

Willis O'Brien

Unsung Pioneer of Animation and Special Effects

by Christian A. Bice

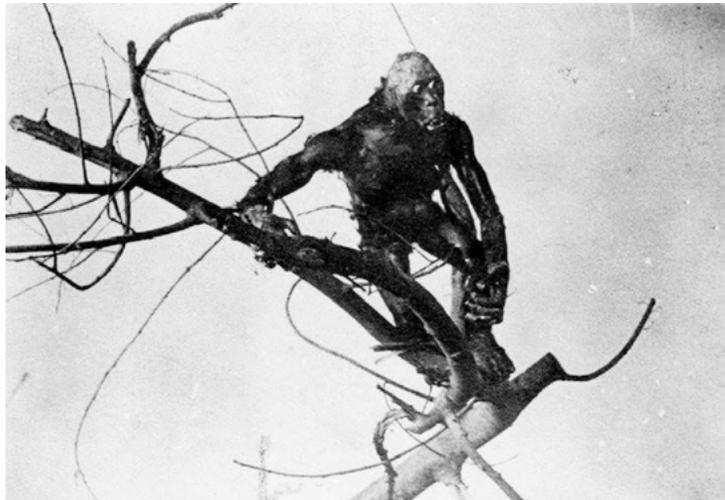


O'Brien working on the set of *The Lost World*, c.1925

What would film be without special effects? It's almost impossible to imagine. Even from the earliest days of film, filmmakers such as Georges Méliès (b. 1861-1938) were exploring film's potential to show us fantastical things that would be impossible in any other medium. In this age of mega-budget blockbusters, from

Star Wars and Marvel films, to *Godzilla* and even *Harry Potter*, movie effects are of supreme importance. But movie effects are also complicated. If you've ever stuck around to see an after-credits scene, you've probably noticed the interminable lists of names of animators and effects artists who worked on a given film. Today, seeing people on screen interact with monsters, dinosaurs, or creatures from alien planets is commonplace, but it took the work of brilliant craftsmen to come up with the concepts and techniques that make such things possible. Woefully overlooked outside the specific realms of special effects and animation, Willis O'Brien, the genius who brought King Kong to life in 1933, made an enormous impact on the history of film, and many of the concepts he developed are still used in films today.

Described as a “two-fisted, hard drinking Irishman from Oakland,” Willis O’Brien (b. 1886)—known, affectionately, to friends and collaborators as “O’bie”—was a multifaceted man.¹ Early in life, he worked as a cowboy, a marble cutter, a prize fighter, and a cartoonist.² He also had a job as a guide for paleontologists in Crater Lake, Oregon, doubtless an impact on the prehistoric creatures he animated later in his career.³ Having been hired to make sculptures for the 1913 San Francisco World’s Fair, O’Brien was working on the sculptures of two small clay boxers when his brother picked up one of the figures and joked, “My fighter can beat yours.”⁴ It’s curious how such a simple, offhand remark can sometimes set the course of a person’s life, but his brother’s joke sparked something in Willis O’Brien, and O’Brien set about shooting the first stop-motion film of his long career: a short film of the clay figures fighting.⁵ Pleased with the results of this effort, O’Brien decided to take another, more serious stab at the technique.



Still from *The Dinosaur and the Missing Link*

With his second effort, O’Brien produced a short film called *The Dinosaur and the Missing Link*. In its September 1, 1917 issue, a writer for *The Moving Picture World* said of the film, “The figures are very jerky in their movements. The comedy is low, but not vulgar. It is not especially interesting.”⁶ Despite this, the film caught the eye of the Edison film company, who bought the short and hired O’Brien to create a series of short stop-motion films for their Conquest series.⁷ Perhaps most notable among the films O’Brien produced for Edison was *Nippy’s Nightmare* (1917), wherein O’Brien intercut footage of dinosaur animation with shots of live actors in matching environments.⁸ As Richard Rickitt notes in his book, *Special Effects: The History and Techniques*, “This was perhaps the first time that a real person had co-starred with stop-motion animated creatures.”⁹

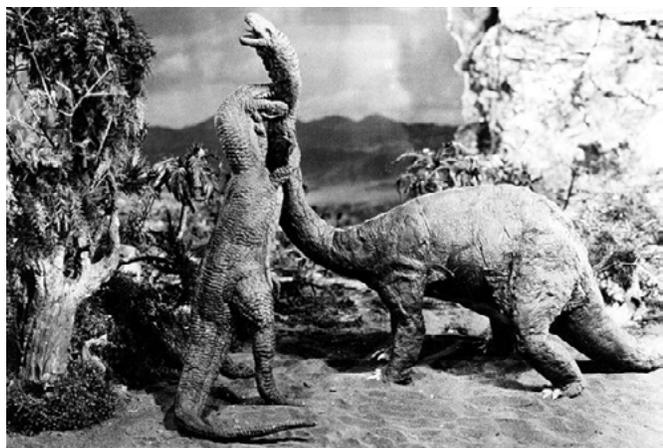


New York Times headline,
June 3, 1922

the ancient world or of the new world which he has discovered in the ether, were extraordinarily lifelike. If fakes, they were masterpieces.”¹² This, no doubt, added to the intrigue of the film, and certainly aided in its success. *The Moving Picture World* said of the film, “*The Lost World* is a remarkable photoplay. Of course, the tricks of the camera have been resorted to, to make the picture, but these tricks defy detection and so marvelously are the animals constructed that to all appearances they are alive. In fact, so well is the picture done, it is only by an effort of the mind that one realizes the animals are artificial.”¹³ Audiences were enamored of the creatures O’Brien brought to life, but impressive as the dinosaurs of *The Lost World* are, audiences hadn’t seen anything yet.

The introduction of sound technology in film may have adversely affected O’Brien’s career when, even after the success of *The Lost World*, he was unable to generate interest in another stop-motion film.¹⁴ In 1930, however, RKO Pictures agreed to fund a film called *Creation*, which O’Brien had conceived of as “the greatest

The quality of work O’Brien was producing at the time was enough to land him a job working on bringing Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel, *The Lost World*, to life on the screen.¹⁰ Another first, *The Lost World* (1925) was the first feature-length film to combine live-action footage with stop-motion puppets in the same frame. O’Brien’s creature effects were so convincing that a showing of some early footage from the film prompted a front-page *New York Times* article with the headline, “Dinosaurs Cavort in Film for Doyle.”¹¹ Unsure whether the creatures in the film were some creation of movie magic, or the genuine article, the *Times* reported that “[Doyle’s] monsters of



Still from *The Lost World* (1925)

dinosaur film of all.”¹⁵ Unfortunately for O’Brien, RKO was in bad shape financially, and after sinking \$100,000 into the project—with many sets and puppets already built—RKO decided to scrap the film.¹⁶ This was the first, but wouldn’t be the last of O’Brien’s projects that never came to fruition. But all was not lost. Soon thereafter, O’Brien heard about producer Merian C. Cooper’s idea for a gorilla film, and O’Brien set about persuading Cooper to let him do the special effects on the picture.¹⁷ After compiling a test reel with footage from *Creation*, Cooper’s ape project was allowed to begin production, and *King Kong* (1933) was soon underway.¹⁸

Though Willis O’Brien was not the director of *King Kong*, he was in charge of all of the film’s animation and visual effects, and with so much of the film relying on those elements, the bulk of the picture fell on O’Brien’s shoulders.¹⁹ With *Kong*, he had to pull out all the stops. All of the techniques that O’Brien had developed up to that point in his career were employed, and



Original armature for King Kong

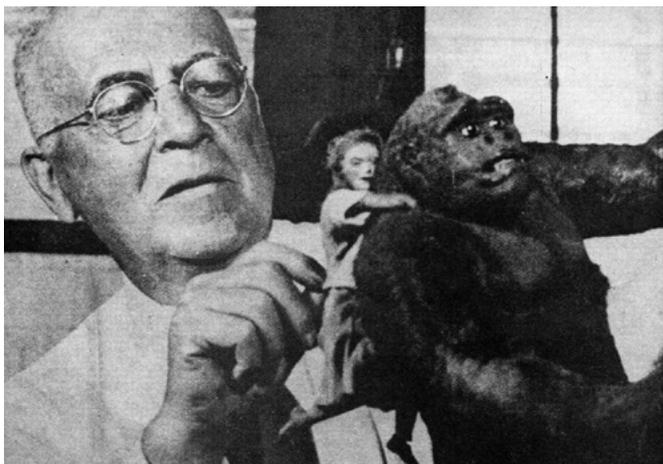
many more were developed specifically for *Kong*. The stop-motion puppets O’Brien’s team created were the first to use metal, ball-and-socket armatures, a mainstay of stop-motion ever since.²⁰ Additionally, O’Brien created and patented an intricate technique of rear projection whereby live-action footage was projected onto miniature sets, frame by frame, so that stop-motion creatures and live-action actors—filmed prior to the miniature footage, on sets made to blend with the environment of the miniatures—could interact with one another, seamlessly existing in the same frame.²¹

This was a tremendous technological breakthrough, but the technical proficiency alone isn’t what gave *King Kong* its power. It was through O’Brien’s wonderfully emotive animation that Kong became more than just a terrifying

creature on the screen; O'Brien made the ape a living, breathing character that audiences sympathized with. "O'Brien *was* Kong," or so said those who knew O'bie.²² For them, Kong's gestures and reactions were inseparable from O'Brien's own.

While O'Brien never again attained the level of success that *King Kong* saw, he worked on numerous other films and received an Academy Award for the special effects on *Mighty Joe*

Young (1949). It was on that film that O'Brien trained Ray Harryhausen, who would later become a legend of stop-motion animation more widely known and renowned than O'Brien himself, working on pictures such as *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (1959), *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), and *Clash of the Titans* (1981).²³ Harryhausen has been cited as a major influence by world-famous filmmakers such as James Cameron, George Lucas, Terry Gilliam, Tim Burton, and Peter Jackson, but for Harryhausen, *O'Brien* was a guiding light.²⁴ In fact, Harryhausen had



O'Brien working on the set of *Mighty Joe Young*, c.1945

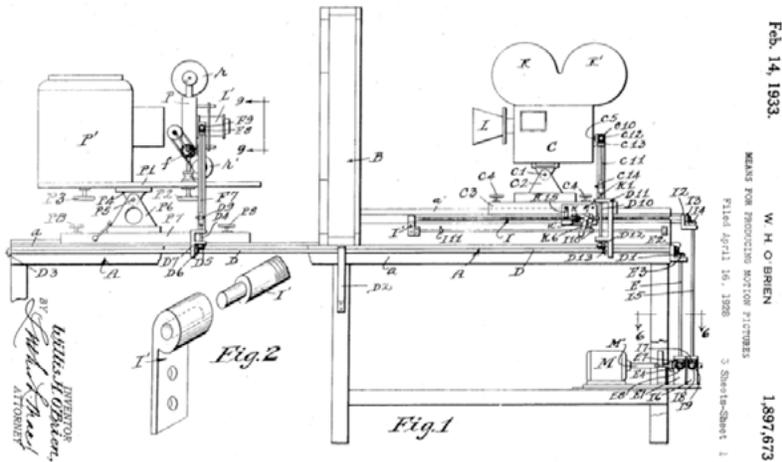


Illustration from O'Brien's patent for "Means for Producing Motion Pictures"

hoped to work with O'Brien again after *Mighty Joe Young*, but when funding fell through on the next project they were set to work on, the two parted ways.²⁵ "It was a big moment for me, needless to say, when I worked with O'Brien," Harryhausen said. "When I was in my teens he and his work were a great inspiration to me. It was certainly a fine

experience to work with him and to know him.”²⁶

Stop-motion films being made today, such as Wes Anderson’s *Isle of Dogs* (2018) or Laika’s *Missing Link* (2019), are still made with puppets using the same style of metal armatures O’Brien developed for *Kong*. Likewise, while his particular methods of compositing footage may be a relic of the past, the concepts that O’Brien developed are used by visual effects artists every day. Given the ubiquity of film franchises spawning from films such as *Jurassic Park*, *Transformers*, or *Star Wars*, all filled with and often even *starring* fantastical creatures that interact with actors, it would be difficult to overstate the impact that Willis O’Brien has had on film.

Additional Links

Willis O’Brien IMDB:

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0639891/>

Article written by O’Brien on the making of *King Kong*:

<https://archive.org/stream/internationalpho05holl#page/n219/mode/2up/search/Willis+O'Brien>

O’Brien’s Patent:

<https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/7f/16/09/5098ed6accfef3/US1897673.pdf>

Notes

1. Goldner and Turner. *The Making of King Kong: The Story Behind a Film Classic*. pg. 41
2. Rickitt, Richard. *Special Effects: The History and Technique*. pg. 150
3. Cavalier, Stephen. *The World History of Animation*. pg. 87
4. Goldner and Turner. pg. 41
5. Bronsan, John. *Movie Magic: The Story of Special Effects in the Cinema*. pg. 151
6. "Comments on the Film." *Moving Picture World*. Vol 33. Sept 1, 1917. Pg 1389.
7. Bronsan, John. pg. 151
8. Rickitt, Richard. pg. 151
9. Rickitt, Richard. pg. 151
10. Rickitt, Richard. pg. 151
11. Rickitt, Richard. pg. 153
12. "Dinosaurs Cavort in Film for Doyle." *New York Times*. June 3, 1922. pg. 1
13. "Lost World Has Brilliant Opening in Los Angeles." *Moving Picture World*. Vol 75. July 18, 1925. pg. 353.
14. Rickitt, Richard. pg. 153
15. Rickitt, Richard. pg. 153
16. Rickitt, Richard. pg. 154
17. Finch, Christopher. *Special Effects: Creating Movie Magic*. pg. 57
18. Finch, Christopher. pg. 57
19. Finch, Christopher. pg. 60
20. Bronsan, John. pg. 156
21. Finch, Christopher. pg. 60
22. Goldner and Turner. pg. 9
23. Cavalier, Stephen. pg. 87
24. O'Neill, Phelim. "Ray Harryhausen: The Father of Fantasy Film-Making." *The Guardian*.

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King Kong. Directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack. Special Effects by Willis O'Brien. RKO Pictures, April 7, 1933. 104 min. Turner Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.

The Lost World. Directed by Harry O. Hoyt. Special Effects by Willis O'Brien. First National Pictures, June 22, 1925. 68 min. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJaXxY3citM>

“Lost World Has Brilliant Opening in Los Angeles.” *Moving Picture World*. Vol 75, New York, Chalmers Publishing Company. July 18, 1925. Pg 353. <https://archive.org/stream/movpicwor75movi#page/352/mode/2up/search/Willis+O'Brien>

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