

*“A place of inexhaustible mysteries”<sup>1</sup>*  
*The modern legendry of Skull Island in the King Kong films*  
*and related media texts*

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**Abstract:** The 1933 film *King Kong* established its giant ape as an enduring cultural figure. It also introduced the public to a strange tropical island where prehistoric animals existed alongside a giant primate and a small human community sheltering behind a wall on a tiny peninsula. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the island was essentially a sub-feature within a number of King Kong-themed films and, indeed, was referred to under various names. In recent decades, this position has shifted. De Vito's 2004 illustrated novel, Peter Jackson's 2005 remake of the original film and associated print and video texts, have significantly enhanced the island's profile, establishing it definitively as 'Skull Island', and have provided contextual rationales for its geology, biology and society. These, in turn, spurred the production of related texts that have embroidered Skull Island into popular culture as an entity in its own right. Most recently, the 2017 remake, *Kong: Skull Island*, has offered a significant re-imagining that reinstates elements of texts that preceded and influenced the imagination of the original 1933 film. This article charts the shifts in representation of the island, the geo-cultural imaginaries played out in its representation and the concepts of islandness and island biogeography involved.

**Keywords:** Skull Island, King Kong, islandness, exoticism, modernity

## **Introduction**

Fictional islands have featured in European culture since antiquity. Many of the earliest versions were Edenic/paradise islands, such as Tír na nÓg, the Celtic 'land of the blessed,' or the Greek Elysium, 'the fortunate isles', as celebrated by the Greek poet Hesiod around 700 BCE. Over the last three centuries, following the lead of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), the fictional islands depicted in western literature and, more recently, audiovisual media have been more varied and have often demonstrated grotesque or threatening types

of alterity. Indeed, as DeLoughrey (2003) has identified, adventure narratives have tended to “migrate towards the aspects of epistemological inscrutability suggested in titles that employ terms like ‘mystery,’ ‘wild,’ ‘secret,’ ‘vanishing,’ ‘uncharted,’ ‘lost,’ and ‘floating’” (ibid: 23). While there have been many examples of such “epistemological inscrutability” in modern literature and cinema, few islands have attained the multi-textual prominence of the isolated locale first introduced to the public in Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack’s 1933 film *King Kong*. Reflecting on close to 90 years of media development, this article considers (what came to be known as) Skull Island as a fantastic biogeographical isolate rendered in various manners and at particular historical junctures as an implicit ‘other’ to the developed modern west.

This article examines the textual ‘chains’ involved in the serial representation and elaboration of the island, its key aspects and the various rationales and ‘back-stories’ that have been provided for the island, its distinct geology, topography, fauna and society. The island’s exoticism has persisted despite the end of the modern ‘Age of Exploration’ that inspired the original film and has been refigured as either nostalgia (in remakes that retain the early 20<sup>th</sup> century setting of the original) or else in modernised, more rationalistic frameworks (in texts with contemporary settings). The reference to ‘legendary’ in the title is a dualistic one, reflecting the term’s principal meanings, as both something based on legend and as something so well-known as to have become legendary. These elements are present in, and developed by, the four film versions of the central story (1933, 1986, 2005 and 2017). In these texts the island is introduced as a rumoured place that lies off the charts of western mariners, of western consciousness and of western scientific rationality in general. Multiple reiterations and refigurations of the island across a range of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century media texts have created what has been described as ‘media-lore’ around it (cf. Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics, 2014; Hayward, 2017), establishing it as a modern cultural entity that sits alongside earlier fabled islands, such as Emain Ablach or Atlantis, or modern literary creations, such as Mu and Lemuria, in the corpus of imaginary entities that can be deployed in modern media practice and related fan and content generating communities.

## ***King Kong and the Origins of Skull Island***

During the 1800s and early 1900s a number of speculative fiction texts offered accounts of undiscovered areas of the planet inhabited by exotic creatures and cultures. These texts originated between the height of western explorations of the continental interiors of Africa, Asia, South America and the polar regions in the 1800s and the tail end of this enterprise around the turn of the century. Several of these texts took their cue from John Cleves Symmes Junior’s popularisation of ‘Hollow Earth’ theories.<sup>2</sup> Symmes promoted this concept in a number of pseudoscientific tracts published in the 1810s-1820s that were dramatised in a novel entitled *Symzonia: Voyage of Discovery* (1820) attributed to an author named ‘Adam Seaborn’. (While the actual identity of the author is unknown there has been speculation that the book was either authored by Symmes and/or an associate or else was a deliberate satire of Symmes’ theories). Perhaps the best-known fictional development of the concept is Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864). In 1912 British author Arthur Conan Doyle made a notable contribution to the speculative fiction genre with his serialised novel *The Lost World* (1912). While Conan Doyle retained notable elements of Verne’s fiction, including the survival of dinosaurs to the present-day,

the location of his story was inspired by less tendentious source material than Symmes' theories and principally by the expeditionary work of his acquaintance, British explorer Percy Harrison Fawcett. From 1906 to 1910 Fawcett explored the area around the border of eastern Brazilian state of Matto Grosso and western Bolivia, encountering the high escarpments and elevated plateau currently included within the Serra de Ricardo Franco national park. Fawcett's autobiography detailed conversations with Conan Doyle about the location and its influence on the author's design of his own fictional 'lost' plateau (Fawcett, 1953: 122). In the novel, the isolated locale, like Verne's underground caverns, has allowed species of dinosaur to survive to the present (and also features a tribe of primitive 'ape-men' in perpetual conflict with a local human tribe). Doyle's novel was adapted for the screen in 1925 in an eponymous, high-budget production directed by Harry O. Hoyt. Aside from shifting the plateau to Venezuela, the film introduces a novel element in having its lead protagonist, Professor Challenger, bring a live Brontosaurus back to London, where it escapes and rampages around, collapsing London Bridge before swimming off down the Thames.

American aviator and writer Merian C. Cooper developed the idea for *King Kong* during the 1920s, when he worked as a researcher for the American Geographical Society, travelling to various parts of Asia and North Africa. During this period, he collaborated with Ernest Schoedsack on documentary film projects before working on the duo's first fiction feature, the military drama *The Four Feathers* (1929). Cooper has cited various inspirations for *King Kong*. The general themes appear to have derived from two main sources. The first was his childhood fascination with explorer Paul Du Chaillu's accounts of his journeys through Central Africa in the 1850s, and of hunting a giant gorilla in the Sierra del Cristal mountains of Equatorial Guinea (Cotta Vaz, 2005: 15). The second was his interest in his friend William Douglas Burden's 1926 expedition to Komodo Island, in eastern Indonesia, and the film footage he shot during his visit, the live specimens of giant lizards he brought back to New York (see Barnard, 2011), and the account of his adventures published in 1927. Komodo was still a place of rumour and legend in the 1920s and the giant lizards reputed to live there could easily be imagined as prehistoric remnants. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Komodo, and the adjacent islands of Rinca, Gili Motang and Flores, which the lizards also inhabited, were relatively isolated from the outside world by their general position, at the eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago (remote from the Dutch colonial capital of Batavia, present-day Jakarta), and were fringed by coral reefs that made access difficult. Western perception of the islands in early 20<sup>th</sup> century were partly correct in that while the giant specimens of *Varanus komodoensis* that inhabit the region are not relic dinosaurs, they appear to be remnants of a lizard species that was common during the Pliocene Epoch (5.3 million to 2.5 million years ago). Their size results from a biogeographical process known as *speciation* that results in animals confined in isolated locations becoming larger or smaller than continental/large island populations due to variously advantageous or disadvantageous local conditions).<sup>3</sup> A series of letters between Cooper and Burden concerning the genesis of *King Kong* in 1964 (reviewed by Cotta Vaz, 2005: 193-194) emphasised that Komodo's status as a "remote, hard to reach volcanic island" with "prehistoric" aspects and a "primitive" human population existing in precarious proximity with mega-fauna inspired Cooper's vision for *King Kong*. Indeed, before the final scenario of the *King Kong* was fixed upon, Cooper considered a series of dramatic possibilities, including filming sequences of gorillas and komodo dragons in their native environments and then intercutting images of them so as to approximate fight sequences on a "prehistoric island with prehistoric monsters" (Cotta Vaz, 2005: 195).

While neither Conan Doyle's novel nor its 1925 screen adaptation are usually cited as conscious influences upon the development of *King Kong* – and, indeed Cooper has denied that he saw the film before working on his feature – the two had a direct relationship in that Willis O'Brien, who directed the stop-motion dinosaur combat sequences in *The Lost World*, was employed to animate the giant ape and dinosaurs in *King Kong*. Indeed, resemblances between the two films were so marked that RKO Pictures bought the rights for *The Lost World* from Warner Brothers in 1932 to cover themselves against potential litigation concerning plagiarism by Conan Doyle's estate (Cotta Vaz, 2005: 231).

In its final version, scripted by James Creelman and Ruth Rose, *King Kong* (1933) related the story of wildlife filmmaker, Carl Denham (played by Robert Armstrong in a role modelled on Cooper himself), voyaging to a mysterious, uncharted island with a lead actress he has plucked from obscurity from the streets of Manhattan (Fay Wray playing the part of Ann Darrow). The island is dramatically segmented by a wall that divides a settled area from a wilderness interior inhabited by a variety of dinosaurs and an enormous gorilla-like creature referred to by locals as 'King' Kong. After various adventures Kong is tranquilised, captured and returned to New York before being presented to the public as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World.' Breaking his chains, Kong escapes into Manhattan and climbs to the top of the Empire State Building, where he is attacked and killed by a group of fighter planes.

The sets representing King Kong's mysterious island were created in RKO-Pathé's Culver City studios in California (in part recycling sets for previous productions) and the locale was referred to in writer Edgar Wallace's original screenplay as 'Vapour Island' (emphasising its volcanic aspects) (Cotta Vaz, 2005: 218, and see Glashan n.d. for discussion). While Cooper referred to the location as 'Skull Island' in interviews and public statements made from the 1940s to the 1960s – long after the film's release – it is not referred to by that (or any other) name in the original film. The name 'Skull Island' appears to have derived from the shape of a rocky outcrop in the centre of the island, which is referred to by characters as Skull Mountain. Indeed, Delos Lovelace's eponymous 1932 novelisation of the screenplay refers to the film's locale as 'Skull Mountain Island.'

The film provides an approximate location for the island when Denham finally briefs his captain and mate on their final destination. When the ship is located at a position "due south 90 east," which Denham refers to as "way west of Sumatra", he instructs the captain to head south-west, with the ship appearing to reach that destination relatively soon after it is specified. Figure 1 provides an approximate representation of the position of the island based on these cues. Whether the position indicated was a fairly arbitrary one or not, it complements the island's characterisation as remote by being approximately 800 kilometres off the coast of Sumatra and 950 kilometres due south of the Andaman Islands. The position also places it close to the undersea Ninety East Ridge, which runs north-south from the Bay of Bengal to the sub-Antarctic Kerguelen Islands. While the ridge is too deep to be marked by islands on its peaks, it provides an elevated delineation of the Eastern and West Indian Ocean.

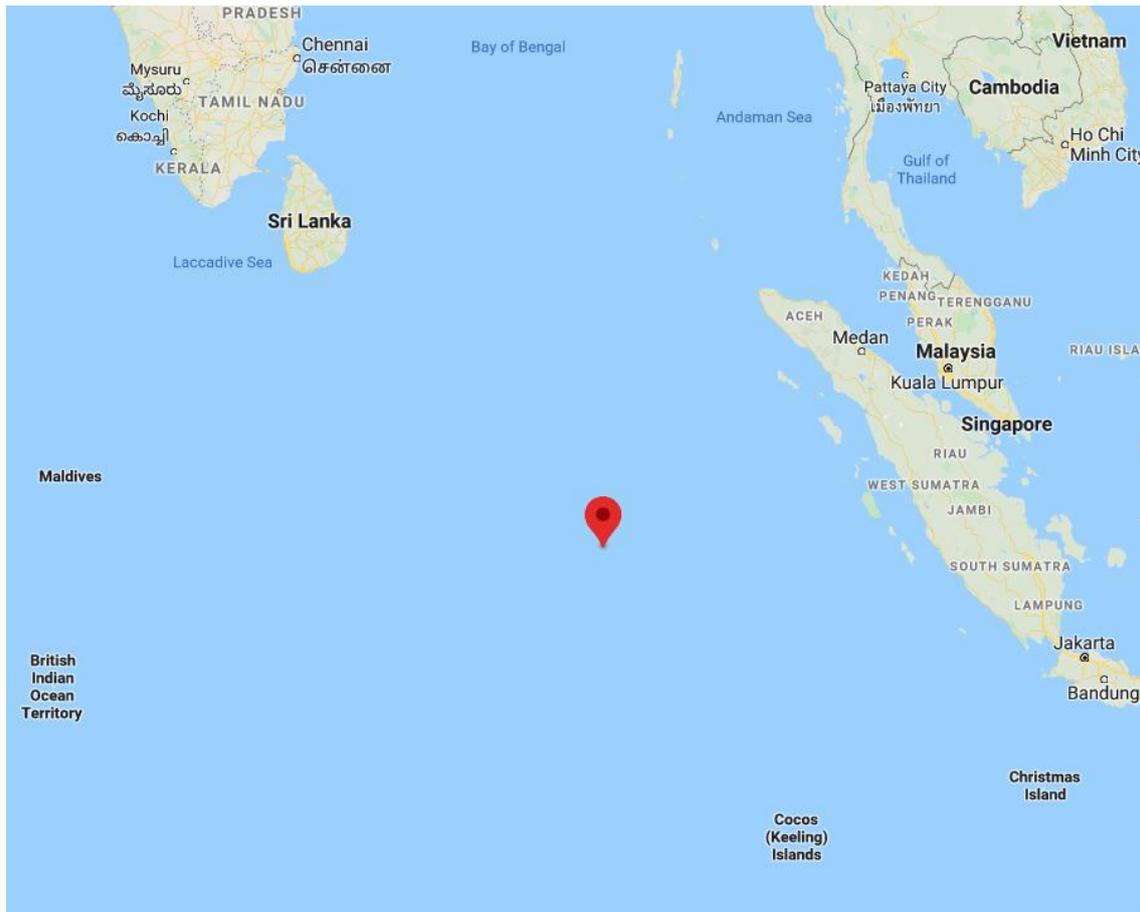


Figure 1 – Google Earth pin showing the approximate position of Skull Island indicated in the 1933 version of *King Kong*

In addition to discussion concerning the ship's position, a scene on the bridge of the *Venture* as it steams towards the eastern Indian Ocean reveals that Denham is in possession of a basic map of the island (Figure 2). Dialogue reveals that he obtained the map three years previously (i.e. in 1930) from the captain of a Norwegian barque who had encountered a canoe that had been swept out to sea from an unknown island. Taking the only man left alive on the canoe onto his ship, the captain had "pieced together a description of the island and got a fairly good idea of where it lies" before the man expired. The map shown on screen, derived from this information, shows a narrow ship route through a coral reef leading to a roughly rectangular island with a village on a southern peninsula cut off from the island by a wall and with Skull Mountain appearing in the main area of the island, labelled as 'Jungle'.



Figure 2. Denham's map of the island (from the 1933 version of *King Kong*)

As Denham elaborates to the ship's captain:

*[The] only possible landing place is through this reef, the rest of the shoreline is sheer precipice, hundreds of feet high – and across the base of that peninsula, cutting it off from the rest of the island is a wall... built so long ago that the people who live there have slipped back, forgotten the higher civilisation that built it. That wall is as strong today as it was centuries ago. The natives keep that wall in repair. They need it... There's something on the other side of it, something they fear...*

Expanding on his theme, he introduces the figure of 'Kong', and provides the cryptic comment that Kong is "neither beast nor man, something monstrous, all-powerful, still living, still holding that island in a grip of deadly fear."

As the *Venture* slowly approaches the anticipated position of the island in thick fog, Denham announces that they will be able to recognise the island because of the "mountain that looks like a skull." They hear the island – or, rather, its human inhabitants, drumming – before they see it. When the fog clears, they find themselves close to shore, just off the small, low, walled-off peninsula from which the drumming sounds emanated, with the precipitous and domed Skull Mountain rising immediately beyond the wall (Figure 3). 52 minutes of the film's 104-minute running total occur on the island in a continuous sequence. Initial and final sections are set in and around the village with the majority taking place in wetlands, in the jungle and on the slopes and peak of Skull Mountain. Aside from the village, the island is represented as an untamed wilderness bristling with prehistoric creatures and dominated by the giant ape, who appears to be the island's apex predator. Between him and the village is a high stone wall and fortified gate. The main narrative element concerns the natives kidnapping of Darrow, to offer as a sacrifice to Kong; Kong's acceptance of her; then taking her to his mountain eyrie; and the ship's crew's successful attempt to rescue her and subdue Kong in order to transport him back to New York. The islanders are represented as dark-skinned and fuzzy haired and the instruments and

weapons they are shown brandishing, their clothes and their face and body paint render them as a fairly arbitrary mash-up of African and Melanesian elements. The only clue given to their cultural origins/identity is that the ship's captain identifies their speech as sounding like Nias Islander speech (an Austronesian tongue) through which he manages to conduct basic communication with them.



Figure 3. The western voyagers' first glimpse of the island (1933 version of *King Kong*)

Nias is the largest island in an archipelago that runs parallel to the west coast of Sumatra (Figure 1). Without claiming that Cooper or any of his collaborators attempted to present the culture of their fictional island as in any way authentic and/or credibly related to actual regional cultures; the film suggests some familiarity with actual regional cultures. The interior of Nias contains ancient megalithic structures (Bonatz, 2012) and a (now rapidly declining) number of small apes occur in its forested areas (although obviously not the African gorilla upon which Kong is modelled). Similarly, Nias was one of the last islands of (what was then) the Dutch East Indies to be fully integrated into the colonial system, this not occurring until around 1914. Indeed, writing in 1991 (following sustained fieldwork from 1979 to 1986), the authors of a slender volume on the traditional architecture of Nias produced a characterisation that is evocative of Cooper's imagination of his fictional island:

*Nias is not well-known. On the borders of the Indonesian archipelago, this island has always remained on the fringe of the great currents of civilization, religion, trade and even interest. One of the most original and elaborate architectures in the world nevertheless developed there... [Historically] it had its own dynamics [and] a sequence of transition where, faced with a logic of evolution to which it is strange, it must "rebalance" its culture to ensure survival.* (Viaro and Ziegler, 2006: v)

Several of the sets from *King Kong* were also used in its lower-budget follow-up, *Son of Kong* (directed by Schoedsack alone). The sequel saw the Denham character returning to the mysterious island, discovering diamonds and Kong's massive son before what is referred to in the film as 'Kong's Island' sinks into the sea during an earthquake. While no further sequels followed, the original film remained prominent in US popular culture, being re-released at cinemas in 1938, 1942 and 1952 and appearing on TV regularly during the 1950s (Erb, 2009) and emerging as a recurrent popular cultural reference in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>4</sup> The film was also re-released in international territories in the 1950s and had a notable role in Japan, where it was influential in spawning the emergence of the *kaiju* (monster) genre that essentially updated aspects of Japanese folkloric creatures, considerably increasing their size and inserting into modern contexts. The genre was initiated by *Gojira* (released as *Godzilla* in the West), directed by Honda Ishirō in 1954, the story of a giant dinosaur that emerges from the sea around (the fictional) Odo island and goes on to menace Tokyo. Cooper's and Ishirō's creatures went on to meet each other in Ishirō's 1962 feature *Kingu Kongu tai Gojira* ('King Kong versus Godzilla'), which has Kong originating from a Polynesian-looking locale named Faero Island and engaging in a climactic battle with Gojira. Five years later, Ishirō's 1967 feature *Kingu Kongu no Gyakushū* ('King Kong's Counter-Attack') had the creature associated with what was then referred to as Mondo Island (with that designation also occurring in the subsequent American-Japanese anime series *The King Kong Show* [1968-69]).

### ***King Kong* remakes and the elaboration of Skull Island**

The first direct remake of *King Kong* occurred in 1976 in a production directed by John Guillermin for the Dino Laurentiis Corporation. Set in the present-day, the film modified the plot of the original by having its expeditionary ship funded by a company named Petrox to ascertain whether a previously undiscovered island had oil deposits. Setting out from Surabaya, on the north coast of Java, the film's scenario shifted the 'unnamed' island's position, (while the term Skull Island is not used in the film, it appears as the title of a composition on the accompanying soundtrack album: track 11 – 'Climb to Skull Island'). As indicated on a map shown to the crew, its location is south of the western tip of Java and due south of Christmas Island (see Figure 1). The mission was mounted to follow up on a mysterious low-angle photo of the location, supposedly taken in 1943 by a US navy ship, which showed a fog bank that had mysteriously persisted through to the present in the same place. A recent thermal image from a NASA satellite had revealed an island within the fog, exciting interest in its geology. As a stowaway, Princeton palaeontologist Jack Prescott (played by Jeff Bridges), reveals there have been accounts of an island in the location, and of a fearsome beast on it, dating back to the early 1600s. Picking up an aspirant actress (named Dwan, played by Jessica Lange) from a life raft on the way, the expeditionary party pierce the fog and arrive on a deserted cove surrounded by high cliffs (Figure 4) and follow a rugged, rocky valley up inland through apparently uninhabited terrain. The believability of island's landscape sequences is enhanced by their being shot on an actual island, Kauai in the Hawaiian archipelago, with its Kalalea peak serving as Kong's mountain. The name 'Kong's mountain' continues to be used by some tourism operators (see Makana, 2009).

The film's plot has the expedition quickly shifting from testing for oil to rescuing Dawn from Kong's clutches and tranquilising the giant ape to bring him back to New York for

Petrox to use for promotional purposes. As in the original, Kong dies atop an iconic New York skyscraper, in this case the World Trade Centre, where he is shot down by helicopter gunships. In many respects, the 1976 film simply replays key themes and scenarios from the original in a modern-day context, utilising Hawaiian locations to represent Skull Island in a more convincing manner than the 1933 film. The other principal difference, the introduction of a petroleum company as the disruptive influence that leads Kong to be captured, transported and killed, is a notable inflection but one that is not used to develop any environmental moral or critique (and, whatever the western agency involved, the outcome is the same).



Figure 4 – The expeditionary party's first landing on the island from the 1986 version of *King Kong*.

Guillermin's follow-up feature *King Kong Lives* (1986) introduced a novel geographical element. After revealing that Kong did not die from his injuries but has been kept on life support for a decade in the US, the film shows a mission setting out for Borneo, following a hunch that Kong's island was once connected to it. Once there, the team discovers a giant female ape (dubbed 'Lady Kong') that they bring back to the U.S. The two apes familiarise themselves with each other before King Kong breaks them from their facility. Pursued by troops, Lady Kong is recaptured and then sprung again by King Kong, after which he is fatally wounded by the pursuing troops, expiring shortly after Lady Kong gives birth to his son. The mother is then returned to Borneo with her offspring.

While Guillermin's feature films failed to inspire a range of directly related texts in the 1990s, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a major revival in the franchise in the form of animated material. The first, a 71-minute production presented the original Kong story in a musical format, including a sequence on Kong's island. This was followed by an animated TV series and two related feature length productions made by BKN Entertainment that freely associated the Kong myth with other legends and mysteries. The first, *Kong: The Animated Series*, was released in 2000 and featured a new Kong, cloned from cells from the original, inhabiting Skull Island, which had been relocated from the north-eastern Indian Ocean to the so-called 'Bermuda Triangle' region of the north-western Atlantic. The first of the two films, *Kong: King of Atlantis* (2005), mixed

up cultural references even further, cross-associating the legends of Skull Island and Atlantis by having Kong relocate to the latter to defend it from an evil sorceress. Taking another tack, the second film, *Kong: Return to the Jungle* (2007), was set on Skull Island again and saw him faced off against hunters attempting to create a *Jurassic Park* style themed attraction.<sup>5</sup> Despite their novelty, these revisions to the Kong franchise had little impact on the overall franchise; indeed the next significant Kong-themed text, the illustrated volume De Vito's *Kong: King of Skull Island*, published in 2004 (after an initial version in 1997, and revised in 2005 and 2017), respectfully revisited its 1930s' sources and was endorsed by Cooper's estate.

The serially-developed literary-pictorial text was conceptualised and developed by illustrator Joe de Vito over an extended period and the published volumes comprised his illustrations alongside narratives developed by Science Fiction and Fantasy author Brad Strickland from de Vito's initial treatments. De Vito extensively researched the original film and its pre-production materials and based his text around Delos Lovelace's 1932 novelisation, providing an historical back-story/prequel to the initial film and an update describing a visit to the island in 1957. The specification of Skull Island as the location of the narrative marked the beginning of that term coming into standard use to refer to the island and the beginning of a series of texts that focussed more on the island as a coherent and complex entity rather than just a colourful backdrop for Kong's adventures.

One distinctive element of De Vito's volume is its revision of the shape of the island, retaining the walled south-western peninsula shown in the map from the 1933 film but rendering the island in a skull-like side profile that matches the shape of Skull Mountain and adds a group of fringing islands along the south and north-western coasts. De Vito's volume is presented in a number of sections. These include the journals written by Vincent Denham, the son of the filmmaker-protagonist of the first Kong film, during an extended stay on the island in 1957 and an account of the island's early history and of its population's origins. In brief, the latter identifies the local population, the Tagatu, as resulting from a merger of two mainland Asian clans who fled their homeland and came to the island around 10,000 years ago, together with a number of large, gorilla-like apes with whom they harmoniously co-existed. Establishing themselves on the island, the Tagatu built a settlement and a high wall to protect them from the island's substantial population of aggressive dinosaurs. Over time the apes grew exponentially in size (again, a type of speciation) and protected the Tagatu from aggressors. A cult later developed around a particular dinosaur that saw bridal sacrifices made (much like that later adopted to placate Kong, the last, massive, feral descendant of the apes brought to the island). Dispirited by adversity, the Tagatu remained besieged until the events represented in Cooper's original film occurred. While the giant apes play a significant part in the narrative of island history, they are only one element, with the focus more on the Tagatu and on the island as a complex, and often hostile, eco-system.

The second remake of the film, directed by Peter Jackson for the New Zealand-based WingNut Films, appeared in the year after publication of de Vito's book. While the film closely adhered to Cooper's original, it also had distinct elements in common with De Vito's work. Indeed, De Vito deemed these to be so pronounced that he sued the film's producers, Warner Brothers/Legendary, for \$3.5million for allegedly plagiarising his conceptualisation of Skull Island as a coherent, detailed world with a distinct history as pitched by him for a proposed television production.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the similarities between De Vito's book and Jackson's film, the cartography of Skull Island is rendered differently

in the latter. The map clasped by Denham (played by Jack Black) when pitching a film project to its producers has far more jagged coastal contours than either of the film's predecessors. In his pitch meeting he refers to the "uncharted island" as a place that was thought to exist only in myth, until now "a primitive world, never before seen by man... the ruins of an entire civilisation." The island sequences in the film were shot around the Wellington area of New Zealand's North Island and the island's wall appears as a high, jagged lava barrier that resembles a fossilised vertebral column stretched across the island. The sequences in which Ann Darrow (Naomi Watts) is captured and subsequently rescued occur in mountainous jungles. While the native villagers are not represented in the jumbled Africanist form of the preceding films, having a more Melanesian appearance, they are more terrifying – being described by one reviewer as "a twisted, emaciated, terrified people, hungry, paranoid, and shamanistic in their outlook" (Langager, 2011: online).

Promotion for the film firmly identified Kong's homeland as 'Skull Island' and the term has become closely associated with the island locale of all Kong films over the last fifteen years. The film was also complemented by various texts that both profiled Skull Island and, arguably, increased its prominence within the broader Kong 'universe'. The most notable of these was a glossy, hardcover book produced by Jackson's Weta Workshop entitled *Kong: A Natural History of Skull Island* in 2005 and a 17-minute pseudo-documentary drawing on it entitled *Skull Island: A Natural History* (2006) which was included as a featurette on the special edition of the DVD released in 2006. These two texts, and the manner in which they build on and expand aspects of the original film, represent the most detailed representation of Skull Island to date and are significant works of speculative island fiction in their own right.

*Kong: A Natural History of Skull Island* is a large format, copiously illustrated, 'coffee table' book that provides an overview of the landscape, environments and fauna of the island as imagined by Jackson and the Weta Workshop team. Jackson's 'Foreword' to the volume provides an account of the origins of the book in the following terms:

*The task of bringing Skull Island to life was the responsibility of the talented artists working at Weta Workshop and Weta Digital... A key part of the design process for any film is creating a believable world. If you are making King Kong, this necessitates an in-depth exploration of the landscape and habitat and animals and creatures of all kinds...* (2005: 7)

One of the more notable aspects of Jackson's comments is that few fantasy/science fiction film productions have involved the degree of "in-depth exploration" of landscapes and animals to create "believable" fictional worlds that the Weta volume identifies. There is no suggestion, for instance, that the production of any prior Kong film involved such detailed world-building, let alone the complexity of accounting for the nature of different local environments as the contexts and motivations for local speciation. Indeed, in its careful and visually ornate vision and representation of an island where dinosaurs and humans co-exist, the film and Weta's publication has a closer similarity to the integrated vision that informed James Gurney's 1992 book *Dinotopia* and the related print, TV series, video and video game products resulting from it. Indeed, there are such substantial parallels between the set of Kong texts discussed in this article and the *Dinotopia* texts that the two can be considered as contextually and intertextually entangled.<sup>7</sup> Aside from the coexistence of humans and dinosaurs, the most obvious element in common is the

nature of their islands as remote, uncharted, tropical islands protected by constant storm systems and dangerous reefs and highly varied archaic fauna.

It is notable that while the landscapes and environments represented by Weta Workshop's *Skull Island* book match those shown in the film, the number of creatures represented exceed those featured on-screen (at least to my eye after several viewings). And, the book's survey of distinct local fauna can be regarded as an expansion and consolidation of the on-screen sequences of Skull Island, rather than simply a descriptive adjunct to it. This aspect is also manifest in the book's conceit of it being realised from research compiled by a series of further expeditions to Skull Island made in 1935 and 1936 subsequent to Denham's first trip to the island that led him to capture Kong and take him to Manhattan. Significantly, later expeditions, involving scientists of various types, explored an island world in which Kong was no longer present. One set of insights that the book sets out in its introduction (entitled 'The Legacy of the Venture') concerns the origins and physical nature of the island. Supposedly drawing on geological research, the book characterises Skull Island as "once part of the vast and ancient supercontinent of Gondwanaland in prehistoric times" and goes on to relate that "what came to be Skull Island was a stretch near the coast of the great Tethys Sea, rich in life" (Weta Workshop, 2005: 20) until the 'super-continent' was fractured by the separation of the Eurasian and Indo-Australian tectonic plates. Left astride the "turbulent boundary" of the two, the fragment was islanded as:

*Fissures and pressure spots created land and forced molten rock to the surface while, at the same time, great chunks of the island fell into the deep subduction trench that marked the plate edge. (ibid: 17)*

Illustrating the processes described above, the book shows three outline maps of Skull Island over a thousand year period with its overall size – and, correspondingly, the size of micro-landscapes and environments within it – shrinking over a relatively short time period. While the diminution of the island invites comparison to those low-lying islands that have been shrunk by global warming, Skull's shrinkage has been caused by geomorphological rather than Anthropocene factors. This aspect is fantastic, as is the characterisation that it subsided and disappeared completely in 1938. While islands can be suddenly created by volcanic eruptions, such as Surtsey, which emerged off the south coast of Iceland in 1963, and others, such as Ferdinanda, off the south coast of Sicily, has risen and fallen several times, the type of fragmentation and sinking attributed to Skull Island does not appear to have occurred in recorded human history. Nevertheless, as the Introduction colourfully describes, the island envisaged in the film and book was "a doomed oddity, a scab on the earth's crust that was about to be scratched off" with "all its wondrous secrets... lost to the waves, the island torn to pieces by the same irresistible geologic force that had preserved it for so many eons" (ibid: 15).

The Introduction also provides an overview of how life evolved on the island that conforms to the principles of island biogeography (McArthur and Wilson, 1967), describing how when the coast of Gondwanaland fragmented:

*many prehistoric ancestors of the island's modern inhabitants rode with it, guaranteeing their survival when catastrophe and ecological change wiped them out everywhere else in the world. Others joined them later, rafting, swimming, or flying to the island sanctuary. Land bridges came and went, bringing new fauna, each adding to the diversity of the*

*island. Over the millennia the island eroded. As habitat was lost, life was concentrated into over-shrinking areas. Competition became fierce. The island saw an evolutionary arms race erupt, forging a menagerie of nightmares.* (ibid: 18)

Complementing this account, the documentary also provides the significant hypothesis that the island's very active geology was a key factor in speciation, in that "thermal vents kept it tropical during ice ages and kept dinosaurs alive, allowing them to evolve into new species."

Until the colourful phraseology of the final sentence (concerning an "arms race" and "nightmares"), the passage from the book's Introduction outlined above provides a fairly sober explanation for the arrival of species and the development of particular attributes in competitive contexts. But while diversification of singular species in response to the conditions of ecological niches in different parts of an isolated landmass are common – e.g. in the Galapagos archipelago which inspired Charles Darwin to develop his theory of evolution – there is little evidence that large species either diversify and co-exist alongside other, similar (and/or competitive) species in small (let alone diminishing) habitat areas. Indeed, research undertaken by Lawrence, O'Connor, Haroutounian and Swei (2018) suggests that while smaller species may exhibit such tendencies, it is not common for larger ones, which show greater diversity in larger areas.

Following the Introduction, discussed above, the book surveys seven distinct segments of the island:

- 1) The crumbling coast and village (22-240)
- 2) The shrinking lowlands (42-80)
- 3) The winding swamps and waterways (81-122)
- 4) The steaming jungle (123-180)
- 5) The abyssal chasms (181-194)
- 6) The barren uplands (195-218)

Chapter 1 considers the islanders within the book's overall project and provides an account of them as poverty-stricken and grimly surviving in a highly hostile environment and as of unknown ethnicity, not resembling any other regional populations (unlike the islanders of original film, who spoke language similar to that of Nias islanders). It is left ambiguous as to what their relationship to the builders of the island's monumental structures is, referring to the latter as "hollow reminders of the glory of an ancient and nameless culture" (Weta Workshop, 2005: 34). Subsequent chapters discuss niche environments distributed across the island, and its coastal fragments, and of the distinctive creatures that have developed there. The final chapter addresses the fauna living around the peak of Skull mountain, and of Kong's eyrie atop it, surmising that Kong was the last survivor of a species of giant ape brought to the island "a few thousand years ago" for unknown reasons.

The 17-minute pseudo-documentary program documentary *Skull Island: A Natural History* (2006) – released as a late-stage promotion of Jackson's film – opens with a caption explaining its use of artists' images (those featured in the book) "since film footage taken by the 1930s' expeditions have degraded." The program draws on and summarises various aspects of the book, featuring statements by various members of the feature film's production team and a narration that provides colourful characterisations of Skull Island as "the most hellish place on earth... a complete geological and evolutionary anomaly – a

place of inexhaustible mysteries... this perversion of evolution” that add to its mystique as a vanished land.

Skull Island’s status as a lost and sunken locale, within Jackson’s version of the Kong tale, was subject to reversal in the mid-2010s as the island was deployed for a fresh purpose. In 2016 the NBC Universal entertainment company decided to add a Skull Island attraction to its ‘Islands of Adventure’ theme park in Orlando, Florida. The park opened in 1999 and presents visitors with the opportunity to visit a number of themed sites around a central lake. While some (such as ‘Marvel Superhero Island’) are identified as islands, others have different spatial designations (such as ‘Jurassic Park’ and ‘Toon Lagoon’). The theme park opened with six themed areas, with a seventh being added in 2010 and an eighth, entitled ‘Skull island: Reign of Kong,’ opening in 2016. The Skull Island area comprises a temple area that resembles the gate in Jackson’s film in terms of scale and design together with a ride that takes customers through a jungle environment featuring large animatronic model dinosaurs and Kong himself (see ITM, 2016). While the space does not offer a coherent realisation of an island (with no apparent coastlines etc.) it represents a material expression of the locale featured in the Kong films and was also promoted in a way that extended and modified the modern-day legend of the island.

As part of a novel, ‘viral’ marketing campaign, of a type previously used for feature films (see Janes, 2015, for discussion), NBC Universal commissioned Questus productions to create an online buzz about Skull Island – posited as an actual place rather than an attraction at Orlando. Questus approached this by establishing a website ostensibly for a (purported) new video series entitled *Myth Explorer*. Lending a degree of credibility to the production, the series was hosted by and centred around its lead reporter Erin Ryder (who had previously appeared as an investigator in the Syfy Channel’s *Destination Truth* [2007-2010] and the National Geographic Channels’ *Chasing UFOs* [2012]). The *Myth Explorer* website hosted a number of blog posts and three videos supposedly charting Ryder’s travel to and exploration of Skull Island (presented as an actual place). Given that the Questus site and video series was closely tied to Weta Workshop’s interpretation of the King Kong story, in which the island sank due to seismic activity, a degree of invention was required. This was accomplished in the narrated introduction to the first program of *Myth Explorer: The Quest for Kong*, entitled ‘Journey to Skull Island.’ Referring to Skull Island as “a place thought no longer to exist” Ryder notes that “reports from the 1940s claim that the island was destroyed and vanished from the face of the earth” before claiming that, “modern technology suggests something else.” The episode then shows Ryder and a small crew approaching the shore of a stark, rocky island (using images similar to those in Jackson’s film) in a dingy and then going ashore and exploring “on an island surrounded by constant storms and crazy magnetic anomalies and volcanic eruptions” and finding artefacts from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century expeditions in the process. Having established its fiction, the final video explained that the series and website was a fictional means of promoting the new Orlando attraction and inviting viewers to visit it. Aside from the novelty of the campaign it served the purpose of resurrecting the island in the 2010s and offering the prospect of fresh exploration of it.

### **Skull Island Re-imagined**

The most significant revision to the visions of Skull Island related above occurred in 2017 in the form of Jordan Vogt-Roberts' 2017 feature film *Kong: Skull Island*. Intentionally or not,<sup>8</sup> the film re-imagines Skull Island in terms of the Hollow Earth theories promoted in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century by John Cleves Symmes Junior and fictionalised in novels such as Seaborn's *Symzonia: Voyage of Discovery* (1820) and Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864). The return of the Hollow Earth theory is all the more notable as the film is set in 1973, long after it had faded from any serious consideration. Set at the tail-end of the Vietnam War, the film's scenario involves a military expeditionary force being sent to a previously unknown island that has just been detected by the US Earth Resources Technology satellite (later known as Landsat), first launched into orbit in 1972. A montage of newsreel footage during the title sequence introduces the post-War period as a new era of discovery and sets a context for the expedition. The detection of small, hitherto unknown, island surrounded by constant extreme storms attracts the attention of a mysterious government agency named Monarch, supposedly established by President Truman in 1946, which links the island to a legendary place referred to in legends as 'Skull Island – the legendary place where God did not finish creation.' One of Monarch's senior staff, Bill Randa (played by John Goodman) is especially interested in the island as he is convinced that the Hollow Earth hypothesis is true, that there are portals to its subterranean levels from the surface and that the island may contain one. As he states in a briefing to his team, "this is a place where myth and science meet". Supporting the Hollow Earth aspect, Warner Brothers' promotional website for the film included a link to a (fictional) 'Monarch Terrasearch' webpage that had top-secret files of encrypted data about the island that could be accessed by visitors obtaining various passcodes (see Aguilar, 2017).<sup>9</sup>

In an unusual promotional tie-in with release of the film in March 2017 Google Earth (briefly) included a marker for location of the island in the eastern Pacific,<sup>10</sup> placing it just south of the Equator, some 3,500 kilometres due west of the Galapagos Islands, represented by a red pin (rather than a map – Figure 5, many people also contributed fictional comments about the island on its beautiful landscapes but rather troubling giant ape and other creatures). The shift from the north-eastern Indian Ocean to the central Pacific emphasises the different nature of Vogt-Roberts' island from its previous namesakes. However, the similarities are still marked. A giant ape resides there, along with a range of bizarre evolutionary throwbacks, including large reptilian bipeds referred to as 'Skullcrawlers' and a small, indigenous population (named the Iwi) that has managed to survive alongside the island's fabulous menagerie. The island's status as a portal is also significant as the locale is an interzone between the surface and hollow planetary realm, with highly variegated environments. As actress Bree Larson (who plays the role of an anti-war photo-journalist named Mason Weaver) states in the promo for the IMAX version of the film, "the island isn't just a place that looks specifically like one thing... as you continue to travel through it, you see the variations."



Figure 5 – Google Earth pin of the position of Skull Island, March 2017



Figure 6 – Skull Island, from *Kong: Skull Island* (2017)

The expedition's motivation to test the Hollow Earth theory determines their initial interaction with the island as their helicopters drop seismic charges to aid their mapping activities. These also succeed in disturbing Kong and prompt him to attack the helicopters in order to defend the island. Much of the remainder of the film features combat scenes between giant creatures and with members of the expedition. Deprived of the final New York sequences key to the previous versions of the film, the conflict between man (specifically gendered, as Larson's character is one of only two females in the film) and

beasts dominates the film, within an aesthetic heavily influenced by the visually and thematically dynamic Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979) (Kaye, 2017: online). The film ends with King Kong injured but alive and with a diminished expeditionary force departing, having proved the Hollow Earth hypothesis but without having conquered the island's creatures.

## Conclusion

At time of writing a partial follow-up to *Kong: Skull Island*, entitled *Godzilla v Kong*, directed by Adam Wingard is due for release. The film takes as its premise that the subsurface spaces and tunnels revealed by the 1972 expedition to the (Pacific) Skull Island are spread across the planet and are home to a host of other giant creatures (specifically *kaiju* such as Mothra and Godzilla) that pose a threat to the US and to world stability. The film's focal conflict between Kong and Godzilla occurs in this context and further reconnects the latest version of *King Kong*, and of its central island, to early 19<sup>th</sup> century pseudo-science and related fiction. As the discussions in this essay suggest, the re-invention of Skull Island in this context reconnects it to the speculative fictions that preceded and informed the original film. In this manner, the remote island of the original film, and Jackson's vision of it as a fragmented and doomed remnant of a larger island space, are innovative twists on a long-established pattern of fantasy islands (also given a contemporary inflection in Gurney's *Dinotopia* franchise).

In all the versions described above, the island is primeval and premodern – a striking 'other' to Manhattan, cast as an icon of modernity in Cooper and Schoedsack's, Guillermin's and Jackson's *King Kong* films. The distortion of scales of creatures and juxtaposition of historical epochs on Skull Island also goes beyond the primeval/premodern. The island provides a chaotic space in which diverse elements battle each other and in which modern western humans are far less confident of their supremacy over nature (in all its forms) than in the developed and subdued world they come from. As such, the space of the island is not over-determined by narrative treatments or prescriptions of functionality. Echoing DeLoughrey's identification of "epistemological inscrutability" as a prominent aspect of modern, fictional islands (2003: 23), there's a strong element of the island and its creatures as being 'beyond belief,' in terms of western rationality (in a manner that goes beyond the *credibility* of the reconstructed species of *Jurassic Park*, which rely on human ingenuity for their resurrection). In this regard, the island, its terrain and fauna instead, resemble those margins of medieval maps decorated with inventively monstrous creatures to illustrate the edge of (western) reason and rationality and the prospect of radical otherness awaiting those who go beyond the known world. On a planet whose surface has been known and normalised by comprehensive mapping systems such as Google Earth, there are no longer such spaces. Skull Island's status as a modern legend, conceived before satellites comprehensively mapped and demystified the planet, has given it a particular status as a reference point for imaginations of bio-cultural 'otherness' that do not require the paraphernalia and precepts of Science Fiction to be called into being. As such, and with considerable irony, Skull Island is firmly 'on the map' of western culture. The incongruity of its prehistoric species and giant apes suggests it as a thoroughly irrational place that has appealed to a series of cultural producers and aficionados on account of the interpretative freedom its peculiarities offer. As the 2006 pseudo-documentary *Skull Island: A Natural History* described it, it is "a

place of inexhaustible mysteries” and one likely to continue to be interpreted and modified in mainstream media and fan fiction.

### Endnotes:

1. A description of the island provided by the unnamed narrator of the 2006 pseudo-documentary *Skull Island: A Natural History* (discussed in Section III).
2. First proposed by 17<sup>th</sup> century British astronomer Edmond Halley – see Kollerstrom (1992).
3. See Hocknull, Piper, van en Bergh et.al (2009) for discussion of *Varanus komodoensis* speciation.
4. In popular music, for instance a sequence in George Dunning’s Beatles-themed animation film *Yellow Submarine* (1968) features a Kong-like, giant ape grabbing a woman from her bed. Frank Zappa also recorded an instrumental composition entitled *King Kong* with the Mothers of Invention in 1967, and featured it his band’s live sets through to the 1980s, and ABBA recorded their (markedly inane) *King Kong Song* in 1974.
5. I refer to the Jurassic Park attractions first conceived in Michael Crichton’s eponymous novel and in an ongoing series of films, which commenced in 1990 with Stephen Spielberg’s eponymous production, set on the fictional island of Isla Nublar off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica.
6. Whatever the rights of the case, it appears to have either been dropped or settled out of court since the case faded from the public arena soon after it was publicised. See DeVito Artworks LLC v. Legendry Pictures LLC (Cullins, 2016).
7. There are also overlaps in that just as Cooper had worked for the American Geographical Society early in his career, developing the concept of *King Kong*, Gurney, worked on assignments for *National Geographic* magazine early in his, developing the concept of *Dinotopia*. In a Norman Rockwell Museum interview recorded in 2015 he also cited reading 1920s’ *National Geographic* magazine accounts of ‘lost worlds’ discovered by explorers as inspirational.
8. I have not uncovered any reference to 19<sup>th</sup> Century ‘Hollow Earth’ theories and/or fictional representations as being influential on Vogt-Roberts’ concept of the film.
9. This site is no longer operational but a promotional video for it remains online at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_LJaWZOuPnU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LJaWZOuPnU) – accessed 14th April 2020.
10. Google Earth had previously featured Diagon Alley, from the *Harry Potter* franchise, and *Lord of the Rings*’ Middle Earth on its service in 2013

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