



APOCALYPSE KONG

Big monkey exposes the naked ape in Kong: Skull Island

I am so utterly sick to death of human beings and their selfish, greedy, murderous ways that — when the latest incarnation of everyone’s favorite big ape finally shows up in *Kong: Skull Island*, swatting Vietnam-era whirlybirds out of the sky and otherwise tearing the invading army to shreds — I was rooting tooth-and-nail for Kong to finish the job and put a merciful stop to the next 90 minutes of misanthropic torment.

No such luck: Humanity, ever in bad faith, ever seeking its own shortsighted advantage, gets to ride this Armageddon to the bitter end, once again. Until the sequel.

Alas.

The valences and metaphors and embittered cautions of *Skull Island* are no less exhausting for being unmistakable: In 1973, a clutch of scientists, led in devious intent by Bill Randa (John Goodman), talks the U.S. government into okaying a deployment of Vietnam troops, led by Preston Packard (Samuel L. Jackson), into the prelapsarian Eden that is Skull Island. The idea is to drop some bombs on this recently discovered island and see what sorta goods they can scare up from the hollow Earth.

Yeah, horseshit. “This is not normal!” one soldier yells after Kong’s first attack, wondering why nobody else is acknowledging the monster their fearsome arrogance and selfish disregard has unleashed. Get it? Mason Weaver (Brie Larson), an “anti-war” photojournalist straight outa “the shit” of Hanoi, gets it; so does James Conrad (Tom Hiddleston), a British mercenary tasked as a tracker.

Packard doesn’t get it: He wants to annihilate the (Viet) Kong because, you know, the ape killed all his troops after they choppered into someplace they’d never been and probably don’t belong and just started blowing shit up, but never mind that. God bless America.

But, you see, Kong is no more the problem than Moby Dick was (though, as the movie implies, Tricky Dick is indeed a problem). Actually, the giant ape — a metaphorical stand-in, like Moby Dick, for Nature, nay Creation itself — protects the island and its native inhabitants from the evil giant lizards that come crawling from the Earth’s bowels when the invaders drop ordnance willy-nilly across paradise.

Yes, *Skull Island* completely delivers as a pre-summer, post-Oscars blockbuster: The special effects are fantastic; the film is suspenseful and action-packed, funny and a bit scary; the cast is above-average.

But the film is something more than that, and not altogether cheerful below the surface of its entertaining glitz. This is a Kong for the post-human age, meaning the film is almost entirely stripped of romanticism; instead, it is steeped in the nihilistic glee of our assured destruction.

How else to explain the appearance of Hank Marlow (the magnificent John C. Reilly), a seemingly batty soldier who’s been stranded on the island since the second world war? Reilly’s role is that of the court jester, the insanely sane fool who speaks uncomfortable truths about how far we’ve fallen since we vaporized Nagasaki. Marlow, like Conrad’s Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, is a man out of time, speaking to a 21st century that is, quite literally, out of time.

And this is how the world ends, not with a bang but a blockbuster — one that subtextually razzes Trump while revealing for the umpteenth time the bankruptcy of U.S. imperialism, all the while reveling in the Strangelovian spectacle of apocalypse now.

And this is how capitalism survives, by absorbing its own undoing and selling it back to us at the box office. But for those with ears to hear, the message is always clear. ■



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