

The main magazine cover features a large, detailed close-up of King Kong's face. The ape's skin is dark and textured, with deep wrinkles and a prominent nose. The background is dark, making the face the central focus.

THE SATURDAY AGE MAY 18, 2013

Life & Style

THE GOOD LIFE | ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT | BOOKS

Capturing Kong

Face-to-face with the world's favourite ape

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GORILLAS IN OUR MIDST

From menacing sexuality to militaristic aggression, the king of the apes has long been used as a symbol of otherness. But as Melbourne prepares to meet a new King Kong, our love-hate relationship with the inscrutable beast reveals pathos amid the paranoia.

BY TED GOTT AND KATHRYN WEIR

In a darkened Regent Theatre in the heart of Melbourne, a shadowy, monolithic silverback goes effortlessly through his paces. As authors of a new cultural history of the gorilla, we had been invited to afternoon rehearsals for Global Creatures' ambitious new stage production, *King Kong*. The mighty gorilla, an awe-inspiring animatronic puppet powered by more than a dozen technicians and 15 motors, defends his heroine, Ann Darrow, from attack by a 16-metre venomous snake.

Directed by Daniel Kramer, this is the first musical stage version of the immortal story that was originally brought to the screen by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack in 1933. And, judging from the rehearsals, Kramer's musical looks set to amaze, delight, confront and move audiences – reproducing, “live” on stage, the same mixture of heady emotions that made the original film such a hit.

As a small child, Cooper had been given a copy of Paul du Chaillu's 1861 book *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*,

which seeded his obsession with gorillas. He first thought of filming mountain gorillas on location in the Belgian Congo, but seeing the stop-motion animation effects cinema technician Willis O'Brien was perfecting in the late 1920s, Cooper realised that location shooting would not be necessary. He could create his giant gorilla onscreen as an animated puppet, without leaving Hollywood.

Hiring O'Brien, Cooper thus brought to cinematic life his modern fable of a giant gorilla captured and shipped to Manhattan for public entertainment and torn between his love for the beautiful Darrow

and his rage against the “civilised” cruelty of the modern metropolis.

King Kong has variously been explained as an imperialist parable about the dangers for the primitive of contact with civilisation; a cautionary tale about rampant

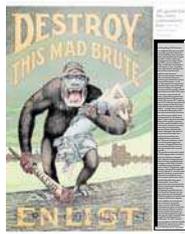
male sexuality and interracial intercourse; and an allegory of the return of the repressed in the form of primitive sexual drives. In Cooper's film, both Kong and Darrow (played by Fay Wray) are objectified. Promoter Carl Denham

wants to capture the ape for commercial exploitation using the woman as bait. When Kong is ensnared on Skull Island, Denham gleefully declares that “the whole world will pay to see this”. The “noble savage” is then exhibited in irons on a New York stage as a spectacle of primitive power.

Completed two years before the release of *King Kong*, the Empire State Building – scene of Kong's final, doomed struggle – represented technological progress and modern city life; the fighter planes that bring him down were equally representative of technology and modernity. The juxtaposition of King Kong, the Empire State Building and the planes in the film's climactic ending provides an unforgettable image of the irruption of the primitive in the modern and an allegory of the confrontation between the wild and technological power.

Two closely related remakes of *King Kong* roughly followed the original film's characters and scenario, but with quite different perspectives reflecting their own eras of production. John Guiller-





min's *King Kong* (1976) focuses more emphatically upon a world destroyed by greed in which the perceived dividing lines between animals and humans have begun to crumble. In Peter Jackson's extravagant and nostalgic *King Kong* (2005), we are invited to witness, as film theorist Barbara Creed has put it, how "together human and animal celebrate the beauty of the natural world – possibly for the last time".

Our own fascination with the gorilla, as cultural observers, stems from our shared love of art, cinema and literature – in all three, this primate has appeared repeatedly, often cast as enraged monster or villain. For human interaction with the gorilla, which began badly more than 2000 years ago, has been tainted with all manner of prejudice against this remarkably human-like primate.

In the 5th century BC, explorer Hanno II of Carthage encountered during a voyage around the west coast of Africa what he called the "gorillae" – savage hairy creatures who defended themselves with stones when attacked by his men. Three of them were killed, their skins taken back to Carthage as trophies. This is the first recorded sighting of the gorilla, a species that was to remain hidden in Africa's forests for centuries to come, known only to local peoples. Rumours of hairy, human-like creatures lurking in the wilds of Africa persisted through time, passed on by travellers who embellished them with lurid detail. They were demons, some said, or ferociously aggressive flesh eaters. All agreed that they were consumed by lust, sure to ravish any woman who crossed their path.

The gorilla was already loaded with this baggage when scientific proof of its existence emerged in 1847, after the *Boston Journal of Natural History* published the first images of the skull of a hitherto unknown type of primate, found in Gabon. This gentle, vegetarian ape – the gorilla, named in honour of Hanno II – now became a target for hunters, as museums and scientists worldwide competed to acquire skeletons, skins and pickled gorilla body parts.

This initiated a "shoot first" response that was to continue for a century, dramatically depleting numbers in the wild.

Following the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, the landmark text that brought the scientific and theological worlds into dispute over the validity of creationism versus evolution, the gorilla became central to the debate about humanity's place in the biological order in relation to other primates. Evolutionists such as Thomas Huxley argued that the human species had emerged from "the gradual modification of a man-like ape". In 1861, French-American explorer Paul du Chaillu published his experiences as the first European to extensively observe the behaviour of gorillas

in their native habitat; he also shot dozens of gorillas in Gabon for clients that included the National Museum of Victoria in Melbourne. Prone to exaggeration, du Chaillu's best-selling books enthralled readers with theatrical accounts of aggressive gorillas killing hunters and chomping on their rifles like carrots. His writings spawned a new genre of gorilla adventure tales, featuring hunters battling these "ferocious" creatures, which eventually filtered down into the immortal *Tarzan* narratives of Edgar Rice Burroughs.

In the early 20th century, these in turn spawned a related publishing and cinema phenomenon full of rippling primate action, while gorillas became villains and anti-heroes within a legion of comic books that abandoned any regard for realism or authenticity.

Du Chaillu's tales also contributed to a "gorilla mania" that broke out in the 1860s in Europe and the US, when audiences clamoured for gorilla content in all forms of popular entertainment. In cartoons, music hall acts and children's books, the gorilla became the terrifying embodiment of the Victorian era's contradictory fascination with and intense fear of nature. This included unease about humanity's own dark inner nature, as the gorilla morphed into a screen upon which to project theories of criminality and sexual phobias.

When a colossal sculpture by French animalier artist Emmanuel Fremiet, *Gorilla Carrying Off a Woman*, won a gold medal at the Paris Salon in 1887, it became, through endless reproductions, one of the defining images of its time. In Fremiet's sculpture lies the origin of the giant gorilla kidnapping Ann Darrow in 1933's film version of *King Kong*.

Fremiet's sculpture reinforced fears of the gorilla as a sexual aggressor, assimilated to fear of the black man at a time when European colonisation of Africa ignited racial prejudice. From the 1860s the gorilla was also used for political purposes, its features being applied to various enemies as indicators of their predatory and uncivilised nature. Members of the Irish Nationalist movement and African Americans were given a gorilla-like appearance by cartoonists on both sides of the Atlantic who sought to associate them with the "less-evolved" characteristics of non-human primates. During World War I, the German Kaiser was regularly depicted in Allied propaganda posters as a snarling gorilla, devouring Europe's

women and children. Warmongering, murder, abduction and sex crimes continued to be the gorilla's cultural baggage in the early 20th century. In the 1920s and '30s a number of serial killers in the US were dubbed "Gorilla Men" by the press.

Perversely, all this negative publicity fed the world's fascination with the mysterious gorilla.

The desire of audiences to experience the thrill of gorillas firsthand – symbolised in *King Kong* by the transportation of the colossal beast to a New York theatre – was to lead to a generations-long drive to bring live gorillas to their adoring public in zoos. Early efforts to transport living specimens to Europe and the US were doomed – most of the captive gorillas died from dietary poisoning or respiratory problems during the long sea voyage from





Africa. It was only in the late 1920s that gorillas were successfully acclimatised within zoos outside Africa, and in 1956 the first one was born in captivity, at Columbus Zoo in Ohio.

Before World War II, cinema-goers' most frequent sightings of a gorilla actually involved a furry-suited actor portraying a killer beast escaped from its confines – forest, circus, zoo or laboratory. These were the

forebears of the hirsute deliverers of “Gorilla Grams” in the 1970s and '80s. As the many captive gorillas in zoos became celebrities within their local communities, public perceptions of these usually gentle apes gradually changed.

Thanks to the field research of George Schaller and Dian Fossey, who lived among mountain gorillas in the wild in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, knowledge of the true behaviour of the relatively peaceful, intensely social and vegetarian gorilla was shared with the world. Their work dispelled many of the negative images and drew attention to the gorilla's plight as an endangered species threatened by poaching, local warfare and other forms of human encroachment.

A German-American mammalogist, Schaller lived extensively with gorillas from 1959, observing their social interactions, intelligence and behaviour in the wild. Fossey's subsequent observations of gorillas in Rwanda brought the study of gorillas to a much wider public and humanised the gorilla for new audiences as *National Geographic* magazine articles, photographs and films made her a household name.

Fossey's *Gorillas in the Mist*, an autobiographical narrative published in 1983, became the best-selling book so far on the animal, and was the basis for a feature film released in 1988.

Alongside this new knowledge of the world's largest primate, the Kong phenomenon continues to resonate: the great ape and his demise have been the inspiration

for endless parodies and references in plays, cartoons, television comedy, advertisements, comics, art and cinema. From *King Kong* and early exploitation films to the B-grade horror of the 1950s and beyond, the image of a beautiful and helpless woman in the arms of the monster gorilla continued to be scripted as the film's moment of greatest tension and used as a major promotional ploy.

This scripting of the virile gorilla combined sex and strength in

an irresistible combination still used in advertising, the gorilla's enormous power equated with a bewildering variety of products.

The original *King Kong* was re-released in 1938, and again in 1942. It was in the 1950s that the film's full pop-cultural impact began to be realised, as it was screened repeatedly in cinemas, on television and in drive-ins.

Time magazine dubbed it “Movie of the Year” in 1952. In this period, *King Kong* moved beyond its original horror-adventure genre when the iconic imagery of a giant gorilla wreaking havoc in a large city was echoed in several science-fiction classics, including *It Came from Outer Space* and *The War of*

the Worlds (both 1953). *Godzilla* (1954) was also heavily influenced by *King Kong*, which enjoyed enduring popularity in Japan, and the big ape went on to feature in Japanese productions *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962) and *King Kong Escapes* (1968).

Daniel Kramer's musical production of *King Kong* seems sure to reignite discussion of the Kong myth as an allegory of nature's rebellion against the destructive forces of global modernisation.

Today, the world's dwindling populations of wild gorillas survive in primary and mixed forests in regions of central Africa. Here they often come in contact with humans when taking food from gardens near the forest edge, as well as when they fall into snare traps. The competing interests of local farmers, conservationists and tourism agencies mean a complex political situation surrounds the four subspecies of gorilla in the 10 countries where they are still found.

In recent years, gorillas have been observed to use tools in the wild, to engage in forms of affectionate sexual behaviour that had previously been thought uniquely human, and to feel grief, empathy and other “human” emotions.

At the Gorilla Foundation in California, a western lowland gorilla born in 1971, Koko, has developed a signed vocabulary of more than 1000 words in American Sign Language and understands twice as many words in spoken English.

All this places the gorilla at the centre of contemporary philosophical and ethical debates questioning the long-held view that humans are unique within – or set apart from – the natural world.

Given the DNA of humans and western lowland gorillas has been found to differ by only 1.75 per cent, it is surely time to celebrate this resemblance and move on from past projections of the dark side of human nature onto this gentle and beautiful primate.

We look forward to being moved and amazed by the new Kong's extraordinary range of emotions in the face of our endlessly corrupt and greedy world.

■ *Gorilla*, by Ted Gott and Kathryn Weir, is published by Reaktion Press, London, \$24.99. *King Kong* opens on June 15. kingkongliveonstage.com

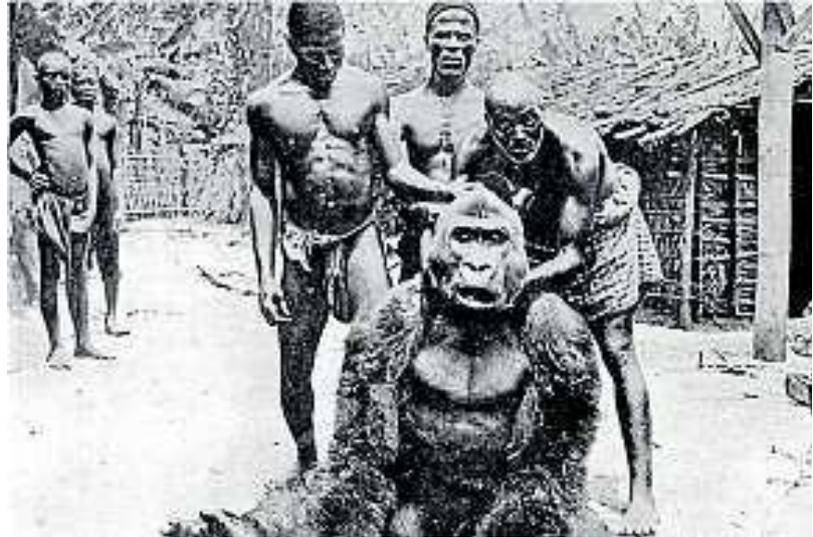
Gorillas ...
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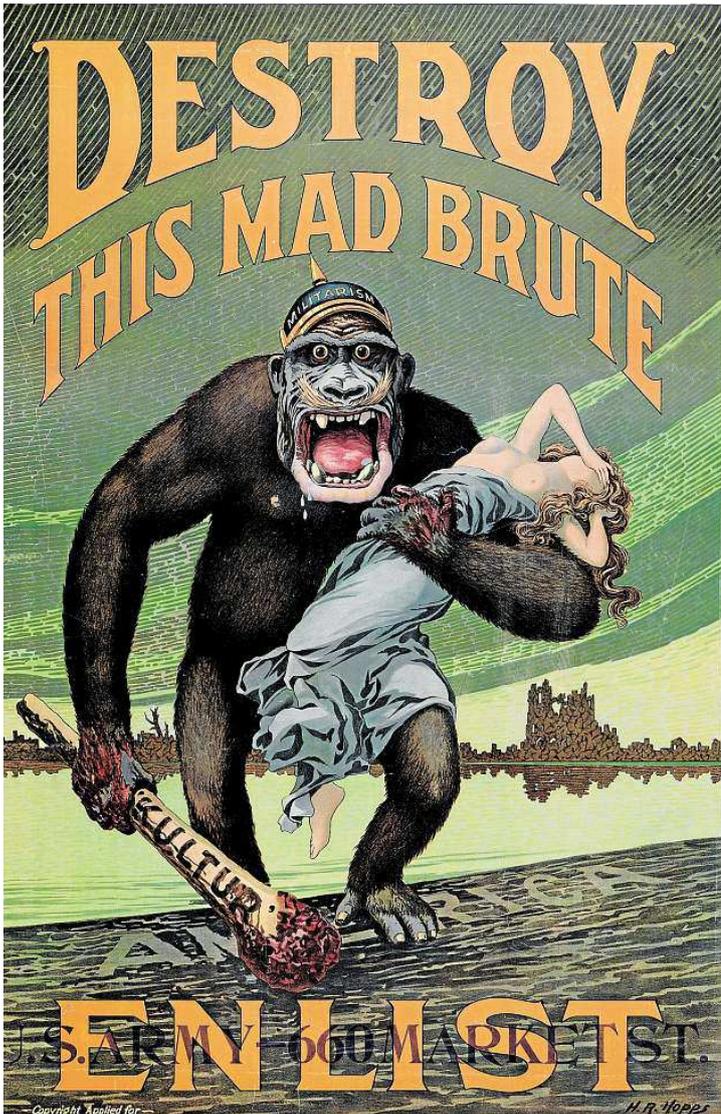


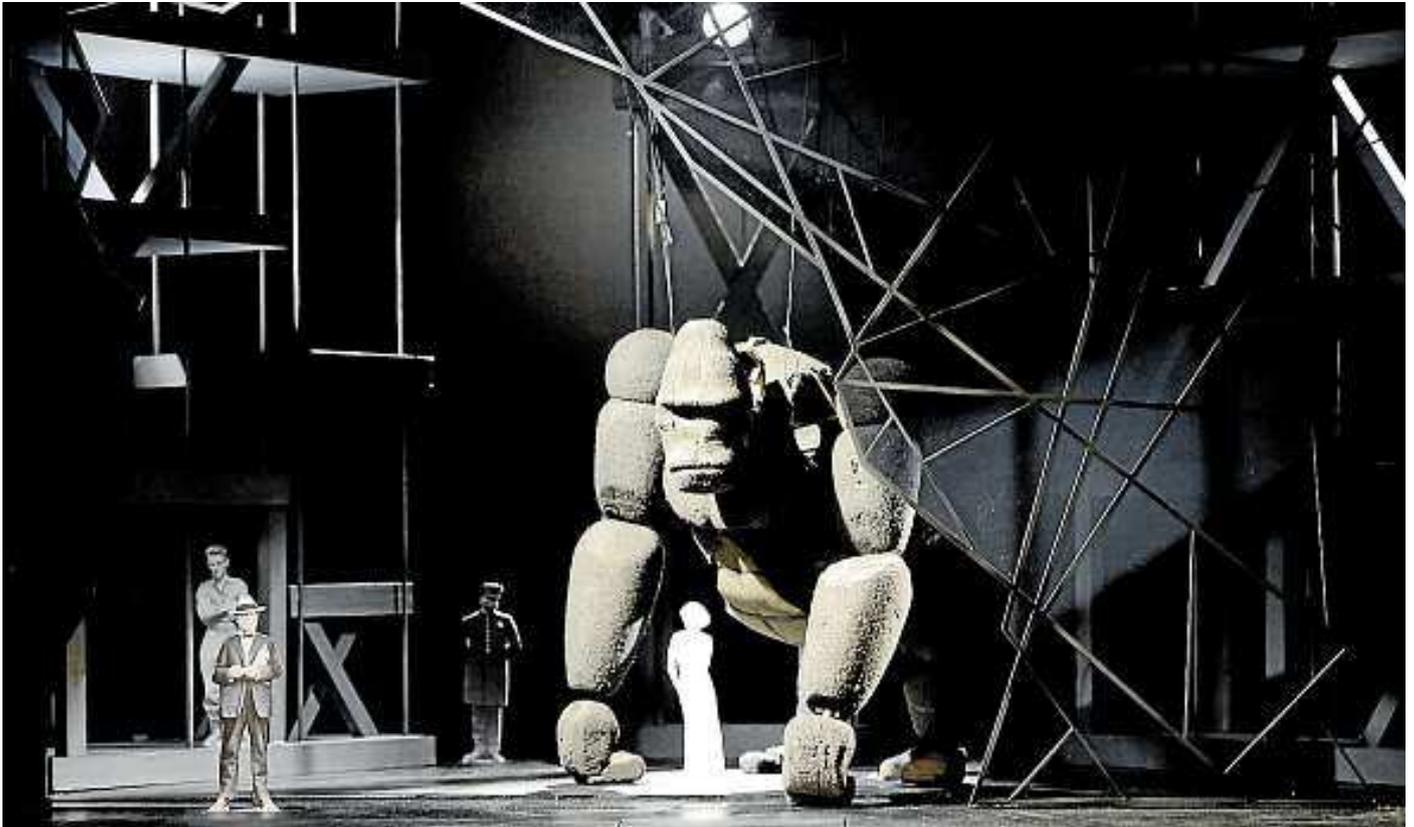
A senior curator at the National Gallery of Victoria, Ted Gott first saw the 1933 film version of *King Kong* in 1970, at age 10; he has been fascinated by gorillas ever since.

Art and film curator Kathryn Weir knows a good hybrid beast when she sees one. They co-curated *Kiss of the Beast: from Paris Salon to King Kong* at the Queensland Art Gallery in 2005 and co-wrote *Gorilla*, Reaktion Press, London, 2013.



Above: Herr Paschen's gorilla, shot in 1901. Right: Harry Ryle Hopps, *Destroy this mad brute: enlist c.1917*, lithograph on paper, collection of the Australian War Memorial.





(From top) a scale model for the stage production of *King Kong*; King Kong street graffiti in Gifu, Japan, 1994; Emmanuel Fremiet's *Gorilla Carrying Off a Woman*, life-size plaster, 1887, shown at the Paris Salon that year.

PICTURE (LEFT):
TED GOTT