

The Eyes of the Ape

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What life is implicated in the question: 'Is life still damaged?' How do we reckon with the question of a damaged life in the face of global climate catastrophe and the sixth extinction, which threaten much of the earth's animal and plant life, in addition to human life? In the seventy-fourth aphorism of *Minima Moralia*, titled "Mammoth," Adorno notes the discovery of a fossil in Utah from an animal that had survived millions of years past any previously known similar species. For Adorno, the interest in life long since extinct expresses a hope that something might survive humanity: "The desire for the presence of the most ancient is a hope that animal creation might survive the wrong that man has done to it, if not man himself, and give rise to a better species, one that finally makes a success of life" (§ 74). The life that survives past its moment provides a hope that a better version of life might still appear even in the face of catastrophe and suffering. Do we still desire the hope provided by such ancient creatures? Does the presence of such monstrous nature still offer the hope of a better species? One of the exemplary expressions of this desire identified by Adorno is Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's 1933 film, *King Kong*, which combines "gigantic images" with the desire for the ancient.¹ What can we learn of the present condition of the damaged life in the shift from the earlier portrayal of natural monstrosity to more recent instances of such?

One recent example appears in Jordan Vogt-Roberts's 2017 film, *Kong: Skull Island*. The film follows a team of scientists on a mission to find Kong. As in the 1933 film, Kong is not the only ancient life on the island. In the earlier film, he battles dinosaurs and other creatures in defense of his romantic interest before being subdued, kidnapped, and taken to New York, where his inability to survive the violence of humanity is cast as a tragic sacrifice to progress. In *Kong*, Kong is enlisted as a defender of humanity against more vicious and dangerous monsters, which are no longer simply sideshows on the way to the grand spectacle. While in *King Kong* (as well as the 2005 remake by Peter Jackson), Kong is afforded a tragically romantic and spectacular end atop the Empire State building following his kidnapping and imprisonment, in *Kong* he communes with the male and female leads, who decide to save him from the more vicious human intruders on the island. Rather than falling to his death amidst heartbreak and bullets, he defiantly watches as the humans with whom he has reconciled secure their escape, waiting to be called upon to protect humanity again in the already expected sequels.

Kong portrays a humanity that saves Kong and is, in turn, saved by him. Each relies upon the other in this version of the myth. The harmonious relationship between humanity and Kong stands in stark contrast to the violence and domination portrayed in the earlier versions. But Adorno reminds us that the solace offered in this semblance of reconciliation is illusory: "The more purely nature is preserved and transplanted by civilization, the more implacably it is dominated" (§ 74). The tragic portrayal of humanity's violent domination of nature in *King Kong* has been reformulated as a tenuous alliance, where enlightened humans must defend Kong against the violence within humanity so that a now civilized Kong can survive to repel the threat that nature poses to humanity's self-exception.

The mutual recognition reached between Kong and the enlightened element of humanity involves a forgetting of the original and ongoing violence which puts Kong at the service of his own domination. In contrast to the closing shot of *King Kong*, where the audience is left with the dead, lifeless eye of Kong in the foreground after his final fall, the audience of *Kong* leaves Skull Island by way of a zoom into Kong's face and ultimately his eye as he defiantly roars and beats his chest. This confrontation with the eyes of the monstrous ape invites a reconsideration of what life is damaged and how some species might make "a success of life" under the conditions of the present catastrophe. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno associates the expressive capacity of the artwork with the eyes of animals: "...there is nothing so expressive as the eyes of animals—especially apes—which seem objectively to mourn that they are not human" (Adorno 1997, 113). In this understanding, the ape's eyes serve as a model for those elements of the world that are external to humanity and yet exist in its thrall. It is telling, then, that as Kong survives, waiting to defend humanity, the confrontation with his eyes is not the final image but merely a prelude to the film's nostalgic imagination of humanity reconciled to itself. In this revision the hope for survival beyond extinction is lost amidst an imagined repair of the past itself, and the moment when such a hope for the survival of something beyond the damage of humanity could still be rendered. The tragic death of Kong which served as a reminder of humanity's damage done to nature is no longer tenable. The fate of nature is now understood as tied to our own. Humanity now welcomes Kong as an honorary ape among men, a benevolent defender against the violent threat of nature; he will not survive us.

Notes

1 For a recent consideration of such "gigantic images", see Doane 2021.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. *Aesthetic Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Doane, Mary Ann. 2021. *Bigger Than Life: The Close-Up and Scale in the Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Biography

Matthew Noble-Olson is a scholar of visual culture with interests in film theory, avant-garde cinema, digital cinema, moving-image installation, and aesthetics. He is currently completing a manuscript titled *Exile, Trauma, Ruin: The Forms of Cinematic Lateness*, which theorizes lateness in twentieth- and twenty-first-century cinema. His writing has appeared in *Discourse*, *Modernism/Modernity*, *New German Critique*, and *Cultural Critique*. He teaches film studies at the University of Michigan.