic" overtones—phallic and otherwise—to various aspects of *Kong*. As far as he was concerned there were no hidden meanings, psychological or cultural implications, profound parallels or anything remotely resembling intellectual "significance" in the film. [According to him,] "*King Kong* was escapist entertainment pure and simple." (13)

By the terms of this argument, if one cannot prove that the makers of the film intended its racial intonations—and I freely admit that I cannot prove such an intention, much less prove that one existed despite the filmmakers' denials—then one must simply desist from all inquiry along these lines.

This latter argument has been amply addressed in discussions of other film genres and thus can be addressed very briefly here. In general, the argument against intentional analysis hinges on the lack of an authorial figure in film: since, excepting the short features of such pioneers as George Méliès (himself an important figure in the popularization of fantasy film), commercial films are collaborative ventures, it is difficult to settle on an individual whose intentions one is to honor. But to the customary arguments against film "auteurism"—arguments ranging from the limitations on directorial control exercised by studio hierarchies to the effects of the complex division of labor on the film product—I would add that antiauteurist arguments are buttressed by the heightened significance of technical personnel in films of fantasy. *Kong* provides an excellent example: since it relied heavily on the specialized knowledge of Willis O'Brien and his technical crew, the effects unit had at least as much say in designing, shooting, and approving the picture as did director Cooper. (*Kong* lore holds, in fact, that Cooper would shoot live-action sequences only after their animated portions had been completed.) To uphold this argument, it might be noted as well that the signal return to the language of "purity" contained in the quotes above makes plain that the intentional argument is but another version of the retreat from history. If, that is, one can ascribe *Kong* to a single, inspired individual, its social relevance becomes subordinated to the quest for authorial commentary and at-

tenuated by the reduction of cultural context to individual will. But such a displacement of history by biography is itself fallacious, as Greene points out:

> Even if artists do not consciously attempt to make "political statements," artists exist in a world of political and social relations. . . . We can reasonably expect therefore that, consciously or not, political realities, events, and themes will register in an artist's work. In fact we should be shocked if a country's political conflicts and social biases do *not* find their way into its cultural productions. (13)

Fantasy film, then, provides a particularly potent and cogent argument against enshrining the author and thereby ignoring the complex, dynamic interaction between works of art and their social-cultural history.

The first argument, the argument for the particularly broad range of potential meaning in fantasy film, is somewhat more demanding to address, in part because I have made the seemingly extravagant claim that racial discourse is not simply a factor in the fantasy of *Kong* but is *integral* to it, and in part because the terms of the critique—in particular the word *meaning*—are themselves in need of refinement. Let me emphasize from the first, then, that I find the argument for polysemy entirely valid, provided it too is not used as a means of reducing a critic's range of interpretation or of denying the validity of interpretation altogether. Though I will continue to reject characterizing *Kong* as a pure fantasy, I grant that even when it is seen within history, it can be interpreted in a great variety of ways: as a commentary on women's rights, a satirical take on Hollywood, a broadside against the merchandising of exotic goods and cultures, a cautionary tale of imperial hubris, a veiled biography of the film's grandiose producer/director, Cooper, or even an *attack* on racism through its portrayal of the smitten and stricken Kong. If, moreover, one permits the film's audience even the slightest degree of responsibility for its cultural work, then it is plain that any one interpretation is necessarily conditional.[3] There is, of course, precedent for focusing on dominant social attitudes; as mass-cultural productions consumed by millions, fantasy films might be expected to inscribe such attitudes, and conversely, dominant social attitudes are, by definition, broadly shared throughout the culture. But by the same token, the films' mass appeal makes them open to other audiences, other attitudes, other readings—even (or especially) readings that emphasize the liberatory rather than the repressive character of their social operations.

One might, of course, respond to this reservation by pointing out that it is merely a restatement of the inherent condition of film viewership: Films suggest many meanings; no viewer can account for them all; hence to focus on racist discourse in *Kong* is not to disclaim other meanings but simply not to address

them. Such a response, however, allows to pass unnoticed a critical problem in the term *meaning*—allows, that is, one to revert to an idealized notion of meaning as something independent of the historical-cultural processes within which a film is generated (or, to follow the lead of those scholars who stress a film's reception over its production, within which the film is successively viewed). Taken to its extreme, such a notion would mean that a film becomes involved in racist discourse—or ceases to—at the whim of its viewers and interpreters; an inverted mirror image of the argument for authorial intent, which holds that a film means only what its makers put *into* it, this notion similarly permits a film to float outside its cultural matrix, acquiring meaning solely as a factor of what its audiences get *out of* it. As such, the term I would employ in preference to *meaning* is *ideology*: though *Kong* is surely open to many meanings, as a cultural performance it is demonstrably involved in—shaped by and shaping—pervasive cultural assumptions or ideological formations concerning race and race relations. *Kong* can, undeniably and crucially, be read in multiple ways—even nonracist ways. But as an ideological structure, as the totality of its elements affiliated with the culture that generated it, *Kong* incontrovertibly invites and incites the discourses, beliefs, and practices of racism characteristic of that culture.

This leads me, in the form of two central assertions about *Kong* and a corresponding assertion about fantasy film on the whole, to propose a model of fantasy film's cultural work. First, *Kong*—irrespective of its creators' objectives, and in concert with the many facets of its ideological operations—is a film that participates in the processes and practices of 1930s American racism: *Kong* provided viewers for whom images of dark-skinned men as libidinous brutes were historically entrenched and incessantly reinforced—not least by film—ammunition by which these convictions could be renewed, enhanced, redoubled. And second, since no viewer of *Kong* within its American contexts, then or now, is exempt from the culture's racist ideologies, then love of *Kong* cannot be divorced from the processes of racism active within the society that produced it: viewers of this film, in its time and today, are both heirs to its racial fantasies and vehicles for reproducing those fantasies as if they were real. For a principal function of fantasy film as dominant social practice, I will argue, is the genre's role in rendering real—or *as if* real—propositions that in other contexts (say, political, educational, or religious discourse) are normally only hinted at, explained away as jokes, or dismissed as preposterous—such as the proposition "black men are lustful apes" or, subjects other chapters will take up, "the poor seek to supplant the rich," "foreigners are mysterious and treacherous," "unwed mothers are deadly predators," "the mentally ill are violent criminals," and "the physically different must be banished from the norm." That such propositions *are* regularly articulated, in

more or less these terms, by the least tolerant segments of society proves that they are not, in reality, fantastic (in the sense of *unthinkable*); that incautious politicians, preachers, and people on the street periodically give vent to sentiments dangerously close to the above indicates that they are not confined to the lunatic fringe. But even more important than these extreme manifestations, the fact that politically liberal, well-educated people like myself can profess to love a movie despite their recognition of the violent racial strategies it performs, the ugly racial emotions it stirs, and the hateful racial energies it receives from them in turn suggests that fantasy films play a more fundamental part in the construction, dissemination, and maintenance of prejudice than is commonly admitted. Precisely because fantasy films can activate audience prejudices while preventing audiences from recognizing or, more precisely, taking responsibility for such prejudices, they are ideal agents of social alienation: their seeming purity permits their pollution.

To refine my earlier definition of the word *frame*, then, what fantasy films do is not simply construct a *certain* way of looking. Rather, they provide a way of looking that is both negative and unfairly so. The process of "framing monsters," in other words, is a process one might broadly define as stigmatizing or scapegoating: a process whereby individuals or groups who lack an adequate means of self-representation or access to political power are made to bear disproportionate responsibility for social anxieties and ills and are therefore seen as justifiably robbed of human rights for the ostensible good of the whole or of the norm. In short, what this study contends is that, by granting the form and force of the imaginable to deeply rooted yet largely unarticulated cultural beliefs, fantasy films serve to focus, quicken, and vindicate energies of contempt, suspicion, rage, and violence against the vulnerable and disempowered. What this study seeks to achieve, accordingly, is to reconnect fantasy films to their social contexts, to read them in light of specific historical-cultural ideologies, and thereby to demonstrate the ways in which these films validate specific discourses and policies of exclusion, inequity, and victimization.

Before turning to the films and issues I plan to open to such an analysis, let me take a moment to address what seem to me two important conceptual issues pertaining to the choice of films themselves. The first of these concerns the scope of my definition of what constitutes a *fantasy* film. Readers who scan the filmography may object that some of the films I discuss belong not to the fantasy genre but to related genres such as science fiction, horror, or fairy tale. To explain my decision to bring such a diverse group of films together under the heading of "fantasy," it is insufficient to plead that it is the only title that *can* accommodate so large a range of films. At issue, rather, is whether fantasy actually serves

as a *productive* rubric under which to classify these films—or, to state this another way, whether the existence, appearance, and interrelation of these diverse films does indeed call for a genre (one that I term *fantasy*) under which all should be grouped.

To begin to answer this question, I would first note that the definition of *fantasy* has proved, so to speak, tenaciously elusive; though countless forays into defining the genre have been attempted, and though all agree that fantasy is that which bears some capricious relationship to reality, little agreement exists as to what precisely that relationship is. Thus, among the most influential definitions of the genre that have been offered in the past thirty years, Rosemary Jackson sees fantasy as that which subverts the status quo; Eric Rabkin understands fantasy as that which violates its own internal rules; Tzvetan Todorov views fantasy as that which engenders a momentary hesitation concerning whether an inexplicable event is real or not; Brian Attebery regards fantasy as that which contravenes what the author considers natural law (*Fantasy Tradition*); and Kathryn Hume, in the most expansive of modern definitions, conceives of fantasy as any departure from consensus reality. One reason for the diversity of definitions, as Attebery has pointed out (*Fantasy Tradition* 3), may be that all are circular, dependent on what counts as fantasy for each critic: Rabkin's thesis, for instance, works best with "nonsense" texts, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), while Todorov's may pertain only to the tiny sample of texts he discusses, such as Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Given this perplexity, some critics have argued that fantasy is beyond definition; others, such as Richard Mathews, have suggested that the problem lies with the definition of *genre*, not of *fantasy*: "There are no pure genres, and fantasy is no exception" (5). Whatever the case, fantasy remains a fugitive genre; though few people older than ten have difficulty identifying a work as a fantasy, the genre itself has proved far more amorphous, and its study far more arduous, than such commonsense classifications would imply.

In the case of fantasy *film*, the picture blurs even further. Indeed, it might be better to say that there have been few attempts to bring *that* picture into focus at all. If literary scholars have labored to pinpoint the characteristics of the fantasy genre, film scholars have generally been content to study the cousin genres of horror and science fiction. That this is so may reflect the differing histories of the two media: where literary fantasy claims aeons-old and globally far-flung examples, film fantasy settled quickly into—or arguably developed from—the popular categories of science fiction and horror. And yet, if anything, this history makes the generic issue more rather than less slippery; if there are scant pure examples of film fantasy (or none), then the genre, such as it is, may in fact embrace films from a host of affiliated genres. If, that is, one could demonstrate

that the genres closest to fantasy are not in fact distinct from it, then one could claim the fantasy genre as the umbrella of all.

And, indeed, I believe that such an overlap among putatively distinct film genres not only *can* be demonstrated but *must*: that the attempt to separate fantasy from other genres breeds enormous, stymieing, and unproductive difficulties. To support this claim, let me consider the ostensible divide between fantasy and science fiction, the two genres that have been most routinely, not to mention resolutely, differentiated by scholars. For the majority of critics, the distinction between the two rests on the degree of relationship each bears toward the real. Thus, for example, Jack Rawlins contends that

> there are only two kinds of things, two ends of a spectrum perhaps. One end looks at the fictive landscape and encourages us to examine it rationally as literal object; the other looks at the same scene and encourages us to relate to it emotively as a manifestation of our inner selves. I hesitate to offer names for these alternative orientations . . . but if pressed I would say that "science fiction" and "fantasy" are reasonably good labels. (167)

Less circumspect, Barry Keith Grant asserts that while "science fiction . . . works to entertain alternative *possibilities*," the "distinctive aim of fantasy . . . is to present 'alternative *impossibilities*'" ("'Sensuous'" 17). Similarly, Karl Kroeber argues that fantasy, unlike science fiction, bears no relation to the quotidian world: fantasy "intrudes" into a culture where it is "quite unneeded" (5), while science fiction engages in the "realistic, rationalistic, expository forms" characteristic of modern society (10). And Attebery concludes, "Any narrative which includes as a significant part of its make-up some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law—that is fantasy. . . . Science fiction," by contrast, "spends much of its time convincing the reader that its seeming impossibilities are in fact explainable if we extrapolate from the world and the science that we know" (*Fantasy Tradition* 2). The fantasy/sci-fi split, in short, hinges on the apparently robust distinction between the socially relevant (represented by science fiction) and the socially redundant (represented by fantasy).

The flimsiness of this supposedly adamantine divide is, however, hinted at in W. R. Irwin's insistence that "no amount of actual or seeming congruity of material should lead to [fantasy and science fiction] being identified as to generic classification" (99). For, in fact, there is such a massive "amount" of "actual or seeming congruity" between the two as to call into question the "generic classification" itself. At the simplest, there are the generic hybrids, films such as *Alien* and its sequels, that transgress the boundaries these critics erect: "In practice,"

Peter Nicholls writes, "fantastic categories overlap considerably. Is *Alien* science fiction, horror or a monster movie? In fact, it is all three" (7). That such hybrids may in fact have supplanted any avowedly purebred sci-fi films is suggested by Brooks Landon's observation that throughout the sci-fi genre there is "a persistent conflict" between "neorealism and out-and-out fantasy" (249). Landon tracks this conflict to the films' technical feats, increasingly the sine qua non of their identity: "Special effects virtually guarantee that SF film will have a strong fantasy component, confronting us with visual experience of things we know cannot be, images that remain miraculous in spite of any cognitive explanation offered in the film" (253). Nor, at that, need one locate the identity between fantasy and science fiction solely in the realm of special effects; one might note as well that *science fiction* is simply not a very useful designation for many films that bear its stamp, films such as *12 Monkeys* in which the nod to science is so perfunctory as to be, effectively, fantastic. C. N. Manlove holds that science fiction always "throws a rope of the conceivable (how remotely so does not matter) from our world" to its own, whereas "fantasy . . . does not" (7). I would argue that at such "remote" reaches, what "does not matter" is whether one terms a work *science fiction* or *fantasy*.

For the crossover works in the other direction as well: if many sci-fi films are intrinsically fantastic, so are many fantasy films intrinsically science-fictional. As George Slusser and Eric Rabkin put it, "science fiction appears . . . (openly or tacitly) as the form in relation to which other forms of fantasy film . . . shape and define themselves" (viii). Thus a film such as *Edward Scissorhands*, though most would term it a fantasy, contains sci-fi elements: most obviously, there are the robotic claws that give the title character his name, but less overtly, there are the unremitting intertextual references to other films of science fiction (and horror) that provide layers of resonance for the film and its audiences. Even so seemingly fantastic a film as *The Wizard of Oz*, as I will argue in the second chapter, is beholden in the most fundamental of ways to the science fiction of its time; if this film seems misplaced as science fiction today, that is simply because we have lost the original context in which Depression-era viewers of the film would have experienced what we now name a pure fantasy. In sum, there are simply too many factors that compromise the attempt to differentiate science fiction from fantasy. Unsurprisingly, then, attempts to sustain the distinction regularly twist the critic into knots, as in Donald Palumbo's tortuous attempt to sort out a motif that occurs in both fantasy and sci-fi films:

> Although the underground journey motif signals and reinforces the death and rebirth theme in both fantasy and science fiction films, it does not operate in quite the same way in both. The confluence of

> motif and theme is handled more literally and immediately in fantasy films, where the mystical already has precedence over the rational, but is handled more symbolically and abstractly in science fiction films, where the rational is superficially preeminent even though the audience is still affected by the same processes of magical thinking and by the same onslaught of mythic archetypes. (211)[4]

Too, efforts to keep fantasy and science fiction pristine often lead the critic to stray into the antiquated notion that certain forms of art passively and perfectly reflect the real world, as in William Coyle's claim that

> the realist [sci-fi artist] looks outward at a world he never made; he observes a looking-glass and objectively records what is reflected there. The fantasist looks inward to a world that never was, the jungle of his own psyche; he passes through the looking-glass into a subjective world of distortion and illusion. (1)

Even more problematically, this lapse into reflectionist thinking all too commonly undergirds the argument that since fantasy (as opposed to science fiction) bears no relationship to social reality, its significance must lie in its universal qualities. As Attebery phrases this argument:

> Science fiction is so much a mirror of the writer's own time and place that SF stories from the turn of the century or the 1950s could be used by historians as documents of vanished world-views, of futures past. Fantasy, on the other hand, posits a barrier between the fictional universe and the reader's own. Because the fantasy world and the axioms that underlie it are radically unlike our own, the reader is forced to seek connections in other than rational, external directions, relating the portrayed reality instead to myth, dream, and other manifestations of psychological or metaphysical principles. (*Strategies* 109–10)[5]

What such ingenious discriminations, polarities, and oppositions fail to entertain is precisely what the thesis of this book contends: that it is the capricious relationship fantasies bear toward their social contexts that lends them their social power. If, then, my choice of fantasy films seems overly inclusive, I believe that such inclusiveness is necessary not only to do justice to the actual dimensions of the genre but to forestall what I consider to be insupportable implications about the fantasy genre's relation to social reality.[6]

At the same time, if such inclusiveness more accurately maps the outlines of the *fantasy* genre, I believe it likewise offers a more robust, capacious understand-

ing of film *genre* itself. If, that is, fantasy and sci-fi genres show signs of interbreeding and tend to collapse when viewed through any number of individual lenses, this may reflect the fact that genre consists not solely or simply of a film's observable *features* but of the relationship between these textual factors and the realm of cultural work or social *function*. Kuhn believes that "efforts to draw lines of demarcation between science fiction and its neighbouring genres have proved on the whole unsatisfactory" because "more interesting, and probably more important, than what a film genre *is* is the question of what, in cultural terms, it *does*—its 'cultural instrumentality'" (Introduction 1). I would argue that what film genre "is" is not uninteresting but is interesting precisely because what genre is depends in large part—indeed, may be indistinguishable from—what genre does. Genre, according to this prescription, would emerge only through a multidimensional approach such as the one sketched by Steve Neale, an approach that situates film texts in social and historical context:

> What is required is a set of concepts with which the pressure of genre can begin to be located: in terms of the relations of subjectivity involved; in terms of the structures and practices both of the cinematic institution as a whole and of that sector known variously as "Hollywood" or as "the commercial cinema"; and in terms of the determinants and effects of each of these within and across the social formation and its component areas. (qtd. in Kuhn, Introduction 3)

In accordance with Neale's model, it becomes less consequential to the question of generic identity that *12 Monkeys* contains advanced technology and futuristic settings (characteristics normally reserved for science fiction) or that *Species* (1995) contains sudden scares and grotesque makeup (characteristics normally imputed to horror) than that, as with all the films studied herein, these and other textual features, operating in conjunction with industrial pressures, audience subjectivities, and social formations, perform particular cultural work. Thus all the films in this study are fantasy films because of their doubly ambiguous relationship to social reality: by rendering fantastic scenarios incarnate, they lend false propositions ("black men are lustful apes," "unwed mothers are deadly predators," and the like) the lineaments of the credible. Ultimately, then, grouping all of these films as fantasies grounds an argument both for the fantasy genre and for genre itself: it enables a recognition of genre as enacting a common cultural work, and it enables a recognition of the fantasy genre's cultural work as the activity of amplifying specific existing prejudices through specific imaginary elements.

This being the case, I turn to what might seem a second quirk in my choice of films: my habit of employing as the representative of a particular form of alien-

ation not the most obvious case but, quite the contrary, films that have routinely been understood as flights of pure fancy, related to their social contexts only in the sense of representing technical milestones in the history of the cinematic apparatus. *The Wizard of Oz*, for instance, serves as my example of the alienation of the poor; *Jurassic Park* is my principal illustration of the attack on female liberation; Harryhausen's Sinbad trilogy is my test case for the travestying of foreign peoples in film and fact. In each case, more notorious possibilities spring to mind: for the first, James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) or any of its modern reincarnations; for the second, *The Brood* (1979) or *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987); for the third, *Men in Black* (1997) or Disney's widely decried *Aladdin* (1992). I chose less straightforwardly alienating films, however, to further two interrelated ends. On the one hand, I wished to illustrate that even the most seemingly fantastic of films can be placed in their specific social contexts and plumbed for their role in the activity of framing monsters. On the other, I hoped to support the claim I just made concerning the *common* cultural work of the fantasy genre—to show that processes of social alienation are characteristic of the fantasy film genre *as a whole* and not merely of the relatively few films this study could accommodate. Just as the wayward, puckish character of some fantasy films is strategic for their ideological operations, the blurriness of the fantasy genre may serve as an impediment to recognizing the genre's corporate project: the all-over-the-map nature of the genre militates against attempts to understand such injurious cultural work synthetically, not as the work of individual exceptions or aberrations but as the work of the whole. As such, my choice of films was motivated by the belief that excavating this work in extreme cases—*extreme* in the sense of *unlikely*—might illustrate my claims for the whole better than my studying more transparent examples. At all times during the writing of this study, I have been aware of the pressure of those other examples crowding the background; I have resisted including them here, but I hope that their presence will be, at least tangentially, evident to the reader as well. (To cite only two examples that have been particularly painful to resist: I have spared only brief moments for the *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* sagas, two of the most powerful examples of fantasy film—and of alienation therein—of recent years, but examples that came to the screen too late and seemed too sprawling to discuss fairly and comprehensively.) As such, if the reader concludes that other, perhaps more suitable, choices could have been found, I trust that this study will have played a part in calling those choices, the strategies they perform, and their place within an enduring tradition to the reader's attention.

This study, in sum, considers the ways in which, throughout their long history, fantasy films have spoken to a shifting, contingent, but nonetheless coher-

ent array of social discourses and practices; it seeks to view these films *as* a tradition, one united not only formally but functionally and philosophically. And it is my hope that, in pursuing a prominent—I might argue a pivotal—vein that runs through the fantasy film tradition, this study will deepen the reader's appreciation not only of the fantasy genre but of the real-world places within which the genre's monstrous beings come to cultural life.

# 1

## KILLING THE BEAST *King Kong* in Black and White

> The persons who participated actively in the lynchings were primarily responsible, yet those sympathizers who stood by shared in the lawlessness, and curious onlookers who rushed in merely because something unusual was happening were not without guilt.—Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (1933)

Viewing one of the most celebrated scenes in *King Kong* (1933), the scene of Ann Darrow's disrobing by her simian captor, from the vantage of more than seventy years, it may be hard to perceive the threat embodied there. That such a threat was perceived at the time, however, cannot be doubted: screened in the film's initial release in 1933, the year before Joseph Breen took over directorship of the Hollywood Production Code, but cut from its 1938 theatrical re-release, the scene was plainly deemed too risqué for public exhibition.[1] Yet at the same time, the disrobing is remarkable as much for what it suppresses as for what it insinuates. For one thing, in contrast to the shot/reverse-shot pattern that characterizes many of the encounters between Kong and Darrow—a pattern of alternating, screen-filling close-ups swooping in to Kong's frankly leering face and Darrow's cringing reaction—this scene is designed as a static medium shot with Kong in profile, a framing that minimizes the suggestion of rape the former device unavoidably suggests. For another, the scene is played to foreground Kong's bestial (as opposed to carnal) appetites: he shows far more interest in Darrow's clothes, which he sniffs with exaggeratedly waggling nostrils, than in what lies beneath. And finally, when Kong does behave in ways more typical of a human sexual partner—when he tickles Darrow's side—composer Max Steiner's otherwise melodramatic score breaks into a teasing, gassy trill set to the wriggling of Kong's finger, as if to affirm that this is, after all, a sketch, a "bit," a digression from the story rather than a development of it.

# Framing Monsters

## Fantasy Film and Social Alienation

**Joshua David Bellin**

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