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## Urban Nightmares and Future Visions: Life Beneath New York

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Urban Nightmares and Future Visions:

# Life Beneath New York

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[Figures]



## 1.

At the conclusion of the first installment of the *Planet of the Apes* series (1967), Taylor (Charlton Heston), the astronaut turned escaped slave, achieves insight into the hinge of the premise of the five-part science-fiction epic through a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, half buried in the desert, torch protruding from the sand at a dangerously oblique angle: he has journeyed through time rather than through space, and the planet of the apes is nothing else than the post-apocalyptic future of his own world. This vision of the Statue of Liberty looks more like a visual metaphor than the thing itself fallen off its island perch in New York Bay, however, the enduring cliché of everything Taylor has seen destroyed for him in this future, the blasted myths of America. It is not until midway through the second installment, *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970), that the metaphor is made concrete, unambiguously asserting that where Taylor is, New York City once was. Penetrating the surface of the planet through a series of caves in search of an explanation for how his world came to be ruled by apes, Taylor's successor, Brent (James Franciscus) stumbles upon a second relic, this time unmistakably the thing itself: a ruined platform, much of its signature tiling still intact, of the Queensboro Plaza station of the New York subway. Following the path of the subway tunnel in imitation of the erstwhile commuter, Brent journeys deeper underground, eventually discovering a tribe **[End Page 9]** of mutant humans who worship the sole remaining atomic bomb in the midtown Manhattan ruins of St. Patrick's Cathedral on 5th Avenue. The prisoner Taylor will duly explode this bomb in a dying gesture that wipes out the degenerate planet and locks it into a time-warp cycle of men and apes, escape and destruction. While the Statue of Liberty stood for an abstract America, the New York subway ushers in the inescapability of material history: by contrast with Bartholdi's emblematic creation (first assembled in Paris, and copied infinitely since), the viewer knows implicitly that these tunnels could not, and would not be reproduced anywhere else, in any other world. On the planet of the apes, as always, the subway embodies an irreducible trace of the past; as Brent mumbles, incredulously: "This is where I used to live. This is where I used to work."

At the same time, by promising a solution to the overarching cipher of script-writer Paul Dehn's cyclical vision, the subway participates in a complex dialogue of visual and material metaphors that in New York of the seventies and eighties used the underground of the city to enunciate a series of questions about class, homelessness, and race. After all, the question for which Taylor and Brent are urgently seeking an answer is one of racial inversion transparently troped in time-honored social Darwinian language: how has a world evolved so that gorillas, chimpanzees, and orangutans have established a primitive regime of brutal domination of humans who have in consequence lost the power of speech? The answer proposed by the underground is striking in its pulp obviousness: it is their own fault.<sup>1</sup> Now, if the plot structures of popular fiction are often viciously circular in their logic, they are seldom so in the visual imagination of their settings. The force of such fictions, both cinematic and literary, lies in their manipulation of the spaces of everyday life and of the metaphorical power embedded in those spaces. The self-evident quality of pulp truth is equally the power of visual recognition: the conviction that what we (and Brent) see can only be the New York City

subway. In this article, I explore the peculiarly [End Page 10] powerful s way of underground New York on the postwar American (and global) imagination, focusing on the flood of these underground myths in movies of the seventies and eighties, as...



Fig. 1. John Brent (James Franciscus) discovers an underground tribe of mutant humans. *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, dir. Ted Post, 1970. Video frame enlargement.



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