

COUNTERCULTURAL TOPICS AND VISUAL ECHOES IN *THE PRISONER* (1967),  
*PLANET OF THE APES* (1968-1973) AND *JOHN FROM CINCINNATI* (2007)

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*There is a revolution coming. It will not be like revolutions of the past. It will originate with the individual and with culture, and it will change the political structure only as its final act. It will not require violence to succeed, and it cannot be successfully resisted by violence. [...] This is the revolution of the new generation.*

Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America* (1970)

During the late 1960s and early 1970s television produced, through a series of innovative and at times unusual shows, what M. Keith Booker terms a “cognitive estrangement” (Booker 2). These shows encouraged viewers to “look at the world in new and different ways, rather than merely act as passive consumers of the television signal” (2). Yet, despite its crucial impact, television cannot be seen as a significant force for social and cultural change at the time. As a matter of fact, it was rejected by the counterculture movement, notably by one of its gurus, Charles A. Reich. Television was envisioned by Reich as an instrument of social control which deeply influenced “public consciousness” (Reich 95). Nevertheless, the present study will try to show how television eventually impacted the counterculture movement. In order to substantiate my claim, I will, therefore, examine how certain television series and films played, to a certain extent, a part in the social upheavals as well as mirrored, through a number of visual echoes, the growing scepticism of the younger generation of the late sixties and early seventies.

The British cult television show *The Prisoner*, initially broadcast in 1967-1968, proved probably one of the most groundbreaking shows in the short history of television. The use of surrealistic scenes, psychedelic mind control and panoptical state surveillance, contributed to the show’s “surreal and counter-cultural” (Paige Wiser)<sup>1</sup> tone which influenced several generations of television viewers. As for the film serial *Planet of the Apes* (1968-1973) and the eponymous television series (1974) based on Pierre Boulle’s 1963 novel,<sup>2</sup> they clearly reverberate various facets of the countercultural movement: drugs, anti-war protest, racial discrimination, the fear of nuclear weapons, etc. The last television show I shall focus on is entitled *John from Cincinnati* (2007) which was produced by David Milch and Kem Nunn. Although aired forty years after “The Summer of Love” when “the full force of the cultural revolution was first visible” (Reich 223), the show may well be viewed as a contemporary statement on the legacy of the counterculture movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Paige Waiser, “The TV Paige: AMC’s ‘The Prisoner’ Remake”, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, November 14, 2009. [http://suntimes.com/tv/2009/11/tv\\_review\\_amcs\\_the\\_prisoner\\_re.html](http://suntimes.com/tv/2009/11/tv_review_amcs_the_prisoner_re.html). Sunday, November 4, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview he gave in February 1972, Pierre Boulle remarked that “in comparison to the book there was a lot of changes made” in the film’s script, in *Cinefantastique*, “Special Planet of the Apes Issue”, Summer 1972, p. 18.

## *Prelude*

From the 1950s onwards a number of social commentators heralded television as the symbol of a system of commodified mass culture. Theodor Adorno viewed contemporary popular culture as a means for the dominant bourgeois ideology to reassert both ideological and mass consumption control. Popular culture had, according to Adorno, “developed into a system” (Adorno 160) which resulted in the uniformization of the spectator’s reaction consequently weakening “the forces of individual resistance” (160). The formulaic pattern of television series encouraged the spectators into developing conditioned reactions, while restricting information and reinforcing the hierarchical and authoritarian social structure imposed upon the individual by what Reich terms the “Corporate State” (Reich 117) or what Theodore Roszak refers to as the “Technocracy” (Roszak 8). Television stood as one of the main symbols of the materialist interpretation of the American Dream and, as such, had to be challenged.

In his famous paean of the counterculture movement *The Greening of America* (1970), Charles A. Reich, then a professor at Yale Law School, followed in the footsteps of Adorno as he viewed the television medium as a means of disseminating “the opinions that serve the interests of monopoly capital” (Reich 12), thus imposing cultural and political standards by refusing, notably, to “carry “radical” opinion[s]” (119). As a consequence, television dominated public consciousness by “numb[ing] the individual’s ability to be conscious” (119). The popular 1970 BBC’s children’s show, *Here Come the Doubledeckers!*, reveals with particular clarity the conception of television as an instrument of depersonalization and social conformism. The series is centred round seven kids, who spend their time goofing about, and their street cleaner friend Albert. The kids meet in an old doubledecker London bus which has been abandoned in a local junkyard. In the episode entitled “The Pop Singer” (season 1, episode 7), the gang meets a young hippie busker, Sidney Jones, who they will eventually commodify into a pop star named “The Cool Cavalier.” When first meeting him, the children ask him what type of songs he sings. Sidney begins performing one of his “countercultural” songs. The gang reacts rather unenthusiastically to his performance:

Billie: I’m not surprised nobody’s heard of you.

Sidney: It’s a *protest song*. You couldn’t have been listening to the words.

Brains: Can you blame us?

Sidney: [...] you tell me what I ought to sing about.

Scooper: What about all the good things in life?

This segment directly mirrors television’s manipulative strategies which inculcate in the young public, at which the show was aimed, the values of mass consumption. The busker is caricatured as having little talent: the lyrics of his songs are rather ridiculous and simplistic while he sings completely out of tune, revealing his disharmonious character and his status as social outcast. Moreover, using conventional hippie stereotypes, the show portrays Sidney wearing creased and dirty clothes (figure 1) a fact clearly underpinned by Tiger:

Tiger: I’m not surprised [nobody has heard of you]. Look at you.



**Figure 1 – *Here Come the Doubledeckers!* (1970)**

By the time the gang has given the busker a makeover, washed him, changed the lyrics of his songs, he begins conforming to the criteria of contemporary popular culture and starts singing in tune. This comes as an illustration not only of television’s imperviousness to new ideas but also to what Charles Reich observes: “[t]he television-world is what our society claims itself to be” (Reich 205) and *should* be.

Yet, despite being in agreement with what Adorno and Reich postulate about television as a potential agent of totalitarian control, I will contend here that, due to the complexity of the medium I believe a certain type of television series provided the viewers with a subversive text, allowing them to read against the grain. Indeed, as Booker astutely notes, “[t]here is, of course, no reason why television cannot simultaneously be boringly stupid and simplistic on the one hand and diabolically complex and clever on the other” (Booker 5). I shall, therefore, follow John Fiske’s approach<sup>3</sup> which encourages the viewer to read the television text as a potentially subversive one while also taking into account the cultural context out of which these works emerged. *The Prisoner* and the *Planet of the Apes* saga were produced in the midst of a period—the 1960s and 1970s—deeply marked by wars (the Cold War and the Vietnam War) and social upheavals; as a result, they are imbued with cultural, social and political meaning. Through a series of close readings in light of Reich’s work I hope to show how three apparently very different television shows and films bear close social and cultural proximity as they explore the different facets of countercultural issues, and reveal the highly complex nature of television as a vehicle of social and cultural subversion.

### **The Prisoner (1967-1968): A Rebel with a Cause**

*The Prisoner*, created by Patrick McGoohan and George Markstein,<sup>4</sup> was initially aired in 1967-1968 on ITV. As the series unfolds we follow a former British secret agent, who has been abducted and held prisoner in a strange coastal village where his captors try to discover the reasons for his abrupt resignation. The show is, as McGoohan repeatedly noted, an allegory<sup>5</sup> which spawns a critique of modern society. Its unconventionality came from the fact that it was probably the first television series designed, as Max Hora observes, “to make people think” (Hora 4)<sup>6</sup> and, as such, was well ahead of its time. As the series progresses the Prisoner learns that he

<sup>3</sup> See John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989; London and New York: Routledge, 2009). Fiske shrewdly notes that “Excessiveness and obviousness are central features of the producerly text. They provide fertile raw resources out of which popular culture can be made.[...] Excess is overflowing semiosis, the excessive sign performs the work of the dominant ideology, but then exceeds and overflows it, leaving excess meaning that escapes ideological control and is free to be used to resist or evade it.” (114)

<sup>4</sup> Roger Langley notes that McGoohan and Markstein “would later part company, the writer [George Markstein] quitting the production mid-1967” in Roger Langley, *Patrick McGoohan. Danger Man or Prisoner?* (Sheffield: Tomahawk Press, 2007) 110.

<sup>5</sup> See Chris Gregory, *Be Seeing You... Decoding The Prisoner* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1997) 60.

<sup>6</sup> Max Hora, *The Prisoner of Portmeirion* (Portmeirion: A Number Six Publication, 1985).

cannot escape The Village and its totalitarian society. He realizes that he “must fight [the system] from within” (Gregory 99) if he wishes to set himself free just in the same way the youths, described by Reich, were challenging America’s materialistic society. The show places slant on the role of the individual in a seamless society. Due to the highly complex dimension of the series’ multilayered text I will only be exploring, in this paper, the role and place of the individual within a panoptical society before examining the way in which education is portrayed as a means, for the predominant ideology, to assert control over citizens.

The dystopian world of *The Village* is peppered with references to George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).<sup>7</sup> The series depicts a society which is kept under constant surveillance through the use of cameras and television screens which monitor the Villagers’ activity. The question of State surveillance was of paramount importance to the proponents of the counterculture as they viewed it, not as a means of providing security to the citizens but, as something which infringed on their freedom. Reich viewed what he calls this “sense of surveillance” (Reich 207)<sup>8</sup> as an essential feature in the process of the State’s coercive policy. The panoptical state surveillance is epitomised by the Control Room located in the Green Dome (figure 2) and which is Number 2’s residence:



**Figure 2 – *The Prisoner* (1967-1968)**

The building, which is at the top of the hill, dominates the entire Village and is reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham’s circular institutional edifice, which enabled warders to observe all inmates without them being able to tell whether or not they were being observed. The viewer is, however, not only faced with a panoptical society “where virtually all resistance, except that of the protagonist, has been eliminated” (Gregory 17) but with a world in which the depersonalization process has reached its peak. The very concept of individuality has been erased. All the inhabitants of The Village, including the recurring characters at The Village’s helm—the nefarious Number 2s—are referred to as numbers.<sup>9</sup> On his first encounter with Number 2 (“Arrival,” episode 1) the Prisoner shows his indomitable character as he refuses to co-operate with his warders: “I will not make any deals with you. I’ve resigned. I will not be pushed, filed,

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<sup>7</sup> On his first visit of The Village with Number 2 (Guy Doleman), the prisoner discovers the Village’s “Labour Exchange”; as he ventures in we are given a glance at some of the Village’s main slogans: “QUESTIONS ARE A BURDEN TO OTHERS” or “ANSWERS A PRISON TO ONESELF” in “Arrival” (episode 1) which are evocative of the slogans of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1949; London: Penguin, 2000] 6).

<sup>8</sup> Reich notes that “[s]urveillance of character has become pervasive in our society” in other words one has to conform to the norms established by society. Thus, maintaining one’s integrity as an individual requires constant awareness. (143)

<sup>9</sup> During an interview McGoochan told a journalist that “[c]omputers have everything worked out for us. And we’re constantly being numeralised. The other day I went through the numbers of units that an ordinary citizen is subject to, including license plate numbers and all the rest and it added up to some 340 digits” (Langley, 118).

stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed or numbered. My life is my own.” The first time he is being addressed by his Number (Number 6) he immediately snaps:

The Prisoner: Number what?

New Number 2: Six. For official purposes, everyone has a number. Yours is Number 6.

The Prisoner: I am not a number, I am a person.

In the episode entitled “Checkmate” (episode 9)<sup>10</sup> the characters will be designed as chess pieces instead of by their usual numbers relegating them to play the role of pawns within a game over which they seem to have no control. In this episode the villagers are human chess pieces who are being placed on the Village’s chess lawn; chess, which obviously stands for a motif of social manipulation, plays a symbolic role throughout the series.<sup>11</sup> As the game begins the Prisoner resists, when ordered to move, before finally complying. While the game unfolds, the White Queen’s Rook suddenly starts moving independently on the huge chess board. This results in his being carried away to the hospital, where he will be “put on a rehabilitation course” (Number 2) to “learn to conform” (Number 2) (figure 3) while the game proceeds with a substitute Rook:



**Figure 3 – *The Prisoner* (“Checkmate”)**

Later, we see the Rook being subjected to electrical shock treatment to be socially reconditioned: human beings have been transformed into interchangeable commodities and mindless creatures by the Village authorities. However, as Chris Gregory avers, one starts realizing that “the society of the Village may not be so compliant as we may previously have thought” (Gregory 113) as the community is divided between “Prisoners” and “Guardians” which, as Gregory notes, stand in chess parlance for “whites” and “blacks” (113). As the story unfolds a metaphorical chess game takes place between Number 2 and the Prisoner as the latter conspires against the Village’s

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<sup>10</sup> At the time chess was also an expression of the political edge of the Cold War which may well be summed up in the dialogue between the Prisoner and the Chessplayer:

Prisoner: Why do both sides look alike?

Chessplayer: You mean, how do I know black from white?

Prisoner: Well?

Chessplayer: By their dispositions. By the moves they make. You soon know who’s against you.

Prisoner: I don’t follow you.

Chessplayer: It’s simply psychology, the way it is in life. You judge by attitude ... people don’t need uniforms. “Checkmate”, episode 9.

<sup>11</sup> In “The Chimes of Big Ben” (episode 2) Number 6 is seen at the Old People’s Home playing with an old general who tells him he is a rebellious individual and that he would have liked to have had him in his regiment to discipline him. This segment uses the chess metaphor not only to convey the idea that society has rules by which each individual must abide but also illustrates the question of the generation-gap. As Gregory astutely notes this scene was addressed “to the 1960s post-conscription generation” (Gregory 71).



authorities<sup>12</sup> in order to disrupt the system from within. Despite being yet again defeated by the Village authorities, the Prisoner has become aware that there are flaws within the system.

The show also focuses on the salience of technology and television as agents of social control. McGoohan “deliberately distorts the generic elements of mass entertainment in order to expose the techniques of ‘mind control’ inherent in the medium of television” (Gregory 17) thus creating an extremely subversive text. Contrary to Marshall McLuhan, McGoohan expresses a rather dark view of science and technological progress.<sup>13</sup> Television is clearly depicted as a means of indoctrination compelling the individual to social compliance and acceptance of the rules established by the State. Like Reich, McGoohan attempted to awaken the viewers to the dangers of television which were veiling the spectator’s consciousness, preventing him from seeing what was actually happening: “we are usually not at all aware of the prison we are in” (Reich 140).

In “The General” (episode 6), television is used as an instrument of political propaganda and manipulation.<sup>14</sup> The episode explores the questions of mass education, brainwashing and mass control. It shows how technological progress is prone to abuse by portraying television as a means of indoctrinating citizens, since it impresses on the villagers’ minds what the Village regime wishes them to believe. The Village authorities have implemented the forced learning of academic facts involving the watching of television. Every evening the programme entitled *Speed Learn*<sup>15</sup> is broadcasted transmitting subliminal images causing, through hypnosis, the mental retention of numerous facts and figures disseminated within:



**Figure 4 – *The Prisoner* (“The General”)**

Television viewing, then, becomes a way for the system to rewrite history while indoctrinating its citizens and preventing them from thinking, brainwashing them into a state of mindless compliance. At the close of the episode, Number 2 proudly presents “The General” to the Prisoner while going on to explain the fantastic power the authorities will be able to exert over the Villagers:

Number 2: And what have we got?

Number 6: A row of cabbages.

Number 2: Indeed. Knowledgeable cabbages.

Number 6: What sort of knowledge?

Number 2: For the time being, past history will do. But shortly we will be making our own.

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<sup>12</sup> As Gregory remarks the conspirators exchange messages “coded in chess terminology” (Gregory 116) plying the Village authorities at their own game.

<sup>13</sup> In an interview he gave in 1985, McGoohan remarked “We live in an era where science is advancing so quickly, you don’t even have time to learn about the latest innovations before something new arises. [...] They’re so busy cranking out information that before you get a chance to digest it, they’re cramming something else down your throat!” in Matthew White & Jaffer Ali, *The Official Prisoner Companion* (New York: Warner Books, 1988) 178.

<sup>14</sup> In “Free for All” (episode 4) television is also depicted as an instrument of political and ideological control.

<sup>15</sup> The term is reminiscent of Orwell’s *Newspeak*.

George Markstein clearly voiced the show's sardonic view on education, "[e]ducation can be part of conditioning and it is often misused. Education is a dangerous subject"<sup>16</sup> (Langley). The bleak view on education was later shared by Reich who views it as the first step towards depersonalisation: "Beginning with school [...] an individual is systematically stripped of his imagination, his creativity, his heritage, his dreams, and his personal uniqueness, in order to style him into a production unit for a mass, technological society" (Reich 9). Interestingly, the topic of education as an instrument of social control resurfaced regularly throughout the seventies in popular music. The third album of Supertramp, *Crime of the Century* (1974), addresses the issue in the song "School"<sup>17</sup> not to mention Pink Floyd's famous song against government mandated form of education "Just another Brick in the Wall-Part 2" which featured in their album *The Wall* (1979).<sup>18</sup> Thus, rather than seen as an instrument of freedom, education was clearly considered as a means of governmental mass control.

In the final episode, "Fall Out" (episode 17), it appears obvious that the Prisoner has destroyed the system from within. The music of the Beatles "All You Need Is Love" and snatches of *La Marseillaise* provide a counterpoint for the visual violence which, as Gregory writes, "represent[s] the act of revolution itself" (166). The revolutionary atmosphere is enhanced by the use of hand-held cameras creating hallucinatory and psychedelic imagery. During the trial sequence the three characters: Number 6, Number 2 and Number 48 symbolise three facets of rebellion as the President remarks: "Revolt can take many forms...." The Prisoner represents the "ideal rebel" who has never compromised with the system, while Number 2 stands as an example of "the rebellion of a member of the establishment" (Gregory 167-68). As for the hippie-like character Number 48,<sup>19</sup> he symbolises the worst and probably most dangerous form of rebellion that of "uncoordinated youth."<sup>20</sup> The dialogue between the bewigged President and Number 48, who is wearing a white frilly shirt and a black braided jacket, with a flower in his black top hat, turns into an absurdist dialogue based on the traditional Negro Spiritual "Dry Bones." The song, based on the vision of the prophet Ezekiel<sup>21</sup> (in which the bones of the dead are reassembled and

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<sup>16</sup> George Markstein in Roger Langley, *Escape Book of The Prisoner. Episode Reviews*.

<sup>17</sup> "I can see you in the morning when you go to school/Don't forget your books, you know you've got to learn the golden rule, /[...] Don't do this and don't do that/What are they trying to do?/Make a good boy of you [...], "School" (Lyrics by Roger Hodgson and Richard Davies), Supertramp, *Crime of the Century* (1974), A&M Records 2002. CD.

<sup>18</sup> "We don't need no education/We don't need no thought control./No dark sarcasm in the classroom./Teacher leave them kids alone [...], "Just Another Brick in the Wall – Part 2" (Lyrics Roger Waters), Pink Floyd, *The Wall* (1979), EMI, 1994. CD.

<sup>19</sup> The President will refer to him as follows "It may wear flowers in its hair, bells on its toes." The use of the personal pronoun "it" clearly signals a process of depersonalization not to mention the reference to Scott McKenzie's song "San Francisco (Be Sure to wear Flowers in Your hair)" which was first released on May 13, 1967.

<sup>20</sup> The President sighs "We have just witnessed two forms of revolt... The first, uncoordinated youth, rebelling against nothing it can define. The second, an established, successful, secure member of the establishment, turning upon, and biting the hand that feeds him. Well these attitudes are dangerous, they contribute nothing to our culture and are to be stamped out...!"

<sup>21</sup> Ezekiel 37: 1-14: "The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones,/And caused me to pass by them round about : and, behold, there were very many in the open valley ; and, lo, they were very dry./And he said unto me, Son of Man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest./Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord./Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:/And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord./ So prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone./And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them./Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, Thus saith the Lord

revivified) is subverted by Number 48 as he metaphorically proceeds to dismember the system symbolised by the President's own body. Tearing limb from limb he brings about the system's final dislocation<sup>22</sup>:

Number 48: Give me the rest!

[...]

Number 48: Oh Dad, I'm your baby, Dad. You owe your baby something, Daddy.

The President: Confess now you're hip

Number 48: Hip dad

The President: Hip! Confess!

Number 48: Ah hip bone...

The President: Confess!

Number 48: ... and the thigh bone ...

The President: Confess!

Number 48: ...Shin bone, knee bone ...

By the end of the dialogue the entire assembly, including the President, picks up the words of the song and the whole scene turns into a psychedelic mayhem as the white-robed and masked delegates begin singing and swaying themselves into an apoplectic dance (figure 5). Yet, while dismembering the system, Number 48 has, like Ezechiel, resuscitated "[the] 'nation' of skeletons – human beings without souls" (Gregory 167) which lived in the Village. As Number 6 and the freed Number 2 and Number 48 burst out of the long dark tunnel we also see the newly freed Villagers running away in all directions. However, the viewer is left dwelling on what they will do with their newly acquired freedom as they seem lost and panicked.



**Figure 5 – *The Prisoner* (“Fall Out”)**

As the Prisoner returns to his London home the Butler (Angelo Muscat)<sup>23</sup> mounts the steps of the house and the front door opens automatically as it did in the Village suggesting that the final escape may not quite be what it really seems. Thus, probably conveying the idea that the whole world may well be a Village and giving shape to McGoohan's belief that freedom is a myth, an illusion which may, if not controlled, become lethal: “I believe in democracy, but the

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God; Come from the four winds, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live./So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army./Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts./Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel./And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of the graves,/And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord. See also Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary by Moshe Greenberg* (1997; The Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010) 741-51.

<sup>22</sup> This comes as a twist of irony when we recall the words of the professor's wife when addressing Number 6 “construction arises out of the ashes of destruction” in “The General” (episode 6).

<sup>23</sup> Angelo Muscat played a part in the Beatles' one-hour television film *The Magical Mystery Tour* (1967).



danger is that with an excess of freedom in all directions we will eventually destroy ourselves” (Langley 118). This clearly illustrates the ambivalence of the counterculture movement which oscillated between the belief in total freedom and freedom within defined boundaries.

### ***Planet of the Apes (1968-1974) as Mirror of the Counterculture Movement***

Three American astronauts,<sup>24</sup> Taylor, Landon and Dodge—while exploring the infinite reaches of space—sail through a time-warp and land on an unidentified planet which will turn out to be Earth in a distant future. After mankind destroyed itself in a nuclear holocaust the whole world has been turned upside down and is now ruled by a simian civilization and humans have been reduced to slavery by the apes. Despite the combination of spectacular action and science fiction the *Planet of the Apes* serial stands, as Herb A. Lightman notes, as an “allegory of our time” (Lightman 256). The profound social significance of the themes developed in the five films (1968-1973) and the television series (1974) clearly mirror the issues with which the world of the late sixties and early seventies were faced. While *The New Yorker* journalist, Penelope Gilliat, claimed it to be “the most left-wing ape picture”<sup>25</sup> she had ever seen, the director of *Planet of the Apes* (1968), Franklin J. Schaffner, alleged in an interview that “it must occur to you as you are watching an ape society, you are looking into a mirror.”<sup>26</sup> I will pay significant attention to some of the main social and political issues which punctuate the narratives of the film serial and the television series.

Behind what was one of the greatest successes at the 1968 international box office, lies a rather dark parable on man and the modern world, which echoed the concerns of a whole generation. The opening scene of the film may well be viewed as a metaphoric drug trip: as the camera fades in, the viewer sees a ripple of coloured lights pulsating at intervals across the screen while he hears Colonel Taylor’s soliloquy while he prepares to hibernate. After injecting himself with a hypodermic needle he continues talking as he prepares to enter his hibernation cubicle: “One final thought... nothing scientific, purely personal. Seen from out here, everything seems different... Time bends, space is boundless. It squashes a man’s ego. I feel lonely.”

Such thoughts are reminiscent of the trips described by those who took LSD. This is enhanced by the fact that, once Taylor is sleeping in his cubicle, one sees through the spaceship’s windshield the infinite reaches of space and ripples of coloured lights flashing before the viewer’s eyes imparting psychedelic visual effects:

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<sup>24</sup> Actually there are four, but the fourth astronaut, a woman, doesn’t survive due to a leak in the suspended-animation cubicle she was in.

<sup>25</sup> Dale Winogura, “Dialogues on Apes, Apes and More Apes,” *Cinefantastique*, “Special Planet of the Apes Issue”, Summer 1972, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Winogura, 21.



**Figure 6 – *Planet of the Apes* (1968)**

Moments after, a strange planet is seen coming closer at each view, looming larger as if it were observed from a spaceship in a spiralling orbit of descent. The Dutch angles induce a sense of dizziness while contributing to the viewer’s disorientation. As the spaceship crashes into the water, viewers and astronauts awake brutally, to what is about to turn into a nightmare. The alien surroundings of the planet induce a true feeling of estrangement as we follow the three surviving astronauts on their trek through what is obviously a hostile world. As the narrative unfolds we discover a world in which humans are mute and barely dressed, a world in which they are prey for the intelligent apes who rule the planet. This world, which has been turned upside down, provides the opportunity for Schaffner to make a “political film” (Schaffner 21) as he foretells the doom of human civilisation. Having been captured by the apes, Taylor discovers progressively that humans are not only treated like beasts but are also used as guinea pigs on which the ape scientists carry out all sorts of experiments. Taylor is a “prisoner in a society dominated by intelligent simians, an autocratic social order” (Lightman 257) which he endangers by the mere fact that, unlike the other humans, he can speak and, therefore, voice his thoughts. Zira, an ape doctor and her fiancé, Cornelius, side with Taylor and will confront Doctor Zaius, chief Minister of Science and keeper of the Sacred Scrolls, who stands for the older generation and whose role is to insure that ape civilisation is not challenged by Taylor.

The imperviousness which characterizes the simian authorities is brought to the fore during the courtroom scene when Taylor is been accused of lying and is silenced by the apes who gag him. As for Zira and Cornelius, they are charged with being heretics. If the scene may conjure up the bleak days of McCarthyism, illustrating the way in which individuals needed to comply with the rules established by the State, the rather humorous “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil”

tableau enables Schaffner to underline the refusal of those who rule to accept any form change. After the trial scene, Dr Zaius, receiving Taylor privately, threatens to lobotomise him if he does not reveal where he really comes from. If this brings us back to the brainwashing treatments the Prisoner undergoes while in the Village, the motif of lobotomy is also evocative of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). Taylor manages to escape with Nova, thanks to the help of Zira, Cornelius and young Lucius. Lucius symbolises the young generation in rebellion against the older one, as he tells Taylor "You can't trust the older generation," to which Taylor retorts "I know what you mean." The countercultural aspect of the film sheds light here on the generation gap. When parting Taylor tells Lucius:

Taylor: That's the spirit. Keep 'em flying

Lucius: What?

Taylor: The flags of discontent. Remember, never trust anybody over thirty.

Having left Zira, Cornelius, Lucius and Doctor Zaius behind, Taylor and Nova ride off along the shoreline. After a while, they suddenly come across the half-buried Statue of Liberty on the beach. "Damn you! Oh, damn you!" shrieks Taylor in despair while pounding his fists in the sand "You did it! You Fools finally really did it!" The shock ending clearly reveals the profound social and political significance embedded in the narrative, while the foreboding words contained in the Sacred Scrolls resonate in our ears with gloom:

Beware the beast, Man,

For he is the Devil's pawn.

Alone among God's primates,

He kills for sport, or lust, or greed.

Yea, he will murder his brother

To possess his brother's land.

Let him not breed in great numbers,

For he will make a desert of his home and yours.

Shun him.

Drive him back into his jungle lair.

For he is the harbinger of death.

*The Sacred Scrolls: 29<sup>th</sup> Scroll, 6<sup>th</sup> Verse*

The sequel *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970) will explore further the concepts of the original movie. The movie picks up where the previous one ended: Nova and Taylor are riding through the desert of the so-called Forbidden Zone while strange phenomena suddenly occur and Taylor disappears mysteriously. Meanwhile, astronaut John Brent, who has been sent to find Taylor, crashes with his spacecraft on the planet. He comes across Nova, who is wandering alone. After being captured by the simians, both Brent and Nova escape and find refuge in the Forbidden Zone. They find shelter in the bombed-out subterranean remains of the New York metro system controlled by telepathic mutants. The mutants bear the dreadful scars caused by their prolonged exposure to nuclear fallout. Brent and Nova discover, in the remains of Saint Patrick's Cathedral, an Alpha-Omega bomb which is worshipped by the mutants.

Brent and Nova are tracked down by the fanatical war monger gorilla, Ursus, who wants to conquer the Forbidden Zone despite Dr Zaius's objections. Undoubtedly, the figure of Ursus

stands metaphorically for that of the Vietnam War hawk. As the gorilla army sets off towards the Forbidden Zone it is stopped by a group of pacifist chimpanzees protesting against the war that is about to be waged. The chimpanzees are carrying anti-war signs on which one can read such slogans as “Wage Peace Not War,” while they are heard shouting: “No More Lies,” “Stop the War,” “Peace” and “Freedom.” These slogans are clearly evocative of the anti-Vietnam War protesters, who were demonstrating across America at the time. The demonstrators try to block the gorilla armed forces without success. General Ursus reacts with extreme brutality as he is about to order that his men fire at the demonstrators (figure 7). Fortunately, Doctor Zaius persuades him not to shoot at the demonstrators who are, however, brutalized and locked away in cages by the gorillas. The film had been officially released on May 26, 1970; this scene may well have come as a terrible and brutal reminder of the ‘massacre’ during which four students, who were protesting against the military intervention in Vietnam, had been killed by National Guardsmen at Kent State University, Ohio a few weeks beforehand.



**Figure 7 – *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970)**

The gorilla soldiers lead by Ursus invade the subterranean city. During the climactic battle, which takes place at the heart of the mutants’ sanctuary, the mortally wounded Taylor activates the switch of the Doomsday bomb destroying the planet. The planet’s final destruction is signalled by the screen going white. The fear of nuclear holocaust was a widespread concern among youths at the time as the director of the film, Ted Post, observed at the time: “Atom bomb for peace is a lethal contradiction” (Ted Post *Cinefantastique* 22). The fear of the atom bomb was all the more accentuated as the American military was in the process of escalating the Vietnam conflict, only one of many growing tensions of the Cold War.

The fourth *Ape* sequel, *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972) takes place eighteen years after the events depicted in the third one, *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (1971). The film is set in North America in 1991 in an unnamed city, run by Governor Brock who also heads the “crypto-fascist” (Alex Abramovitch)<sup>27</sup> Ape Control Agency. He is assisted by the white security inspector, Kolp, and his Afro-American assistant MacDonald. The film depicts a dystopian world in which the presence of the police force is ubiquitous and apes have been turned into slaves. This is enhanced by the opening scene where white tower buildings are silhouetted against the sky and the city streets fill progressively with apes that are heavily guarded by members of the police force. The film, which refers to the painful social convulsions of the Civil Rights movement, has

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<sup>27</sup> Alex Abramovitch, “The Apes of Wrath. The racial political history of *Planet of the Apes*”, Slate, Friday, July 20, 2001, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2001/07/the\\_apes\\_of\\_wrath.2](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2001/07/the_apes_of_wrath.2).

been viewed by critics as an allegory of the Watts riots which occurred in 1965. Eric Greene avers that *Conquest* “may be more than rote repetition of the images of the Watts riots;<sup>28</sup> it may in fact provide a key for rereading the Watts riots as a justifiable violent reaction to intolerable violent oppression, rather than just an outbreak of lawless abandon” (Greene 16). The images of the film exude racist references: the various activities the apes perform bring seemingly to mind the work carried out by the members of the Afro-American community not to mention the brutal way in which they are treated by the police.

Caesar, the son of Zira and Cornelius, is an intelligent ape who can speak and who is therefore a danger for the authoritarian human regime; he will be arrested and tortured by the authorities. Thanks to the help of MacDonald, however, he will manage to escape and free the enslaved apes:

MacDonald: I never believed it. I thought you were a myth.

Caesar: Well I’m not. But I will tell you something that is: the belief that human beings are kind [...]. they won’t learn to be kind until we force them. We can’t do that until we’re free.

MacDonald: How do you propose to gain this freedom?

Caesar: By the only means left to us: Revolution.

The apes upsurge bursts into scenes of extreme violence and as the camera zooms in on the apes, in the final scene, we see their dark, demented faces amid the glow of firelight. The scene is reminiscent of the Watts riots slogan “Burn, Baby Burn:”



**Figure 8 – *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972)**

After the success of the film serial, CBS television network decided to produce a series called *Planet of the Apes*, which “is not a continuation of the theatrical series.”<sup>29</sup> The show was aired on CBS between September and December 1974 and did not turn out to be as successful as the producers hoped, failing to draw an audience in the States; it was, however, a great success in Britain. Like the film serial it takes place on Earth in the distant future. Two astronauts, Colonel Alan Viridon and Major Pete Burke, land on the Earth in the year 3085, in the crash of their spacecraft they manage to save the ship’s flight records. They are immediately hunted down by General Urko and Dr Zaius, head of the apes’ governing council. Befriended by a chimpanzee named Galen, the trio embarks on a quest in order to find a way of reading the data. The executive producer Herb Hirschman believed the show would be an opportunity “to make comments on contemporary society” as they were “particularly concerned with making

<sup>28</sup> The six-day riots, which had been triggered off by police discrimination and brutality, resulted in the death of 34 people, 1,032 injuries and 3,438 arrests. Thomas Pynchon wrote a paper on the riots one year later entitled “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” (1966) in which he sketches a rather bleak portrait of the neighbourhood. The full text is available at <http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/uncollected/watts.html>.

<sup>29</sup> *The Definitive Science Fiction Television Encyclopedia*, 5th Edition, 3188.



comments on racial violence.”<sup>30</sup> In the eighth episode of the series entitled “The Deception,” the trio is tracking down a gang of Ku Klux Klan-like apes, the so-called Dragoons who are terrorizing humans and accusing them of the murder of Fauna’s father who as the story unfolds, we discover, has been killed by another ape. The story is a fable on racial prejudice and depicts with political correctness the terrible consequences of colour prejudice.



**Figure 9 - *Planet of the Apes* (TV series – 1974) “The Liberator”**

The penultimate episode of the series, “The Liberator,” was not aired due to its controversial issue concerning chemical warfare: the trio encounters the leader of a human village, who produces gas ceramic containers, and claims the moral right to destroy Ape City. The network decided not to air the show as they deemed it inappropriate at the height of the Vietnam War protests and in the midst of the Agent Orange controversy.

The *Planet of the Apes* theatrical series and its television adaptation depict a post-apocalyptic world while a number of social and political issues of the 1960s and 1970s lurk behind the films’ narratives, causing viewers to read hindsight into the films and the television series. It is probably the subtle balance between science fiction and social comment which may explain the success of the series. However, on the other hand one cannot avoid taking into consideration the vast merchandising process which resulted from the films’ commercial success; merchandise ranging from comic books to toys literally overwhelmed the market. Hence, *Planet of the Apes* highlighted the ambiguity lying at the core of popular culture, as the films inscribed a series of controversial issues into the narrative’s fabric while at the same time filming sequel after sequel, producing a television show as well as an animated spin-off, *Beyond the Planet of the Apes*, in 1975 on NBC. As a result, the issue of March 1973 of the satirical magazine *MAD*<sup>31</sup> decided to “ripping off... “The Planet of the Apes” and its sequels” proposing a spoof version of the Apes entitled “The Milking of the Planet that Went Ape,” which underlined the economic and mass consumption aspects lying at the core of the Ape Saga.

### **John from Cincinnati (2007) or ‘tis forty years since**

*John from Cincinnati*, produced by David Milch and Kem Nunn was aired on H.B.O. from June to August 2007. The show portrays a dysfunctional family of surfers —the Yost surfing dynasty—who live a stone’s throw from Tijuana, at Imperial Beach, a southern Californian beach town. The Yost family intersects with the arrival of a strange young man, John Monad (Austin Nichols), and a surf talent scout and successful manager Linc Starck (Luke Perry). As Andrew Russ observes, “Milch examines a self-indulgent community in desperate need of redemption and revitalisation.” This community expresses the spiritual and cultural malaise which prevails in

<sup>30</sup> *The Definitive Science Fiction Television Encyclopedia*, 3190.

<sup>31</sup> *MAD*, No. 157, March 1973.

contemporary America; the show may, therefore, be read as a statement on the legacy of the counterculture movement of the late sixties and early seventies. The show initiates the viewer to reflect upon its philosophical and spiritual subtext. It is hardly surprising that Milch chose the surfing community to develop his thoughts; in the mid-sixties the surfing community proposed an alternative “opt-out lifestyle known as soul-surfing” (Booth 313), which led to the emergence of a countercultural philosophy concern with environment and nuclear war (Booth 316) contributing to the image of surfers as “subversives and outlaws” (Booth 316). By the end of the decade, surf culture reflected countercultural themes while promoting the drug subculture. The show, therefore, clearly refers to the remote subversive philosophy of the counterculture symbolised by Shaun’s hippie-ish grandparents, Mitch and Cissy Yost. Imperial Beach, located on the border of two countries, provided Milch with an ideal setting “because it’s on the border” (McDonald) between land and sea, between civilisation and the wilderness it may be viewed as a metaphor of “the border of the natural and supernatural” (McDonald), while also capturing something of an “end-of-the-world feel.”<sup>32</sup>

The characters of Butchie (Mitch and Cissy’s son) and Tina Blake (Shaun’s mother) may stand as two facets of the counterculture movement. Butchie, who lives in a derelict motel leading a rather anti-social life, is a heroin addict and Tina is a porno-star who has decided to quit the industry. The freedom through sex and drugs seem somewhat limited as it has been corrupted by its industrialisation. Sex and drugs now stand as symbols of mass consumption. Drugs had been viewed, during the countercultural revolution, as a means of exploring new realms of consciousness and spirituality whereas today it may well be viewed as a means of social control and of violence symbolised by the drug dealer, who surfaces on Imperial Beach, seeking Butchie. As for sex, it symbolised not only hedonism but was also viewed as a symbol of freedom. What seemed to be a step towards progress seems to have gone progressively wrong. In the aftermath of 9/11 and looking back on the hope and innocence of that short time span when all seemed possible, Milch explores “the fetid and corrupt heart of [contemporary America]” (Russ 276). The conflict between Mitch and Cissy concerning Shaun’s career is another way of highlighting the way in which our modern world commodifies all forms of talent through mass consumption, which may well be deemed a key agent of acculturation. In an interview he gave, David Milch remarked that the show was “really about the cultural malaise which prevails in our country whereby every experience is turned into an article of commerce” (Nina McDonald).<sup>33</sup> The character of John Monad seems, therefore, to be an attempt to recapture the feeling of a period of innocence while he also stands as a symbol of a new spiritual frontier. John’s last name refers to the Greek word *monas* which harks back to the Pythagorean belief that God is the original one from whom all else flows. The importance Milch attaches to the oneness and indivisibility of all life is reminiscent of the way in which Consciousness III, described by Reich, envisages community, a fundamental aspect of the countercultural movement: “It rests on two integrated concepts: respect for uniqueness of each individual, and the idea expressed by the word ‘together’” (Reich 250).

John’s arrival at Imperial Beach provokes bewilderment among both characters and viewers. Butchie takes the mysterious stranger under his wing, since he appears to have an important amount of cash to subsidize his drug addiction. The multiplication of bank notes, while

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<sup>32</sup> *John from Cincinnati.net Fan Site*, <http://johnfromcincinnati.net>, Sunday 18 November 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Nina McDonald, “Exploring Life on the Border with David Milch”, Thursday, December 14, 2006, <http://www.imperialbeachnewsca.com/news/article...>, August 6, 2011.

probably referring obliquely to the Feast of Canaan, may also come to symbolise the fact that money is without true value. John's name Monad refers to the philosophical concept used by Leibniz to encompass the concept of irreducible simplicity. On Craig Ferguson's late night show, Milch explained that the "wave... is the only visible embodiment of what physicists tell us matter is composed of, which particles held together by some kind of magnetic or molecular force" (Nancy Franklin).<sup>34</sup> John may, therefore, be viewed as the magnetic force which will bring together all the fragmented and disrupted lives of Imperial Beach. His speeches are riddled with religious and philosophical symbols contributing to the show's cryptic aspect. The first words he utters resonate with an apocalyptic motif "the end is near." It is worthwhile noting that his first words are addressed to Linc Stark the successful surfing agent and owner of *Stinkweed* surf products, who symbolises the world of false values and mass consumption. John's mysterious if not supernatural origins convey a deep sense of spirituality to the show as he stands in stark contrast to what our materialistic world represents.

If we consider the show's narrative structure, the theme of the border is central as it enables the authors to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, "[t]he border will come mean something over the course of time" (McDonald 1). The unpredictable quality of the show hooks the viewers who wish to understand where this "trip"<sup>35</sup> is going to lead them. The fragmented, puzzle-like structure of the show enables Milch to focus on the "connectedness" (Franklin 2) trope which links all things in life. The fragmented lives of the characters seem to gather around John, for instance in the scene in the motel yard where all the characters gather. The way in which certain scenes are filmed contributed to conveying a blurred reality as if a veil or some fuzzy boundary stood between fiction and reality.

The show's abrupt finale leaves the viewer in a state of bewilderment, not unlike that felt probably by the viewers of *The Prisoner* in the late sixties. *John from Cincinnati* may be viewed as an afterthought or critical commentary of the counterculture. Forty years after the "Summer of Love" the dream has been blown to smithereens, all the frontiers opened by the counterculture movement have disappeared one after the other while a growing sense of failure hovers over its legacy. As we stand on a fringe of despair our eyes are left to wander into the dark abyss of the future. We have lost our innocence and seem to have lost our bearings in a world which is becoming more and more alien.

### ***Coda***

The seminal 1960s show *The Prisoner* was probably the first television series using the medium as means of subversion. The show was riddled with symbolism and required of the viewer his full attention while delivering a rather subversive message on our modern world. *The Planet of the Apes*'s theatrical series and its television avatar embodied the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of film and television media as they contributed to convey and mirror countercultural topics and images while at the same time taking advantage of their commercial success to launch sequel after sequel and invest in a vast merchandising campaign. David Milch's innovative series, *John from Cincinnati*, aired forty years after the "Summer of Love," mirrors the acute anxiety of our contemporary world while reflecting on the social and cultural inheritance of the countercultural movement. Each series modulates its countercultural rhapsodies

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<sup>34</sup> Nancy Franklin, On Television "Dead in the Water. David Milch on a surfing safari", *The New Yorker*, June 25, 2007, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/television/2007/06/25/070625crte\\_television\\_f...](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/television/2007/06/25/070625crte_television_f...), June 5, 2012, 2.

<sup>35</sup> In her article on the show Nancy Franklin refers to Milch's personal history of "multiple addictions" (Franklin 4). This may explain the "trip"-like features of the show.

through a series of metaphors and images which mirror the multi-faceted nature of a movement which was, in the late sixties until the mid-seventies, believed to be about to change our world and our way of being. If Reich's depiction of the philosophy which lay at the core of the countercultural movement is extremely accurate and enlightening, his theoretical approach, on the contrary, clearly underestimated the power of the Establishment: "[T]he heart of Consciousness III is not in the shape of its pants, but in its liberation, its change of goals, its search for self, its doctrines of honesty and responsibility. The Establishment cannot safely swallow those" (Reich 311).

Unfortunately, those values have been swallowed by the Establishment. Yet, unlike the character of Taylor, who left "the twentieth century with no regrets," we are left to look back on that period with a mixed feeling of nostalgia and bewilderment. The hope which sprung from the counterculture revolution seems to have vanished into thin air while the cry of rebellion has been silenced by oblivion.

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