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Film Studies 380

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Reading Response 2: King Kong

King Kong (1933) was one of the major American films that pointed the way to the current special effects that we see today in the modern Blockbuster. King Kong's groundbreaking special effects that were created by Willis O'Brien achieved what Professor Leger Grindon states in his article: "The Role of Spectacle and Excess in the Critique of Illusion" a form of 'Spectacle' for the audience. With the remarkable usage of such effects like stop-motion animation, miniature models, back projection, and matte paintings; these groundbreaking effects created the illusion and trickery of another world that audiences have never believed could be possible on the movie screen. These forms of effects, most importantly the effects of the monster Kong, are what create the frightening and exciting role of spectacle; a thrilling cinematic experience which evolved throughout the decades into many other different forms, most famously the acid-filled space aliens in the Alien movies and the fast and ferocious dinosaurs in the Jurassic Park movies. The only difference with those monsters and of the character of Kong is that Kong actually cares for its capture and is largely perceived as a misunderstood victim within a cruel world run by the selfish idiocy of human beings.

What clearly stood out for me when watching *King Kong* were the themes on gender, the female sex and the unfair sexual tension throughout its story. Grindon's article suggests that spectacle has always been associated with the feminist critique of the film image with Judith Mayne stating, "The manifestations of spectacle in the cinema, they are all...sooner or

later...about men looking at women” (Grindon 35). This argument makes complete sense, especially when viewing King Kong again. The approach to this theory points to Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in which the spectacle creates a Freudian perception for the audience. The only real female character in the story is of Ann Darrow played by Fay Wray. Immediately when being casted by the movie director she creates sexual tension with all the other male crew members. “The man controls film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator “(Grindon 37).

King Kong is essentially a masculine voyeuristic spectacle which gazes at the female. Mulvey’s theory states that usually the woman in these stories tends to freeze the flow of action within the narrative by essentially becoming an erotic fetish for the male protagonist and spectator. All throughout King Kong the men constantly bicker, whine and talk down to Ann like small children on how a woman doesn’t belong on a ship with other men. “According to Mulvey, all viewers assume the male gaze which alternates between pleasure in looking at the erotic object, the female as spectacle, and a narcissistic identification with the male protagonist” (Grindon 37). The way the material approaches its themes on sex seem pretty sexist and dated when viewed today by a modern audience, especially because the character of Ann is doing nothing wrong. Like Mulvey suggests this sexual tension that Ann brings upon the crew seems to freeze the flow of action between many of the male characters and their duty to correctly to their job. Throughout the narrative Ann becomes obviously the male gaze and is the object of desire for the leading sailor and King Kong’s romantic affection. Her female beauty is what leads the narrative to its spectacle conclusion and her beauty ultimately destroys the beast and wins over the romantic affections of the sailor. Well, that’s the male gaze for you.