

A bigger picture of apes

The recent *King Kong* film highlights how our perceptions of gorillas have changed.



Janet Browne

In one way or another, apes have always been in show business. They have long been a source of spectacle, wonder, horror and, as often as not, moral parables about ourselves. With the new version of the film *King Kong*, the producers have tapped into a rich, almost primal, experience. An adventure story full of classic metaphors and stunning visual effects, it pays generous homage to the original 1933 film, while intensifying and filling out the drama.

Kong is much more humanized than in the original, a change that evidently reflects the requirements of modern audiences, as well as a greater public knowledge of gorillas, thanks to wildlife programmes and widespread publicity for conservation issues. What's more, Kong's blonde (Naomi Watts in the new film) now falls in love with him, a material departure from the original that responds to the idea that gorillas are our closest evolutionary relatives.

Yet he is more gorilla than before, too. The first glimpse shows Kong as a mature silverback, and his movements and behaviour are incredibly naturalistic. A scene in Kong's lair shows the skeletons of other giant apes, a suggestion that he is the last of his kind — fierce only because he is lonely. The final phrase "It was beauty killed the beast" movingly acknowledges the opposing forces of nature and mankind, and the fragile bonds between them.

Anthropomorphisms like these are

intriguing to cultural historians. Gorillas were unknown to Western naturalists until the 1850s when mysterious bones were sent back from Africa and received a scientific name. Humans thereafter regularly projected their own assumptions on to the species, and gorillas soon came to represent the dark side of human existence.

Even though ape ancestors were not mentioned by Darwin in *On the Origin of Species*, they erupted into the evolutionary debate with the first displays of stuffed specimens in Europe promoted by Paul du Chaillu in 1861. Du Chaillu's stories of the gorilla's ferocity were at once terrifying, amusing and revolting to most Victorians and are often cited as an early source for



Early views of gorillas were very different to the more realistic ape in *King Kong*.

King Kong. One of those vintage specimens is preserved in Melbourne, Australia.

With the rise of the great museums in the early twentieth century, interest in capturing and filming live animals led pioneering curators such as Carl Akeley of the American Museum of Natural History to mount lavish collecting expeditions. Akeley created a remarkable display that served as a starting place for Willis O'Brien, the model maker for the original *King Kong*. Indeed, Akeley also humanized gorillas, regarding himself as an old male silverback, and established the first nature reserve for them in Rwanda, where he was buried.

At the same time ethologists tended to see warlike, competitive human society replicated in apes. The notion of dominant alpha males lasted for more than 40 years until George Schaller and Dian Fossey observed gorilla behaviour in the wild and showed them living cooperatively in small family groups. Television, film and modern ecotourism have recently presented gorillas to the public as shy and friendly animals, a mirror image of how we would like to see ourselves. The original *King Kong* of the 1930s stood at the crossroads. This new film invites us with wit, insight and great moments of heroic imagery to reflect on what it is to be human. ■

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