



KING KONG: Interpreting a dream using active imagination and a film.

By Stephen Goodfellow

Earlier this year I had a dream. In it were a giant ape and a blonde haired woman. I thought the association to the movie *King Kong* was too blatant to be ignored, so I sought out a copy of the 1931 version of the movie to re-watch it. Surprisingly, a collector's edition, with several documentaries, had just been released on DVD and this provided me with insight into Merian C Cooper's life, the creator of the original *King Kong* movie. I felt the use of the movie to provide meaning to my own dream would be a good exercise to share with you. I am sure most of you know the story of *King Kong* so I won't repeat it here.

Dream

I am in a city. I am with a blonde woman. I am in a silver/white concrete construction site. A giant ape is loose. He is after both of us. We are being chased around the construction site. The ape is punching the walls of the building so they collapse and he can reach in to search for us. The woman and I get separated. The ape follows me and I am concentrating on diverting his attention away from the woman. I see part of the building collapse. He is getting nearer. I find a narrow corridor with a hand-washing sink and tap coming out from the wall. I crouch underneath the sink. I worry that the ape will still see me. I also have a head of lettuce in a bag. I put it on top of my head so that the ape cannot see me. I can hear him breathing near me. He does not move away. I am fearful for my life. He stays put and does not attack me.

Active Imagination

Before interpreting the dream, I wanted to learn more about this giant ape and to find out why I felt that it

was trying to kill me. Here is the transcript from the Active Imagination that occurred.

Me: "I think I need to speak with the ape that was after me in the dream I had last night. The issue is I need a safe environment for me to be in. The dream reminded me of the movie *King Kong*. Would it be possible to set this talk on Skull Island with me up on the wall as a protection from King Kong?"

"Yes." I hear a disembodied voice say.

Me: "Then please, I wish to be on top of the wall with a megaphone, so King Kong can hear me."

I begin to see the villagers down below chanting to get Kong. I look over the other side of the high wall and see jungle. I hear the villagers chanting, beating the drums, and dancing around the fire. I look back into the jungle. Nothing is happening. I look back at the villagers chanting Kong, Kong, Kong. I look over the other side and there is King Kong looking up at me. He starts thumping his fists against the wall, trying to attack me, or is it to get my attention? I speak through the megaphone.

Me: "King Kong, I know who you are. I respect who you are. I fear who you are. I wish to know more about you."

KK: "Get out of my way."

Me: "You cannot pass the wall. I am part of the wall. The wall is here to protect me."

KK: "You don't understand."

Me: "No, I don't understand, that's why I am here."



King Kong sits on the ground looking up at me.

KK: "It is I who fear you. I am trying to kill you."

Me: "Why?"

KK: "Because you have become too powerful."

Me: "I have no power. I am but a mere mortal. I am not a god."

KK: "Then why do the villagers honour you?"

Me: "The villagers are just chanting to get you to come here so that we can talk with each other."

KK: "But you arranged that. You put that together. You had the thought and sense to get this done. No other man has done this."

Me: "I'm sure there are other men who have done this before."

KK: "You have made the grade. You are the one."

Me: "We are the one. I can't do this without much help from the energies in my personal unconscious. You all teach me about myself. Isn't it strange how I feared you and yet it is you who fear me. We are both fearful. You just have the strength to cause havoc and I have the strength to run [Fight or Flight instinct?]. It is not in my mind to kill you, even though that is what happens in the end of the *King Kong* movie. You die protecting your love. In my dream I fear for the blonde woman. I am willing to sacrifice myself for her."

KK: "You see you are the one."

Me: "I guess in the universe of my mind you could say I am. If you are my instinctual personality, the something bigger than I, how can you possibly fear me knowing what I have told you."

KK: "I can't."

Me: "Then can we coexist in harmony with each other?"

KK: "Yes."

Me: "Very well. I will leave you here and will not take you to New York City." END.

Archetypal Interpretation

The limited space for this article prohibits me from expanding too much on this type of interpretation, but the image of an ape in a construction site closely resembles the 'reconstruction of the ape' or 'Rites of Renewal' texts appearing in Volume 12 of Jung's *Collected Works* para.191-193.

Para.193 reads, "The fourth function is contaminated with the unconscious and, on being made conscious, drags the whole of the unconscious with it. We must then come to terms with the unconscious and try to bring a synthesis of opposites. At first a violent conflict breaks out, such as any reasonable man would experience when it becomes evident that he had to swallow a lot of absurd superstitions. Everything in him would rise up in revolt and he would defend himself desperately against what looked to him like a murderous nonsense."

According to Jung, "*the 'ape' refers to the instinctual personality, which has been completely neglected in favour of an exclusive intellectual attitude.*" (CW11, para.56). Hence, in the dream, the symbol of the 'head of lettuce' (opposite of an intellectual attitude) is the only way to stop being attacked by the giant ape and to instinctually hide under the proverbial sink.

Reductive Interpretation

I was enthralled by the documentaries contained in the *King Kong* DVD and I wanted to know more about Merion C. Cooper, especially his upbringing. After all, he did say in a radio interview that "He was King Kong". So, I read his biography "*Living Dangerously: The Adventures of Merian C. Cooper*" by Mark Cotta Vaz. Shortly after getting the book I read in Jung and the Cinema that reductively interpreting the storyline, to the life of the originator,



is not the best approach. However, something was pulling me towards understanding Cooper - just like how I was trying to understand the ape. So I followed my gut feeling and went with what I was doing. Here is a little background on Cooper's early years

Merian C Cooper was born in 1893 and the youngest child of John and May Cooper and brother to John Jr. and Nancy. The father was a prominent lawyer who had a powerful network of friends. The Cooper lineage was one of the first to establish cotton plantations north of Jacksonville, USA. Merian was immersed in comfort and traditions, always looking up to his father and brother. Very little is mentioned about his mother and sister, although they were still part of the family. When Merian left home he always wrote to his father and brother telling them about his exploits, seeking their approval. He felt he was not as intelligent as they were. He vowed never to return home until he accomplished something that his father would be proud of.

It is said that Cooper's inspiration for *King Kong* came from a dream he had, where a giant ape destroyed New York City. He had the wherewithal to write it down. Although Cooper did not write the whole script of *King Kong*, he had in his mind the major scenes and hired a screenwriter, Edgar Wallace, to fill in the gaps. Wallace was accredited on the film as being the screenwriter. What is less well known is that Cooper did not like anything that Wallace had written, but he had already promised to give Wallace the screenwriting credit. The final fill-in script was

actually written by Ruth Rose, a woman who had accompanied Cooper and his friend/associate Ernest Shoedsack on many of their real life adventures. Ruth had no screenwriting experience at the time.

I could see a pattern forming here, the missing mother and sister; the missing credits in the *King Kong* movie for Ruth Rose; the missing blonde haired woman in the primeval forest. What is the missing feminine about?

"I've always felt that RKO at the time of Kong was like a laboratory from the days of the old alchemists who wanted to create the perfect homunculus.

Kong was the perfect homunculus, this figure that was injected with life through the stop-motion process." –

*Ray Harryhausen
(head of special effects for
Mighty Joe Young)*

I will use a couple of the major scenes to explore the inner meaning of this story.

Movie Scene 1: The boat and movie crew arrive at Skull Island. Anne Darrow (the blonde haired woman) is abducted by the island natives and a ritual sacrifice takes place. The village is protected by a large wall and gate. On the other side is the dark, primeval forest. The villagers chant in a dancing frenzy and *King Kong* arrives to take their offering. *Kong* does not let Anne out of his sight and has a tight grip on her. He protects her from dinosaur attacks and is

attracted to her gold hair and fair complexion. Here are some associations:

Skull Island/Dark Forest – the unconscious in masculine psychology/instinctual. The island is shaped like a cross section of the human brain, hence the name.

King Kong – symbolizing the "giant guarding the treasure" or dominant father complex, which may also represent the intellect (as opposed to the instinct). Something Cooper did not acknowledge in himself.



Blonde-haired woman – Alchemical gold/the treasure hard to obtain (the love from the father?).

Giant Wall & Gate – a dividing protection from left to right, order from chaos, conscious from unconscious.

Sacrificial Ritual – Active Imagination performed on a regular basis is considered ritualistic. Its aim is to sacrifice some of the egocentric control/power. (Not to mention the frenzy of the villagers dancing as symbolic of the Dionysian myths, also similar to the word 'dinosaur'.)

I feel the relationship between Kong and Anne is not about love, but of the ownership of love. One chooses whether to share their love, or not. Had Cooper perceived that his father withheld his love towards him?

Movie Scene 2: Kong is captured and taken to New York to be put on show. He escapes and recaptures Anne Darrow, taking her to the top of the Empire State Building. Several fighter planes soon arrive and shoot Kong. He loses his energy and falls to the ground, dead. Here are some associations:

New York – city of light/intellectual attitude/man made.

Empire State Building – Tallest building in the world at that time. Kong is the biggest natural object. Nature and man made – union of opposites – instinct and intellect.

The Fighter planes – The key to this whole scenario. What is something that flies, aims and shoots? Could it be *CUPID - EROS - LOVE*? Is it love (acceptance) that takes the power away from the dominant father complex? After all, it was the fighter pilot that killed King Kong – not Anne Darrow.

Two Interesting points from Mr Cooper's biography are:

1. Cooper became a bomber pilot during WW1. It was his job to throw bombs out of his plane and to blow

up enemy targets e.g., large buildings/structures (complexes?). More flying, aiming and shooting! Was the unconscious guiding his life, with the answer on how to handle a dominant father complex?

2. In *King Kong*, Cooper played the role of the plane's pilot that fires the fatal shots killing Kong.

Personal Interpretation

When I read the biography I identified immediately with the father – son relationship that was portrayed in the book. My father is no longer alive, so what I can't get from the outside I have to find within. My perception is that my father did not express or show me love. On the other hand, I followed his example and did not express or show him love either. Looking back at my Active Imagination it seems



Eros by Praxiteles (c. 400 B.C.E.).



Weaving Voices

like the psyche had it all mapped out for me, by saying “I am the one”. It’s up to me to act.

Robert A Johnson wrote in *The Psychology of Romantic Love* “Love is the power within us that affirms and values another human being as he or she is. Human love affirms that person who is actually there, rather than the ideal we would like him or her to be, or the projection that flows from our minds. Love is the inner god who opens our blind eyes to the beauty, value, and quality of the other person.”

Johnson sums it up quite well when he says “And we can discover, to our surprise, that [what] we have needed, more than anything, was not so much to be loved, as to love.”

A year after the release of the film *King Kong*, Merian meets Dorothy, whom he falls in love with and marries. They eventually go on a 12-month honeymoon. Earlier I asked what was the missing feminine about? It’s the missing love!

Finally, something I noticed about the title, *King Kong*. Cooper just made the title up. But what is the difference between the two words? The “I” in *King* and an “O” in *Kong*. In technological terms these are the symbols for on and off. Opposites. The phallic and the receptacle. Masculine AND Feminine.

Here’s a list of some of Merian Cooper’s contributions to society, apart from the 65 movies he produced/directed.

- Helped form the Kościuszko Squadron in battle-torn Poland and became the senior pilot and master strategist for the campaign.
- Was the first filmmaker to team Fred Astaire and

Ginger Rogers together and organised Katherine Hepburn’s first screen test.

- Became the head of production at RKO Pictures.
- Became Vice-President for production at Pioneer Pictures where he introduced the ‘Technicolor’ process to filmmaking and convinced the makers of *Gone with the Wind* to use it.
- He returned to military service during WWII, serving with General Claire Chennault in China, flying missions into the heart of enemy territory.
- Introduced the ‘Cinerama’ filming/cinema experience to filmmaking.
- Became one of the instigators of Pan American Airways in the United States, when it took 48 hours to fly from coast to coast of the USA.

Not bad for a man who thought he only had a fourth rate intelligence. Merian C Cooper died 21 April 1973.

I hope you enjoyed this exploration of *King Kong* as I attempt to show you how I used a dream, active imagination, a film and Jung’s work to learn a bit more about myself. Bearing in mind, it is still a work in progress.

Thank you to my wife, Rosemary, my sister, Boni and my friend, Jacinta for their feedback.

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