

THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD: VISUAL LANGUAGE IN KING KONG

AN ENGLISH AND FILM STUDIES UNIT



INTRODUCTION

Peter Jackson's *King Kong* is a rich and versatile text. Its combination of spectacle, action and romance makes it immediately appealing to students, and at the same time the film raises a number of complex and important questions about human-animal relations, exploitation of the natural world, violence and friendship. Because the main character is a CGI animal who cannot speak – at least not in human terms! – his portrayal



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is a vivid example of how the methods and procedures of visual language are used in crafting and shaping a filmic text – especially in the creation of mood, meaning and characterisation. *King Kong* also provides an excellent opportunity for studying structure and setting: from the opening shots of depression-era New York, to the contrast provided by the prehistoric jungle on Skull Island, to the visual echoes of earlier settings that occur in the New York-based final third of the film. In addition, by considering the film against the background of changing attitudes to captive animals, and especially the great apes, students can learn how context shapes the making and the viewing of films. Finally, because the film is a remake of an earlier classic, it can be used to explore how the conventions of the classic “monster movie” operate, and how they can be modified to achieve new meanings and effects.

In this unit, students will closely analyse particular scenes, both by watching them and by reading extracts from the screenplay, and will respond to specific questions that will build them towards answering an exam-style question on the film.

ACHIEVEMENT CRITERIA

This unit is designed to fulfill internal assessment standard AS90723 (English 3.4): Respond critically to oral or visual text studied.

This achievement standard involves previous viewing and study of a visual text, or listening to and studying an oral text, and developing a critical response using supporting evidence.

As the explanatory notes for AS90723 state, “a critical response” to a film may involve referring to:

- ▶ aspects such as theme(s), characterisation, setting, context (social, political, historical, etc), positioning of audience.
- ▶ ‘methods or procedures used in crafting and shaping text’ (EiNZC glossary), eg, structure, method of narration, verbal features (such as music, sound effects, dialogue, etc) and visual features (such as camera techniques, lighting, props, costume, colour).
- ▶ conventions of the genre.



This unit may also be used to fulfill AS90379 (English 2.5): Analyse a visual or oral text.

ACHIEVEMENT CRITERIA AS90723 (ENGLISH 3.4): Respond critically to oral or visual text studied.

ACHIEVEMENT

- ▶ Develop a critical response to specified aspect(s) of oral or visual text using supporting evidence.

ACHIEVEMENT WITH MERIT

- ▶ Develop a convincing critical response to specified aspect(s) of oral or visual text using supporting evidence.

ACHIEVEMENT WITH EXCELLENCE

- ▶ Develop an integrated and perceptive critical response to specified aspect(s) of oral or visual text using supporting evidence.

ACHIEVEMENT CRITERIA AS90379 (ENGLISH 2.5): Analyse a visual or oral text.

ACHIEVEMENT

- ▶ Analyse specified aspect(s) of a visual or oral text, using supporting evidence.

ACHIEVEMENT WITH MERIT

- ▶ Analyse specified aspect(s) of a visual or oral text convincingly, using supporting evidence.

ACHIEVEMENT WITH EXCELLENCE

- ▶ Analyse specified aspect(s) of a visual or oral text convincingly and with insight, using supporting evidence.

THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD: VISUAL LANGUAGE IN KING KONG

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- 1** Watch the whole of Peter Jackson's *King Kong* (2005).
- 2** Work through one or both of the following exercises.



Teachers may choose to divide the class into groups of three or four students and direct half of the groups to do Exercise One and half to do Exercise Two. Alternatively, the sub-tasks in each exercise could be divided amongst the different groups. The groups can then present their findings to the whole class before all students work individually on the final part of the unit (writing the essay).

EXERCISE ONE:

CHORUS LINES AND CIRCUS PONIES

- 1)** Watch *King Kong* (00.00 → 4.10). Read Draft Script Extract 1, "Opening Scene" (p.197). Then discuss the following questions:
 - ▶ The opening sequence of a film often establishes some of its main themes through the use of visual language. *King Kong* opens with shots of zoo animals against the backdrop of 1920s New York. Why? What is the effect of these shots?
 - ▶ How do the shots of zoo animals relate to the shots of people that follow immediately afterwards?
 - ▶ How does this opening sequence relate to the vaudeville sequences that introduce us to Ann Darrow? Why does Ann compare a chorus line to "circus ponies"?
- 2)** Watch the scene in which Jack is shown to his "cabin" in the hold of the *Venture* (23.15 → 24.15). Read Draft Script Extract 2, "A Lion or a Chimpanzee?" (p.198). Then discuss the following questions:
 - ▶ What does the setting tell us about the kind of voyage this is? How does it relate to the film's opening scenes, and to what happens to King Kong later on?
 - ▶ Jack ends up sleeping in a cage meant for captive wild animals. This is one of many reversals in the film that create "irony" (p. 24). What is the point of this reversal? Can you think of others?
- 3)** Watch the scene of Kong's capture (2.05.50 → 2.12.26). Read Draft Script extract 5, "Capture" (p.200).
 - ▶ Why does the filmmaker use slow motion near the start of this scene, when Ann is looking around at the preparations being made by the men?
 - ▶ What feelings do we have towards the capture of Kong? How do the production techniques – shots, editing, camera angles, intercutting with reaction shots from characters – create these feelings?



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KING KONG DRAFT SCRIPT

www.imsdb.com/scripts/King-Kong.html



THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD: VISUAL LANGUAGE IN KING KONG

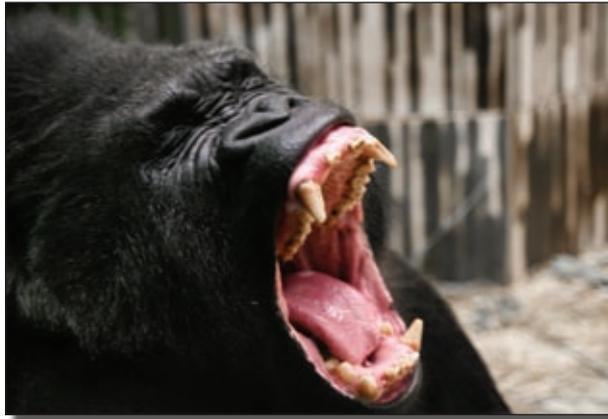
TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

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EXERCISE ONE:

CHORUS LINES AND CIRCUS PONIES CONT...



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- 4) Watch the scene of Kong put on show in a Broadway theatre (2.16.30 – 2.24.13). Read Draft Script extract 6, “For the Price of an Admission Ticket” (p.202). Then discuss the following questions:
 - ▶ Sometimes a film shows characters reacting in a certain way to an event or situation, but we are supposed to react differently. For example, when Carl Denham puts Kong on display in a Broadway show, how does the audience in the film react? How does our reaction – that of the real audience – differ from that of the fictional audience? How does the film make us react in this way?
 - ▶ How does the film use the contrast between oral language (Denham’s introductory speech) and visual language (how Kong actually appears when the curtain goes up).
 - ▶ How is irony (p.24) used in this scene, in the casting of the two main human characters: “the man who hunted down the mighty Kong” and “Miss Ann Darrow”?
 - ▶ What effect is created by switching back and forth between Denham’s show and what is happening to Ann and to Jack?

- 5) Compare the “Kong on Show” scenes in Peter Jackson’s film with their equivalents in Marian C. Cooper’s original version of *King Kong* (1933).

OPTIONAL

- ▶ What are the differences between the two films in their portrayal of the relationship between Kong and Ann?
- ▶ What are the differences in the assumptions of the two films about putting animals on show?

- 6) Read or view one or more of the following texts, from this resource, about zoos and/or circuses.

Take notes on any facts or arguments in the texts that relate to the way zoos and/or circuses are referred to in *King Kong*.

- ▶ “Why Zoos Disappoint.” John Berger. (p.89)
- ▶ *Reading Zoos*. Randy Malamud. (p.50)
- ▶ *Zoo Culture*. Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin. (p.69)
- ▶ *Circus Suffering*. Tim Phillips. (*Animals & Us* DVD)
- ▶ *No-One’s Ark: Exotic Animals Acts in the Circus*. Tanja Schwalm. (p.159)



KING KONG DRAFT SCRIPT

www.imsdb.com/scripts/King-Kong.html

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TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- 1 Watch the whole of Peter Jackson's *King Kong* (2005).
- 2 Work through one or both of the following exercises.



EXERCISE TWO:

DUMB ANIMALS AND TALKING APES

- 1) Watch the scene in which Ann stands up to Kong (1.25.48 → 1.32.17). Read Draft Script Extract 3, "Connection" (p.198).
 - ▶ In the draft script, Kong eats the leg of a dead dinosaur, whereas in the film, he breaks off a stalk of giant bamboo and eats that. In fact throughout the film, although he fights and kills dinosaurs, we never see him eating any meat. Why do you think the filmmakers decided to make this change?
 - ▶ What kinds of visual language – types of shot, editing, camera angle – are used in this scene to convey Kong's feelings and reactions, as these are described in the script?
 - ▶ Why are Ann's performance skills portrayed by the filmmakers as the means to create a connection between her and Kong?



© Udo Weber

- 2) Watch the scene of Kong and Ann together at Kong's Lair (1.52.32 → 1.56.30). Read Draft Script extract 4, "Kong's Lair" (p.200).
 - ▶ There is almost no dialogue in this scene. How do the filmmakers use visual language and production techniques:
 - to give us more information about Kong?
 - to influence our feelings towards him?
 - to convey the development of the relationship between Ann and Kong?



KING KONG DRAFT SCRIPT

www.imsdb.com/scripts/King-Kong.html

- 3) Watch the scene of Ann and Kong watching the sun rise from the Empire State Building (2.34.38 → 2.39.40). Read Draft Script extract 7, "Beautiful" (p.205).
 - ▶ What is the significance of the gesture that Kong makes?
 - ▶ What scene from earlier in the film is being echoed here? What is the significance of this echo?



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TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- 1 Watch the whole of Peter Jackson's *King Kong* (2005).
- 2 Work through one or both of the following exercises.



EXERCISE TWO:

DUMB ANIMALS AND TALKING APES CONT...

- 4) Watch the final scene of the movie (2.48.54 → 2.50.28). Read Draft Script extract 8, "Just a Dumb Animal" (p.206).
 - ▶ The script says that Denham stares at Kong's body with "realisation dawning on his face". What do you think is meant by this?
 - ▶ The final line of this film is taken from the original 1933 version: "it was beauty killed the beast," says Carl Denham. But in Jackson's version, this comment is a reply to the second photographer's remark that "it was just a dumb animal — it didn't know nothin'". How does this change the meaning of the line?



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- 5) Peter Jackson's version of Kong is very different from the giant ape of the original 1933 film. In Jackson's film, the character of Kong is shaped by the ways our knowledge of the great apes has changed over the last few decades – mainly as a result of research by Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, Penny Patterson and others.



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Read or view one or more of the following texts, from this resource, about recent research on gorillas. Take notes on any facts or arguments in the texts that relate to the way Kong, and his relationship with Ann, are portrayed in *King Kong*.

- ▶ Dian Fossey, from *Gorillas in the Mist*. (p.184)



- ▶ Biruté Mary Galdikas, from *Great Ape Odyssey*. (p.185)



www.gorillafund.org

- ▶ Francine Patterson "Penny", *The Case for Personhood of Gorillas*. (p.192)



- ▶ Read about or view footage of Koko the "talking" gorilla online at www.koko.org or www.richardstoneuk.com/dailymail.htm



www.koko.org

KING KONG DRAFT SCRIPT

www.imsdb.com/scripts/King-Kong.html



THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD: VISUAL LANGUAGE IN KING KONG

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

3 Drawing on your responses to Exercises 1 and 2, write at least 500 words on *King Kong* in response to one of the following questions from past examinations:



EXERCISE THREE: CAPTIVE CHARACTERS

ACHIEVEMENT CRITERIA AS90723 (ENGLISH 3.4): Respond critically to oral or visual text studied.

- ▶ 2008 Examination, at: www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/exams/2008/90723-exm-08.pdf
- ▶ 2007 Examination, at: www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/exams/2007/90723-exm-07.pdf
- ▶ 2006 Examination, at: www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/exams/2006/90723-exm-06.pdf

CHOOSE FROM ONE OF THE OPTIONS BELOW:

OPTION 1)

To what extent do you agree that the **production features** of a particular scene can **contribute to a film's central idea(s)**?

To answer this question in relation to *King Kong*, you need to:

- ▶ Decide on one or two central ideas that you will focus on.
- ▶ Decide which production features you will focus on and select some examples of the use of these that have strong links to the central ideas of the film.
- ▶ Decide how much these production features help the audience to understand the central ideas. Are some more important than others? You need to establish your viewpoint in the first paragraph and develop this throughout your answer.

OPTION 2)

To what extent do you agree that films **offer insight into society** (past or present)? Respond to this question with close reference to a film (or films) you have studied.

To answer this question in relation to *King Kong*, you need to:

- ▶ Select one or two specific examples that identify how *King Kong* manages to offer an “insight into society” in regard to the use of animals for entertainment in circuses and zoos.
- ▶ Use these examples to discuss how certain ideas and attitudes towards animals have changed. In particular think across and beyond the text in order to make value judgements about how and why attitudes have changed towards the use of animals as a form of human entertainment.

OPTION 3)

“The use of a range of **production techniques** can help a director to develop **characters**”. To what extent do you agree with this view? Respond to this question with close reference to one or more films you have studied.

To answer this question in relation to *King Kong*, you need to:

- ▶ Choose one of the main characters from *King Kong*. Select and identify specific material from the film to support the view that production techniques have been used to develop and enhance this character.
- ▶ Fully discuss how production techniques are used to create change in the character. Explain which aspects of the character have changed and support your answer with specific examples from the film.

OPTION 4)

Symbolism, narrative structure, and special effects are significant features of films. Focusing on ONE OR MORE of these features, discuss the extent to which you agree with this view. Your response should include close reference to one or more films you have studied.

To answer this question in relation to *King Kong*, you need to do one or more of the following:

- ▶ Discuss how the special effects used in *King Kong* to create the settings, or to portray Kong himself, contribute to the impact of the film on the audience, or the meanings it conveys. Specific examples from the scenes you have studied above will be needed to back up your discussion.

THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD: VISUAL LANGUAGE IN KING KONG

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- 3** Drawing on your responses to Exercises 1 and 2, write at least 500 words on *King Kong* in response to one of the following questions from past examinations:



EXERCISE THREE: CAPTIVE CHARACTERS CONT...



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- ▶ Discuss how the narrative structure of *King Kong* (for example the use of “dramatic irony” [see p.24]; or the “echoing” or repetition of events or scenes from Skull Island later on, in the New York scenes), contributes to the impact of the film on the audience, or the meanings it conveys. Specific examples from the scenes you have studied above will be needed to back up your discussion.
- ▶ Discuss how symbolism used in *King Kong* (for example the images of capture or captivity, or of sacrifice), contribute to the impact of the film on the audience, or the meanings it conveys. Specific examples from the scenes you have studied above will be needed to back up your discussion.

ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS

The essay should include:

- ▶ an introduction, stating clearly the focus and scope of the argument.
- ▶ a range of appropriate points, supported by accurate and relevant evidence.
- ▶ a reasoned conclusion.

SUGGESTED TEXTS AND WEB LINKS

VISUAL TEXTS

King Kong. Peter Jackson. 2005
King Kong. Marian C. Cooper. 1933
Circus Suffering. Tim Philips. (Animals & Us DVD)

EXTENDED WRITTEN TEXTS

Reading Zoos. Randy Malamud. (p.50)
Zoo Culture. Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin. (p.69)
No-One's Ark: Exotic Animal Acts in the Circus.
 Tanja Schwalm. (p.159)
Gorillas in the Mist. Dian Fossey. (p.184)
Great Ape Odyssey. Biruté Mary Gladikas. (p.185)

SHORT WRITTEN TEXTS

Why Zoos Disappoint. *New Society*. John Berger. (p.89)
 Updated Draft. *King Kong*. Internet Movie Script Database. (p.197)

WEB LINKS

Koko.org - www.koko.org
 Internet Movie Script Database: *King Kong* Draft Script
 - www.imsdb.com/scripts/King-Kong.html

TEACHING AND LEARNING

AS90723 (ENGLISH 3.4)

Type the url below followed by the remaining url listed beside each Examination link:

www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/exams/

- ▶ 2008 Examination: 2008/90723-exm-08.pdf
- ▶ 2007 Examination: 2007/90723-exm-07.pdf
- ▶ 2006 Examination: 2006/90723-exm-06.pdf

AS90379 (ENGLISH 2.5)

Type the url below followed by the remaining url listed beside each Examination link:

www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/exams/

- ▶ 2008 Examination: 2008/90379-exm-08.pdf
- ▶ 2007 Examination: 2007/90379-exm-07.pdf
- ▶ 2006 Examination: 2006/90379-exm-06.pdf

THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD: VISUAL LANGUAGE IN KING KONG

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- 4** Drawing on your responses to Exercises 1 and 2, write at least 300 words on *King Kong* in response to one of the following questions from past examinations:



EXERCISE FOUR: CHAINED FOR OUR AMUSEMENT

ACHIEVEMENT CRITERIA AS90379 (ENGLISH 2.5): Analyse a visual or oral text.

- ▶ 2008 Examination, at: www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/exams/2008/90379-exm-08.pdf
- ▶ 2007 Examination, at: www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/exams/2007/90379-exm-07.pdf
- ▶ 2006 Examination, at: www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/exams/2006/90379-exm-06.pdf

CHOOSE FROM ONE OF THE OPTIONS BELOW:

OPTION 1)

Analyse how **production techniques** strengthened or changed your opinion of a **particular topic or issue**.

To answer this question in relation to *King Kong*, you need to choose a scene that changed your opinion on the treatment of animals used for entertainment.

- ▶ Analyse the techniques used in the film that guided you toward this change.
- ▶ Examine and describe in detail how the scene uses techniques to communicate the issue of capturing animals for entertainment.

OPTION 2)

Analyse how the text presented a **positive OR negative view of humanity and/or society**.

To answer this question in relation to *King Kong*, you need to:

- ▶ Identify what kind of view into society *King Kong* offers: for example into changing attitudes between humans and animals, and/or to the capture and display of wild animals and/or to gorillas and other great ape species.
- ▶ Give specific examples from the film of how these views are conveyed.
- ▶ Analyse these examples and point out how they offer an insightful observation of how attitudes have changed towards the use of animals in entertainment.

OPTION 3)

Analyse how **BOTH internal and external conflict** were **important** to the text as a whole. NOTE: "Internal conflict" means conflict within a character, and "external conflict" means conflict between a character and other individuals(s) or group(s).

To answer this question in relation to *King Kong*, you need to:

- ▶ Identify some of the key features of the main characters in *King Kong* especially Ann, Kong and Denham.
- ▶ Discuss how these characters, or their attitudes, or the relationships between them, change as the film proceeds.
- ▶ Give specific examples from the film of internal and external conflict between these characters, how this changes them and the relationships between them.

OPTION 4)

Analyse how **ONE OR MORE symbols** were used to present an **important idea or ideas**.

To answer this question in relation to *King Kong*, you need to do one or more of the following:

- ▶ Analyse how the use of symbolism helped make an important setting realistic or believable.
- ▶ Analyse how the use of symbolism helped develop an important theme.

ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS

Texts chosen should be of sufficient depth and complexity to enable learners to develop a full and detailed analysis of several aspects of content and crafting.