

THE GREATEST THREAT TO AMERICA! The Mighty Ape and its Role in American Cinema

(By Toshio U.-P.)

In King Kong (1), Outbreak (2), Monkey Business (3), and Planet of the Apes (4), America is vulnerable to a series of different threats which put the population at risk in a social or medical context, hinder the American way of life, or contest its power structure. At the center of these threats is the ape, which is often seen as an outsider up against a mighty American empire.

In King Kong (1), the ape takes on mythical and gigantic proportions. As a viewer, we are soon taken on board a vessel under the leadership of grandiose film producer Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong), who is determined to travel to a remote island to “make the greatest picture in the world”. After following a strange map to find a skull-shaped mountain, the captain and crew come upon a village next to a giant wall built to keep the island’s monstrous beasts at bay. After the picture’s starlet Ann Darrow (Fay Wray) is kidnapped by the tribe of natives and eventually taken into treacherous jungle beyond the village’s wall, Denham and some of the crew follow the gigantic gorilla Kong and miraculously capture him to bring him back to America. However, the beast escapes its shackles, wreaks havoc in the metropolis and eventually carries starlet Ann Darrow like doll in his hand again, this time atop tall New York City buildings. To try to restore order, radio broadcasts are made announcing that “Kong is climbing the Empire State Building” and airplanes are called into the cityscape for a final stand-off at the top of one of America’s most iconic landmarks. Unable to withstand the many rounds of enemy fire, Kong loses to US capitalism, and falls many stories below, still dwarfed by the massive building, which symbolizes America’s might.

In Outbreak (2), the scale of the threat is reduced to smaller and even minute or microscopic dimensions. As a viewer, director Wolfgang Petersen takes us into USAMRIID (United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases), where a series of point of view shots and peripheral long takes reveal laboratory areas of increasing biohazard levels. This highly specialized medical world, which is constantly waging war against potential outbreaks of viruses like HIV or Ebola, has the difficult task of trying to contain viruses and track the hosts before the threat increases to epidemic or pandemic proportions. Much different from the trail of giant ape Kong, the diminutive monkey from Zaire in Outbreak is virtually untraceable, despite all efforts of the concerned military group, after animal trafficking leads to the monkey’s release in the United States; the animal is carrying a rare strain of an airborne virus called Motaba. Like in King Kong, the media is used to potentially track the creature which is described on public television as “a small monkey about the size of a cat [with] a white face [and] dark fur running down its back.” The balance of power shifts several times during the course of the film when two military groups try to resolve the situation differently: the first group looking for a serum to cure the sick and dying, the second by using a massive King Kong-sized ballistic missile to decimate the disease perimeter.

In Monkey Business, old age is seen as a threat to Americans, who look to science and laboratory research to not only prolong lifespan, but also to restore eyesight, cure arthritis, and restore the energy of youth. Similarly to the world of laboratory science showcased in more detail and modernity in Outbreak, absent-minded chemist Dr. Barnaby Fulton (Cary Grant), has difficulty coming up with the 'fountain of youth' formula that his employer Mr. Oxley (Charles Coburn) has hired him to find through research on chimpanzees. When the chimp research doesn't lead to noteworthy results, Dr. Fulton decides to self-experiment against the advice of his laboratory. Unaware that he is sampling a mixture in part created by a chimpanzee who managed to escape and play chemist, Fulton takes a dose of the formula, which transforms him into a teenage version of himself. Meanwhile, the same fate awaits his wife Edwina and other laboratory staff and visitors who happen to drink from the water cooler, which has likewise been contaminated by the chimp. The film culminates with a scene of pandemonium in the plant's laboratory, where chimpanzees are doing more advanced research than their human counterparts.

In Planet of the Apes (4), the reversal of roles between humans and other primates is even more evident. After Taylor (Charlton Heston) and his surviving crew crash land on a planet that they believe is "320 light years from Earth", they plant a small American flag and venture off wondering whether there's something "better than man" out there to find. Soon after they come upon a group of mute and peaceful humanoids who are scurrying around looking for food, Taylor says proudly to his crew that "in six months [they]'ll be running this planet." However, soon after, they are chased and rounded up by hunting parties of apes who can fire weapons, ride horses and use nets and sticks to catch and enslave humans. Some of the ape captors soon take an interest in using Taylor as an animal research subject and claim that "the foundations of scientific brain surgery are being laid [...] in studies of cerebral functions of animals [like this one]." Soon after we realize that the real threat to Americans like Taylor is anything that contests their dominion on Earth or in space. While Taylor and his crew almost expect to find themselves in a world with a favorable power structure like the one that they left behind before their voyage, they end up dying or losing a battle to a strange ape super-race determined to assert its supremacy with ideologies of their own and stronger power retention tactics. At the end of the film, the decaying Statue of Liberty that a fleeing Taylor and his love interest Nova (Linda Harrison) come across on a beach, is a reminder that no global super-power can assert its dominance forever.

Films:

- 1) King Kong (1933), Dir. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Shoedsack, Radio Pictures, USA, 104 min (with overture).
- 2) Outbreak (1995), Dir. Wolfgang Petersen, Warner Brothers Pictures, USA, 128 minutes
- 3) Monkey Business (1952), Dir. Howard Hawks, 20th Century Fox, USA, 97 min.
- 4) Planet of the Apes (1968), Dir. Franklin J. Shaffner, 20th Century Fox, USA, 112min