



2014

The Monkey on America's Back: The Fears of 1960s America as Seen in the Film Planet of the Apes

Grant Reynolds
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean>



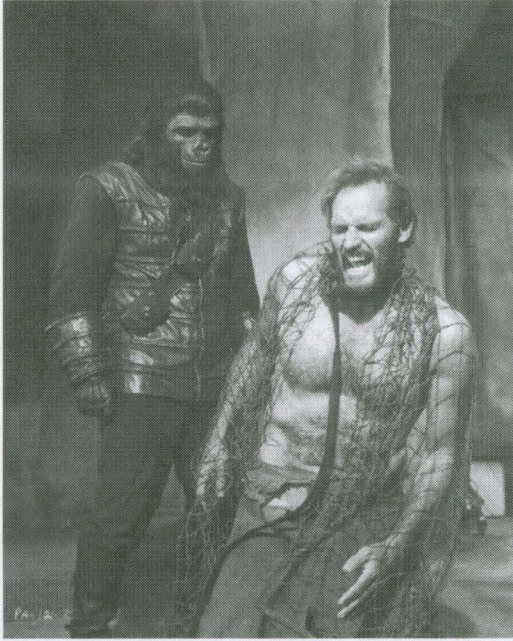
Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Medieval Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Grant (2014) "The Monkey on America's Back: The Fears of 1960s America as Seen in the Film Planet of the Apes," *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing*. Vol. 43: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol43/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Astronaut George Taylor (Heston) is captured in Planet of the Apes (1968). Still from film.

Article

The Monkey on America's Back

The Fears of 1960s America as Seen in the Film *Planet of the Apes*

Grant Reynolds

FEW MOVIES WITH BLATANT SOCIAL MESSAGES ARE BOTH ENTERTAINING and profitable, but 1968's *Planet of the Apes* is an historic exception. The launching point for a franchise that included seven additional films, *Planet of the Apes* became a box office financial success and a cult classic, perhaps because of its social message. *Planet of the Apes* was released during one of the most stressful periods of American history and was written to shine a spotlight on the fears of the times, especially fears about the issues of the Red Scare, race relations, Vietnam, and nuclear war.

Planet of the Apes is a story of a world turned on its head. The film opens with three astronauts crash-landing on an unknown planet after a two-thousand-year voyage at near-light speed. Believing their voyage through time and space has taken them far from Earth, they set out to explore this foreign world. They discover a group of mute, primitive humans foraging in a cornfield, who are suddenly attacked by a party of fully clothed talking gorillas on horseback. The humans who are not killed by the apes are captured, including one of the astronauts, George Taylor (played by Charlton Heston). Taylor is captured alive, but is unable to speak after a bullet grazes his neck. The gorillas place the captive Taylor in the care of two chimpanzee scientists.

Taylor discovers that on this planet apes run a nearly modern society, while mute humans are considered vermin fit only for scientific experiments. This startling social reversal contributes to the film's sense of chaos. Taylor, however,

proves his intelligence by writing notes and by speaking once his injuries heal. Before long, Taylor is questioned by an illegitimate ape tribunal that tries to determine his origins, but soon brands him a freak of nature that should be destroyed. The two sympathetic and forward-thinking chimpanzee scientists manage to free Taylor and take him to the "Forbidden Zone." In this area, there is a cave containing artifacts of an earlier nonsimian civilization. The ape elites find the runaways, destroy the cave, and arrest the chimpanzees, but Taylor is able to ride off into the wastelands looking for answers. It is there he finds the ancient remains of the Statue of Liberty, confirming that the *Planet of the Apes* is actually the post-apocalyptic Earth.

Planet of the Apes was an instant success, earning four times its production budget with a gross of \$26 million.¹ Many were drawn in by the science fiction plot of the film, but just as many came for the ethical and societal questions that the film posed. *The Bulletin* reviewed the film, saying, "The sociological approach makes it, up to a point, the most interesting of the futuristic films we have had to date."² Pointing out the powerful messages in the film, *The Courier-Journal* wrote,

If *Planet of the Apes* maintained the pace and fantastic mood it establishes in the opening reels, it would be a dandy bit of escape fiction. But there are morals behind its methods, and the movie soon turns into a ponderous allegory that frequently preaches even more than it entertains.³

The allegorical message of the film was especially relevant to the audiences of the 1960s, and it hit home. The reaction to the film's sociopolitical themes was exactly what the director, producer, and screenwriters had in mind from the start. The film's director, Franklin Schaffner, said of it, "I had never thought of this picture in terms of being science fiction. It was a political film."⁴ The most apparent messages warned about the paranoia of the Red Scare, nuclear war, and race relations.

Both screenwriters, Michael Wilson and Rod Serling, were Hollywood insiders who held strong opinions about American culture in the late 1960s.

1. David Hughes, "Planet of the Apes," Contact Music, www.contactmusic.com/pages/planetoftheapesgreatapesx19x04x04 (accessed Dec 4, 2013).

2. Arthur Jacobs and Roddy McDowall, *Planet of the Apes Revisited* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), 86.

3. *Ibid.*, 87.

4. Hughes, "Planet of the Apes."

Wilson, an accomplished screenwriter, became a victim of the wave of McCarthyism and the Red Scare that crashed over Hollywood in the 1950s. Wilson was brought before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and was blacklisted, which limited his professional possibilities.⁵ By the end of the 1950s, thousands had been negatively impacted by the Red Scare and the general public, like Wilson, were highly critical of McCarthyism. Wilson's experience of defending his own innocence in a flagrantly political and unjust trial surely inspired the kangaroo court in which the astronaut Taylor is accused and condemned by apes.

When a reporter asked co-writer Rod Serling in 1961 what he would most like to write about, he responded, "I'd like to do a definitive study of segregation—say from the Negro's point of view. A definitive study of how the Negro feels about it."⁶ During the film's production in 1967, Serling said, "The singular evil of our time is prejudice. It is from this evil that all other evils grow and multiply."⁷ *Planet of the Apes* places a white man at the bottom of an unjust social system, subject to the demeaning ridicule of apes. American audiences watching the film would have had a hard time disassociating this image of prejudice from the racism affecting the African-American populace in the 1960s.

Throughout American history, white society has often demeaned other races that lacked political or societal power. Africans, black slaves, and even free African Americans were often equated with animals or apes and were believed to be genetically inferior to whites.⁸ Around the beginning of the twentieth century, eugenic scientists classified the black population as carriers of inferior genes. Even after WWII and the Holocaust, some Americans in the 1960s continued to see blacks as inferior or even as subhuman. A 1972 Senate Committee testimony revealed that during the first half of the 1900s at least two thousand involuntary sterilizations had been performed on poor, Southern black women without their consent.⁹ Similarly, in *Planet of the Apes*, the ape overlords threaten to neuter Taylor to prevent him from spreading his "mutation." White mainstream America was forced to question the legitimacy of these racist

5. Eric Greene, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth* (London: McFarland & Company, 1996), 39.

6. *Ibid.*, 25.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Green, *American Myth*, 6.

9. Martha Ward, *Poor Women, Powerful Men: America's Great Experiment in Family Planning* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), 95.

attitudes, through imagining a world in which they were the social class being subjected to prejudice.

The film is built around the conflict between a racially dominant, oppressive group and a racially subordinate, oppressed group. To upset social norms, the film places a white man in a powerless position beholden to a people that he had once considered to be no more than wild animals. As Martin Luther King Jr. called for harmony and integration and Malcolm X called for separation and black supremacy, the American public grew nervous at the possibility of a reversal of racial power.¹⁰ Nonetheless, many Americans welcomed civil rights and saw *Planet of the Apes* as a film that addressed the the resistance to racial equality put forth by many prejudiced Americans.

Planet of the Apes shows the viewer the possibility of a future filled with violence, war, and catastrophe. Yet many Americans in the 1960s already saw the world they lived in as one of violence and chaos. Racial violence in Birmingham, Alabama required 3,000 federal troops to restore order.¹¹ 1961 saw \$40 million worth of damages in Los Angeles after police oppression of black neighborhoods sparked the Watts Riots.¹² Also ignited by racial police brutality, the Detroit Riot of 1967 resulted in 43 deaths and over 7,200 arrests.¹³ Many Americans already saw the growing violence as the beginning of a race war, and *Planet of the Apes* showed that ignoring the problems, leaving them for future generations to sort out, did not mean they would go away.

Racial violence was only part of the growing chaos that Americans of the '60s felt. Author Eric Greene writes of the race riots, "The sense of instability engendered by these events was heightened by national shocks such as the escalating war in Vietnam, the assassinations of US political leaders, and the growing civil unrest on college campuses."¹⁴ The assassinations of President Kennedy in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in 1968 kept violence and death in the headlines of every US newspaper.¹⁵ Still,

10. James Henretta and David Brody, *America: A Concise History* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2010), 842.

11. John Cotman, *Birmingham, JFK, and the Civil Rights Act of 1963* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 89–90.

12. Paul Finkelman, *Encyclopedia of African American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5:102.

13. *Ibid.*, 2:61.

14. Greene, *American Myth*, 12.

15. Henretta, *America: A Concise History*, 823, 843, 845.

while unrest and danger sprouted within the US, it was the violence abroad that concerned most Americans.

1967–1968 were years with the heaviest US losses in Vietnam, with around 20,000 total casualties.¹⁶ By 1968, American support for the war was less than solid, but just two months before the release of *Planet of the Apes*, the Tet Offensive bloodied the US force in South Vietnam. While the US military in Vietnam came out of the offensive relatively uninjured, American tolerance for the war took a heavy blow. The American public left the terror of their TV screens to see the terror, albeit farcical terror, in *Planet of the Apes*. Greene, discussing the imagery of Taylor kneeling before the decaying Statue of Liberty, writes,

The American hero, fallen before the decomposing statue, is a further critique of US ambitions. The image hit theater screens precisely when the country's poisonous racism at home and disastrous militarism abroad had led to a public questioning of the image of the United States as the land of the free and the home of the brave—precisely the image that the statue had come to symbolize both for those at home and those abroad. The statue scene juxtaposed a bright shining myth with a corroded reality.¹⁷

Looking up at the statue, Taylor's denial is crushed and he is faced with the cold, hard reality of his situation. The great "silent majority" of America was facing that same harsh wake-up call. America had never lost a war. However, by the late 1960s, more and more began accepting the reality of defeat.

With America's failures in Vietnam, many Americans believed the Cold War would grow hotter, perhaps culminating in nuclear war, much like the one that created the fictional *Planet of the Apes*. The film ends with Taylor screaming, "You blew it up!" as he pounds his fists into the sand, implying that a nuclear holocaust caused man's destruction. Rod Serling, a screenwriter for the film, was a member of an anti-nuclear group in Hollywood in the 1950s.¹⁸ His fear of nuclear war surely influenced his writing, and his message likewise resonated with Americans living in the nuclear age.

What made *Planet of the Apes* such a captivating picture was that it brought to light the unthinkable and secret fears of Americans of the 1960s. The film shows an upside-down world where beast dominates man; the viewers also imagined a world of black subjugating white, Vietnam besting America, violent

16. Ibid., 856.

17. Greene, *American Myth*, 54.

18. John Huss, *Planet of the Apes and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2013), 95.

Reynolds: The Monkey on America's Back: The Fears of 1960s America as Seen

chaos replacing peace and prosperity, and nuclear insanity obliterating rational cooperation. *Planet of the Apes* came out during a turbulent time in American history, not to placate fears, but to shine a spotlight on them and by doing so, made a powerful argument for change.

Grant Reynolds is a junior at BYU studying for a BA in History. Grant grew up in a military family and lived overseas most his life, where he was exposed to a variety of cultures and peoples. He returned to the States in 2004 and graduated high school two years later in northern Virginia. Grant served an LDS mission to New York City from 2007–2009. Returning to BYU, he minored in Computer Science and Middle Eastern Studies before deciding to pursue his love of history. Grant has long been a student of classic cinema, especially science fiction and horror. Grant fills his free time with piano, guitar, movies, knitting, and reading. Grant attributes all of his academic success to his nurturing parents, Michele and Richard, and to his supportive, loving sisters.