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The Unheimlich Pacific of Popular Film: Surreal Geography and the Darwinian Sublime

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> The Imagination is one of the highest prerogatives of man. By this factor he unites, independently of the will, former images and ideas, and thus creates brilliant and novel results…[1]

Charles Darwin seems a rather unlikely figure to bring into a discussion of surrealism, film and the Pacific. The epitome of a respectable Victorian gentleman, Darwin was a scientist and family man: well connected, solid and upright. Like the surrealist René Magritte, Charles Darwin's external image of respectability and conformism belied the impact of his radical ideas and achievements. In fact, Darwin was so anxious about causing a controversy and upsetting the religious beliefs of Emma, his wife - and about possibly even causing her social ostracism - that he kept the manuscript of his theory of natural selection in a cupboard under the stairs for fifteen years with instructions to Emma, in the event of his death, to secure its publication as he believed it would represent 'a considerable step in science.'[2] He was not wrong. As Margot Norris and others have convincingly argued, the revolution in ideas initiated by Darwin's theory of natural selection made possible many of the great radical achievements of the twentieth century:

> Freud was made possible by Darwin, as was Surrealist art and thought. Darwin's Nature does not imitate Surrealism; Surrealism expresses the ruptures in conventional ways of thinking about the world inaugurated by Darwin's discoveries.[3]

Darwin's theory of natural selection destroyed the belief that man occupied a privileged place in the universe and instead located him along with all other animal species as a part of the natural world and subject to the same laws of selection and survival that regulated the lives of all other living things. 'In the world he proposed there was no crucial explanatory function for God, nor indeed was there any special place assigned to the human in his argument.'[4] Darwinian theory has had profound implications for narrative. 'God is abolished along with the fiction of the subject as the origin of the text.'[5] Luis Buñuel, the surrealist filmmaker, said that when he read *The Origin of Species* his whole life took 'a sharp turn.' 'Reading Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was so dazzling that I lost what little faith I had left.'[6] Buñuel's entire film career could be seen as an exploration of the death of God and the fiction of the rational subject. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin went further, explicitly abolishing the major differences between the human species and the higher animals including differences in physiology, emotions and morality. Darwin's anti-anthropocentrism is one of the most radical aspects of his work. 'It is absurd to talk of one animal

being higher than another,' he wrote in his notebook, 'People often talk of the wonderful event of intellectual Man appearing – the appearance of insects with other senses is more wonderful.'[7] Lautréamont, a literary precursor of surrealism, was strongly influenced by Darwin. He saw 'literature and art as an attempt to confront, perhaps to solve, the "problem" that man, the "sublime ape," finds himself in the finite world and yet innately seeks after the infinite.'[8] As Norris convincingly argues, the Darwinian revolution resulted in, 'a subversive interrogation of the anthropocentric premises of Western philosophy and art…'[9]

In his research, Darwin developed a special rapport with the non-human world and paid attention to the smallest, most minute, seemingly inconsequential aspects of plants, insects and animals, even imitating their actions and habits. He was interested not in nature's so-called 'grand plan' but rather in variations and differences, absences and inter-relationships. He saw all aspects of life as entangled – one with the other. One of Darwin's most famous metaphors is of life as an 'entangled bank.' The art of Max Ernst, who in his early years was influenced by the evolutionist Ernst Haeckel, explores compulsively the way in which human and animal, human and plant life, are enmeshed. This is particularly true of his Loplop paintings in which Ernst adopts the identity of a bird-headed man, and of his 'The Entire City' series: 'Ernst assaults one's Platonic notions of form as something unified, ideal, permanent, and normative by inserting into his representations the Darwinian disruptions of form: time, mutability, variability, and chance.'[10]

Darwin, whose writings profoundly influenced Sigmund Freud, was also interested in dreams and the unconscious – particularly the possible unconscious behaviour of animals and plants as an explanation for the appearance of variations in members of species.[11] He even recorded his own dreams and attempted to analyse their meaning. It appears he found some of his nocturnal adventures very disturbing. 'Insanity, he wrote in his "M" notebook, must be very like a dream.'[12] Darwin also recorded the bizarre. Stanley Hyman relishes what he sees as the 'odd surrealist scenes' in *The Descent of Man*: 'The sexuality of the lower animals in the Descent is wildly surrealist. A cast-off cuttlefish tentacle goes off on its own and mates with the female';[13] 'Mr Verreaux of Australia, with a female butterfly in his pocket, pursued amorously by a crowd of several hundred male butterflies.'[14] Darwin was also fascinated by hybrids and variations in species, which of course was the foundation stone of his theory. He records instances of individuals whose bodies were completely covered in hair, women with supernumerary mammae, and men whose breasts secreted milk.

Darwin's connection to surrealism lies in a number of conceptual areas, central to his theory of natural selection, that were taken up by surrealists who did not necessarily see themselves as directly influenced by his work. The surrealists, however, lived in an age so impregnated with Darwinian theories, ideas and perceptions which had so dramatically disrupted traditional ways of thinking, that it was virtually impossible to think outside them. Darwin's influence on surrealist thought, however, was also quite specific and includes the following: a

fascination with change and metamorphosis and the interconnectedness of human and animal; an attraction to the uncanny side of human experience in relation to the familiar (human) becoming unfamiliar (merging with the animal, nature, a common ancestor); a belief in the workings of chance and randomness in life; a belief that all life in a religious sense was without meaning; an interest in dreams and the unconscious; and a fascination with collecting found objects and the relationship of material things to the human. Although Darwin was enraptured by the marvellous scenes he encountered on his voyages, his theory of natural selection with its focus on life and death, chance, entropy and dissolution, embraces what Hal Foster has described as the dark side of surrealism – the uncanny, the death drive and the compulsion to repeat.[15]

Darwin's adventures in the Pacific took him to the Galapagos Islands, the Cocos Islands, Tahiti, New Guinea, and Australia. Like the surrealists, Darwin believed that travel to other lands would free the imagination, and for Darwin this is exactly what happened. In his journeying Darwin encountered 'primitive' peoples, dense jungles and forests, strange animals and life forms, vast seas, Pacific islands, and vistas of great beauty and also of great foreboding. He saw everything, human and animal, as connected. He was overwhelmingly drawn to the animal and the 'primitive' and he collected thousands of objects, strange specimens from distant lands, not unlike the found objects of the surrealists. He wondered if creatures living on desert islands might not have been cast ashore from other lands. His voyages on The Beagle inspired a craze for travel and publications, with 'the romance of The Beagle's travels in the far south and the Fuegian project capturing Victorian imaginations far and wide.'[16] This resulted in 'a flood of personal journals and "incidents of travel".'[17] A strange and possibly unexpected consequence of the Darwinian revolution in ideas was that it led - in the popular imaginary - to the creation of the Pacific as a surreal space for the exploration of subversive and uncanny ideas.

In the Surrealist Map of the World published in 1929, France had all but disappeared and the Pacific Ocean was at the centre of the world. The surrealists were fascinated by the idea of the Pacific which represented a faraway exotic location, a refuge, a place to seek the marvellous, to make new beginnings, to encounter other cultures. Robert McNab has written a fascinating account of the love affair between the surrealists and travel. In their determination to encounter the marvellous the surrealists hoped that by 'loosening the grip reason had on the way things were done' they would 'replace its rationales with instinct… They were determined to listen to la bouche d'ombre, the Voice in the Dark.'[18] One way to do this was through travel, embarking symbolically on journeys of the imagination as well as actual journeys across France and around the world. According to McNab, the first surrealists were gripped by travel fever. 'Surrealism arrived suitcase in hand. Travel shaped it and remained one of its favourite themes.'[19] The surrealists saw travel as a means to achieving a state of *dépaysement*. The word literally means being 'outside your own country, but its meaning also encompasses exile and disorientation, and

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has both a geographical and a psychological sense.'[20] *Dépaysement* was infinitely preferable to living a life governed by forces of the known, rational and familiar world.

Some surrealists left France altogether, bound for distant horizons. McNab traces their various journeys around the globe: Robert Desnos went to the Caribbean, Benjamin Péret travelled up the Amazon, André Breton went to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and André Malraux and his wife, Clara, set out for Indochina. In March 1924, Paul Eluard, a co-founder of the surrealist movement, caught a French steamer, the SS Antinous, bound for Indochina via Tahiti. According to McNab he was depressed because his wife, Gala, had become seriously involved with his best friend Ernst. The following year Gala and Ernst followed Eluard across the Pacific. The surrealists who then followed Eluard into the Pacific were Jacques Viot, Emile Savitry and Georges Malkine - the voyage of the latter was inspired by the MGM film, *White Shadows in the South Seas*, directed by Willard Van Dyke in 1928. There, on islands such as Tahiti, the surrealists met filmmakers such as F. W. Murnau and Robert Flaherty, who co-directed *Tabu* (1931). McNab states that the voyages of the surrealists were stimulated by the movies they saw as well as by the books of Jack London and Joseph Conrad, particularly *Heart of Darkness*, with its Darwinian focus on 'the indifference of nature to humanity.'[21]

The makers of popular fiction films also turned to the Pacific. From 1895 onwards they took their cameras to the four corners of the globe, recording strange lands and exotic sights to bring back home and screen to astonished spectators. As film developed as an art form, directors turned not just to tales of adventure but also to tales of fantasy and horror, many of which were explicitly Darwinian. What we find in these early films is a strange intersection of surrealist and Darwinian themes and motifs. These films, many of which were made again and again, included *The Mysterious Island* (1929, 1961), *The Lost World* (1925, 1960, 1993, *The Lost World – Jurassic Park*, 1997), *Treasure Island*, (1934, 1950, 1972, 1990) *The Island of Lost Souls* (1933, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, 1977, 1996) and *King Kong* (1933, 1976, 2005). A number of these films were based on novels written by authors who had been strongly influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution. These included Jules Verne (1828-1905), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894), Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950) and H.G. Wells. (1866-1946). The filmmakers used the device of the traveller or explorer to take their readers on voyages into the heart of the Pacific where - like Darwin before them - they came face to face with 'primitive' peoples, exotic landscapes, and strange surreal creatures who had been caught in an evolutionary time-warp. Since the publication of Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) and *On the Origin of Species* (1859), the popular view of the Pacific - already seen as a place of inversions and marvellous monstrosities - came to incorporate an *unheimlich* dimension based on fears of nature, atavism and degeneration.

Darwin's theories prepared the ground for a range of new and subversive ideas that led, in many films and books, to the creation of a post-Darwinian Pacific as a place where human and

animal merged through ritual, desire and death. Novelists and filmmakers explored the dark side of Darwinian theory: a world full of competitors, marked by the struggle of individuals against individuals, species against species; a world full of great beauty and terror; and a world governed entirely by chance. Darwin's revolutionary theory signalled the death of God. If God was dead, who was to take his place in the Pacific paradise? *The Island of Lost Souls* (1932), based on H.G. Wells' tale of horror, produces the Frankensteinian scientist Dr Moreau as the monstrous demi-god. Obsessed with creating human forms from the animal, Dr Moreau experiments in vivisection in order to explore the workings of evolution. His experiments all fail as the 'stubborn beast flesh' grows back in every instance. Moreau holds the power of life and death over the surreal monstrosities he has created. The hero, a shipwrecked sailor called Edward Parker, falls in love with Lota, a panther-woman, raising the controversial issue of bestiality. Moreau wants her to mate with a human to see what will happen. Moreau's Pacific island becomes a place beyond the borderlines of civilisation where the forces of devolution, fate and cruelty hold sway.

Cruelty is also a dominant motif in *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932), which transforms an idyllic Pacific island into a horrifying place ruled by the Darwinian motifs of survival of the fittest and the indifferent workings of randomness and chance. Based on a novel by Richard Connell, it tells the story of Count Zaroff, a Sadean monster. Zaroff has created his own world on a Pacific Island where he entertains guests and shipwrecked sailors. He sends them out into the woods where he hunts them down like animals. If they can survive his sadistic game for twenty-four hours, he sets them free.

Creatures at the limit of the human and the animal also feature strongly in these films. Jules Verne's fantasy tale *The Mysterious Island* (1874) was made into a film in 1929 and again in 1961. It relates the adventures of a group of soldiers from the American Civil War who escape in a balloon and crash-land on an unchartered Pacific island that is inhabited by surreal creatures of vast proportions. With its castaway, Ayrton, who lives like a wild creature and a domesticated orangutan, named Jupiter, the tale is clearly Darwinian in focus. Edgar Rice Burroughs was another important writer influenced by Darwinian ideas. He explored the figure of an ape-man in his classic Tarzan tales and also wrote a series set in the Pacific called *The Land That Time Forgot*, *Out of Time's Abyss* and *The People That Time Forgot* (all of 1918). Burroughs creates a fantasy land called Caprona, set in the distant reaches of the South Pacific. In the interior of Caprona is a vast waterway called Caspak, a place where evolution appears to have come to a standstill. Here a collection of strange, surreal prehistoric animals dominate. The further away from the mouth of the river the more advanced, in evolutionary terms, are the species of animal and plant. At the furthest point, the creatures turn into apes and then humans. Some of these creatures, the Wieroo, are bird-people or winged humans not unlike Ernst's birdman. Travelling through Caspak is tantamount to a short evolutionary journey through time.

From this brief survey we can see that the mysterious waters of the Pacific have offered a fantastic range of monstrous beasts – human and animal alike. These films are set on isolated Pacific Islands where time appears to have stopped, literally or symbolically, to allow for the surreal creation either of human/animal hybrids or for bizarre relations between the human and animal. There are also Darwinian images of human-animal hybrids, prehistoric monsters, ape-men, impenetrable jungles and an indifferent nature. Surrealist motifs and images which intersect with many of the Darwinian themes include the voyage into the unknown, 'primitive' worlds, the power of the irrational, the horror of metamorphosis, a sense of *dépaysement*, and 'mad love,' *l'amour fou*. These tales adopt Darwinian themes of evolution and devolution, metamorphosis, the struggle to survive and the role of chance in human endeavour.

An exploration of the Darwinian surreal is only possible because events are set on Pacific islands that are 'out of time,' islands where travellers and castaways experience the strange uncanny underside of the Pacific. Portrayed as a place of uncharted islands, subterranean worlds, ruined temples and hybrid creatures, the surreal Pacific becomes Europe's *unheimlich* other where the Darwinian forces of devolution, fate and randomness hold sway. With its storehold of special effects, the cinema was the one art form that could capture both the Darwinian and the surreal with its ability to bring to life with great realism images of lost worlds, human-animal hybrids and prehistoric monsters. In addition, the cinema could create images of metamorphosis, and play with scale in order to create surreal juxtapositions; it could also collapse the passage of time between past, present and future. If Darwin's radical writings gave rise to a host of strange and uncanny tales set in the Pacific, the cinema was the machine capable of bringing these to life.

King Kong

The film that most powerfully combines Darwinian and surrealist motifs is *King Kong* (Merian Cooper & Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933). In its exploration of the nature of Lautréamont's 'divine ape,' *King Kong* examines Darwinian disruptions of form. Directed by Cooper & Shoedsack, *King Kong* reveals the close relationship between surrealist and Darwinian discourses and their mutual focus on the Pacific as a place of exoticism, 'primitiveness,' taboo and entanglement. The surrealist Jean Ferry was drawn to the technological achievements of the film, particularly the fact that Kong was an automaton. Writing about the film in *Minotaure* in 1934, he argued that much of the viewer's pleasure arose from watching Kong move on screen, creating an 'acute sensation' of the *unheimlich* or uncanny. He claimed that 'the presence of automata and trickery' makes the whole film deeply 'poetic.'[22] Darwin's own descriptions of evolutionary change are sometimes poetic and magical, particularly, for example, his account of the possible metamorphosis of a swimming black bear into a whale.

King Kong tells the story of a party of explorers, including a woman, searching for a monstrous beast said to inhabit an uncharted Pacific island known to sailors as Skull Island. Having found their destination, the travellers encounter a terrifying world - a 'primitive' people, human sacrifice and the monstrous ape, Kong, whom the islanders worship as a god. When Kong sights the white woman, whom the islanders have captured and offered to him as a human sacrifice, he seizes her and takes her back to his cave. Jean Ferry praised the film because of its erotic depiction of the theme of bestiality and *amour fou*:

> … in the last analysis why does King Kong carry off this white woman instead of devouring her, why does he tear off her clothes then sniff their perfume, why does he defend her against the other monsters, why does he pursue her when she is ravished by him . . . why does he let himself be gunned down by aeroplanes to keep her? As one of my neighbours said: 'In any case he can't do anything with her.' That remains to be seen.[23]

The film's eroticism is conveyed not through a phallic threat of penetration (clearly impossible to show) but through touch and scent – a kind of animal erotics. Bestiality was of course a taboo topic in 1933 but one the filmmakers were able to disguise by outwardly focussing on the narrative's elements of fantasy and adventure. Another reason the filmmakers were able to get away with so much was that the events were set in a faraway imaginary place – a Pacific island.

When Darwin abolished all clear distinctions between human and animal, he raised the possibility of devolution. The fear that the human race might 'slip back' into primitivism is voiced in the film by Denham, the leader of the expedition. In describing the island's vast wall designed to protect the inhabitants from Kong, he says the wall was: 'built so long ago the people who live there have *slipped back*, forgotten the higher civilisation that built it' (my emphasis). King Kong appears to be set in an evolutionary time warp, thus creating a context in which a bizarre form of sexual selection comes to the fore.

The phantasy of a relationship between woman and ape pre-exists *King Kong*. It was given concrete expression in Emmanuel Frémiet's controversial sculpture of 1887, *Gorilla Carrying off a Woman*. Max Ernst refers to this taboo union in his 1924 painting *Woman, Old Man and Flower* in which the old man, who has an ape-like face, nurses a naked woman in his arms. *King Kong* creates a space for the spectator to consider the history of our evolutionary past and the possibility of union rather than separation between human and animal. The film's exploration of the Darwinian themes of devolution and sexual selection allows for a subversive questioning of the anthropocentric bases of the conventional love story. This strategy also allows the animal, Kong himself, to speak in his own voice, to express his desire for the forbidden woman and for the possibility of a union between human and animal other.

The film's portrayal of the hidden city - the temple set in the dark recesses of the jungle - is of particular interest because it represents a series of bizarre, even surreal, entanglements.

The very existence of the walled city, now inhabited by a 'primitive' people, suggests that it had been built long ago by a superior civilisation and that as the latter devolved, the city fell into ruin. Strangely enough this concept of devolution is literally and symbolically true in relation to both the inhabitants of the island and the elaborate film set itself. As McNab points out:

> The ruined city in the jungles of *King Kong* is an image of great complexity…being in fact the ancient capital of Judaea, Jerusalem, but a Jerusalem abandoned an overwhelmed by rainforest. This bizarre creation was the result of decisions taken by RKO studios, which produced Kong, to distress the set they had originally built for Cecil B De Mille's *King of Kings* (1926), and then smother it in jungle…Thus the world of *King of Kings* doubled as *King Kong's* lost jungle domain.[24]

McNab also draws an interesting parallel between the ruined city of *King Kong* and Ernst's ruined city series. The former was entangled by jungle 'much as Ernst's ruined city was smothered by him.' The painting by Ernst that most effectively and powerfully conveys a Darwinian sense of entanglement is his 1936 *Joie de vivre* with its web of tropical vines and convoluted, coiled plants. The painting also captures the same sense of nightmarish impenetrability that distinguishes Skull Island. A key influence on Ernst was the evolutionary theorist Haeckel, also known as 'Darwin's bulldog' because of his fierce defence of evolutionary theory. The surrealists, particularly Ernst, were fascinated by Haeckel's stunning biological illustrations of evolutionary processes that were surreal and hallucinatory in the extreme. The walled city of Skull Island, Judea, King Kong, Darwin, Ernst, Haeckel – all come together in a surreal tale of unexpected interconnections.

'Entanglement' is a particularly appropriate word to describe what lies at the heart of the *unheimlich* Pacific. Darwin used the word 'entanglement' in his writings to describe the lush and intertwined forms of nature. On the final page of *The Origin of Species* he wrote:

> It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.[25]

The role of decay, degradation, dissolution and death was not lost on Darwin who, as Gillian Beer writes, saw the law of Extinction as absolutely crucial to reproduction, growth and life.[26] He also wrote in *The Origin of Species*:

> We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life.[27]

Darwin frequently reminds us that the glorious earth is also alive with worms and death and that one species is entangled with another. The word 'entangle,' which undermines the possibility of

coherence and transparency, necessarily implies a sense of disorder, of restriction, of something being interlinked, entrapped, snarled or caught up. To entangle is often to merge or enmesh opposites, to render the familiar unfamiliar. In this context the Darwinian world becomes quintessentially uncanny: life is entangled with death, nature with culture, man with woman, human with animal. Entanglement denies order, clarity, simplicity, and transparency. Entanglement captures what is at stake in the Darwinian surreal and in the uncanny horror films of the Pacific.

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[25] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, [1859] Everyman's Library, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2003, 913.

[26] Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, preface.

[27] Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 586-87.

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