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Book review of: tracking King Kong: a hollywood icon in world culture

Brian M. Yecies

University of Wollongong, byecies@uow.edu.au

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Cynthia Erb, *Tracking King Kong: a Hollywood icon in world culture*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998.

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Reception history of *King Kong* (1933) is an interesting case study in the effects of the Production Code. During the early 1930s the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association Advertising Code pressured local exhibitors in the US into utilizing more standardized advertising practices surrounding the promotion of Hollywood films. The goal of the Advertising Code was "to avoid untrue, sensational and vulgar advertising of films and to avoid federal censorship of films and film advertising." The MPPDA Advertising Code also encouraged American film companies to shift their advertisements away from a circus exploitation approach, which included lobby displays, street stunts and hoaxes. However, sensationalism, vulgarity, and exploitation continued to flourish as local exhibitors attempted to connect with their audiences by exploiting local racial differences. One film in particular, *King Kong*, offered a spectacle, an eroticized experience, advertised as: "something that no white man has ever seen."

King Kong's huge box-office success (including re-releases, subsequent remakes, and spinoffs) seems to have resulted from the exploitation of its inter-racial "beauty and the beast" story. This enduring sensationalist approach demonstrated the willingness of the Advertising Code censors to overlook racial exploitation. The film's promotions perpetuated racial segregation as Ann Darrow, the white blonde female lead, was objectified and used to attract Kong, the savage representation of the black slave. At the same time, Kong was signified as the "icon of the captive black man's love for the white woman." As a result of this "forbidden" love, Kong was brutally killed. Although newspapers such as the *Birmingham news*, *Atlanta constitution*, *New York times*, and *Los Angeles times* used slightly different images of Kong and the girl in their 1933 film promotions, the racial message remained the same: Kong was the black man, one who was feared, hunted, captured, enslaved, and put on display to a Depression-era public. Other sources, including the Sunday comics and political and editorial cartoons, as well as product ads, amplified these negative images

and demonstrated that these signifiers circulated in wider social discourses of the times. These images continue to flourish today.

Cynthia Erb's book *Tracking King Kong* follows these historical and contemporary images of Kong and highlights the unheralded ways with which their "use value" has left the "space of the film and exhibition industries" to be appropriated by "surprising sectors of culture and everyday life" (203). She offers a rigorous study of the promotional discourses used throughout the production and release of *King Kong* and a close textual analysis of the film. Erb also presents a reading of the film's 1950s comeback as a pop cultural phenomenon in a postwar context and how it was reappropriated as a camp fantasy as a way of illustrating the larger "cultural intervention" with the film. With this in mind, Erb achieves much more than simply reifying the line of racist criticism directed at the film. Rather, her research concerns the phenomena of the film's international cult following such as with *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1963) (142-154), Kong's "mass campness" in Ronald Tavel's 1960s play *Gorilla Queen* (160-181), and the film's influence on blaxploitation films (181-201). In this way, the book extrapolates the impact the film's narrativization has had on the reception history of its "exotic monstrosity."

The central contention throughout the book is that: "*King Kong's* call to identify with the position of tormented outsider has historically been answered by spectators outside the mainstream, including international, gay, black, and feminist artists and audiences" (14). Critical to this eclectic approach is Erb's thorough research of historical documents (obviously collected over many years) which has taken her from the archives and files of RKO, Turner Entertainment, USC, UCLA through to BYU, MOMA, the New York Public Library, BGSU, and the US Library of Congress. Erb uses primary and secondary sources to reinscribe the receptions of the film's marginal and minority audiences back into a textual analysis of the film and its surrounding discourses. The book's methodological approach seems to avoid the mass mythos and the white/exotic, white/black, and civilized/savage binaries, for example, that more mainstream theories of reception and cultural studies can often create. Ultimately, Erb deepens our understanding of the multiple receptions surrounding *King Kong* by building on the ethnographic theories offered by Fatimah Tobing Rony and Rhona Berenstein and the feminist reception studies of Janice Radway, Lea Jacobs, and Helen Taylor.

In summary, *Tracking King Kong* is an entertaining analysis of the ways in which *King Kong* and its iconography have gained new currency through the previously unrecognized receptions by minority and marginalised spectators. The book's detailed endnotes, selected bibliography, and eclectic approach provide an excellent research model and multifaceted framework for other academic research positioned somewhere between cultural studies, textual analysis, and reception studies. Scholars, students, historians, and collectors of *Kong* memorabilia will find Erb's work a must.

[Brian Yecies](#)