

King Kong vs. Rambo: A Cautionary Tale (again)

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But wait! Consider what's at stake

When e'er we venture to remake

-paraphrased from

Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion*, Canto vi. Stanza 17

In perhaps the earliest attempt to capitalise on Peter Jackson's planned remake of the 1933 classic *King Kong*, Paramount released in 2002 a DVD-format version of the previous feature remake; producer Dino De Laurentiis' 1976 blockbuster starring Jeff Bridges, Jessica Lange and a man in a monkey suit. I recently revisited this film as part of my own preparations for Jackson's effort (due out for Christmas 2005), and found the experience of watching the 1976 version at once bizarrely stupefying for a thriller, let alone a monster movie, as the cast stumble their way through interminable self-exploratory dialogue (Lange's and Bridges' characters even stop for a chatty drink in a deserted NY bar as Kong rampages through the city), and grossly insulting, as the "King" of the title displays all of the technical virtuosity of television's Barney the purple dinosaur. Since its theatrical, and now DVD release, the 1976 film has received mixed reviews, such as a lambasting from Christopher Null, who calls it "frankly one of the worst films ever made, a useless and unwanted recreation of the past," (Null, 2003) and strange if faint praise from Pauline Kael, who while she agrees that the "film doesn't have the magical primeval imagery of the first version; it doesn't have the Gustav Doré fable atmosphere," she nevertheless argues that "the movie is sparked mainly...by the impudent new conception of the screaming-in-fear blonde, and Jessica Lange's fast yet dreamy comic style" (Kael, 1992, 372-3). Kael's opinion is (as always) well-considered, but frankly, that was thirty years ago. Any appeal held by Lange's emoting, the monkey suit or the film overall has gone the way of the dinosaurs—masterfully animated for the original by Kong's creator, Willis O'Brien—that De Laurentiis forgot to include. Scarcely anyone remembers that he tried again in 1986 with the even more awful *King Kong Lives*. Of the 1976 film, Jackson himself has been quoted as referring to it as

"Crap! Unadulterated crap! Worse crap, even, than those Japanese imitation *Kongs*! The Japanese, at least, had their own tradition of crap to honour" (Turner, 2002, 17).

Remaking a popular film is always a dubious endeavour, and is even more challenging when the original work is included on virtually everyone's list of greatest movies ever made. Gus Van Sandt did it with *Psycho*, and audiences and critics alike just scratched their heads and wondered why. The 1933 *King Kong* is credited, among other things, with twice saving RKO studios from insolvency, in the aftermath of its initial release and again with a 1938 re-issue (Turner, 2002, 78). Even after the De Laurentiis' debacle, the original *King Kong* was reunited with lost footage in the 1980s, earning heavy grosses in the home video format. We're still waiting for a "special edition" DVD, but it can't be far off. Along with economic success, there is undeniably immense universal appeal in the original; Kong, in fact, may be among the most recognisable film stars in history.

Both despite and because of the ubiquitous iconography of the original, what really makes things interesting for Jackson is the obvious qualification of the De Laurentiis film as one of the worst remakes ever attempted. That's not just a lot to live up to, it's a lot to live down. It's a serious challenge, made ever the more intimidating by what's at stake with regard to its success; as he builds his New York sets in a New Zealand paddock Jackson, his studio and his production company have a whole nation pulling not just for them, but for a film industry that is increasingly helping to define New Zealand **as** a country.

In a November 2003 report, New Zealand's Ministry for Arts, Culture and Heritage announced a NZ\$10,000,000 increase in baseline funding for the New Zealand Film Commission, representing a nearly 100% boost to a primary source of funding for local filmmakers (Jackson has on many occasions thanked the Film Commission for assistance he received early in his career)(Development, 2005a). New Zealand features such as *Whale Rider* and *Perfect Strangers* have proved the viability of this industry, and a corresponding report from the Ministry of Economic Development Growth and Innovation notes that the Creative Industries sector, which includes film production, "grew faster than the economy as a whole between 1997 and 2001" (Development, 2005b, n.p). In the same period, the Ministry reports that creative industries exports grew

by 435 percent. All of this is without the special consideration due to Jackson's massive *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (the first film was released in 2001), which has to date grossed nearly three trillion U.S. dollars world-wide, employed thousands of New Zealanders from pre- and post-production duties, down to extras for the huge battle scenes, and spawned a new facet of the national tourist industry, welcoming visitors to Hobbiton and other Tolkienesque locales. *LOTR* has in addition re-introduced the film industry and its audiences to the wide-open cinematic splendour of the New Zealand landscape, giving us an astonishingly varied and visually rich conception of Middle Earth. Even Bollywood has expressed interest in utilising such scenery for new Indian spectacles (Enterprise, 2004, n.p). In a small island nation of only four million people, movies are fast becoming a very, very big thing.

Government subsidies for national film industries have, of course, been around since the first decade of the twentieth century, and countries like Germany and Canada currently invest heavily in local production. The situation in New Zealand, however—when one considers the size and character of the nation and the monumental commercial success and development its cinema is generating on an international level—may represent something unique. Pacing the Hollywood juggernaut, cinematic New Zealand is becoming the little country that could. Now, with some of Hollywood's money but with Kiwi energy and creativity, we get to see if they can successfully resurrect the screen's original giant.

Meanwhile, at least one part of the U.S. film industry is contemplating a very different sort of resurrection, of a very different cinematic icon. Quoted on Ananova.com in January 2005, Sylvester Stallone once again reports that work is progressing on a script for a fourth instalment of the *Rambo* franchise (Joyner, 2005). Comparison of this albeit unconfirmed possibility with Jackson's *King Kong* remake invites some fascinating questions about what cinematic icons and their resurrections indicate in terms of cinema and culture. Such questions are particularly interesting with regard to what is at stake, what it is that filmmakers and even nations gamble with, in and around any attempt to revive a cinematic moment.

The *Rambo* series, beginning with *First Blood* in 1982 and last seen in the Afghanistan setting of *Rambo III* in 1988, cannot of course be credited with the singular

economic support of a studio ascribed to the original *King Kong*, despite huge commercial success worldwide. Neither can a potential *Rambo* return be expected to have an economic significance to the U.S. film industry that parallels what Jackson's *King Kong* means to New Zealand. Rather, the significance of the *Rambo* films has long been taken to be one of cultural—and especially political—ideology, some details of which are incisively explored by Susan Jeffords in her 1994 *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*.

Using *Rambo* as a centrepiece for her argument, Jeffords finds that in terms of the Hollywood action film, the *Rambo* series "can be used to illustrate how the hard-body imagery evolved during the eight years that Ronald Reagan was in office" (Jeffords, 1994, 11). She ties the screen presence of the "hard-bodied" *Rambo* to the American political climate of the times, citing what John Orman has called Reagan's "macho presidential style," which incorporates traits of being "[d]ecisive, never wavering or uncertain," "[s]trong and aggressive, not weak or passive," and a "'real' man, never 'feminine'." According to Jeffords, the "macho" presidential image and its cultural counterpart in the muscular *Rambo* is both reflective of and instrumental to what was the Reagan administration's increasingly aggressive stand on foreign policy and its massive military build up internationally (Jeffords, 1994. 11-17).

The evolution of the *Rambo* images is indeed profound, from a homeless drifter fending off sheriff's deputies and weekend warriors in *First Blood*, to a one-man killing machine defeating the Soviet army in Afghanistan in *Rambo III*—explicitly symbolic, as Jeffords notes, of the tough, uncompromising, "hard" American body crushing the "evil" Soviet "empire" as defined by Reagan (Jeffords, 1994. 11-17). The political stance—and hence the significance—of the films is ultimately just as uncompromising with regard to the characterisation of America; if *King Kong* is about to become the new face of the little nation that could, *Rambo* provided in the 1980s the primary cinematic characterisation of the superpower that by God will. And as Richard Crenna's colonel Trautman tells us about *Rambo*, in perhaps the franchise's most enduring line, "God would be merciful. He won't."

Times, of course, have changed. While Jeffords suspected in 1994 that the Clinton/Gore era would bring subtle differences to the "hard-bodied image" as a

dominant element in Hollywood narrative film, Americans and the world are in 2005 witness to a new era of "macho presidential style." The U.S. has a whole "axis of evil" to contend with, and a foreign policy stance that, as the new Secretary of State has explained, is anything but conservative. And here, rumour has it, comes Rambo.

Sylvester Stallone will be 59 in July, and one must wonder if *Rambo IV* will be a Schwarzenegger-like final grasp at hard-bodied-ness, a la *Terminator 3*, or a more compromising approach to updating the character. On what front, one also wonders, will Rambo fight this time? There are so many to choose from, including the mess he (the U.S.) left in Afghanistan. And are Americans or global audiences still willing to swallow the one-man army routine? Maybe he can get a sidekick. The point, however, is clear: while many in the U.S. may politically be holding onto the myth of the "hard-bodied" hero—the "macho President"—and his fight for American "democratic" superiority, the cultural resurrection of Rambo in our twenty-first century is, if anything, a gamble—not just with money, or cinema, but with national self-image. The *Rambo* films are a version of that image, which Hollywood shipped overseas to the tune of big worldwide box office returns. A decade and two U.S. administrations later, in the face of the Iraq war and the increasingly implied threat behind the George W. Bush administration's vows to "bring democracy" wherever a disadvantageous lack of it can be found, the ideology of a "macho" foreign policy is for some of us, in America or its western allies, becoming a lot to live down—just like Rambo, the icon of American strength *sans* diplomacy, or mercy.

For, if *King Kong* (as I have argued elsewhere) represents a paean to the great dark unknown, that cultural quantity of the mysterious and inaccessible, immortalised by Joseph Conrad and lost (at least in a geographic sense) to the onrush of twentieth century modernity, *Rambo* is representative of an era that seems all too resurrectable. You can't find *King Kong's* Skull Island on a map or with a satellite, but somehow the world of Rambo, the killing machine with a pure and democratic heart, is not yet consigned to the mists of time. Kong dies the loneliest death in cinema; Rambo, it seems, just keeps coming back for more.

Meanwhile, work on *King Kong* progresses, under more international scrutiny than can be calculated, via both traditional and new media sources such as a daily video production diary on www.kongisking.net. We're waiting, but not for a message; after all,

any political content to the original film (virtually every kind of content has been ascribed to it at one time or another) is unlikely to cost Mr. Jackson any sleep at night—as quoted in a *Wired* magazine article from last year, he just wants to "recapture what I loved about the film when I saw it when I was nine" (Jackson, 129). At his WingNut studios in Wellington, they aren't concerned with right- or left-wing posturing; they're making movies because they can, with a natural joy that seems the antithesis of the "hard-bodied" American action hero. The national importance of the new *King Kong* will come not, as with a new *Rambo* in America, from what the film says *about* New Zealand, but by what it does—or doesn't do—*for* New Zealand. Perhaps Stallone will get his fourth instalment, but *Rambo vs. King Kong*? In terms of a remake reflecting well on a nation, my money's on the little country that could, with one final word to Jackson and his team: watch out for us die-hard *King Kong* fanatics. God might be merciful. We won't.

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