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## **Ironic Identities and Earnest Desires: *King Kong* and the Desire to-be-looked-at**

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### **Abstract:**

Since the 1970s, feminist film theory has worked with the assumption that women's objectification in films and images is the very index of their disempowerment. However, in equating 'to-be-looked-at-ness' with a loss of subjectivity, could such a formulation be seen to conceal the cultural privilege that inheres precisely in being looked at, and the seductiveness of this position for the subjects of an increasingly *visual* culture? In the light of recent claims that the work of feminist film criticism has been done – that 'the battles have been won' - this paper considers what there might still be left to say about the relationship between looking, being looked at, desire and power in contemporary culture. Who is looked at? Who looks? What does it mean to be invisible in a culture of images? If irony complicates our reading of the politics of representation, does it mask a deadly earnestness in the contemporary aspiration to be seen at any cost? These topics are broached across a comparative reading of *King Kong* in its original and contemporary incarnations.

**Keywords:** feminist film theory; gaze; narrative cinema; *King Kong*; to-be-looked-at; Laura Mulvey; visual pleasure; irony; politics of representation; sublime



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In the latter decades of the twentieth century, feminist film theory produced an astonishing critique of the gendered nature of the look in narrative cinema.<sup>1</sup> According to the famous argument, in such cinema, man looks, and woman is looked at.<sup>2</sup> The image of woman in classical Hollywood cinema is a spectacle which halts, exceeds and indeed transcends the diegesis; as Mulvey wrote, it ‘takes the film into a no man’s land outside its own time and space’ (1999, p. 63). The eroticized image of woman carries the spectator beyond the field of a merely *narrative* pleasure (which is always bound up in movement through time) and into the frozen, extratemporal realm of a pure pleasure in looking. The nature of this looking, and this pleasure, have been subsequently theorised from all angles, whether they be fetishistic or masochistic, exclusively male or also female, heterosexual or lesbian, racially marked (as white) or universal. More recently, many of the pioneers of the field of what was dubbed feminist ‘cine-psychoanalysis’ have politely excused themselves from any continuing investment in its project, claiming, as Annette Kuhn did in a recent survey edition of *Signs*, that ‘many of the battles [of feminist film theory] have been won’ (2004, p. 1221).

Indeed, it is no longer so easy to summon up without ambivalence the kind of activist fervour that fuelled the publication of Claire Johnston’s ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema’ (in 1973) and Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (in 1975). Early feminist film theory was bound up with the call for an active intervention into film-making practise, a radical rethinking of cinema aesthetics. For complex reasons, this call today is hard to make. Perhaps there is less certainty about the relation between questions of aesthetics and political effects. Perhaps there is greater interest in historical contexts – points of emergence - than in future possibilities.<sup>3</sup> However, it also seems likely that the gendered schematic upon which such an activist intervention was called for has lost its sure footing in the face of the indeterminacies and ironies of a ‘postmodern’ visual field. The boundaries between positions in the visual field – looking and looked-at, for example – can no longer be so easily demarcated, nor do they correspond easily to fixed identities, such as those based on sexual difference. Indeed, in light of

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Sue Thornham for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Prior to the publication of Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in *Screen* in 1975, which formulated this argument in psychoanalytic terms, it had been made in relation to art history, notably by John Berger (1972).

<sup>3</sup> For her part, Kuhn locates the ‘cutting edge’ of ‘feminist-informed work in film and media studies’ precisely in the domain of the historical: tracking ‘the history of women’s contribution to the making of films and the history of women’s activities as consumers of films’ (2004, p. 1228).

Western culture's endless fascination with the spectral *surface* of bodies – from the ideology of cosmetic makeover as personal transformation, to the phenomenon of 'reality television' itself – it would not be outrageous to argue that 'identity' itself today inches ever closer towards a complete subsumption within the realm of the *seen*; to be looked at, far from (or as well as) the incriminating sign of objectification, may be the defining characteristic of the contemporary *subject*, the strongest currency of subjectivity.

If not quite in these terms, it is something like this indeterminacy of positions in the visual field that Annette Kuhn alludes to in elaborating her claim that 'the battles have been won':

themes and motifs that might thirty years ago have seemed commonplace or gone unremarked (women in peril, say) are treatable on screen today, if at all, only *ironically* or in some other distanced manner (2004, p. 1222, emphasis added).

Kuhn's surprisingly masculinist figuration of the feminist film studies project as a 'battle' from which a victor would emerge reflects the activist agenda which conditioned its emergence. However, the assault on traditional, narrative film form and its pleasures that Mulvey advocated in 'Visual Pleasure' (and practiced in her own films) is clearly not a 'battle' that has been 'won'. As I noted above, what may have perished in its place is the demand for a feminist counter-aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> But it is a subtler shift in aesthetics that Kuhn identifies as the basis of her proclamation of a feminist victory in the field of popular representation. It is not necessarily the case, nor is it necessary, she suggests, that the 'themes and motifs' of narrative cinema should be radically different in their content. What has changed is the rhetorical encoding of these representations, which are 'treatable on screen today, if at all, only ironically or in some other

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<sup>4</sup> In the same edition of *Signs* in which Kuhn's comments appear, Mary-Ann Doane suggests that feminist theory has suffered from a 'tendency to equate aesthetic radicalism with political radicalism' (2004, p. 1232). She refers to the critique of art's 'autonomy', by Peter Bürger (1984) following Marcuse, according to which art in capitalist culture is relegated to an autonomous realm with no bearing on political realities or social praxis. In light of this work, of which Doane insists feminist criticism must take account, she cautions against an unquestioned assumption that 'films are intimately allied with political effects' (1231). Such a focus can not see further than the question of the *contents* of representation – which she characterizes as an 'ethical' question related to 'choice' (1234) – i.e. whether or not to make a "feminist" film. I agree that a broader, more theoretical questioning of the relation between aesthetics and politics remains an important project, and yet, I would argue (contra Bürger) that it is precisely in popular representations like commercial cinema – and precisely not in 'avant-garde' works of art - that aesthetics articulates most clearly and visibly into politics/social praxis. A renewed attention to the political effects of the contents of representation might in fact be crucial to the kind of theoretical enterprise Doane appears here to be advocating.

distanced manner’. It is *irony* – or some other (unspecified) form of ‘distancing’ – that is seen here to intervene between the sign and its ideological content. Irony, it would seem, *redeems* sexist – and, by extension, racist or homophobic – representations. The claim that ‘the battles have been won’ is here hung upon the evidentiary scaffolding of an irony that is offered up as a feminist achievement.

What, then, is irony, and how does it effect this miraculous redemption of the sign? In order to observe such ideological alchemy in action, it might prove instructive to consider, for example, a contemporary blockbuster that was also a blockbuster in the time before the advent of identity politics. If Kuhn’s claim is correct, that ‘women in peril, say’ is a theme only treatable in a distanced manner, then Peter Jackson’s remake of *King Kong* (2005) takes up the enormous challenge of shifting the historical valence of the original film’s problematic inscriptions of gender and race, and thus of creating a new set of contemporary meanings out of an old set of images. An assessment of the success of this enterprise might allow us to determine to what extent the rhetorical device of irony serves to modify or reverse the ideological encoding of the look in relation to narrative. For if ‘irony’ and ‘other form[s] of distancing’ excuse us from an examination of what we might call the politics of looking in the film, and thus free up our attentions for more ‘cutting edge’ concerns, might we not then elaborate an entire feminist and anti-racist aesthetics, no longer around the avant-garde, but around irony? Or might we find that there is an earnestness at work in the contemporary circuitry of looks that troubles the operations of irony, and renders looking and being looked-at a deadly serious affair?

**“Look at the golden woman!”**

An example from the original *King Kong* (dir. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) will serve to situate the ideological heritage which it becomes the precarious task of the remake to negotiate. Carl Denham, a film-maker with the masculinist aspirations of an explorer, has taken Ann Darrow to the uncharted territory of Skull Island to star in the film that will save his career. Denham, who normally prefers to make films without women, has grudgingly acceded to the commercial imperative to include a love interest in his most current scenario. The explicit thematic of the film has been conveyed via its opening title:

“And lo, the beast looked upon the face of beauty. And it stayed its hand from killing. And from that day, it was as one dead.”

–Old Arabian Proverb

Along the course of the journey to come, Ann will tame not only Kong’s savage heart, but also that of Denham’s friend, Jack Driscoll (in the remake Driscoll is made into the scriptwriter for Denham’s film). The theme of domesticating femininity as that which tames and undoes the male subject *through the force of its visual desirability* is central to the film’s narrative economy. At this level, the film perfectly confirms Mulvey’s schematization: woman as object of the male look is the explicit focus of a narrative in which men are the only active agents (Fay Wray as Ann Darrow seems strangely paralyzed throughout the film – all she can do in the face of danger is scream and faint). The film’s explicit discourse reverses the apparent power relation of this dichotomy, by suggesting that beauty triumphs over the beast, thus that woman possesses ultimate power over man. Insofar as Kong functions as a surrogate for the masculine ego unconstrained by civilization, the film stages the feminine power of desirability as a threat: Kong is destroyed by his love for Ann. However, the film also colonizes this threat by putting Jack Driscoll in the place of Kong as the male subject who enables a romantic resolution. The promise of domestic conjugality is the acceptable version of the love narrative which otherwise ends with the death of the protagonist. However, domestic conjugality and death are constructed here as closely related variants of the same theme, in that both are versions of the taming of the wild masculine ego (Kong *and* Jack) by a desirable, domesticating femininity which possesses a dangerous, and distinctly visual, power.

This reading – very close to the film’s own explicit discourse – produces, from the contemporary perspective, the obvious verdict of sexism. But we need to be more specific about how this power that is associated with feminine to-be-looked-at-ness is visually configured. Upon arrival at Skull Island, the crew enter into a negotiation with the natives, who appear to be preparing a sacrifice of one of the native women (a regular sacrifice to appease Kong, as we will learn). The Native Chief, played by African-American actor Noble Johnson, spies Ann, played by white actress Fay Wray. “Look at the golden woman!” he exclaims, awestruck, and promptly offers to trade six of ‘his’ women for Ann. In this narrative manoeuvre, both the transcultural valence of patriarchal exchange and the superior status of the Western ‘goods’ (i.e. Ann, the ‘golden woman’) are taken for granted. The premise of the film – that ‘beauty’ has power over

the ‘beast’ – is itself premised on the assumption that this ‘beauty’ must take the visual form of a white woman, while the ‘native’ (i.e. black) women previously offered to Kong have, in their failure to embody ‘beauty’, failed to ‘stay his hand’. *King Kong* thus makes clear that the sexism inherent in the cinematic operations of classical cinema is inseparable from the racism of those same operations, even as it explicitly thematizes the power that accrues to (white) women’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’. While offering no position of agency to women, the film does however give vision to an aesthetic ideal, in the form of Fay Wray, and elevates this set of visual tropes (white skin, blond hair) to the status of what Lacan might call an ‘enigmatic signifier’. White woman as enigmatic signifier transcends the realm of mere subjective agency and signifies a mysterious power which goes beyond, and causes the undoing of subjectivity, for men and beasts, black and white, alike.

If *King Kong* in its original version provides material evidence of the sexism and racism that condition the emergence of cinema as the twentieth century’s premier form of mass entertainment, the contemporary remake nonetheless celebrates it as a masterpiece of genre. Where the new version pays faithful homage to the stylistic and formal innovations of the original, it does so at the expense of any ideological critique or reassessment of their terms. The new *King Kong* does, however, encourage an *ironic* reading by heightening the self-reflexivity that was already germane to the original film, which was a film about making a film. Jackson’s remake stages the confrontation with the Skull Island natives in (deliberately?) exaggerated, orientalist terms. With eyes that roll back in their heads, what appear to be supernatural powers and grotesque piercings, they are somewhere between human and monster, elementally attuned in a way that undermines the claim to power over nature espoused by the Western rationalist explorer/film-makers.<sup>5</sup> The ancient native woman who accosts the group is the visual antithesis to Ann (now played by Naomi Watts), the ‘golden woman’, dressed throughout in white, with glowing blond hair. This ancient woman (a witch?) seems to embody the ‘horror’ that is disavowed in the representation of Naomi/Ann – the horror of the aging female body and the paranoid fear of a feminine power unconstrained (unbleached) by civilisation, which can only be imagined as supernatural. We might say that it is the image of the ancient native that is repressed

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<sup>5</sup> By restaging the film’s own narrative as a piece of badly executed, orientalist theatre (in Carl Denham’s Broadway show), the film by extension satirizes the spectacle of the ‘natives’ as they are presented in the film itself. In this sense, the sign of ‘natives’ in *King Kong* could be said to be marked with self-reflexive irony.

in the image of Naomi/Ann, the latter emerging – victoriously, in long and frequent close-ups – as a defence against the troubling associations of the former, who is quickly banished from the screen. The two images of womanhood appear as versions of, alternately, a culturally disavowed and a culturally celebrated femininity. The film thus inadvertently underscores the continuing sexual and racial specificity of the category of the ‘to-be-looked-at’ that, albeit with several important differences, remains its structuring trope.

In its fidelity to its predecessor, to the point of elaborately reconstructing scenes that were filmed for the original but omitted,<sup>6</sup> Jackson’s *King Kong* manifests a degree of earnest attention that surpasses irony, and more closely resembles nostalgia.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty of deciding between irony and nostalgia points to the underlying slipperiness of irony – to what Linda Hutcheon calls its ‘transideological politics’ (1994, p. 9 and passim.) As Hutcheon’s analysis makes clear, irony is not merely a feature of a text; in fact, ‘irony isn’t irony until it is interpreted as such’ (6), and this dependence on interpretation leaves irony at considerable risk of ‘misfiring’. Even when successfully recognised, irony does not necessarily impel a resistant reading strategy: ‘Even if an ironist intends an irony to be interpreted in an oppositional framework, there is no guarantee that this subversive intent will be realized’ (15-16).

### **the paradox of distance**

There is no doubt that irony can be a powerful rhetorical device which, by reversing signs, can radically destabilise them.<sup>8</sup> But what Hutcheon’s analysis reveals is that where a text deploys what *may* be construed as an ironic mode of address, it is difficult to tell whether its appeal derives from its complicity with representational norms or its ironizing of them – or some mixture of the two. This indeterminacy is certainly evident in *King Kong*. While the sophisticated viewer can build a reading of the film that imagines the representation of the

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<sup>6</sup> The sequence where the crew are attacked by insects was filmed, but omitted from the original version after it was found to horrify test audiences so much they forgot about the main story. Cf *It Was Beauty Killed The Beast*, (Scott Benson, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard describes nostalgia as ‘the phantasmal parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials’ (1993, p. 372). The urge to rehabilitate lost referentials (whether ‘parodic’ or not) must be seen as qualitatively different from the self-knowingness of irony, which Linda Hutcheon (1998) describes as ‘a mark of the fall from innocence’.

<sup>8</sup> To this extent what Baudrillard says about parody also applies to irony: ‘[P]arody... can touch power more deeply than any force relation,’ he writes in *Forget Foucault*, because it reveals the fact that ‘power *does not exist*,’ is in fact ‘invented on the basis of signs’ (1987, p. 59).

natives as well as the ‘damsel in distress’ narrative ‘in quotations’, as it were, it is equally the case that these things provide the only basis for the narrative pleasures the film offers. It can only be through its images and narrative – which are at least *apparently* sexist and racist – that the film solicits our enjoyment, an enjoyment which justifies itself under the cover of an ironical ‘good faith’. In any case, even if, as viewers, we *do* read the film’s stereotypical tropes ironically, it is not clear that this works to place us somehow outside the ideological system to which the film does not in fact offer any alternative. Annette Kuhn’s allusion to modes of textual ‘distancing’ invokes a spatial metaphor that is *grounded*, so to speak, upon a paradox. For the idea of ‘distancing’ from a given meaning still situates that meaning as the point of orientation. As Claire Colebrook notes, ‘any distance attained [through irony] is always *distance from* (and therefore never outside the context it delimits)... To see oneself as ironically detached from a context requires a blindness to one’s position at the limit of that context’ (2000, p. 17, emphasis in original). In other words, the appearance of distance merely confirms that we have not yet departed from a given semantic topography.

Perhaps, then, we might do better than to rely upon irony as an index of our ideological ‘progress’. Perhaps, moreover, we are wrong to conceive of the political critique of representation in the terms of a teleological progression towards enlightenment, nor as a battle which might be won or lost. Democracy, as Derrida might say, is always still to come. The example of *King Kong*, which for some weeks after its release was the most-watched film in both the UK and the USA, suggests to me that it is not yet (and perhaps never will be) the time to relax our vigilance concerning what is for many the tired question of the politics of representation. For while academic fashions change faster than the seasons, popular representations tend to exhibit a considerably greater degree of inertia. This is not of course to suggest that we should simply attach to some sort of theoretical life support system the aging analytic strategies of the grand decades of feminist cine-psychoanalysis.<sup>9</sup> It is however to acknowledge that the politically charged critique of narrative aesthetics that energized the field of feminist film theory at its formative moment has left us with a legacy and a responsibility to attend continually to the political stakes of looking. As I shall now attempt to show, what *King Kong* reveals to us, apart from the tenacity of sexism and racism in cultural representations, is

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<sup>9</sup> On 1970s and 80s psychoanalytic film feminism as a ‘closed orthodoxy’ see Doane (2004), pp. 1230-1.

that while irony may have transformed the way in which we look, it is with great earnestness that the subject of visual culture aspires to be seen. The irony of ironic looking is that looking is nothing if not a serious business.

**to be or not to be (seen)**

In discussions of the gaze to date, much has been said about the *desiring subject* – a position which has historically coincided with the (white) male look in patriarchal culture.<sup>10</sup> In general, where theory has considered it at all, it has tended to view the *object of desire* as a constitutionally disempowered position. For example, in the early essay ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema’, Claire Johnston formulated her platform for a political intervention in cinema aesthetics in this way:

In order to counter [women’s] objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women’s cinema must embody the working through of desire (1999:39).

Subjectivity – and, by extension, power – are here seen to coincide with being the subject of *desire*; thus the way to combat women’s oppression – which is here conflated with their ‘objectification’ – is to find a cinematic language for ‘working through’ women’s desire, to wrest control of the cinematic apparatus of looking. Similarly, in their Mulvey-inspired work on images of men, Steve Neale and Richard Dyer have both described the various strategies that are used in texts to disavow men’s object status, and to link them again with the possibility of action and subjective mastery.<sup>11</sup> The idea that being the *object* of vision, and of desire, is inherently de-subjectifying, has been taken for granted by a tradition which finds its most salient point of

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<sup>10</sup> The term ‘gaze’ is often used in the sense ‘the male gaze’, but in fact its Lacanian origins belie such a usage. For a critique of feminist film theory’s use of the term ‘gaze’, see Copjec (2000). For a clear exposition of the difference between the gaze (*le regard*, which is not associated with a single, or subjective, vantage point but rather ‘issues from all sides’) and the look (*l’oeil*, which belongs to a subject, for example, the white male spectator), see Silverman (1989).

<sup>11</sup> Neale (1983) describes the complex process of disavowal and repression of possible homosexual desire that takes place in order to legitimise images of men in narrative cinema. Dyer (1989) analyses the systems of visual (textual) defences against the threat of disempowerment/passivity in male portraiture, such as an emphasis on an implied impending physical activity through a taut-muscled posture, or the use of phallic accoutrements. While both of these arguments are convincing, especially applied to the contemporaneous examples the authors draw on, it remains the case that the idea of disavowal is unable to explain the very *desirability* of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ in contemporary culture, which is what creates the need for such defensive strategies in the first place.

articulation in Foucault's model of the Panopticon, in which the object of vision is subject to an imprisoning surveillance.<sup>12</sup>

However, feminists of colour have pointed out that the focus on the oppression of the image masks a greater oppression: that of invisibility. As bell hooks recalls of her experience watching films as a child:

Even when representations of black women were present in film, our bodies and being were there to serve – to enhance and maintain *white* womanhood as object of the phallogentric gaze. (1999, p. 310, emphasis added)

hooks goes on to posit black women, who have learned through their exclusion to enter the viewing experience 'suspiciously', as paradigmatic bearers of a productive, 'oppositional gaze'. In making this move, she follows Johnston and others in equating looking with cultural power. Nevertheless, concerning her childhood experience of viewing the character of Sapphire on the *Amos 'n' Andy* show, hooks writes:

We laughed at this black woman who was not us. And we did not even long to be there on the screen. How could we long to be there when our image, visually constructed, was so ugly... Her black female image was not *the body of desire*. There was nothing to see. (311, emphasis added)

What this description contrastively evokes is the sense that the ability to 'long to be there on the screen' is itself a mark of privilege: what is denied to the black girl is the very *aspiration* to be seen, to imagine herself as the 'body of desire'. In this description, it is not the desire to look that is thwarted; what is mourned is the failed identification with the 'to-be-looked-at'. hooks' account makes clear that this visible 'body of desire' is not simply a site of oppression, it is *also* a highly circumscribed space of focused cultural aspiration. Anecdotally speaking, the large number of girls (and boys) who proclaim a desire to be not movie directors, but movie *stars*, would appear to support such a thesis. *Big Brother* and other reality television shows provide only one obvious contemporary example of the way in which the logic which drives visual culture may be one which equates subjectivity less with looking than with being the *object* of the look.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cf Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams' (1984) introduction to *Re-Vision*, in which they compare the status of women in patriarchy to the prisoner in Foucault's Panopticon.

<sup>13</sup> In a recent op-ed piece for the *Guardian*, Angela McRobbie (2006) uses the term 'phallic girls' to describe female celebrities who have appropriated the 'trappings of power historically attached to masculinity' – namely,

*King Kong* explicitly thematizes the gravitational force the to-be-looked-at exerts in a culture whose image of subjectivity emerges to a large degree *cinematically*, at the same time that it implicitly reveals the circumscribed terms according to which that category takes shape. As a film about making a film, the gaze in the film becomes self-referential, and takes on what Miriam Hansen has called in another context an ‘almost figural independence’ (1986, p. 15). And here a decisive historical shift does emerge in the relation of the look to the figure of the woman. In the original film, Fay Wray as Ann constantly averts her eyes, and the few times she does look at Kong, it is with horror, as if she is being violated merely by the fact of his looking at her. Indeed, the film suggests she is a legitimate visual object only for her white saviour Jack Driscoll (and of course for the camera which also stands in for the white male look). In the contemporary remake, Naomi Watts as Ann comes to accept and, crucially, to return Kong’s gaze; indeed Ann’s gaze at Kong emerges as one of the most striking visual motifs of the film (here I am using ‘gaze’ in the sense of the Lacanian look, rather than the impersonal and asubjective gaze). Actively soliciting his gaze by performing for him, Ann develops a close, affecting rapport with Kong, which is signalled via long sequences of mutual gazing.<sup>14</sup> These scenes function, not unlike the image of woman in Mulvey’s analysis of classical Hollywood cinema, to halt the narrative flow, as they open out onto other forms of visual and affective pleasure: the sunrise, the sweep of the horizon, or indeed the ‘radiant pictorial quality’ of the beautifully lit screen image itself (Hansen, p. 12). But it is not simply a question here of what

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economic and professional power – through marketing their own sexualised images. She thereby associates a specifically ‘phallic’ power with being the object, not the subject, of the gaze. Catherine Grant (unpublished dissertation) has recently analyzed the work of female photographers which ‘tries on for size’ those modes of looking associated with what has been perhaps reductively defined as the ‘male gaze’. There is indeed a sense in the work of Cindy Sherman, Collier Schorr, Amy Adler, and other female and also queer artists that what is being ‘appropriated’ is not only the power to look – a reclaiming of subjectivity through a reclaiming of the desiring gaze – but equally the desire to live out, to play out, to play *at* being the object of representation. The pleasure of Sherman’s famous *Untitled Film Stills*, for example, does not only come from the feminist critique they can be seen to stage. It also comes from an identification with the fun of her performance, a pleasure taken in embodying the various permutations of woman as ‘to-be-looked-at’ as they are culturally visualised.

<sup>14</sup> We might recall Linda Williams’ argument in ‘When the Woman Looks’ that the woman and the monster – as doubles for each other – share a ‘strange sympathy and affinity’ (1984, p. 88). Here the affinity is based on Ann’s recognition and gradual acceptance of Kong’s gaze. Further, Ann’s humane way of wielding her own look (at the ‘beauty’ of the world, which she also embodies) is precisely what she teaches to the monster – thus, humanizing him. But it is not so much that the woman recognises herself in the monster (for this explanation remains internal to the narrative), as that the circuitry of looks between them effects a slide from the narrative to the sublime, from movement through narrative time and space to the transcendence of the universal, which is what the image alone can achieve.

Mulvey called ‘fetishistic objectification’<sup>15</sup>, because the image in which the film concentrates its aesthetic interest is not primarily the woman’s body: it is the woman’s *look*. The narrative embodiment of the film’s humanism, the woman’s gaze here is *privileged* because she can *see* what Carl Denham’s camera can only transform into a commodity.<sup>16</sup>

Not only does Naomi Watts as Ann wield the film’s most significant look, she also teaches this humanizing look to Kong. The scenes where Kong and Ann gaze out over a sweeping vista, and Ann teaches him the word ‘beautiful’, give another resonance to the final line of the film, when Carl Denham declares that ‘it was beauty killed the beast’: it was not merely Ann’s beauty, it was the view she opened for him onto a universal ‘beauty’ that she also comes to stand in for. This aesthetic force – the ‘beauty’ which Ann teaches Kong to *see* in the world – is both grounded in and signified by Ann’s image – her white, gazing face and glowing hair. The face whose eyes open out onto the natural world, and the filmic image which mediate both are collapsed into a sublime whole.<sup>17</sup> These are moments of affective excess, of the sublime, that exceed the demands of narrative and that, in their simultaneous figuration of agent and object of the gaze, recall Miriam Hansen’s (1986) similar observation about Valentino, whose gazing face Roland Barthes described as ‘of an inaccessible...beauty; made of exquisite dough, no doubt, but... belonging to an inorganic being, a cruel statue which comes to life only to pierce’ (1953, p.7, my translation). More and less than human, then; of the order of the artefactual, object of aesthetic pleasure which nonetheless eludes our controlling gaze, whose strange autonomy undermines our fantasy of being ‘source and centre of the represented world’ (Copjec, p. 441).

What is so affecting in these halted and halting scenes of mutual gazing between Ann and Kong is precisely the impossibility of traversing the space of the gaze. When Ann reaches out to touch Kong atop the Empire State Building, her tiny hands cannot seem to reach him, cannot provide the solace of touch. For this reason, the gaze between Kong and Ann perfectly

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Mulvey, pp. 62-3.

<sup>16</sup> Ann’s humanist gaze at Kong is explicitly juxtaposed against the rationalist gaze of the film-maker/explorers. Nevertheless, the two forms of gazing are not as opposed as the film might attempt to convey: what Denham’s commodifying look understands is precisely the power of the image, a power which is embodied in the film’s own images of Naomi Watts’ gazing face.

<sup>17</sup> Lyotard (1982) describes the sublime as that which eludes representation. Here, the affective promise contained in Naomi Watts’ gaze cannot be reduced to the (representable) terms of a romance narrative, which is suspended by the incommensurability of the agents involved – a woman and a monster. The image of the gazing face gestures beyond what can be inscribed as narrative.

figures the gaze between star and spectator, for ‘the cinema provides only a kingdom of shadows, in which human touch remains an impossibility’.<sup>18</sup> The gaze here is so powerful not because of what it threatens but because of what it withholds. Our gaze always bridges an impasse that it simultaneously brings to light *as* impasse: the impasse between our subjectivity and the rest of the world. If the look of the other ‘pierces’, as Barthes says, this piercing can only be figurative, though no less affecting for that: the gaze, for all that it lacks materiality, has an uncanny ability to *move* us. It is this gulf between Naomi and Kong – this chasm which their gaze strives hopelessly to breach – that gives the film its force of pathos.

At the end of the film, Ann is restored to the patriarchal realm of modernity, and the film clumsily reasserts the imperative of narrative resolution, as Ann’s human saviour literally steps into the space left by her monstrous double, thus restoring a heterosexual order which also restores the possibility of sexual consummation. If we read *King Kong* at the narrative level we are forced to diagnose a familiar sexist scenario: a passive woman in distress, a sensitive but forceful man who wins her heart and saves her body. The never-ending, reciprocal gaze between Ann and Kong offers a different interpretation. Ann’s look itself becomes the film’s primary object of desire. At one moment this is made explicit when Ann ‘performs’ for Denham’s camera: what he films is her standing and gazing; her look becomes the very spectacle which his camera – and ours – drinks in. Reflected in Ann’s glassy, gazing eyes is the sight of a world looking back at her. To be locked in this ever-retained and returning gaze is something like the fantasy of the contemporary subject of visual culture, who, without a trace of irony, as she ‘lights up’ the world with her look, imagines the world might light her up as well.<sup>19</sup>

To conclude, we might want to bear in mind how the boundaries of this category of the ‘to-be-looked-at’ configure their own networks of ‘power’ and exclusion. Hilary Radner notes that ‘for the contemporary woman, “self-worth” does indeed “reside” in the body’ (1994, p. 64), and this may be because when the ‘to-be-looked-at’ sets itself up as a space of cultural aspiration

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<sup>18</sup> Here Tom Gunning paraphrases Gorky’s reaction to the first projected film images (Gunning, 2005, p. 265). Linda Williams has been interested in the ways in which film can directly impact on the body: see her essay ‘Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess’ (1999). Also cf. Sobchack (1995), and Melendez (2004), who asks, ‘What allows those pixels [on the screen] to transcend their own material boundaries, to move as well as be moved?’ (421). In his discussion of video pornography, he considers the ‘body’s experience of technology’ (413) as a relation that transcends the presumed subject/object distinction, and thus challenges Gorky’s description of cinema as a realm beyond touch.

<sup>19</sup> On the idea of the look as ‘lighting up’ the world and conferring beauty as well as existentiality upon it, see Kaja Silverman’s *World Spectators* (2000).

defined in highly delimited terms, the specificities of *this* body, the marks of gender, race, and age, constitute so many barriers to be overcome in the quest to *be seen*. As a privileged signifier of this privileged cultural realm, white femininity (at least, in the form incarnated by Naomi Watts) becomes the symbol of an aspirational ideal. The traces that remain of the ‘other’ in *King Kong* – the woman who does *not* gaze, who is not gazed at, who therefore fails to ‘stay the hand of the Beast’, who fails to launch beyond the narrative into the realm of a ‘universal’ beauty, who remains bound to her hopelessly marked and mortal material existence; the ancient crone, the native – these are the suppressed reminders of the violence of the normative impulse with which the ‘to-be-looked-at’ exerts its cultural force. Irony aside, cultural privilege here would seem to pertain not so much to *looking* as to *looking the part*.

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## Films

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- King Kong* (2005), dir. Peter Jackson, Big Primate Pictures/Universal Pictures/ Wingnut Films
- King Kong: The Eighth Wonder of the World* (1933), dir. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, RKO Radio Pictures