

The Evolution of *Planet of the Apes*:

Science, Religion, and 1960s Cinema

Amy C. Chambers

Newcastle University

Introduction

“Three wise monkeys” see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil; they shield themselves from immorality and its temptations. Three injudicious orangutans turn a blind eye to anything that contradicts their religious dogma; they see no truth, hear no truth, and speak no truth. By rejecting science and restricting knowledge, the orangutans in *Planet of the Apes* (1968) have stunted the evolution of simian culture. This scene, which appears in the film’s central trial sequence, apes a recognizable folklore image and was initially shot as an on-set joke. Yet, the director, Franklin J. Schaffner, needed to lighten a dense dialogue sequence and chose to save the three (un)wise monkeys from the cutting room floor. Critics saw this visual pun as “a gambit for mass appeal” that inclined audiences “to laugh rather than grin at the irony” (Murf 1968, 6). But, by retaining this short sequence, audiences gain a metaphorical maxim that neatly encapsulates the film’s attitudes to institutions that disregard civil liberties and responsibilities. Using the lens of science and religion, *Planet of the Apes* allegorically critiques the restriction of rights enacted by the United States’ major religious, political, legal, and commercial institutions during the 1960s.

Planet of the Apes tapped into endemic feelings of alienation from, and distrust of, the “establishment.” In a similar fashion to notable New Hollywood films of the late 1960s such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* (1967), and *Easy Rider* (1969), *Planet of the Apes* is structured around a complicated anti-hero, corrupt institutions, and a pervading hopelessness expressed through a disquieting, desolate conclusion. In *Planet of the Apes*, the church is the oppressive regime that restricts free speech by keeping alternative beliefs and histories suppressed; the apes are stand-ins for authoritarian figures; and the final cut of the film uses the well-trodden science-versus-religion discourse to engage with issues of institutional interference in individual freedoms.

Planet of the Apes has most readily been read as a civil rights allegory, but this does not allow for a complete understanding of the film and its cultural impact (Greene 1998; McHugh 2000; Nama 2008). When reviewing the entire franchise, race appears to be the most prominent issue across the films,¹ but this reading relies upon viewing the franchise “as one great work” (Greene 1998, 1) and overlooks the fact that these films were conceived as individual works (Chambers 2013). Each film was produced in a specific historical moment by different production teams, each with its own set of cultural concerns and interpretive potential. *Planet of the Apes* became the first film of a series, but it was initially a discrete entity, and sequels were only considered once the debut feature was a proven box office success. Other discourses are neglected when *Planet of the Apes* is simply evaluated as a franchise installment. *Planet of the Apes* offers a much wider social commentary than previous texts have suggested since it connects with a far broader spectrum of socio-political tensions than the later sequels, which are beset by overt allusions to US race relations.

I will demonstrate that *Planet of the Apes* changed throughout its journey from page to screen in response to financial, rather than ideological, concerns. The processes of evolution had a central role in the novel and early drafts, but the function of this narrative element transformed across the production process. Budgetary restrictions and concerns over believability led to changes in the narrative's ideological framings. The completed film deliberately downplayed the apes' acceptance of scientific evidence and promoted the apes' religiosity. Technology was aligned with scientific acceptance, and technological inadequacy was blamed upon an adherence to religious dogma. The changes in the narrative caused primarily by production budget restriction and fears of box office failure led to *Planet of the Apes* becoming a satirical film about the state of United States at the end of the 1960s. The film allegorizes the erosion of the wall of separation between church and state in the United States and comments upon the multifarious nature of the late sixties vocal counterculture.

As the following sections discuss, the narrative and allegorical development of *Planet of the Apes*, its meaning, reception, and continued popularity, was the result of the actions of many different people from the author of the source novel, to the critics, to the audience. The 1968 film continues to have relevance, and this is in no small part due to a production process that allowed for the development of rich polysemous interpretations.

Deterioration, Not Detonation: Pierre Boulle's Evolutionary Themes

Planet of the Apes is an adaptation of Pierre Boulle's 2001 [1963] novel *La Planète des Singes* and was written for the screen by Rod Serling (in 1964–6) and Michael Wilson (in 1966–7). The 1968 film follows the voyage of astronaut George Taylor (Charlton Heston) who crash lands onto a seemingly alien planet of intelligent apes and feral humans. The film has many similarities with the novel but significantly differs at the end, when a battered and half-buried Statue of Liberty reveals that Taylor actually landed on a post-apocalyptic Earth. In the source novel, Ulysse Mérou (a journalist) and a spaceship of scientists crash onto an alien, yet Earth-like, planet (Soror) run by a technologically advanced ape species. The reversed evolutionary scale is not the result of a nuclear holocaust; instead, the switch follows a much slower process of human devolution.²

Pierre Boulle framed evolution as a crucial aspect of his narrative, but his novel was not, at its core, a discussion of evolution. In *La Planète des Singes*, humanity is gradually replaced rather than being abruptly usurped by apes or devastated by a bomb as later indicated by the film. On Soror, the former human race becomes dependent upon their ape slave class, as the apes' intelligence and aptitude increase, the humans become progressively idle, thus allowing the apes to rise to a position of power. The de-evolution of humanity is a narrative device to allow for the discussion of human nature rather than the intricacies of the biological theory. The novel was adapted into *Planet of the Apes*, and throughout the process of adaptation, production, and post-production, the theme of evolution was also adapted for the new media form.

It is “literally impossible” to produce an entirely faithful film adaptation of an original source novel (Stam 2005, 17). The various adaptations of Boule’s *La Planète des Singes* created between 1964 and 1967³ eschewed fidelity in order to place the narrative within a specifically American setting.⁴ Rod Serling’s early remediation of Boule’s novel provided a comparatively faithful revisioning of the book’s story world, but it was ultimately rewritten, and essentially reimagined, by a second screenwriter (Michael Wilson) in order to align with the studio’s budgetary requirements. Cinema is a “hybrid art” that combines word, image, and movement, and screenwriters and directors draw inspiration from many sources, including the source novel (Elliott 2003). *Planet of the Apes* is a dialogue heavy film, but much of this “text” is not taken from *La Planète des Singes*. Instead, the novel acts as a source of inspiration in terms of themes and the central concept of a world run by intelligent apes. In adaptation studies, the novel is not prioritized over the film (Whelehan 1999), and in this article, Boule’s novel is used as a starting point for discussing the evolutionary science content that emerges in the book, develops across the adaptation process, and is present within the *Planet of the Apes* and its dissemination strategies and eventual reception.

Rod Serling’s main addition to the film adaptation was the Statue of Liberty ending, which supplanted *La Planète des Singes*’s evolution narrative. In a letter to producer Arthur P. Jacobs dated 29 April 1965, Boule (1965) remarked that the revelation of the Statue of Liberty relocated the film to Earth and meant that the new world order was no longer the “result of a natural oddity in evolution.” Boule remarked in the letter that the “statue business [would be] a cheap unwarranted effect” that undermined the social commentary by changing the role of evolution in the

narrative. *Planet of the Apes* is part of Boulle's literary canon that is bound up with the themes of subjugation, incarceration, and the dangers of complacency. These preoccupations perhaps draw upon his Second World War experiences – Boulle served as a resistance fighter in Burma during the war and was later subjected to forced labour after being captured as a prisoner of war. According to his biographer, Lucille Frackman Becker (1996, 66), these wartime experiences “supplied the background and atmosphere” for his novels. However, Boulle rejected the notion that his work was intended as anti-military commentary, instead remarking that he created “an illustration of a general ‘absurdity’ which could as well have been located in other times, other places and with other personages” (qtd. in Joyaux 1974, 179).

In *La Planète des Singes*, the evolutionary scale is reversed; humans regress and apes progress. Boulle consulted on early script drafts of *Planet of the Apes*, continuing to work under a limited understanding of the principles of biological evolution, misconceptions that lived on in subsequent screenplay drafts, the final film, and even into the film's reviews. In particular, the notion of evolution having a goal is repeated throughout the iterations of the narrative; it is an erroneous concept that is explored and explained from a lay perspective.⁵ Boulle used evolution as a narrative device, and his apes were shown to be intelligent and advanced because they accepted evolution. Boulle's simian race is educated, and his protagonist Ulysse Mérou is questioned about his origins in an academic university setting rather than in the theatrical and accusatory tribunal that Heston's character is subjected to in the film.

It is a slow process of mental deterioration, not the detonation of an apocalyptic bomb, which leads to the rise of the apes in *La Planète des Singes*. The threat to human dominance does not come from an advanced alien civilization or

unruly robots; rather, the novel's humans face extinction following the rise of another species. Humans are used as test subjects in exploratory surgery and as a slave class by apes that consider themselves to be intellectually and ethically superior. The apes are shown to be technologically and culturally similar to the humans that preceded them, aping not only their achievements but also their arrogance. *La Planète des Singes* revels in anxieties about the nature and instability of power and the dangers of complacency.

La Planète des Singes presents a future world that is the result of the rise to intellectual superiority by a non-human species. The strict division between animal and human is obscured in this post-human future, with one species taking on the characteristics of another. *Planet of the Apes* actively subverts the definitions of being human by re-appropriating these terms to a wild animal species and placing non-humans in positions of power. The apes have ingeniously adapted the modern world to suit their unique abilities and requirements.⁶ The novel's version of evolution is presented as an unstable process that does not guarantee human dominance and suggests that the apes have their own evolutionary advantages. Evolution as a theme and narrative device allows for the discussion of socio-political issues and a satirical treatment of contemporary (French) culture in *La Planète des Singes* (Porter 1995).

Descendants of the Bomb: Rod Serling's Drafts

Rod Serling made some significant changes to Boule's *La Planète des Singes*. His draft scripts, written between 1964 and 1966, altered the story's location and the reason for the rise of the apes, but he still gave the topic of evolution a prominent role.

Crucially, his apes are still a technologically advanced species that accept evolution as a viable theory that explains their genetic development and the stagnation of the animal-human. The added inclusion of references to ape anthropological studies (primatology) that place the apes in what chimp scientist Zira refers to as “evolutionary ascendance” also confirms an evolutionist perspective.⁷ The apes’ understanding of evolution is not based upon pre-existing human theories but is recognizable as Darwinian for contemporary audiences.

However, from Serling’s earliest treatments, the theme of evolution was secondary to the shocking Statue of Liberty ending that ultimately allied the film to Cold War fears of nuclear annihilation. This ending also aligns the film with Serling’s “overtly didactic” science fiction television anthology *The Twilight Zone* (Worland 1996, 104). The series’ weekly stories drew upon contemporary political dialogues and prevailing social anxieties by presenting socio-political parables that often culminated in twist endings. The final revelation of *Planet of the Apes* is reminiscent of one of the episodes that Serling wrote for *The Twilight Zone*. “I Shot an Arrow into the Air” (15 January 1960) was about four astronauts who believe they have crash-landed on an asteroid with limited supplies and water. One astronaut kills off his companions in order to survive only to discover that their spaceship had in fact crashed into a desert on Earth.

In an early draft script, Rod Serling (1965, 48) describes the ape city as being technologically similar to contemporary America, with shops, cinemas, and bustling traffic. Serling’s earliest apes, like Boulle’s, scientifically eclipsed their human predecessors by building huge metropolises, developing advanced technologies, and eradicating war. Serling’s setting description depicts “stores with ape mannequins in

the window; chimps and monkeys walking back and forth on the sidewalk; a gorilla policeman directing traffic; a movie marquee with a large picture in front of two monkeys in a passionate embrace.” Serling claimed that the ape world imagined in his early treatments would have cost “no less than a hundred million dollars” (Serling 1975, 13). At producer Arthur P. Jacobs’ request, Serling redeveloped the apes into a “semi-primitive, semi-civilised” species to allow for a more manageable budget when pitching the film to the studios (13). These budgetary restrictions in the early stages of development forced Serling to fundamentally alter one of Boule’s focal points that positioned apes as replacing and surpassing humans both biologically and technologically. As cost issues became evident, the apes’ society culturally regressed to fit speculative film budgets.

In spite of the changing narrative influence of evolution within *Planet of the Apes*, Serling’s drafts still focused upon evolutionary theory and its role in ape dominance. In one scene, the main human character, John Thomas, compares the apes’ “accepted hypothesis” of evolution to Darwin’s theory and establishes that on this world the humans “never progressed beyond the point of the most primitive existence” (Serling 1965, 86).⁸ Thomas is confident in his own understanding of the theory of evolution and attempts to strengthen his argument by undermining the apes’ “scientific” beliefs. Following the discovery of an unexploded bomb in a later sequence, he says:

That bomb and others like it were dropped. It buried this planet, it turned it into a jungle. And from it emerged ... *you*. And a handful of human beings. Descendants of the bomb. Only this time around ... the

ape became the dominant creature. And man evolved as an animal
(120).

Thomas argues that the apes have simply mimicked the culture of a self-destructive human race. Religion quickly becomes part of the discussion, and the presence of faith is listed as evidence of a previous superior species. Responding to questions about the development of an ape culture, Thomas continues:

You don't have a culture. Or a science. Or an industry. The houses you live in, the buildings you occupy, the clothes you wear, the things you believe, the books you read—even the God you worship—that all came from Man! You're imitators. *You've been mimicking the creature Man who was there ahead of you.* (121).

Despite the inclusion of a scientifically advanced race of apes in the Serling drafts, religion is still positioned as being in conflict with science. In part, the apes' failure to admit they are descended from humans is associated with their more prominent religious beliefs.

Arthur P. Jacobs endured years of rejection from the major Hollywood studios (1963–6) for his pet project *Planet of the Apes*; talking monkeys were considered financially risky if not entirely laughable. Richard D. Zanuck, the head of production at Twentieth-Century Fox, also had concerns “about whether or not the apes themselves would appear comical” but eventually agreed to finance a test reel and make-up development (Zanuck, qtd. in Russo and Landsman 2001, 26). An action scene or a simpler street scene would not be sufficient, the studio needed to see that the apes could be taken seriously. Serling was commissioned to produce a short script

with philosophical dialogue and a minimal setting that would test the *gravitas* of the ape prototypes.

Although this short sequence was intended as a showcase for the make-up, the Serling-penned script provided a theoretical discussion of the origins of apes and humans. The test sequence was rehearsed and shot in one day (7 March 1966) on an existing studio set (a military-style tent) with the film's proposed stars and two company actors (John Brolin and Linda Harrison). Dr Zaius (Robinson) and Thomas (Heston) discuss ape evolution and whether human beings are the biological and cultural predecessors to the current dominant ape species. Humanity's potential for development is also considered, with suggestions that the apes might have purposefully stunted human development. The apes' argument against their species evolving from human beings hinges upon the belief that humans have never spoken. This is questioned by the discovery of a talking doll at an archaeological dig that says "mama." The mama doll first appeared in a Serling draft dated 15 May 1964 and added a new tension within the film and a challenge to the apes' evolution narrative. As Thomas, and later Taylor, ask, why would apes make a toy human that talks?

Throughout the development of *Planet of the Apes*, across script development, shooting, and post-production, humans are described as mentally inferior to the apes because their intelligence has not been nurtured. In the earlier versions of the script (1964–6) the orangutan Dr Zaius is posited as an unbending authority figure, poised to undermine the protagonist's intelligence and curiosity. The test sequence includes an exchange that engages the suggestion of a deliberately stunted human intelligence:

Zaius: You're quite remarkable. You go from the floor of a cage—to the holder of scientific opinions in the space of a month and a half. Given more time—I wonder how far you *would* go.

Thomas: I think the question is, Doctor—how far would *you* let me go? Or any of my kind for that matter.

Zaius: *Your* kind? I don't think that question will very likely be put to the test, Mr Thomas. Man, here, is an animal. Man, here *was* an animal. He had no civilisation. He wore no clothing. He thought no thoughts. He spoke no language. (Serling 1966)

By asking “how far would you let me go,” Thomas, the only human seemingly capable of speech on the planet, suggests that the failure of the human species is not entirely natural but also due to the apes’ control and suppression of the human population. The idea of being allowed to develop, to evolve, is present throughout the different stages of the adaptation process. However, as religion becomes a more prominent component, the scripts provide a less nuanced response to scientific thought by engaging with simpler science-versus-religion dialogues.

The technologically advanced simian society that had been originally envisioned by Boulle and then in part by Serling continued to deteriorate through each script revision as, first, budget and, then, studio requirements dictated a less advanced ape race. As the apes became less scientifically advanced, their faith became more prominent and an obstacle to science. When Michael Wilson took over, he constructed an ape religion that appeared in more than passing references; it became the basis for the actions and reactions of the apes, the visual look of the film, and perceptibly altered the science/religion balance. When Serling stopped work on *Planet of the Apes*, the film focused upon the dangers of powerful authorities restricting science and knowledge rather than the evolution of a sophisticated ape species. The authority of the apes was not a natural oddity of evolution, as Boulle had envisioned, but, rather, the result of political and ethical failures of humans, drawing

upon the fears and expectations of atomic war that were adroitly articulated in Serling's shock ending.

Changing the Scope(s): Michael Wilson Rewrites

Concerns about Serling's script and its costs were connected and considerable. The budget given to the producers by Twentieth-Century Fox would not allow for the futuristic urban setting that Serling had previously described. Novels are "overtly compatible, [yet] secretly hostile" when it comes to film adaptations as films are often restricted by budgets and technology (Bluestone 1957, 2). Serling's adaptation retained Boulle's contemporary ape utopia, which would have been a huge undertaking to realize on screen. Once the film was given the green light in September 1966, Michael Wilson replaced Rod Serling as the screenwriter. Wilson rewrote and reworked the existing material with the "specific remit of relocating [the film into] a more backward, and cheaper, society, and trying to make the dialogue more realistic" (Pendreigh 2001, 79).

Serling's contribution to the completed film was palpable, and he was given screen credit alongside Michael Wilson. Serling's involvement dated back to 1964, and he constructed central plot points that have become iconic, including the famous ending (Greene 1998; Pendreigh 2001). Wilson was a well-respected Hollywood screenwriter who had first-hand experience of the oppressive nature of the Cold War and the establishment's control over the life and living of individuals. He had proven his ability to deal with Boulle's satirical prose when he co-wrote an adaptation of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* that won Boulle an Oscar for best screenplay in 1957.

Wilson was unable to claim credit for his work at the time because the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) considered him an “unfriendly” witness in the 1951 Hollywood trials. HUAC ran two investigations into the perceived communist infiltration of Hollywood; screenwriters formed nearly 60 percent of those subpoenaed and blacklisted during this period (Buhle, Buhle, and Georgakas 1998). Wilson refused to give HUAC names of colleagues who may have been involved with communist activity but managed to continue producing work during his blacklisting “under the table” by either using a pseudonym or writing without onscreen credit (Dmohowski 2002, 498).

Wilson’s rewrites of *Planet of the Apes* were inspired by his own experiences during the Hollywood trials. Buhle and Wagner (2003, xvii, viii) argue that Wilson transformed the script into an “allegorical attack on the blacklist” and a critique of the United States as a developed nation that “gags its artists and intellectuals for political reasons, forces them to confess and recant and suppress their role in history.” Wilson used the script as a means of communicating his ideas concerning autocratic government and the restriction of freedom, whether it be artistic, political, sexual, or scientific. Wilson replaced Serling’s scientific simians with religious apes living in a technologically retrogressive—and therefore cheaper to film—society with a blind devotion to faith. The religious component of the film became increasingly prominent, and the scientist characters were relegated to dingy labs and forced to suppress their convictions and research findings in fear of retribution. In Wilson’s *Planet of the Apes*, the apes’ understanding of evolution falters as it is fused with their religious perspective and institutionalized prejudices. These inseparable parts of ape

culture offer a comment not only on the need to have clear partitions between science, religion, and society but also on a general need for freedom of thought.

The ape religion that Wilson constructed mirrors major monotheistic world religions; it is structured around the belief in the existence of a higher power with a written creed that dictates beliefs and behaviours. References to “god” and “lord” in passages recited from the scripture by the apes confirm a belief in a deity. The sacred scrolls are the holy texts and contain all of the lore and the prophecies, and the apes appear to be capable of recalling scripture and readily use it as a guide to matters religious, legal, and even scientific. The ape religion itself is not fully explained in terms of the exact rules and obligations in the film. But its development and detailed construction gives it a clear role with the film’s, and subsequently the franchise’s, abundant story world.

Wilson’s main addition to *Planet of the Apes* was the trial sequence. Changes in the science/religion balance are most clearly evidenced by the inclusion of this sequence and the development of the ape religion as a major visual and structural component of the film. The trial is an allegorical set piece with lengthy stretches of dialogue and loaded phrases that reinforce the representation of the apes as anti-evolutionist luddites. Thomas is put on trial for bolstering a fledgling theory of evolution posited by a female chimp scientist, Dr Zira, and supported by the findings of her archaeologist fiancé, Cornelius.

The tribunal is an investigation of Thomas as a contradiction of the law that unsettles the apes’ faith in their own superiority. Zira and Cornelius have posited an evolutionary theory that incorporates the notion that a biological link exists between apes and humans—a hypothesis that the orangutan council rejects on religious

grounds. Thomas is questioned by Dr Honorius, the deputy minister of justice, who uses scripture as a basis for his cross-examination, evidencing how truly enmeshed religion is within the government system. Honorius' opening statement makes reference to the scriptures and their "sacred truths" and claims that the study of humans and evolution is "insidious" and "perverted." Dr Honorius denounces Taylor as an abomination, claiming that he is part of the experiments of Zira and another "corrupt scientist" who actively attempts to "undermine the very cornerstone of [the ape] Faith."

The language and tone of *Planet of the Apes* trial sequence takes many of its cues from the drama and posturing of *Scopes v The State*, famously nicknamed the "Scopes Monkey Trial," and the anti-evolutionist movement of the 1920s.⁹ The Scopes Monkey Trial was triggered by the actions of a teacher from Tennessee who was put on trial for breaching a state law that made it illegal to teach alternatives to the scriptural explanation of creation (Bowler 2007; Burgen 2010; Ruse 2005). The trial was essentially "a publicity stunt" to give the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) the platform it sought to get the Christian fundamentalists to defend religious education policies in front of the national press (Larson 2006, 93). The trial has since become part of "the folklore of liberalism," a common reference point in the continuing debate on science, religion, and society in the United States (Krutch 1967, 83).

Wilson used the Scopes Monkey Trial as a dramatic frame to discuss pertinent political issues and, in particular, highlighted the US history of restricting the rights of educators, scientists, and artists as he himself experienced. Wilson's approach mirrors, and may have been influenced by, the writers of the stage play and film

Inherit the Wind, which fictionalized the Scopes trial and used it to discuss McCarthyism (Laurence and Lee 1955). As Ronald L. Numbers (1993, 764) remarks, “*Inherit the Wind* illustrates why so many Americans continue to believe in the mythical war between science and religion. But in doing so, it sacrifices the far more complex historical reality.” Historical accuracy is secondary to the *Inherit the Wind*’s critique of the intellectual consequences of the McCarthy era; the science-versus-religion frame allows for the broader criticism of McCarthyism to be realized. One of the scriptwriters for the 1960 film, Nedrick Young, was blacklisted during the 1950s, and the screenplay, and the play it is adapted from, admonishes the actions of government-sanctioned committees that restricted American civil liberties.

Planet of the Apes rejects historical “truth” in favour of allegorical commentary; the film references a historical touchstone while entirely sidestepping questions of accuracy. *Planet of the Apes* updates the science-versus-religion narrative and engages with the then contemporary issues surrounding the aftermath of the McCarthy trials. Continued clampdowns on intellectual freedoms were related to late-sixties educational reforms that ensured the teaching of evolution and protests against the government’s foreign policies (Vietnam) and domestic injustices (civil rights movement, fledgling feminist movement). *Planet of the Apes* caricatures those with fundamentalist beliefs as hypocritical vicious orangutans who are restricted by a loyalty to their beliefs.

In *Planet of the Apes*, the legal system is used to validate the principles of a religious belief. The apes exploit the tribunal to attack the scientists and demonstrate that Thomas is little more than a “performing animal” and that his inability to answer the questions about religious dogma stem from an inability to think and reason. In

addition, during the closing sequence of the film, Zaius declares that there is “no contradiction between faith and science. True science.” His words echo the anti-evolutionist sentiments of John W. Butler who claimed that evolution “was only a guess” and that there was “no controversy between true science and the bible.”¹⁰

Wilson’s scripts introduced a more structured and pervasive ape religion with the sacred scrolls taking a central role in societal stagnation. The apes’ understanding of humanity is derived from holy texts, and they use these teachings as proof in place of scientific evidence. The merging of faith, law, and science is evidenced throughout the ape story world from the phrases they use, to the arguments they make, to the costumes that they wear. Seemingly religious robes are worn all of the time—for example, those worn by the orangutan leaders are visually similar to vestments worn by both legal and religious figures, visually conjoining religion and state.

Wilson may not have created the shock ending that is often recalled as *Planet of the Apes*’ most iconic moment, but he did imbue the script with rhetoric and political allegory that has ensured the film’s continued popularity and relevance. He developed the religious content, and through mockery of the imagined war between science and religion, Wilson used the *Planet of the Apes* to provide a critique of apparently secular institutions that have allowed religious beliefs to corrupt the duty to govern and suppress the right to free speech.

Selling and Seeing Science and Religion in *Planet of the Apes*

The publicity materials for *Planet of the Apes* promoted a reading of the film as “an allegory for our times” (*Planet of the Apes* Pressbook 1968, 4). Each part of the

advertising strategy was intended to support this assertion while also promoting the film as an adventure film with a serious and valuable allegorical undertone. The film's most recognizable star, Charlton Heston, was marginalized in the posters in favour of narrative images that show caged humans. Similarly, the theatrical trailer shows Heston being subjugated by apes. In a section of the trailer shot on set, Heston talks directly to the camera referencing evolution and the film's scientific and philosophical elements. He describes the film's central question as one that asks "what a civilisation would be like where the evolutionary process had been reversed and apes were the superior species." The film and the visual merchandising set up a tension between humans and animals, between science and faith, between "young" and "old." Twentieth-Century Fox and APJAC Productions framed *Planet of the Apes* in terms of the evolution debate and the US science-versus-religion discourse in their marketing materials. They produced a variety of ephemera aimed at different sectors of the intended audience including posters, print adverts, trailers, press interviews, and even an educational guide.

In 1967, APJAC and Fox commissioned Dr William Leader to write *Planet of the Apes: A Guide and Commentary for Teachers and Students: Pursuing the Study of Man*. This was essentially a form of advertising that actively positioned the film as a worthy, science-based, academic text. It provided an explanation of the theory of evolution, placing the original novel and film alongside political and social satirists "who employed fantasy, for political and social satire in order to warn and prepare man for what he may encounter as new frontiers are opened" (Leader 1967, 1). The guide poses a series of questions about whether "man ... the noblest creature of all, [is] also doomed to be supplanted by forms already existing?" and if it is humanity's

“destiny to await some catastrophic errors and miscalculations” that will lead to the creation of “the environment for his own defeat” (3). The guide locates the film within an educational context and targets a youth audience by using a more clandestine method of advertising than traditional print marketing.

Being taken seriously was a major concern for the filmmakers and the distributing studio, as the financing of the 1966 test reel attests; they did not wish to be the subject of critical or audience derision. They tried to disassociate themselves from the science fiction B movies of the time, and huge efforts were made to develop a feature film that provoked some serious debate but not too much controversy. The evocation of evolution throughout the production process exploits a trend within US culture that tapped into several debates ranging from civil rights and race to animal rights and vivisection.

Although much of the explicit discussion of evolution was changed or removed from the various incarnations of *Planet of the Apes*, it was the theme most frequently referenced by contemporaneous reviewers who were quick to point out the film’s evolutionist standpoint. The majority of reviews collected from a variety of archival collections included a reference to Darwin’s theory or at least the confrontation between science and religion. For example, Kathleen Carroll (1968) claimed in the *New York Daily News* that to understand the film the viewer had to “reverse Darwin’s theory of evolution”; the *Plain Dealer* from Cleveland, Ohio, highlighted that the apes were “perverting Darwin” with their corrupted science (Bellamy 1968); the potentially “uncommercial” nature of the theme of evolution was pointed out in a review in the *Financial Times* (Robinson 1968, 32); and the *Variety* reviewer focused upon the broader controversial nature of the commentary on the

“peremptory rejection of scientific data by maintainers of the status quo” (Murf 1968, 6).

Reviews will be used in this article to provide an insight into the attitudes of *Planet of the Apes*' then-contemporary audience. It is important to recognize, however, that reviews can be ignored or missed by audiences and cannot provide an absolute inscription of the views of the original audience. Even so, “upon release ... reviews hold the power to set the parameters for viewing, what to watch for, and how to make sense of it” (Gray 2010, 167). Reviewers express their subjective view (within the strictures of their specific publication) and can change the perception of a film, from the way that it is advertised to the way in which it is remembered within popular culture. Reviews can offer the audience a particular approach to the material, with the critic acting as a mediator between the viewer and the text; in the case of the examples given here, it is the science content rather than the countercultural undercurrent that garners the most attention.

The reviews for *Planet of the Apes* in the mainstream press were mixed, and although they applauded the audacity of the closing shots, the film more generally was understood as “a parable about evolution” (Gelmis 1968). Several reviewers directly referenced the allegorization of US anti-evolutionists, with the reviewer from the Canadian daily the *Globe and Mail*, noting that Zira's research “turns out to be a scientific heresy damnable in apes society as the Darwinian theory has been in ours” (Michener 1968, 19). The potentially controversial nature of evolution highlighted in the popular press may be seen as a response to Fox's *Planet of the Apes* marketing strategies that promoted a science-based philosophical reading of the film. Essentially, the cultural touchstone of the *Scopes* trial, like the use of the term “evolution,”

became an opportunity for discussions of issues pertaining to the constitutional separation between church, science, and state, and of broader issues concerning institutional power and individual freedoms.

A Representative Religious Response to *Planet of the Apes*

Specifically religious publications, in contrast with the secular press, were unenthused by *Planet of the Apes*' evolution narrative and its engagement with science-versus-religion debates. In reviews that were aimed at religious audiences, the tired cliché of science versus religion was of little interest and was only mentioned to highlight its irrelevance. The stereotyping of religion's interference with science was considered more problematic than the specific topics discussed. Religious commentators were concerned with why religious leaders were being held up as authority figures that needed to be confronted alongside civilian government and the military authorities. They did not want to be seen as oppressive authorities. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church following the revolutionary creation of the Second Vatican Council (post-1965), there was a desire to be seen as a more liberal institution that was in tune with the modern world. They did not want to be thought of as controlling, but, ironically, in terms of cinema viewing, the reviews officially produced for the church community told congregants what to think and what to watch at the multiplex.

This section provides insight into a representative non-secular audience, specifically members and clergy of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. The Catholic Church has a long history of involvement with Hollywood, most notably

the National Legion of Decency, established in 1933 to contest immoral film content and ensure that audiences were not corrupted by motion pictures. Although founded by Roman Catholic bishops, the legion had both Protestant and Jewish members, and for more than twenty years, this association was quite powerful in the American movie industry. Alongside lobbying, the circulation of their pledge in churches, and limited control over content, their influence was also spread via their ratings system. Ratings were constructed by the legion in response to individual reviews submitted by lay Catholics and clergy who attended screenings of newly released film that were organized specifically for the collection of reviews. From 1933 through 2004, a large proportion of the films released from Hollywood, from independent filmmakers, and from abroad were reviewed by a cross-section of the Catholic community that rated each film according to its alignment with Catholic values.

By the end of the 1960s and in time for the release of *Planet of the Apes*, the Catholic Legion of Decency had “a new purpose” (Leff and Simmons 2001, 262). It was renamed the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures (NCOMP) in 1965 and had become an exclusively Catholic endeavour with the intention of providing “an intelligent and discriminating moral guide to moviegoers” rather than censorship (Catholic Legion of Decency 1964). It continued with the practice of collecting individual film reviews from the laity and the clergy, as it had done since 1933, and generated an official review and classification. The reviews were published in the bi-weekly *Catholic Film Newsletter* and syndicated to a number of state and regional Catholic newsletters and papers. The published reviews and the collections of individual reviews, many of which can be accessed in archival collections, provide “visible points of contact with the religious community” (Romanowski 2012, 175).

The *Catholic Film Newsletter* reviewed *Planet of the Apes* as “timely but garbled allegorical warning” and classified the film as “morally unobjectionable for adults” (National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures 1968). The brief coverage of the film gave some narrative information but made no reference to the film’s shock ending, choosing instead to highlight the film’s science and religion narratives. It stated that “religion sustains puny blows, but Darwin’s theory of evolution, ironically, hasn’t been so badly misrepresented since the prosecution got going in the Scopes ‘Monkey Trial’.” The critique of religion is easily shirked, but this interpretation suggests that science received worse treatment. It is unclear as to how the NCOMP understood evolution to have been “misrepresented”—was this a reference to the apes’ suppression of scientific evidence or a jibe at the accuracy of the science in the film?

The reviews that informed this official NCOMP review written by the priests and lay Catholics show that the science-versus-religion theme was perhaps more relevant than the official response suggests. One review, submitted by a Jesuit priest who was a regular reviewer for the NCOMP, highlighted the presence of the “old cliché” of science versus religion and the film’s promotion of science over religion. He follows this by noting that “the implication here is nasty in that it would seem to say that we, today, on our planet, should not be guided by the teachings of religion, but should be guided by the findings of science.” Another reviewer notes that religion is given a “beating” and that it is “presented as the enemy of science and resolutely willing to falsify or cover up evidence.” One reviewer asks: “Is it not the fact that the evolution ‘problem’ is dated? Surely there is not an intelligent person alive today who

does not at least suspect the possibility of evolution,” perhaps sneering at other Christian denominations that rejected evolution.

Philip T. Hartung, reviewer for *Commonweal*, responded to *Planet of the Apes* quite positively, noting that the ending “socked you in the face” (Hartung 1968). The review opened with the line: “the proper study of mankind is man,” referencing Alexander Pope’s 1733 poetic critique of science, a reference that points to a criticism of science based upon a religious conception of knowledge. Hartung’s review does not evince any uneasiness with the biological link between apes and humans as he highlights that Zira, the ape scientist, is “very advanced” because she “believes” in ape evolution. But this reference may instead imply a difficulty with the spate of science-based fiction films released in the late 1960s, including the “ridiculous” *Dr Faustus* (1968), which presented their scientific conclusions as self-evident truths.

The producers of *Planet of the Apes* did not mobilize developed discussions of evolution because they did not need to. The film was made for a broad family audience, and the evolution and science-versus-religion narratives were not at the film’s core but, instead, allowed for socially relevant conversations to take place. They hoped to appeal to a younger audience by tapping into popular protest discourses concerning race, gender, science, and political corruption. The filmmakers used the apes and their theocracy to make bold statements about the state of US society; an ape could say and do things that might have been too controversial for a human character in a major mainstream Hollywood drama. The countercultural commentary is technically submersed beneath the surface of genre fiction. *Planet of the Apes* presents an imagined “future with no future” where the fears of a generation have transpired (Sobchack 2004).

Conclusions

During the lengthy process of remediating *Planet of the Apes* from novel (Boulle) to script (Serling/Wilson), changes were made to major components of the original narrative. Evolution was no longer a driving plot device but, rather, one of many elements that allowed for the discussion of contemporary social issues. As critic Linda Hutcheon (2013, xvii) remarks, “adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable ... and with change comes corresponding modifications in the political valence and even the meaning of the stories.” The process of translating *Planet of the Apes* into a politically relevant American milieu required considerable adjustment. The requirements of the budget and the change in screenwriters, and, therefore, style and political perspective, resulted in a simpler science-versus-religion narrative where evolution and the critique of those unwilling to accept science was merely an aspect of the film. *Planet of the Apes* evolved into a political allegory inspired by the attitudes of a disaffected, politically active element of the US population in the 1960s. The screenwriter, Wilson, had his own experiences of victimization during the Hollywood blacklist period and responded to growing discontent with institutional interference, including religion, in the lives of individual Americans and the progress of the nation as a leader in science.

Released in 1968, the pivotal year “of the American decade” (Isserman and Kazin 2004, 222), *Planet of the Apes* responded to the culture war that had been building throughout the post-war period. The film forms part of a collection of cultural forms that declared that the United States “seemed to be falling apart” (Chafe 1997, 169). In the case of *Planet of the Apes*, this extended to a future where the United States had fallen apart. The infamous closing shot of Taylor discovering the

truncated remains of the Statue of Liberty is an iconic shot that devastatingly concludes the film by representing not only the destruction of the United States as a place but also, cathartically, its ideology (which is ironic considering the history of the statue itself). The filmmakers make use of the culturally embedded “science-versus-religion” discourse to grapple with larger issues surrounding the US balance of power and the rights of politically voiceless minorities in the face of perceived corruption. Religion and science are used as a means of articulating the attitudes of the filmmakers toward their own society.

Planet of the Apes uses science and religion as both distinct and culturally intertwined components to frame a culturally relevant discussion of US society. As the science-based content deteriorated in specificity, the religious elements flourished, taking on a dominant visual and rhetorical role. Yet despite the increased religious imagery, few reviews beyond the religious press made note of the film’s religiosity; instead, it was the evolution narrative and the implication that the world order could be turned upside down that caught the attention of commentators. The allegorical content of the film and resultant franchise, although seemingly overlooked at the time of release, cemented *Planet of the Apes*’ continued popularity, and no single reading can fully explain the film’s continuing social and cultural relevance.

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¹ The original series comprised: *Planet of the Apes: Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970); *Escape from Planet of the Apes* (1971); *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972); *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973).

² In *La Planète des Singes*, the human race is described as gradually regressing to a primitive state. Humans devolve as apes simultaneously evolve to replace them.

Devolution is an anthropocentric concept based on the erroneous presumption that evolution should be understood as progress toward a more advanced or complex organism.

³ The draft scripts for *Planet of the Apes* can be found at Franklin and Marshall College Archives and Special Collections, Lancaster, PA, and Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA.

⁴ For a discussion of fidelity in adaptation, see Hodgkins 2013.

⁵ For discussion of misconceptions about evolution and notions of progress, see Gould 1996.

⁶ For example, Boulle (2001 [1963], 63) describes the traffic in the ape metropolis as smooth flowing, as “there were no marked crossings, only overhead passages consisting of a metal frame to which they clung with all four hands.”

⁷ In terms of the history of science, Zira’s use of the term “ascendance” indicates an early understanding of the theory. It suggests that the ape planet is equivalent to nineteenth century human understanding of science (Serling 1965, 86).

⁸ The main character’s name did not change from John Thomas to George Taylor until the release of the shooting script (Wilson 1967)

⁹ *Scopes v State*, 152 Tenn 424 (Tenn 1925).

¹⁰ John W. Butler was a Tennessee state representative, the head of the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association, and proposed the *Butler Act* (1925) that prohibited teachers from teaching evolution in Tennessee (qtd. in Ginger 1950, 82–3).