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***Midterm Essay***

***IMA Visual Culture***

Using Roland Barthes’ system of semiotic analysis, I will examine racial and gender-related themes present in early 20th century films King Kong (1933) and Night of the Living Dead (1968). Many elements of these films have been examined through shifting cultural viewpoints, and as these films serve as iconic examples of the horror genre and have been remade several times, they remain constantly relevant in pop culture, and open to multiple interpretations.

1933’s King King was an instant success, sparking multiple sequels, spin-offs, and remakes. Hailed as one of the fathers of the monster movie genre, certain elements have come to be seen as racially insensitive, reflecting both the personal prejudices of co-director Merian C. Cooper and the superior western mindset of the time. Cooper, a former fighter pilot, wrote the film as a reflection of his own experiences of “taming the wild natives”, and his lust for adventure and conquest1. Although Cooper stated multiple times that the film was not meant to convey any racial messages or undertones, the movie contains multiple scenes with spear-wielding, “evil”, scantily-clad, black natives. In one scene, the native tribe attempts to trade six of their own women for the blonde leading-lady, a signifier that could be seen to convey both the moral and physical superiority of the white invaders compared to the natives. The very existence of the island’s tribe, an element that has been removed from Kong’s latest remake, adds to the film’s undertone of western invasion and conquest *(colonialism).* The tribe is depicted as violent and uncivilized, compared to the heroic portrayal of the white leads. While Cooper insisted that the relationship between Kong and the leading lady was meant to reflect the classic tale of Beauty and the Beast, many see Kong’s capture and imprisonment as a metaphor for slavery; the dynamic between Kong and the blonde-haired leading actress has also been interpreted as a metaphor for interracial relationships, representing a fear of black men “stealing” white women.

In contrast, 1968’s Night of the Living Dead gained instant notoriety as one of the first horror movies to cast a black male lead. African-American actor Duane Jones’ role, Ben, was originally written without race in mind, and Duane made strict demands in order to defy common stereotypes associated with black horror characters of the day2. The resulting depiction of the character of Ben is that of an intelligent, cool-headed hero, who fights for survival despite his genre-typical demise at the end of the film. Due to the timing of the release of the film, many associated Ben’s unjust death with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and the oppressive activities of the government in the midst of the civil rights protests.

While these films differ in their representations of race, they share similar tones in their depiction of their female leads. *King* *Kong’*s Ann and *Night of the Living Dead*’s Barbara, both fair-skinned blondes, share qualities of helplessness and naivety. Both women are subject to capture, and are expected to follow the lead of their male counterparts; Barbara slaps Ben in a nervous fit, and Ben hits her back, displaying a common trope of the era of men “controlling” hysterical women with violence. *King Kong*’s Ann is captured multiple times in the film; by the island’s natives, by Kong, and later by Kong again. Each time, she is rescued by the film’s male leads, who see her as a “troublesome dame”; and, much like the film’s own director, use her as eye-candy for the production of their own exploitation film. These women serve as examples of the era’s “ideal” woman; they act submissively, and follow the lead of men who know better than them. They are used as props for the hero or devices for the progression of the plot, but possess no agency or ability to act independently.

King Kong and Night of the Living Dead are considered groundbreaking movies, and each reflect the social and political attitudes of their eras. While they represent different themes and cultural mindsets, the context in which they were created and the controversial nature of their content provides extensive material for analysis. These films serve as a representation of how different themes, tropes, and filmmaking techniques shift in the public eye from commonplace to unacceptable; as well as how the historical and cultural context of a work always affects the perceived meaning of the piece, regardless of the creator’s intent.

Works Cited

1. Zakarin, Jordan. “How King Kong's Politics and Racist Elements Evolved Over Time.” Inverse, Inverse, 9 Mar. 2017, [www.inverse.com/article/28860-king-kong-skull-island-politics-racism](http://www.inverse.com/article/28860-king-kong-skull-island-politics-racism).
2. Kane, Joe. “How Casting a Black Actor Changed 'Night of the Living Dead'.” TheWrap, The Wrap, 1 Sept. 2010, [www.thewrap.com/night-living-dead-casting-cult-classic-20545/](http://www.thewrap.com/night-living-dead-casting-cult-classic-20545/).

*Megan,*

*This is very clear and concise. A few things… The act of a black man striking a white woman in pre-60’s America was grounds for lynching or some sort of retaliation. In this fiction film, it is merely an act of sexism since it’s “race-blind” from the original script. The shooting of his character by the police posse, acts as a reiteration of that historical retaliation, albeit not detailed as such in the script – as well as the MLK reference you cite. Also, the staging of the KK film in a far-away place exoticizes that culture and allows for the colonial, ethnocentric attitude of the actual filmmakers and the actors-as-filmmakers in the narrative.*

*The changes in cultural connotation can be described or referred to here also as the result of a shift in an episteme’s discourse (Foucault, text p. 101) or Barthes’ suggestion of the death of the author (text p.57) – meaning as a negotiation between the viewer and producer.*

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