

Name:
Hon. US History II

Dr. Mealy
Block:

Popular Culture During the Great Depression

Instructions:

Today, you will complete a study of popular culture during the Great Depression. Before the end of class, respond to the prompt below.

Prompt

What was the relationship between escapism and American entertainment during the Great Depression?

Step 1: Watch the video on action comics and the Great Depression (link found on the website). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3kFeJw0jl0> Take notes on important points, themes, and claims in the video.

Step 2: Read the blog, "Why Batman was the Answer to the Great Depression" (link found on the website). <https://extremisreviews.wordpress.com/2014/06/19/why-batman-was-the-answer-to-the-great-depression/>

Step 3: View the clips from King Kong and read the article

- 1) View clips of the 1933 film King Kong
 - Scene 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zct1tPK1Zk0>
 - Scene 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DujyJ1EDft8>
 - Scene 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOZjxntOVG0&t=17s>
- 2) Read the short article "King Kong: Appropriating Racism" (included on pages 2-3)

Step 4: Answer the prompt. Share responses with Dr. Mealy via Google Drive.

- 1) Answers should be 2-5 paragraphs. The length of the essay is not important. What is important is that you include the following:
 - a. Introduction paragraph with a thesis statement that connects these examples of 1930s popular culture and the Depression
 - b. 2 references to the Action Comic video about Superman
 - c. 2 references to the Batman article
 - d. 2 references from the collection of King Kong sources (film clips and blog post)
 - e. Properly footnote sources (see proper citations below)
 - f. Conclusion paragraph that summarizes points made in the body of the essay

***Have this completed by the start of class tomorrow. Don't waste time!**

Citations (copy and paste into your footnote):

- 1) Minty Comedic Arts. "Inside Action Comics No. 1." YouTube. April 4, 2017.
- 2) Munds, Julian. "Why Batman Was the Answer to the Great Depression." *Blog*. June 19, 2018. Accessed March 12, 2018. <https://extremisreviews.wordpress.com/2014/06/19/why-batman-was-the-answer-to-the-great-depression/>
- 3) Cooper, Merian C. and Ernest B. Schoedsack. *King Kong*. 1933. Radio Pictures.
- 4) Morley, JC. "King Kong: Appropriating Racism." *Blog Archive*. January 18, 2010. Accessed March 12, 2018. <http://raceandkingkong.blogspot.com/>

King Kong: Appropriating Racism

MONDAY, JANUARY 18, 2010 (AMENDED FROM THE ORIGINAL)
BY JC MORLEY

Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Shoedsack's 1933 *King Kong* is widely considered to be one of the most iconic films of all time. Certainly, the image of Kong atop the empire state building is one that has permeated the public consciousness through a continuous stream of references in popular culture, and has become part of our cinematic lexicon of cultural and visual icons. It comes as no surprise that a film as recognizable as this has delivered an extensive field of Jungian criticism and analysis that examines the images of the 1933 *King Kong* as symbols. Carl Jung theorized in *Psychology and Literature* that any artist was a "collective man - a vehicle and molder of the unconscious psychic life of mankind." (Jung, 1922, p 104) and that archetypal images are rearranged in the artists' mind to create an artistic representation of the society in which they live. This theory has formed the basis for the majority of contemporary socio-literary analysis of *King Kong* as metaphor.

Scholars differ in their opinions of what the film's narrative and individual symbols demonstrate about American society in 1933, but the most pervasive in terms of popular readings of *King Kong* is the one of racist allegory and commentary on the white man's view of African Americans in the US during this time. The plot at its most basic certainly raises a few politically correct eyebrows. A heroic and entrepreneuring film crew sails to an unchartered island in Africa for a shoot. While there, their white leading lady (Ann Darrow) is kidnapped by the local 'savages' and offered to Kong who drags her literally kicking and screaming through the jungle of the island until she is rescued by her white knight in shining armor. Here, he is himself taken in chains back to New York to turn a profit for his captors, but breaks free, kidnaps Ann, and goes on a destructive tour of Manhattan before being shot down atop the Empire State building.

Released 35 years before the end of segregation and the passing of the Civil Rights Act, the film offers up a disturbing portrait of the dominant white racial ideologies of the time, implying that the idea of America (as represented by Manhattan's iconic topography) would be destroyed if the black man were given total freedom.

The character of Kong, according to the race reading, independently acts as a semiotic representation of the white man's perception of black men. The film's narrative takes us to Africa, asks the audience to embark on an adventure to a land so lost to the modern world that its inhabitants exist side by side with dinosaurs, which Brian McKay argues to be the most "obvious symbol for the perceived primitive nature of Africa and Blacks" (McKay, 2005) The gorilla that they bring back from that island may now be an icon of popular culture in himself, but before *King Kong* was released there was another image of popular social consciousness that he was associated with, which were the disturbingly dehumanizing cartoons of black people as monkeys popularized by Collins and Tinsley. Snead argues that these images were "a willed misreading of Linnean classification and Darwinian evolution [that] helped buttress an older European conception [...] that blacks and apes, kindred denizens of the 'jungle' are phylogenetically closer [...] than blacks and whites." (Snead, 1994: 20) Certainly, these images allowed the mainstream white audience to continue to psychologically distance themselves from black people, to perceive them as other. This is enhanced even further by Kong's anthropomorphic behavior in the film. He walks on two legs, has basic emotions of lust and jealousy, and – as seen when he detaches the manacles from his feet – has basic human intelligence. It is this conduct that ultimately removes him from the identity of ape, and closer to black man/ape hybrid popularized by conservative cartoons.

These cartoons, however, were written as humor and were (in terms of content) non-violent. These cartoons fall into the same category as the popular black comedians of the 1920's, in particular the character of Stepin Fetchit, a chronically lazy, stupid, cowardly, and good-natured slave who is on the receiving end of a 'Punch and Judy' -like dynamic with his master. The 1933 Kong, on the other hand, is intended to scare, to intimidate, and to thrill. The reading of Kong as the black man in the United States is indicative of the growing tensions between the white man and the black man in culture and society through the first 30 years of the 20th century. America was still in the midst of segregation - the Jim Crow laws that mandated this legal racism had been in place since 1876, and would only be abolished in 1965. D.W Griffiths' *The Birth of a Nation* had become the most profitable film of all time when it was released in 1915, but its deeply racist message and support of the Ku Klux Klan had led to the KKK expanding their membership all the way through the 1920's. The Black Tuesday stock market crash of 1929 had resulted in the Depression, and with black people being "traditionally last hired, first fired" (Rosen, 1975) hunger and racial tensions escalated dramatically in the early 1930's. Kong, as the ape from Africa who acts like a man, therefore becomes

something far more threatening. By removing the image of the ape from the 'harmless' context of cartoons and placing it in the far more sinister scene of Kong destroying the subway car, the film "demonstrates the very real fear of the destruction of White hegemony by the savage Black. [It] tells us that once the Black is integrated into White society, the order of things will crumble" (McKay, 2005) Kong, in this sense, becomes a product of the West's discussion of that which was colonialised, which was foreign, and which was not white.

Intriguingly, the 1933 Kong was released during the greatest economic recession of the 20th century: the Depression. Before and during these years African-Americans, exhausted by years of extreme persecution and exploitation in the more radically racist South, had begun migrating to the North where they effectively set themselves up as fierce competitors to working class white men as they were willing to work more hours for less money. The image of Kong climbing the Empire State building therefore becomes something else altogether. Built in 1931, the iconic building was a symbol of economic force and optimism in a financially ravaged Manhattan, and Snead (1994) argues that Kong's invasion of it with Ann clutched in his hand suggests the growing fiscal emasculation of white men during the Depression by the black migration. His final destruction and the rescue of Ann by white Air Force pilots becomes a symbol of the white man regaining his manhood by conquering the black threat and rescuing the white woman.

The reading of the 1933 *King Kong* as a racist film is no exception, but it cannot be denied that the social conditions that surrounded its release in the United States indicate widespread and complex racial discrimination in the country. The implicit racism of Cooper's *King Kong*, when analyzed according to the symbols it presents us with, offers a fascinating portrait of the "common" white man's perception of segregated America and his perception of his African-American countrymen. In the seventy-two years that separated the release of both films, the world witnessed the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King's dream coming true in the Civil Rights Act, the election of the first black President, and countless other milestones in creating racial equality in America. By revisiting Cooper's iconic story and images, the 2005 *King Kong* appropriates the perceived racism of the original story to the modern world by humanizing Kong and his relationship with Ann Darrow. In doing so, it ultimately condemns the intolerant attitudes of the 1930's by presenting the audience with the concept that the socially and politically equal black man is not just equal today in the 21st century. He has always been equal as he has always been human, and implies that ultimately it is our capacity for love and compassion that makes us feel as humans do. In as much, by dehumanizing and suppressing African-Americans as they were when the original *King Kong* was made, the remake suggests that the inhumanity was on the part of the white man who shot King Kong down more than it was on the big black gorilla who fell from the top of the Empire State building.