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TEAM VISIO  
**KING KONG**  
ANATOMY OF AN ICON

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# KING KONG

ANATOMY OF AN ICON

intra



Visio & Pop Icons Series



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# Introduction.

## The First Monster of the Twentieth Century

King Kong is not merely a cinematic creature: he is the first great monster of the twentieth century, a symbol born at the heart of modernity to embody its tensions, desires, and fears. His appearance on screen in 1933 marks a point of no return. From that moment on, the global imagination understood that nature could become spectacle, that the exotic could be brought to the center of the civilized world, and that wonder and terror could coexist within the same titanic figure.

The giant is a relatively recent cultural invention. Giants certainly existed in ancient myths, but Kong is a giant born of modernity. He emerges from nineteenth-century anthropology, from colonial narratives, from human zoos and sensationalist reports about “wild lands.” He is the reflection of a Western world that looks elsewhere in order to define itself: the jungle as the opposite of the city, the animal as the opposite of the human, desire as the opposite of the norm. And in Kong’s massive body — powerful, muscular, irreducible — crystallizes the dream of an Other that fascinates and terrifies in equal measure.

Among the arts, cinema is the one that shaped this myth more than any other. Before Kong, there was no true aesthetic of “spectacular nature”: only with the big screen did the jungle become a stage, the monster become an actor, and the incredible become believable. Technology is not an added value here; it is the very act of birth of the myth itself. Stop-motion, optical effects, thunderous music, vertical architectures: every element contributes to transforming an editorial idea into a visual event without precedent.

But Kong is also what modernity fears most: power that escapes control. His story is a parable of violence suffered and returned, a narrative in which humanity, in its attempt to dominate, captures what it does not understand and exhibits it until it destroys it. The city — the emblem of civilization — becomes his gallows, the stage of the final clash between human order and the primordial force of the natural world.

At the heart of this conflict pulses something even deeper: the Western gaze. Kong does not choose to desire the Beauty; it is the human gaze that attributes feelings, intentions, and guilt to him. The Beast exists because civilization needs the Beast. And when the Beast climbs too high — “above its place in the world” — the fall becomes inevitable, almost cathartic.

Kong survives the impact of his own death because he embodies a permanent contradiction: he is monster and victim, threat and icon, brute force and aching emotion. He is the very image of a twentieth century questioning the boundary between nature and technology, between desire and control. And even today, he continues to remind us of an uncomfortable truth: no matter how hard we try to rise above ourselves, the primordial world we have hidden within us will never stop climbing skyscrapers.

## Chapter 5.

### 1976: The Industrial Dream of the “Real Giant”

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In the mid-1970s, American cinema discovers that myths can be reborn if they find a new body. This is the intuition of producer Dino De Laurentiis (1919–2010), convinced that King Kong is ready to return as a global phenomenon. His challenge is ambitious: to recreate the giant not as an animated miniature, but as a physical attraction—a real body that could be filmed without visual tricks, shown to the press, and taken on tour as tangible proof of unprecedented industrial power.

Thus is born the idea of a gigantic animatronic, entrusted to the mechatronic genius of Carlo Rambaldi (1925–2012). The Italian artist designs a mechanical Kong over twelve meters tall, a marvel of hydraulics and cables conceived to move and interact with actors like a true “monster.” From the earliest stages of production, the machine is promoted as the beating heart of the film, guaranteeing a colossal publicity campaign: posters, press conferences, photo shoots, and articles celebrating the imminent revolution in special effects.

Unfortunately, the dream shatters against the reality of the set. Rambaldi’s automaton is an engineering masterpiece, but it proves too bulky, too heavy, and too difficult to manage within the tight constraints of film production. Its movements are jerky, its mechanisms prone to failure, and it soon becomes clear that it cannot sustain the entire narrative on its own. In the end, the “robot” appears on screen for only a few seconds (in the stadium cage sequence), almost like an industrial ghost: omnipresent in media memory and in the end credits—earning Rambaldi an Academy Award for Special Effects—but nearly absent from the final cut.

Saving the film’s fluidity is Rick Baker (1950–), a young makeup prodigy, who proposes an opposite and complementary solution: a gorilla suit worn by Baker himself, featuring expressive design and realistic movement. It is the human body, not the machine, that restores the giant’s dramatic force—the mobile gaze, the emotional roar, the stage presence that the robot, in its statuary rigidity, could not provide.

Decisive to this result is the debut performance of Jessica Lange, who redefines the role of Beauty: no longer merely a screaming victim, but a figure capable of dialogue—even sensual dialogue—with the Beast, anticipating the empathetic turn of the decades to come.

Thus, in a spectacular short circuit, what was meant to be a triumph of aseptic technology becomes a return to performative craftsmanship.

The film's backstage generates a new parallel mythology: misleading promotional photographs, optimistic declarations, traveling exhibitions of the “unfinished” robot. The public, more than being fascinated by the giant on screen, becomes captivated by the giant behind the scenes—an industrial icon more than a cinematic one, a symbol of a dream that never fully ceased to be incomplete.

*King Kong* (1976) ultimately relocates its climax not to the Empire State Building, but to New York's Twin Towers, then symbols of economic power and the latest technological conquest. As in 1933, the giant climbs what represents the pinnacle of the human world. Only this time, the myth no longer looks to the sky with hope: it becomes a direct challenge to the city of global capitalism. Modernity, renewed, rediscovers its primordial antagonist.

Read today, that final sequence takes on an unforeseen and spectral resonance. The image of the giant slain at the feet of the Twin Towers—which in 1976 symbolized the victory of capital over nature—after September 11, 2001 has become an “impossible” visual document, charged with a pain that transcends fiction. Kong lies destroyed before monuments that no longer exist: in that single frame, two falls overlap—the fall of the myth and the fall of history. The film thus becomes an involuntary memorial to the idea of limit, reminding us that no colossus, of flesh or steel, can ever truly be considered eternal.

The legacy of the 1976 film generates further spin-offs and reinterpretations, including *King Kong Lives* (1986), again produced by De Laurentiis with Rambaldi's creatures, in which the giant returns in a storyline emphasizing sentimental and biological elements (a heart transplant). It is an attempt to reclaim Kong's dramatic identity, albeit within a cinema that is more spectacular and less inclined toward tragic compassion.

The 1976 rebirth does not replace the original myth; it reinterprets it. Less existential tragedy, more spectacle and industry. Kong once again becomes an event—a narrative machine that exists between screen, marketing, Italian mechanics, and the collective desire for wonder.

<b>Title</b>	<i>King Kong</i>
<b>Director</b>	John Guillermin
<b>Year</b>	1976
<b>Country</b>	USA
<b>Running time</b>	134 minutes (some editions list 135 minutes)
<b>Genre</b>	Adventure / Fantasy / Action
<b>Production</b>	Dino De Laurentiis Corporation (production), distributed by Paramount Pictures



Making of *King Kong* (1976)



The story of *King Kong* (1976)

KING KONG



PART II — THE CINEMATIC HISTORY OF KING KONG (1933—TODAY)



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