

The Lost World

By Brian Taves

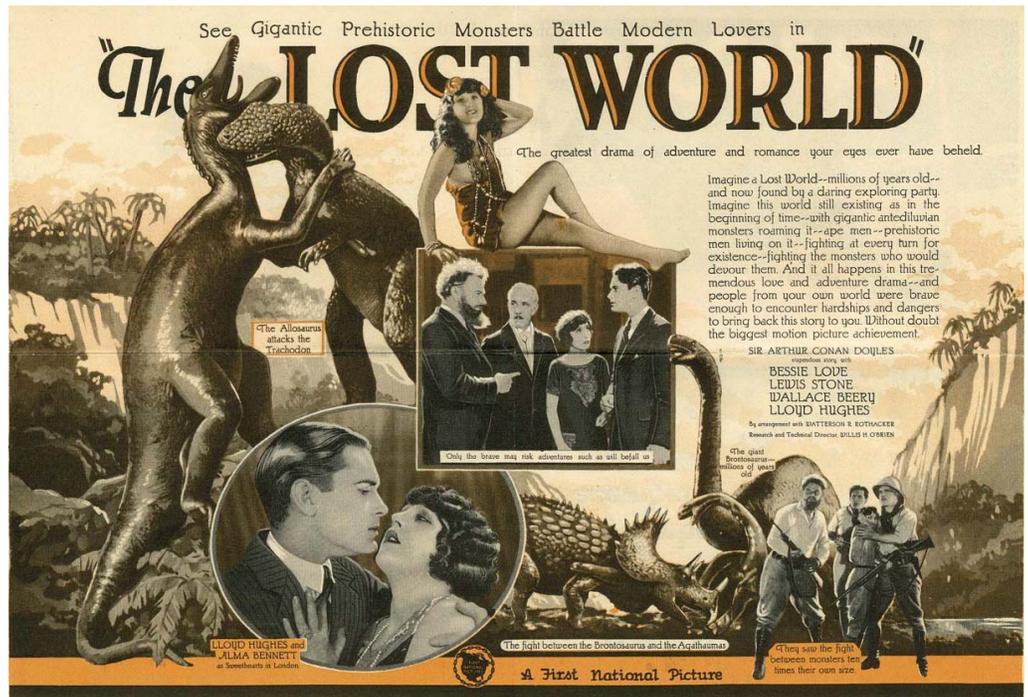
“The Lost World” reveals creatures from a time long ago. So think back in time—although not millions of years, merely a couple of centuries ago. The early 1800s were a time when scientists first began to sense the vastness of pre-history, as the bones of monsters long extinct began to be unearthed. There were fairground exhibits of pieces of enormous skeletons, and it gradually began to penetrate popular understanding that creatures once walked this Earth far different from those of today.

These ideas first appeared in fiction in 1864, in a novel by the French writer, Jules Verne (1828-1905). “Journey to the Center of the Earth” quickly became popular in all the primary languages of the globe. Verne introduces dinosaurs in his underground sea, and a giant prehistoric man herds mastodons on its shore.

Enthusiastically reading this novel was the young Englishman, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930). He tells us that he taught himself French by reading Verne, so he would have seen later Verne stories comparing man and ape—particularly one called “The Village in the Treetops” (1901), telling of a sort of “missing link” tribe living in the jungle of remote, unexplored Africa.

Even as Conan Doyle had become famous for his Sherlock Holmes stories, he was trying other genres, including science fiction, and wanted to extend Verne’s idea by combining more fully dinosaurs and primitive ape-men in a single undiscovered realm, selecting South America as his locale. And that became the classic, “The Lost World,” first published in 1912.

The influence of Conan Doyle’s synthesis of Verne’s conception was widespread: the ideas were taken a step further as early as 1918 by Edgar Rice Burroughs, beginning with “The Land That Time Forgot,” and in more recent times Michael Crichton’s “Jurassic Park” sequel even appropriated “The Lost World” for its subtitle.



An advertisement shows vivid graphics and key scenes from the film to draw in prospective movie goers.

What made Conan Doyle’s book so unique was not only its premise, but its humor and characters, especially the principal, Professor George Edward Challenger. Volatile, egotistical, pugnacious, brilliant, and a source of amusement, Challenger is later revealed to physically resembles one of the ape-men inhabiting the Lost World.

Challenger was Conan Doyle’s favorite character (not Holmes), and the author enjoyed dressing up in costume and make-up as the explorer. He wrote a follow-up novelette the next year, 1913, in which only Challenger recognizes the danger as Earth passes through a gas-filled area of space, “The Poison Belt,” another concept reminiscent of Verne, who in “A Fancy of Doctor Ox” (1872) described how mankind is temporarily altered by changes in the atmosphere. In 1924, Conan Doyle presented a skeptical Challenger converting to spiritualism, in “The Land of Mist.” Just before the end of Conan Doyle’s life in 1930, he concluded the saga with two short stories, “The Disintegration Machine” and “When the World Screamed”—the latter a satire of the very premise of Verne’s “Journey to the Center of the Earth” that had inspired “The Lost World.”

Conan Doyle was fascinated when he learned that a special effects artist, Willis O’Brien (1886-1962), had created convincing dinosaurs and prehistoric men on the screen in a series of late 1910s films, using first clay and later rubber over complex, articulated metal

armatures. It was photographed in a very slow, painstaking, laborious process of shooting one frame of film, then ever so slightly moving the figure, shooting another frame, and so on. Once the film was projected on the screen, this allowed the illusion that the creatures were moving in a manner that were exceptionally convincing for their time. Stop-motion animation creates the effect of a more magical, fantastic realm—especially by comparison with today’s dominant mode of computer-generated imagery, and for this reason stop-motion’s impact continues to be used in films from Aardman Animation’s Wallace and Gromit series to “Corpse Bride” (2005). Stop-motion is also a method that has not been surpassed by other movies and television versions of “The Lost World,” which adopt such short-cuts as animatronics, or photographing modern lizards as if they were of enormous size, methods much less labor-intensive and costly.

Conan Doyle had shown O’Brien’s first test footage to audiences, deliberately not telling them the secret of how it was made. The movie was deliberately planned and marketed as an “event,” a film unlike any other feature widely marketed at the time. The mix of the actors in the frame with the dinosaurs created through stop-motion also startled audiences, and the movie benefitted from an ideal cast in the roles Conan Doyle had imagined, especially Wallace Beery as Challenger.

After “The Lost World,” O’Brien worked for another 30 years, and is best remembered today for the original “King Kong” (1933), “Son of Kong” (1933) and “Mighty Joe Young” (1949), and as the man who trained Ray Harryhausen. The influence of “The

Lost World” on “King Kong,” made only eight years later, is readily apparent, both sharing an imaginative combination of different types of life, all occupying the same “lost” geographic area. The resemblance is especially true of the ending; the idea of a primitive monster loose in the modern city is the only major departure of the movie of “The Lost World” from the Conan Doyle novel, and the same plot device was reprised in “King Kong.” Ideas from “The Lost World” echoed in films O’Brien sought to make without success; one of these, telling of prehistoric life found in a remote part of Mexico, was finally filmed by Harryhausen as “Valley of Gwangi” (1960).

In these ways, not only did “The Lost World” become a perfect adaptation of a literary work, and influential, but one that is historically important in its own right. Yet for many years, only an abbreviated version existed, less than an hour in length. Not until the 1990s were prints discovered in the Czech National Film Archive, and while substantially complete, they too are missing notable portions, so even today, the search for “The Lost World” continues.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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