

Between Humanity and “Apeity”: Examination of Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism, and Freedom in “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” and Ape Saga

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Article History

Received: 04.09.2018

Accepted: 16.09.2018

Published: 30.09.2018

DOI:

10.21276/sjhss.2018.3.9.8



Abstract: This is an analysis, commentary, and critique of the “Planet of the Apes” saga, with major focus on the 2011 film, “Rise of the Planet of the Apes”. The author examines the film from the perspective of an extended and continuing, overarching theme characterizing earlier films of the same: “Planet of the Apes” (1963), and “Planet of the Apes” (2001). The issue of freedom and anthropocentric values defining things human are examined in the face of what emerges as a merger or transformation of this “humanity” to, and with apes, and thus, the creation of what the author describes as “Apeity” in the film. The author examines what can be viewed as a bi-directional “violation” of both Humanity and “Apeity” and describes this “violation” in terms of its meaning to the concept of Humanity using various characters from these films and explores the “apish” and “human” values and behaviors inherent in concepts of culture – social psychological and sociological. The author evokes themes of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism in exploration of values, freedom, identity, and conflicts as depicted in the ape saga. The author briefly examines the continuation of the social humanism and conflicts in the 2014 film “The Dawn of the Planet of the Apes” into the third presentation, “War of the Planet of the Apes” (2017). These ideas are presented in relation to ideals of femininity and masculinity, individualism and collectivism relative to definition of Humanity. Finally, the author reconciles this treatment of the film with concurrent practices regarding human values and treatment of non-human creatures and the ideas of human fate and future.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism, Apeity, Apekind, Collectivism, Culture, De-anthropomorphism, Femininity, Humanity, Humanification, Humanization, Individualism, Mankind, Masculinity, Social humanism

INTRODUCTION

Pierre Boule and “La Planète des Singes”

Great films often come from great novelistic discourses and literary concepts and ideas in history and social life. The “Planet of the Apes” series, both film and television series of 1974 are from a 1963 novel by Pierre Boule [1]. Pierre Boule who was born Pierre François Marie Louis Boule on February 20, 1912 in Avignon, France, passed away in 1994 at the age of 81. Between the time of his birth and death he became well-known as a French novelist [1]. His two most famous works are *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* (1952); dealing with a company of British soldiers taken prisoner by the Japanese in World War II (*Le Pont de la Rivière Kwai*), and *Planet of the Apes* (1963) - *La Planète des Singes*, which has transformed from novel to multimillion dollar films [1]. Other literary works by Boule include *Les Oreilles de jungle* (1972; Ears of the Jungle), *Les Vertus de l'enfer* (1974; The Virtues of Hell), *Le Bon Léviathan* (1978; The Good Leviathan), *Miroitements* (1982; Mirrors of the Sun), *Pour l'amour de l'art* (1985; “For the Love of Art”), and several

others before his death in 1994 [1]. The “Planet of the Apes” is however, the most well-known and celebrated of Boule’s work and will continue to gain the interest of film makers in one form or another [1].

The “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” [5] is a remake of the original “Planet of the Apes” [3] and the 2001 remake (also titled “Planet of the Apes”) of the 1968 film directed by Tim Burton, and which stars Mark Wahlberg, Tim Roth, Helena Bonham Carter, Michael Clarke Duncan, Paul Giamatti, and Estella Warren [3; 4]. The 2001 “Planet of the Apes” tells the story of astronaut Leo Davidson (Mark Wahlberg) who crash-lands on a planet inhabited by intelligent apes [4]. On this planet, just like the storyline of the 1968 original film, the apes treat humans as slaves and as their inferiors. However, with the help of a female ape named Ari (played by Helena Bonham Carter), Leo starts a rebellion to free humans from the oppression of the apes [4]. Thus, we now have Leo playing the role of “Caesar” for the enslaved and oppressed humans [4].

The Planet of the Apes Themes and Poetic Justice

Beginning in 1968, director Franklin J. Schaffner and writers Michael Wilson (screenplay) and Rod Serling brought us the “Planet of the Apes” with the legendary and late Charleston Heston in a major starring role accompanied by Roddy McDowall and Kim Hunter [3]. This film set in the year 3978 A.D. is about an astronaut crew which crash-lands on a planet in the distant future where intelligent talking apes are the dominant species, and humans are the oppressed and enslaved [3]; a poetic reversal of roles that will enthuse and justify the ravings of adamant animal rights activists. Thus, the animals which we treat as mere nuisance and circus entertainers in our human world now become the rulers [3]. This is typical of the “technological fear” that one day we will build robots or intelligent machines that will come to dominate us.

The same underlying concept in the apes’ series is played out in the 2004 film “I, Robot” by director Alex Proyas and writers Jeff Vintar (screenplay) and Akiva Goldsman, with major starring roles by actors Will Smith, Bridget Moynahan, and Bruce Greenwood [2]. “I, Robot” is set in the year 2035 where a techno-phobic cop (Will Smith) investigates a crime that may have been perpetrated by a robot, which leads to a larger threat to Humanity [2]. In fact, similar to “Planet of the Apes” or the Ape movies’ storylines, in “I, Robots” robots are common assistants and workers for their human owners [2]. The development in the Apes series progressed to the apes becoming household-domestic and general assistants; literally, slaves to their human masters until the arrival of Caesar.

Interestingly, “Planet of the Apes” [3] only sets the tone for what would come as development in the series of ape movies to include a climatic 2011 film, “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” [5]. This film is a story about a chimpanzee named Caesar (played by Andy Serkis) which is given an experimental treatment by scientist Will Rodman (played by James Franco) that makes “it” or more personified, “him” (anthropomorphically speaking), very intelligent and extremely dangerous [5]. The major difference between this and previous ape series is that the “strange” or not too distant planet is here on planet earth. “The Rise of the Planet of the Apes” represents an “origin” story set

in present day San Francisco, where man’s experiments with genetic engineering is what leads to the development of superior intelligence in apes and the onset of a war for supremacy between mankind and “apekind” as the ape Caesar with an extraordinary “humanness” [5] – such a frightening and forbidden violation of man’s uniqueness – emerges as the champion of Ape Cause – the great abolitionist, the “Martin Luther King, Jr. of Ape Rights and Freedom”, the “George Washington of the Ape Revolution” and “Emperor Caesar” of the war against mankind to build and transform our “human” Earth – the planet Earth, which is, and has been made so human, so humane – anthropocentrically speaking; an almost synonymous term with humankind into “The Planet of the Apes”. This from our human and anthropocentric perspective would represent de-anthropomorphism. This gave both readers and followers of the series an expectation of something to come in the series such as “After the Rise of the Planet of the Apes”.

Apeity versus Humanity

Where does Humanity begin and end? Is it unique to man, or is it the equivalency of “Apeity” depicted in the 2011 film, “Rise of the Planet of the Apes”? [5] Can genetic engineering imbue non-human creatures with what we characteristically see as human attributes, intelligence, qualities and emotions that make us unique? Is our fascination with apes related to our Darwinian ideas in science and evolution? Do films such as “Planet of the Apes” and “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” push scientific theories and ideas concerning human origin as part of the creationism-evolutionism controversy and debate? [5].

These are some of the first questions that the philosophical mind would perhaps ask regarding significance and ideals depicted in the film “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” and the previous “Planet of the Apes” films [5]. Additionally, to what degree does intelligence constitute Humanity or the distinction between apes and human? Figure-1 below certainly shows a thinking creature displaying both fascination and intelligence [5]. The creature in Figure-1 below seems to be analyzing and internalizing with a deep concentration that to us, is characteristically human, and which reflects much of our own inquisitive and behavioral nature [5].



Fig-1: Caesar in “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” 2011 Film

Source: “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2011)

Perhaps most poignant in the “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” is the result of the experiments of the scientists on the ape that becomes the intelligent “Caesar”; the “Humanity” which this experiment imbues “it” or “him-personified” with [5]. The first violation of “Humanity” or bridging of the gap between “Humanity” and “Apeity” is the name ascription: “Caesar” [5]. This is not only a human name, but one with profound historical and psychological significance. After all, the human Caesar of history is one of Rome’s god-emperors and is among the greatest of historical figures of leadership; leadership that is not only in a class of its own, but has been emulated in so many ways by great men and women throughout our political history, written upon by scholars, and has changed the world forever.

There is a direct violation of what we call “Humanity” within this film; an imposition which violates the uniqueness of the Humanity characterizing human beings or our species and no other. The directors and writers have clearly broken and severed the distinction between “Apeity” and “Humanity” to a great degree in this film, and this, in a way never before accomplished in previous films that play upon anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. While talking apes like talking animals are fun to watch and pose little to no threat to our sense of Humanity and uniqueness as the “dominant” species of this world and planet, and even to some extent, the Universe insofar as our knowledge exists, this film hits the soul of Humanity in such a way where a great discordance is felt; a discordance that is even sickening. The humanization or “humanification” of the Ape Caesar is chilling, and like a violation of dignity, imposes on the human psyche and soul diabolically. The very visuality of the film in terms of the refined human appearance the costume designers and creators, makeup artists and actors have

given their ape characters, especially Ape Caesar [5], leaves us violated and even with a “sense of guilt” toward our treatment of these and similar non-human creatures.

The Humanity or human attributes of intelligence, dense and intense emotionality, and the ability to project, dispense, and display a variety of complex “human” emotions simultaneously and with such loud tone are the strengths of this film as apparent in the main character Caesar the ape [5]. At the same time, these are the weaknesses of the film. There is a point where imbuing Caesar with so many complex and strong human emotions, the refined baby-like visual texture as an “ape-child” and then the glaring human look as an adult represent too much Humanity in an ape; even too much Humanity, more than a majority of human beings are able to possess, project and express today. Thus, while our Humanity is grossly imposed upon and violated by the “Humanity” given Caesar in this film [5], the “Apeity” is also violated by Caesar’s “assigned” or genetically imbued “Humanity” [5]. Thus, what we have is a bilateral violation or imposition; Humanity imposing on “Apeity” and “Apeity” imposing on Humanity.

The famous “few seconds glare” (Figure-2 *below*) which created a buzz several months before the debut of the “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” and which was a key-point marketing and promotional strategy to raise interest in the film, is the most critical [5]; the most poignant and even discordant when Humanity and “Apeity” are considered from our current anthropocentric worldview. This is directly in contrast to previous depictions of apes and the Ape Caesar in previous 1968 film (Figure-3 *below*), and even in the 2001 remake with leading ape-figure “Thade” played by Tim Roth (Figure-4 *below*) where the lack of

refinement and texturization certainly presented a creature whose facial expressions were less human [3; 4]; less poignant in human qualities and hence, displaying less of humanity. The apes still looked like

apes in the previous two films [3; 4] and lacked the striking human features and expressions in the 2011 film “Rise of the Planet of the Ape” [5].



Fig-2: Caesar’s Characteristically Human Gaze

Source: “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” Trailer (20th Century Fox, 2011)

Caesar in this film; “Rise of the Planet of the Apes”, is only ape by virtue of his external physical appearance because his “assigned” Humanity emerges in a simple glare with intense passion and emotionality; intense anger and derision for mankind’s treatment and

oppression of ape-kind [5]. Through his “Humanity” Caesar displays what becomes “Ape-centrism” and thus, the “Apeity” overrides the “Humanity” in him to free his fellow apes from captivity [5].



Fig-3: The Ape Caesar in “Planet of the Apes” 1968 Film

Source: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

There were not many significant improvements in the creaturely appearance of the apes between the 1968 (Figure-3) and 2001 (Figure-4) films as far as this poignant humanity is concerned despite the assignment of more human qualities [3; 4]. This is with one exception where the ape known as “Ari” (Figure-5 below) seems more “human” than the previous apes of the 1968 film, and even more so than the other apes in the 2001 film [3; 4]. This perhaps relates to her role as

the most “human” among the apes that astronaut Mark Wahlberg in his role must deal with. In fact, she expresses both sensibility, and the “femininity” aspect that gives Humanity great meaning in both her ape society and the human world [4]. She represents a delicate balance where both worlds are in harmony in her being – her gentleness, her inner beauty and peaceful temperament, her charity and consideration

expressed in the gentle outer physical characteristics

refined into her appearance [4].



Fig-4: The Ape “Thade” in the 2001 Film “Planet of the Apes”

Source: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation (2001)

This is contrary to the rough “Thade” in the 2001 film “Planet of the Apes 2001” (Figure-4) which represents “masculinity” and the non-harmonious aspects of ape society and humanity – the almost primitive and aggressive nature that also characterizes man as the “destroyer” and the “warrior” [4]. The films play so much upon gender-based theories in psychology and sociology and reflect Hofstedian cultural dimensions and concepts of “masculinity vs. femininity” and “individualism vs. collectivism”, but

more so, the assertion of feminist writers who ascribe the problems and “plagues of humanity” such as war, crimes, aggression, and lack of goodwill to the male gender [4]. Here we might recognize Caesar’s qualities of Humanity and Apeity; nurture and nature conflicts; harmony versus disharmony – the virtual violation of “Humanity” and “Apeity” as effectively engendering or combining the gentleness of “Ari” and rugged aggressiveness, masculinity, and individualism characterizing general “Thade” [4].



Fig-5: The Ape “Ari” in the 2001 Film “Planet of the Apes” Trailer

Source: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation (2001)

“The Dawn of the Planet of the Apes” is one of the more recent in successful apes’ franchise film series. Here, we see the full transformation from “Apeity” to “Humanity” as Caesar and his kingdom of apes go to war – something that typifies the human race for eons [6]. Here, we see the docile beastliness of once lovable and highly instinctual creatures becomes transformed into the warlike and vindictive metaphysical image of mankind – and where consequently, murder and massacre become part of the “society of apes” – there, the line between “Apeity” and “Humanity” becomes fully obliterated as they are now not only in our image but fully like us in character, spirit, and values as

warlike creatures [6] (Figure-6 below). If the development and transformation of the apes continue they will eventually become the masters of humankind since now they are not only fully capable with warlike spirits, but are an organized society with a strong leader fighting for the same cause – freedom and survival – which has propelled man to dominate the planet and to dominate each other as nations, people, and master and slave, among other things. With the 2017 release of the “War of the Planet of the Apes” we fully see how the apes have emerged to acquire the collective humanity which swiftly is evading mankind [7].



Fig-6: Ape Leader with Gun

Source: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation (2014).

Themes of Freedom and Human Values

This film is about freedom, but this time freedom is for apes, not humans. It is interesting how values such as freedom are intimate to our definition of selves and our Humanity. Freedom, pain, sorrow, rights, and the like are defined from purely human perspective. In this film however, apes are demanding the same (as they have in the original “Planet of the Apes”); their “Apeity” demands and requires these in as much as our Humanity does [3]. While the film shows more similarity than differences between what we could call Humanity and Apeity, the film stresses the similarity more in terms of the desires which drive Caesar and his apes to fight for freedom; a value which drives so much of human action and behavior.

There is a fear in some people that when we assign objects or animals human qualities we risk being devalued and may fail somehow to honor the God that created us in his image. This is especially a fear in some Christians who while respecting the “rights” of animals

understand that they should not be treated as or better than human beings, and we are very guilty of that in American society. Millions of Americans treat their dogs and cats, or other pets far better than they treat their fellow human beings. At the expense of dehumanizing what is human, we must recognize apes as apes and humans as humans; and thus “Humanity” as neither the domain nor right of the apes. At the same time however, we must not deprive apes of their “Apeity” whatever that demands.

CONCLUSION

This film is very serious in its humanization of its ape characters and might have overstepped the boundary by far when it assigned such intense Humanity to Caesar. Whatever the case, the downfall impending Humanity, whether as conquest by apes or robots, or a group of extraterrestrials from distant galaxies has always been linked to human actions or perpetrated on a fate of impending doom and downfall to beset humankind at some point in time. The “Rise of

the Planet of the Apes” is not just a film, but a continuation and extension of debates and discussions, themes and issues that concern our Humanity and how we define ourselves relative to other creatures, our anthropocentric views of things and the uncertainty which ever looms in regard to how our future could potentially unfold, be it realistic or fantastical. While the film merges Humanity and “Apeity” in profound ways, and this represents a violation of discordance, the film writers and director have done a great job in presenting the overarching and relevant themes that hold important lessons for us as a species.

The consequences of human actions are played out in the film; human actions as social behavior and as science. We create and foster our own destiny or fate through social and scientific behaviors; in this case, our treatment of non-human creatures and our experimentation with the unknown. This is strikingly interesting as our curiosity and intelligence which we believe are unique, are transferred onto a creature which has been esteemed somewhat like us, but lacks the ability to be us – the ape which becomes our Frankenstein, which in this case is our own creation through genetics and science. This is what Caesar represents in “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” - man creating his own Frankenstein through our human behaviors and actions [5].

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