

Planet of the Apes

By John Wills

In 1963, French writer Pierre Boulle, best known in film circles for penning the novel "The Bridge Over the River Kwai," published a science fiction novel about space travel and human-primate relations. Inspired by classic adventure stories by Jonathan Swift and Jules Verne, Boulle's "La Planète des Singes" (published as "Monkey Planet" in the US market) depicted a future where astronauts discover a world ruled by advanced apes. In a bizarre twist of Darwinian evolution, the apes own mute and backward humans as their slaves.

Enthusiastic over Boulle's story, producer Arthur P. Jacobs purchased movie rights prior to the book's official publication. By November 1964, Rod Serling, creator of the classic "Twilight Zone" TV series, had drafted a film script. Major studios proved hesitant over financing an expensive project about astronauts and monkeys. However, the success of the Verne-style science fiction film "Fantastic Voyage" (1966), coupled with a well-received \$5000 test reel, led Twentieth Century-Fox to adopt the project in September 1966. Jacobs hired Michael Wilson to finesse the script and John Chambers (a talented make-up artist responsible for Spock's pointy ears in "Star Trek") to develop the simian prosthetics. Marlon Brando, Paul Newman and John Wayne were all considered for the lead character. Most famous for his heroics in "The Ten Commandments" (1956) and "Ben Hur" (1959), Charlton Heston assumed the role of astronaut Taylor, and was supported by Roddy McDowall and Kim Hunter. Franklin J. Schaffner, who had previously worked with Heston on "The War Lord" (1963), directed.

Bringing Boulle's novel to the big screen presented a series of challenges. Constrained by a limited budget, a cheaper, pre-industrial setting replaced Boulle's vision of a highly advanced and technological ape society. The primate makeup proved labor intensive and time-consuming (veteran actor Edward G. Robinson pulled out of the project over the issue, with the production of other Hollywood pictures de-



This poster shows a shackled Charlton Heston appearing before a tribunal of apes. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Collection.

layed by the multitude of make-up artists working on set. Straying from the novel, Schaffner gave the film a distinctly American angle, with US astronauts travelling in a NASA-style spaceship and Cold War themes lurking in the backdrop. He filmed "Planet of the Apes" between May 21 and August 10, 1967, near the Grand Canyon in northern Arizona, Malibu Creek State Park (then the Fox Ranch), and Zuma Beach, Malibu. An innovative Jerry Goldsmith soundtrack accompanied an impressive range of chase-scenes and violent confrontations, with epic visuals and dramatic music throughout. Thanks to Serling, the movie featured one of the best surprise endings in cinematic history. Schaffner's movie cost \$5.8 million to produce.

Released February 8, 1968, "Planet of the Apes" met with both critical and commercial acclaim. "Variety" enthused over "an amazing film... a political-sociological allegory" marked by both "optimism and pessimism." Renata Adler, writing for the "New York Times," proved more dismissive: "It is no good at all, but fun, at moments, to watch." Chambers received an Honorary Academy Award for his makeup design, while the film received nominations for Best Costume Design and Original Music Score. It grossed \$26 million.

The 'inverted world' depicted in "Planet of the Apes," where humans are enslaved, beaten and even lobotomized by gorillas, orangutans and chimpanzees, remains one of the most disturbing and iconic fanta-

sies of twentieth-century cinema.

The movie commented on a range of challenges facing 1960s America. In 1968, the Tet Offensive and My Lai Massacre highlighted escalating problems in the Vietnam War, while on home soil the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy shocked the nation. "Planet of the Apes" emerged as a troubling movie for a troubling time. Most obviously, the movie presented a chilling allegory on the subject of racial conflict, highlighting the injustices of America's slave past, while also speaking to the struggle for Civil Rights in the contemporary period. A black archetype trapped in a white skin, Taylor is captured by hunters and taken to Ape City where he is treated as a simple commodity by militaristic gorillas, then hauled up for a range of punishments that include whippings and beatings. Paralleling harsh treatment of civil rights protesters in Birmingham, Alabama in the early 1960s, fire hose water jets are employed to force the astronaut into submission, and silence any voice of protest. Ape society is revealed as caste-based, violence ridden, led by dubious religious schema (the Sacred Scrolls), and marked by questionable court judgments. Intrigued by a 'speaking' human in their midst, only chimpanzee scientists Cornelius and his partner Zira listen to Taylor, who they fondly nickname 'bright eyes'. In its 'upside-down' format, Schaffner's film critiqued any lingering attachment to white superiority in American culture, as well as raising broader questions over citizenship, individual rights, and basic human identity. As screenwriter Wilson explained, the movie was always "more about the human predicament than it was about apes."

Referencing Cold War fears of total nuclear annihilation and the end of civilization, the film also explored a striking dystopian future for the audience to consider. "Planet of the Apes" predicted a return to barbarism and savagery for humankind, starkly set against

the rise of other species. It depicted a realm of regressive cave people and warned of impending cultural collapse. Crash landing on the planet clean-shaven in white NASA-style overalls, even Taylor, intelligent, independent and strong, falls prey to the unraveling process, soon dressed in animal skins and progressively angrier and more primal as events proceed. An enduring beacon of hope, the Statue of Liberty appears in the film as a totem of civilization lost and buried. Schaffner's movie thus cast huge doubt over the future of America precisely at a time of great uncertainty. Despite its otherworldly pretensions, "Planet of the Apes" captured a sense of a nation in crisis.

The success of "Planet of the Apes" led to four sequels being filmed in quick succession. An entertainment franchise emerged, complete with an impressive range of merchandise and two television series. The science fiction series set the trend for later franchises such as George Lucas' "Star Wars." Reprising his role as chimpanzee archaeologist Cornelius, Roddy McDowall appeared in four out of five of the feature-length pictures. Charlton Heston went on to play lead in two more dystopian science fiction movies of the period, "The Omega Man" (1971) and "Soylent Green" (1973). In 2001, Tim Burton crafted a remake of the original film, while a separate series reboot began in 2014 with "The Rise of the Planet of the Apes" directed by Rupert Wyatt.

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

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