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REFERENCES

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 282. ISBN 9781137359827

- 1 Kirk Combe and Brenda Boyle's recent book *Masculinity and Monstrosity in Contemporary Hollywood Film* is part of the Palgrave series of books "Global Masculinities." The book presents a socio-political analysis of monstrosity in contemporary blockbuster filmmaking, especially in relation to masculinity and gender performance. From the onset of the book two ideas frame their discussion. First, who is the hero and who the monster in these narratives is often surprisingly complex. Their natures intersect and their roles fuse: "Monsters refuse to play our convenient game of Platonic binaries, of being always Bad to our perpetual Good" (3). Second, study of contemporary film monsters and heroes can shed light to our dominant cultural narratives. Studying these texts becomes an imperative then: of uncovering our collective fears, and the thought processes and ideologies that inform our popular culture. More so, because these texts are packaged as "just entertainment" and as an audience we may be inattentive to the messages we are consuming.

Combe and Boyle establish in the introduction of their book the theoretical foundation of their analysis. This foundation is informed by certain key ideas regarding power structures in contemporary society as Foucault and post-Marxist theorists have discussed these. How the

ruling class exerts power by normalising ideology and presents dominant ideas as universally true are related here to the idea of heroes and monsters: “concepts of monstrosity and masculinity are two essential ingredients in any recipe of power relations formulating a predominant world-view” (6). As a result, the texts examined in the book are seen as either reinforcing or subverting these dominant cultural narratives. Who these films will place as a hero and who as a monster will be dictated by the ideology informing the narrative, by the choices the *auteur* will make in how to present his/her story. Additionally, the representation of gender is quite central in Combe and Boyle’s analysis since in these films the patriarchy is either questioned or established depending on how the body, sex, and gender are presented and performed. Hollywood, it is asserted, often normalises hegemonic masculinities, and Combe and Boyle wish to see what these films present as acceptable masculine behaviour.

The first chapter, and one of the most impressive in the book, outlines an analysis of *King Kong* (2005) both in comparison to the 1930s classic, but also in relation to contemporary social issues. The film is examined as a subversive text that attempts to undermine dominant narratives regarding race and gender. At the heart of their argument is the idea that the new Kong (Andy Serkis) is the hero of the story, who seeks his soul mate Ann (Naomi Watts). Their analysis is indeed important, since this is a film that critics shunned. For example, critics complained that the new ending, unlike the iconic 1930s final scenes at the Empire building, is slow and uneventful, and rendered anti-climactic since this new Kong does not seem to pose a great threat to civilization (New York City). He obsessively picks up and checks blonde women, looking for Ann, and any destruction he causes is incidental, not wanton or savage. All he wants is Ann.

For Combe and Boyle, Kong is not the monster in this narrative. He is a tragic hero who meets a horrible death in the hands of civilization. In this analysis the one true pairing is Ann and Kong, although this is not romantic love, but one of camaraderie; them against the world. They are neither Beauty nor Beast. Their reality is far more complex than the dominant social narrative allows for. Ann in the film, again and again, will choose Kong over any of the other leading men: “Ann breaks free from the modern patriarchy, crosses over to the subaltern realm, and allies with the marginalized male” (65). But, herself a tragic hero, she will be trapped in her failed mission to save Kong either in Skull Island where Kong is caught, or in Manhattan Island where he dies. Kong is then firmly situated as the victim, an escaped slave, running to freedom. If Kong is the victim, Ann becomes the action —hero, autonomous and active— traits that Hollywood movies use to signify masculinity. For example, at the end of the film Ann will place herself in front of Kong to protect him from the military (the masculine hegemonic forces). In a sense, by stepping in front of Kong she is performing “traditional” masculinity, demonstrating strength and courage and as a result casting the military in the role of

the monster. She is the Hollywood leading man now —an epic hero attempting, against all hope, to save the one she loves. And since as an audience we are meant to empathize with her, “[p]atriarchy is shaken to its core and the conventional performance of gender is troubled severely when blonde bimbo transforms into righteous action hero” (54). In reading this chapter the reader is left with a desire to re-watch this film as a subversive text, away from the long shadow cast by the 1930s classic, and as a good example of Peter Jackson’s liberal minded politics.

This strand of *auterism* continues in the next chapter of the book, in the analysis of *300* (2006). Whereas Jackson is the subversive liberal hero of Combe and Boyle’s book, Zack Snyder, the director of *300*, seems to be the neo-conservative, pro-military monster. *300* is the film adaptation of the popular Frank Miller graphic novel of the same name, telling a historically inaccurate version of the story of Leonidas and the Spartan soldiers who stood up to the invading Persians at Thermopylae. On the surface, the Persians are the monsters of the film, their army made up of Immortals, vicious elephants, giants, and other humanoid creatures. And their ‘partner in crime’ Ephialtes (Andrew Tiernan) is hideously deformed and hunchbacked (a very telling historical inaccuracy for Combe and Boyle). In this film “deformed bodies are essentially monstrous, but even more disturbingly...is that these exteriors unfailingly reveal the corruptibility of moral faculties” (90). The audience is asked to side with the Spartans, the normal, unmarked heroes who fight these monsters. They have perfect bodies therefore perfect minds and hearts. The Spartans, who for Combe and Boyle express the ethos of American militarism, are led by Leonidas (Gerard Butler), the universal warrior hero. Leonidas in this analysis stands for reason, battling both the monsters that invade his country, and the religiosity and politicking of the city council that is holding back his plan for action. In the final battle, Leonidas —short and brawny— will fight the Persian leader Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro), who is bald, pierced, decadent, and gigantic. Again, and in a very superficial manner, the marks of the body will become signifiers of good and evil. Leonidas’s character in the film is stripped from any historical issue that the contemporary audience might find problematic: for instance, slavery, pederasty, incest, subordination of women, and the belief that physical abnormalities should be eliminated. The film for Combe and Boyle communicates a strong and favourable militaristic message. The military is presented as heroic and apolitical, committed to reasonable and pure aims that any member of the audience can accept as true (a topic that is explored further in chapter 4 in the analysis of the 2008 satire *Tropic Thunder* and in the conclusion in the analysis of *Hurt Locker* (2010)). Masculine ethos is driven by patriotism and the love of freedom. The leaders are selfless and must be trusted without question.

Combe and Boyle also note the conservative representation of women in the film. Leonidas’s wife, Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey) is a rational partner for Leonidas who embraces the masculine Spartan

ethos and at the same time satisfies our voyeuristic drive. "In Snyder's monstrously deceptive and manipulative filmmaking, Leonidas's wife is made to look as modern males and females of all sexual proclivities are tutored to imagine feminine and sexualized females should look...Just as the unusual look of Snyder's film can beguile spectators into cheering for and believing in the beautiful Spartan warriors and booing and hating the monstrous Persians, so may the appearance of Leonidas's wife have those same viewers believing that she is an independent woman." (102)

Unlike *300*, the film *V for Vendetta*, which came out the same year, is openly hostile to these militarist ideas. In the film *V* (Hugo Weaving) is a lone challenger who sparks a revolution against an authoritarian regime that echoes the politics of Thatcher (in the graphic novel) and of Bush Jr (in the film). As a result, for Combe and Boyle, the film becomes "a vehicle for openly socialist instruction and illumination" (122) and is a Hollywood novelty since it asks the audience to think about the causes behind actions in socio-political and economic terms. Combe and Boyle describe the character of *V* as the instrument to carry through this message of socialism. He is, in traditional terms, the monster –the cultural 'Other' of this narrative: deformed, ambiguous, violent, and possibly gay. At one point in the film he rants, "What was done to me was monstrous!" to which his protégé Evey (Natalie Portman) replies: "And they created a monster." He seems to be "pure performance," capable of playing all identities, and meeting violence with violence. For many critics the politics suggested in the film are a sanitized didactic propaganda, encoded in an action-adventure blockbuster. But Combe and Boyle see more: "*V* is a Nietzschean relativist locked in a semiotic contest for Foucaultian Truth and Power with the pyramid hierarchy of the day" (138). His actions become an invitation to the people: to join him in assessing how they have surrendered their freedoms in the name of fear, and to change the way they relate to their government. His violence, especially in the final scenes when he blows up the parliament, is what makes the film escape the canon of Hollywood blockbusters. *V* remains to the end the monster he was designed to be, and since everyone joins him in wearing his Guy Fawkes mask of choice, his monstrosity succeeds in altering our collective present. For Combe and Boyle he is the most overtly political monster of their book, asking us to question who we consider 'Other,' and how the government itself can be monstrous.

In the last chapter of their book, Combe and Boyle analyse the science fiction film *District 9* (2009), where aliens that look like monsters arrive on Earth and are treated harshly by humans. The real monsters of the film, according to the authors, are the modern social forces of exclusion and marginalization. Neo-conservative masculinity, both of corporate greed and militarist xenophobia, is once again the oppressor (a theme that is also explored later in the book in the analysis of *Avatar* (2009)). Corporate capitalism aligns with the scientists who perform monstrous acts. It seems in the film that what humans are

mostly interested in is how to take advantage of the aliens and their superior war technology. Any opposition to this thinking seems limited and insignificant. The aliens, the supposed monsters, are asexual and presented as living in cooperation, with no understanding of property or ownership. They come to “symbolize the world’s mushrooming population of urban slum dwellers” (202), the true victims of global capitalism. Their alien saviour/leader is honourable and sincere, caring for his people and son. The ‘Other’ to this hegemonic, oppressive, militarist, human masculinity. The alien leader even comes to care for the protagonist who, due to an accident, transforms into a hybrid human/alien. This hybrid, Wikus (Sharlto Copley), symbolizes for Combe and Boyle the middle classes. He never really becomes an agent of change. Rather, his whole struggle is to return to his original form, to return to the status quo, although reality has pitted him with the oppressed. Through their analysis of his character, Combe and Boyle come to conclude that “an ominous reading of *District 9* is that the underclass can’t count on their middle-class betters for help in redistributing wealth or equalizing opportunity. That is, only the oppressed can free themselves” (209).

There is always a risk in analysing such mainstream texts of popular culture as Combe and Boyle do. One often feels that the authors might be reading too much into it. Why can’t we just entertain ourselves? Why think about capitalist greed and post-Marxist agency when there are so many beautiful special effects and stars on the screen? But that is exactly the point Combe and Boyle wish to make. These texts *are* ideologically loaded and, decoding these messages is for the audience usually secondary to the enjoyment of the visual spectacle. By bringing forth these ideas Combe and Boyle succeed in revealing the dominant ideologies at play, the ones we digest much more easily than when watching a more earnest and explicit film about social reality. And their analytic perspective holds true for many recent films. *Jurassic World* (2015) deals with the same issues of capitalist forces in cooperation with science and militarism. The monster of the film is not the dangerous hybrid dinosaur but the calculating and materialistic humans. In *Chappie* (2015) the supposed monster is a sentient machine, but as the story progresses it is the humans, driven by *megalothymia* and greed that commit the monstrous acts. Scrutinizing these texts, as Combe and Boyle suggest we do, allows for complex interpretations that are ideologically and culturally meaningful.

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