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Planet of the Apes

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Planet of the Apes

Abstract

This is a review of *Planet of the Apes* (2001).

Planet of the Apes was the defining narrative of my childhood. For years, I wasn't interested in anything if it had nothing to do with *Planet of the Apes*, *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, or *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*. Some of you may remember the action figures. I had them. Remember "the tree house"? I had it. When I first heard in the early 90s that a new version was in development I knew that God was hearing my prayers.

Many reviewers are evaluating Tim Burton's film by comparing it with the 1968 version, which is a mistake. These are two different films, speaking to different times, concerned with different issues. For instance, the social and political issues that drove the original were the Cold War and nuclear proliferation. The major issues in the current film are handguns and the ethical treatment of animals.

When I used to teach a course on Religion and Film to high school students, they found the 1968 version "boring." If Burton had simply recycled the dialogue-driven original with its slow-paced sequence and lengthy heresy trial, many viewers in today's audience would say the same thing. Burton's film is an action film. The 2001 rendition of the story fits today's criteria for science fiction. But it also does so much more. Consider the way this story has been adapted to address post-enlightenment spirituality.

The 1968 film reflects an Enlightenment mentality. Cornelius (the late great Roddy MacDowell) was the prototypical Enlightenment man: the one who trusts in reason, rationality, and scientific method to make the world a better place. Ape religion was ingrained with his culture, but Cornelius the anthropologist was too "sophisticated" for it. The 2001 *Planet of the Apes* is addressing an audience that is largely post-Enlightenment, meaning many of us are open to the supernatural because it's obvious to us that rationality did not make the world a better place. So naturally, the social scientist in the new film, Ari (Helena Bonham Carter), could not mimic her 1968 counterpart. While leading Leo out of the city, Ari explains they are headed for Calima, the sacred ruins. "According to our holy writings," she explains, "that is where creation began; where Semos breathed life into us. But most intelligent apes dismiss it as a fairy tale." So far she sounds like Cornelius, but the conclusion of the film gives us an Ari who has crossed the bridge from rationality to faith: "One day they'll tell a story about a human who came from the stars and changed our world. Some will say it was just a fairy tale; it was never real. But I'll know."

And where would a postmodern religious film be without the character that becomes disillusioned with institutional religion? In the 1968 film, ape aristocrats reflected the mentality of "the scrolls say it and this issue is not up for discussion." Attar (Michael Clarke Duncan) begins Burton's film in the same vein. We are

privileged to two scenes where he prays. His prayer is that of a pious ape: "Bless us holy father, who created all apes in his image. Hasten the day of your return when you bring peace to all apes." He even accuses Ari of blasphemy when she argues that humans have souls. But Attar discovers in the conclusion that his faith is really nationalistic propaganda. He turns his back on civil religion, where holy war is a family value.

Even the astronaut character had to be adapted to fit a postmodern view. In the older film, Taylor (Charlton Heston) is so fed up with humanity that he opts for a space mission that endures for years. He begins and ends the film as a loner. Leo (Mark Wahlberg), likewise, begins the film as a loner, having been away from earth for two years. Even one of his colleagues remarks that training chimpanzees is better than having a boyfriend. Leo receives a postcard where a friend tells of his recent engagement and another asks, "When are you going to make a commitment?" After crash landing, he won't make a commitment to his fellow slaves either, saying, "I didn't come here to save them." But once he allows himself to "hear their cries and see their anguish," Leo goes from loner to becoming part of a community.

Of course, Leo is an amalgam of Moses and Jesus. Using apocalyptic imagery, he is known as the human "not born of this world" who "fell from the sky with a thunderous sound and the ground shook." A reluctant Leo leads the slaves

out of Egypt. They even cross the Red Sea. He promises Ari, "I'll show you something that will change your world forever." The slaves, sheep without a shepherd, see Leo as their last hope. There's also an ascension and a parody on the parousia or "second coming."

Burton's goal was to "reimagine" *Planet of the Apes*. I would say he accomplished his goal maybe even beyond his own realizations. My prayers have been answered.