

Charlton Heston and postwar American filmmaking

Joanne Laurier, David Walsh
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American film actor Charlton Heston died April 5 in Beverly Hills, California, at the age of 84. In 2002, he announced publicly that he had been diagnosed with symptoms “consistent with Alzheimer’s disease.”

Heston was best known for roles he played in some cases half a century ago—Moses in Cecil B. DeMille’s spectacular *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Ben-Hur in the film of the same name (1959) and Michelangelo in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965).

Given the generally repellent nature of the political stances he took in the last decades of his life, Heston’s name may arouse strongly negative opinions and feelings.

His evolution was not an attractive one. The actor prominently and no doubt sincerely identified himself both with the civil rights movement in the early 1960s and, through the film roles he played only a decade or so after the fall of the Nazi regime, with the struggle against anti-Jewish prejudice.

By 1996, however, Heston had reached the point where he could pose for a photo with the founder of the Council of Conservative Citizens, the descendant of the White Citizens Council—the more respectable ally of the ferociously racist and anti-Semitic Ku Klux Klan. He later served as president of the ultra-right National Rifle Association. Whether or not he was mentally deteriorating by that time or not, his end was undoubtedly ignominious.

A certain superficial “leftist” will simply make life easy for him or herself by arguing that Heston was always “essentially” a right-winger and there is nothing to be gained by looking at his life and career. Such people never learn anything. The more challenging task is to look at the evolution of individuals like Heston as the product of objective historical and social processes. One has to make an effort to explain the kind of artistic and social environment the given figure encountered and worked within, the options that were open to him or her, and the ones that were closed. People are responsible, in the end, for what they do, but that responsibility is historically conditioned and shaped.

Heston was born in 1923 (some obituaries have 1924, but 1923 is apparently correct) in Evanston, Illinois, a Chicago suburb, and grew up in St. Helen, Michigan, a small town in the north-central part of the state, where his father ran a lumber mill. He eventually moved back to Illinois with his mother and stepfather, and attended Northwestern University.

After three years in the military and a failed first attempt at an acting career in New York, Heston and his wife returned to the city in 1947 where he got a significant role in a Broadway production of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, with the legendary Katherine Cornell. He subsequently appeared on television and made his film debut in 1950 in *Dark City*, directed by William Dieterle, opposite Elizabeth Scott. His first major role came in Cecil B. DeMille’s circus extravaganza, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, in 1952, in which he gave a forceful characterization as a hardnosed circus manager.

The years are significant. Heston broke into film just as the anti-communist witch-hunts were wreaking their greatest havoc in Hollywood,

in the form of the various hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (1947 and 1951) and the blacklist, and the reactionary spasm known as McCarthyism was gripping the US.

The Greatest Show on Earth was released as the studios were fully consolidating the blacklist. At that time, Heston believed that “actors, on any subject other than their own work, should keep quiet.” Not admirable, but not an entirely surprising attitude for an up-and-coming actor given the repressive atmosphere in the film capital.

Heston later wrote that he deplored the witch-hunts, and there is no reason to doubt his word, but he was nonetheless shaped by the atmosphere and circumstances then emerging in the film industry. From this time onward, certain kinds of criticism of “American democracy” simply could not be uttered or implied in studio films. Heston, there is every reason to believe, genuinely held such an uncritical attitude.

McCarthyism was a response by the American ruling elite to its crisis in the postwar period. As the US became the dominant capitalist power and embarked on the militaristic and belligerent course of “containing Communism,” the witch-hunts at home from 1947 to 1954 served as an adjunct to this effort. At the same time, unable to openly assault the conditions of the American working class, which emerged with considerable confidence from the war, official anti-communism reinforced the grip of the AFL and CIO union bureaucracies and helped keep the labor movement under the thumb of bourgeois politics.

The purge of left-wing elements in Hollywood had immense consequences. American filmmaking did not instantly wither. Major figures untouched by the blacklist, such as John Ford, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Anthony Mann, Vincente Minnelli, Otto Preminger, Raoul Walsh, George Stevens, George Cukor and Douglas Sirk continued to direct and, in some cases, did their most important work in the 1950s.

Screenwriting suffered more deeply in the short term, as a considerable number of the ablest writers in Hollywood were left-wingers. The “average” film of the mid-1950s unquestionably possesses less texture and depth than its counterpart from the late 1940s, and not simply because the social and psychological area that could be treated was far more circumscribed.

Moreover, Hollywood essentially lost its next generation of film directors. Some of the most talented individuals in their thirties were either driven out, intimidated, demoralized or, perhaps worst of all, turned into informers. The last group largely nullified themselves as artists who could tell the truth about the most important matters. After 1960, as the older generation of classical directors began to fade away, Hollywood suffered a precipitous collapse. Critic Andrew Sarris, who has tended to play down the significance of the purges, no doubt was unaware of the implications of his comment in 1968 about Orson Welles (born in 1915) being “the youngest indisputably great American director.”

None of this was Heston’s fault. He entered a field that was undergoing enormous trauma. It is useful to consider this problem from the point of view of the shifting opportunities open to different generations of

performers in the postwar period.

Taken as a whole, for example, it would be hard to dispute that the film roles available to Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas, John Garfield, Robert Mitchum, Robert Ryan and others in the aftermath of World War II were considerably more substantive than those presented to Charlton Heston and his contemporaries (Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis and Rock Hudson) in the early 1950s.

Lancaster began his career dynamically with Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946) and Jules Dassin's *Brute Force* (1947). Douglas started off strongly as well, with Lewis Milestone's *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946) and that "annihilating melodrama," Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947). Mitchum had made films during the war, but came into own after 1945 with films directed by Vincente Minnelli, John Brahm, Raoul Walsh, Edward Dmytryk and Tourneur.

Both Garfield and Ryan (whose film careers were launched on the eve of the war) also had a number of remarkable credits within a few years of the war's end—the former starring in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), *Humoresque* (Jean Negulesco, 1946), *Body and Soul* (Robert Rossen, 1947) and *Force of Evil* (Abraham Polonsky, 1948); and the latter in Jean Renoir's *The Woman on the Beach* (1947), Dmytryk's *Crossfire*, Joseph Losey's *The Boy with Green Hair* (1948), Fred Zinnemann's *Act of Violence* (1948) and Max Ophuls's *Caught* (1949).

By and large, such opportunities did not offer themselves to Heston. It was not entirely a barren landscape in which he operated, but a far more uneven one, with gaping holes. Collectively, his first films never reached anywhere near the cosmopolitan heights of that group including works by Renoir, Ophuls, Tourneur, Siodmak and Zinnemann, all European-born filmmakers, nor did they retain the left-wing perspectives of Dassin, Losey, Milestone, Rossen and Dmytryk (before the latter two turned informer), not to mention screenwriters like Polonsky (*Body and Soul*).

There are interesting moments and scenes in King Vidor's *Ruby Gentry* (1952), Henry Levin's *The President's Lady* (1953) and some of the other mostly Westerns Heston made in the first half of the 1950s, but there is also a good deal of stagnant or routine material. *Naked Jungle* (1954), directed by Byron Haskin, with Eleanor Parker, stands out from the crowd here. Heston and Parker are owners of a South American plantation threatened by a vast column of army ants in this tense, action-packed melodrama.

The Ten Commandments ushered in a period of some two decades during which Heston played leading roles in studio films. DeMille's film is spectacular, lavish, absurd, anachronistic and sometimes quite moving. The most nuanced performance perhaps is given by Anne Baxter, as Queen Nefretiri. The film is not so much a throwback to the previous decade as to another *epoch*. Can one imagine such a Biblical epic striking a chord in the late 1940s or even the 1930s? At the same time, there is enough obvious genuine feeling about the Holocaust, slavery and assorted social tragedies to provide the drama with a burst of energy.

Heston was never an extraordinarily expressive or subtle actor, but it would be a mistake to dismiss him. Even in later, more tired films of the 1970s and 1980s, he lent considerable weight to the roles. He tends to represent something more quantitative, so to speak, than qualitative. He is physically impressive, more so than anyone in the previous generation. The bulk and muscles seem to say something about America in the 1950s, for better or worse.

Not stupid or inarticulate, Heston seemed, however, not to possess a deeply reflective or self-critical nature. This quality made it possible for him to play big figures—Moses, John the Baptist, Ben-Hur, Michelangelo, El Cid, Andrew Jackson (twice), William Clark (of Lewis & Clark), Gen. Charles Gordon ("Gordon of Khartoum"), "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Abraham Lincoln (voice), Cardinal Richelieu, Henry VIII and God, in addition to numerous commanding (in both senses of the words) officers in the military and police—without apparent qualms or self-doubts.

Again through no fault of his own, but due rather to the difficulties of the times, when he worked with major directors, it tended to be in works of their declining or more turgid phases: William Wyler (*Ben-Hur*—interestingly, Lancaster reportedly turned down the role because he was an atheist), Anthony Mann (*El Cid*), Nicholas Ray (*55 Days at Peking*) and Carol Reed (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*).

The stiffness in Heston's performances (with a few exceptions) speaks to the limitation of his abilities, the roles he chose or was assigned, and the historical circumstances. Texture, ambiguity, the questioning of authority, flexibility—these qualities were dealt serious blows by the purges. "Democratic" America of the 1950s saw itself as a strong, confident and bullying country. By and large, film star status did not go to men and women who bore the imprint of failure, defeat and other life difficulties.

Heston, due to both his physical size and his relatively unreflective nature, was vulnerable to being picked up and made into American cinema's "larger than life" personality.

The great exception to all this, which jumps out at the observer, is Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958). According to an interview done in the 1990s, Heston recognized Welles as the greatest artist whom he ever encountered, but considered the film to be nothing more than an exotic "B" picture. He was all too attracted, unfortunately, to the pompous and bombastic.



Film poster for "Touch of Evil" (1958)

In *Touch of Evil*, Heston plays a Mexican narcotics cop embroiled in an investigation in a seedy US border town. For once, he appears in a film that shows something of the corruption, violence and outright criminality of postwar American society, and treats all of it, including the villains in the piece, with ambiguity and complexity. And Heston performs well. His relatively relaxed performance in *Ben-Hur*, or at least the more restrained parts of it, may have resulted from the salutary influence of Welles as a director and performer.

Marlon Brando, almost an exact contemporary, might be considered the anti-Heston: intensely thoughtful, sensitive, flexible, politically subversive. In the end, like two of the other greatest figures in American filmmaking, Charles Chaplin and Orson Welles, Brando found Hollywood an impossible place in which to work. In between Heston and Brando, Newman, Lemmon, Curtis, Hudson and others navigated the increasingly shallow waters of the film studio system until it dried up in a spectacular manner.

Shift to the right

It is worth briefly considering Heston's political trajectory on its own.

As noted, his first political resolution as a young, ambitious actor in

Hollywood, at the time of the witch-hunts, was to keep his mouth shut.

But as his fame grew exponentially after *The Ten Commandments* in 1956, and with a shifting mood in Hollywood, Heston broke his silence and campaigned that year for Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson; and he campaigned for John F. Kennedy in 1960 (the year the blacklist officially ended). In 1961, he joined a picket line outside a segregated Oklahoma movie theater that was premiering *Ben-Hur* in the face of strong disapproval from the studio heads. Heston had already won an Oscar for the film.

He went on, famously, to participate in the 1963 March on Washington, after Martin Luther King, Jr., persuaded Hollywood craft guilds to open their ranks to black workers. In response, a committee calling itself the Arts Group was formed at Brando's home. Heston, who referred to King as "a 20th Century Moses for his people," was elected its chair.

The original group numbered only 10 artists, including Heston, Brando, Curtis, Lancaster and Mel Ferrer, but quickly attracted such leading actors as Shirley MacLaine, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Steve McQueen, Gene Kelly, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Debbie Reynolds, Sidney Poitier, Kirk Douglas and Judy Garland.

The Washington event would be Heston's last civil rights march, although he considered joining King for the culmination of the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965, but was prevented by schedule constraints. The actor would for the rest of his life claim a role in the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

While Heston was involved in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, he admitted in his later years to having been attracted as early as 1964 to the right-wing Republican senator from Arizona, Barry Goldwater, despite Goldwater's opposition to the civil rights bill.

Heston's choice of roles—Moses, Ben-Hur, El-Cid—and the way he rendered them, personified his twin nostrums of self-reliance and personal responsibility. "I think the most important thing a man must learn is to fulfill his responsibilities, and that he is responsible for whatever happens to him. He cannot blame others for what happens to him. That's the easy way out," he once told a journalist.

In 1960, Heston filled a vacancy in the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) leadership and moved up the ranks to its presidency in 1965, maintaining the conservative inner circle that had developed under the leadership of former SAG chief Ronald Reagan.

In *From My Cold, Dead Hands: Charlton Heston and American Politics* (2006), author Emilie Raymond compares Heston's political shift in the 1960s to the right to that of the neoconservatives, particularly Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Martin Peretz and Gertrude Himmelfarb. (The book's title comes from a Heston speech at a 2000 National Rifle Association convention, paraphrasing an NRA bumper sticker: "I'll give you my gun when you take it from my cold, dead hand.")

Contrary to Heston's autobiography in which he claims to have opposed the Vietnam War, Raymond writes that the actor, whom she labels a "visceral neoconservative," was an early proponent of the war after having traveled to South Vietnam in 1966. She asserts that Heston became alienated from the civil rights movement with King's opposition to the war and his participation in antiwar marches in 1967. In general, it seems the increasing radicalization of the antiwar and civil rights movements, with the accompanying inevitable clashes with police and authorities, disturbed and appalled Heston.

In 1968, following the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, Heston supported gun control—by the 1980s, he was opposing affirmative action from the right and defending gun ownership as some fundamental social principle. He voted for Richard Nixon in the 1972 presidential elections (although he later denounced Nixon in his autobiography), shunning the Democratic nominee, George McGovern and saying he was "sick to death of the doom-watchers and the naysayers. This is a good country."

Between 1966 and 1976, Heston's roles were no longer in epic films,

which featured larger-than-life, heroic characters. On the contrary, Hollywood was making a different type of movie, such as the acclaimed *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975, Milos Forman), in which the vulnerable anti-hero (played by Jack Nicholson in that film) takes center stage. Heston hated the "counterculture" or any real or imagined challenge to bourgeois American values. His ire was especially directed at films like *Cuckoo's Nest* that depicted society's "crazies" as being more rational and legitimate than officially sanctioned authority.

According to Raymond: "The movie roles that he accepted and rejected during the 1960s and 1970s reflected his dissatisfaction with the political and cultural radicalism that seemed to be gaining infinite momentum. By retaining the trademark characteristics of masculinity, individuality, and responsibility that he had presented to the public in the 1950s, Heston demonstrated that he still preferred traditional values. Even in the futuristic *Planet of the Apes* (1968), in which he launched himself as a modern-day action hero, he displayed this conventionalism."

This is no doubt true from the point of view of Heston's wishes; however, he or at least his films did not go untouched by the changed mood in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s, even as he was politically hostile to the radicalization. Cracks in America's apparent invincibility emerged, and Heston's characters inevitably showed signs of the process. Considerable anxiety and even apocalyptic sentiments find expression in *Planet of the Apes* (1968, Franklin Schaffner) and its sequel (*Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, 1970, Ted Post), *The Omega Man* (1971, Boris Sagal), *Skyjacked* (1972, John Guillermin), *Soylent Green* (1973, Richard Fleischer), *Earthquake* (1974, Mark Robson) and *Two-Minute Warning* (1976, Larry Peerce).

All was not well in the US, after all. But this did not apparently make Heston think more critically about American society. On the contrary, he was well on his way toward the right.

In 1976, he made *The Battle of Midway*, a patriotic war film celebrating the American victory over the Japanese at the Battle of Midway, playing the most valiant—and the only fictional—character in the movie.

Near the end of Heston's reign at SAG in 1971, a group of actors organized to shift the union to the left in an effort dubbed the Revolution of '73. Heston resigned from the union's board in 1975, reasoning that it had "changed radically recently, and I've become a surly curmudgeon, bitching about policies they go ahead and vote for anyway."

As Heston's connection with the Reagan administration deepened, his relationship with the SAG leadership became increasingly strained. Heston took particular offense at Ed Asner, the Guild's president at the time and a vocal opponent of the administration. Asner had picketed on behalf of the air traffic controllers, a strike provoked by Reagan and a seminal conflict whose defeat ushered in a period of union-busting.

When Asner set out to merge the actors' union with the Screen Extras Guild—in light of recent mergers such as the one between the Coca-Cola Company and Columbia Pictures—he had a public confrontation with Heston, whom he called a Reagan "stooge."

It was Asner's opposition to Reagan for aiding the El Salvador government in suppressing the country's guerilla movement that intensified the feud between the two actors. Heston founded Actors Working for an Actors Guild (AWAG) to attempt to block the merger proposal between SAG and the Screen Extras Guild, an action that proved successful. In 1986, several thousand Guild members voted to censure Heston for his "antiunion" activities.

During the 1980s, Heston worked with various religious and right-wing groups, as well as large corporations. When Anheuser-Busch Brewery hired him as a spokesperson, Heston absurdly told television viewers that beer has "figured prominently throughout our nation's history," from its presence on the Mayflower to its swilling by the nation's founding fathers.

Heston opposed abortion and delivered the introduction to a 1987 "pro-

life” documentary called *Eclipse of Reason* that focuses on late-term abortions. He was honored by both Bush administrations and supported the first Gulf War in 1991, as well as the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. At the end of his life, he was a largely discredited and pitiable individual, as evidenced in Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine*.

A significant figure in American filmmaking for two decades, Heston made a certain mark, but not the most illuminating or enduring. Artists have the obligation not only to be conscientious, but to think about their world and society and bring that to bear on their artistic efforts. There is too much in Heston that is labored, unthought through and contrived. He attached himself far too thoroughly and uncritically to a society riven by contradictions. Heston thought, like many others, that American society was a great success story that would go on forever. The truth helped prove his undoing.



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