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From sacred to scientific: epic religion, spectacular science, and Charlton Heston's science fiction cinema

‘Damn you! God damn you all to hell!’ In the infamous closing shots of *Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner US 1968), a blaspheming Charlton Heston falls to his knees, having only just realised that humans have destroyed the planet and themselves. Heston was cast as the disenfranchised astronaut George Taylor because, according to producer Mort Abrahams, ‘he *was* American civilization’ (qtd Pendreigh 56). The filmmakers utilised him as a symbol of American culture – at its best and at its worst. In *Planet of the Apes*, Heston plays a cynical scientist who is stripped of his intellectual power when he crash-lands on a technologically underdeveloped, ape-run planet. Taylor fights against the powerful ruling elite, challenging their religion and consequently their entire way of life. But his scientific knowledge is overpowered by the apes’ restricted worldview. As part of a broader cycle of sf that pushed science to the forefront of Hollywood while retaining religious rhetoric and imagery (Kirby and Chambers 2018), *Planet of the Apes* sets up a tension between science and religion that reflects and engages with the 1960s countercultural discourse that questioned the nation’s most powerful institutions. The apes’ theocratic government comments upon the unsteady separation between church and state in the US, and the religious influence over the advancement of science and technology.

Charlton Heston is an ideal case study for examining Hollywood’s move from historical and biblical epics in the 1950s and 1960s to science-based narratives in the 1970s. He signified the shift from religious to scientific genre films; *Planet of the Apes* signalled his departure from the biblical epics that had made him a Hollywood icon and the beginning of a new era of spectacular sf cinema. But despite the apparent dissimilarity between these two genres, they are deeply interconnected, and major thematic and visual concepts were drawn across from the former to the latter, with the axiomatic Charlton Heston’s presence providing convenient connective tissue.

This essay examines the move from sacred to scientific narratives in late 1960s Hollywood by considering this change as a transition from the golden age of religious epics to the second ‘golden age’ of sf.ⁱ As one of the industry’s most profitable and popular genres, sf cinema was in some senses a response to broader shifts in US culture and changes in popular tastes. The religious epics of the 1950s and 1960s can be seen as ‘a product of American cold war ideology’ that upheld

America's political and religious beliefs (Nadel 416), and the sf films of the late-1960s and 1970s filled 'the commercial and moral vacuum left by ancient-world epics' (Keane 15). The issues that had inspired the religious epics in the immediate post-war era were less relevant to the baby-boomers who now constituted a large part of the cinema-going audience. The tumultuous 1960s and the various battlegrounds of the Cold War both at home and abroad, including the civil rights movements and the Vietnam War, needed to be explored in new, otherworldly spectacular settings. Hollywood therefore created a spectacle-laden cinema for a new generation – an audience that was countering the fashions, attitudes, and culture of their parents' generation.

Sf narratives emerged reinvigorated following the success of two 1968 films: Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (US/UK 1968), and *Planet of the Apes*. Both films were interpreted as having explicitly religious content. *2001* was heralded by Christian publications, such as *The Christian Century*, as a 'prophetic statement of hope and transcendence' and was awarded Film of the Year by the Catholic Film Board for its religious relevance (Meyers 845). *Planet of the Apes* dramatised the dangers of an unchecked theocracy and starred the actor best known for playing Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (DeMille US 1956). *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Planet of the Apes* are therefore boundary films that inspired a long cycle of sf films that were infused with religiosity through casting decisions, visual and rhetorical references, the reception and response to the film by religious groups, and through their marketing. In this essay, I will therefore focus upon how and why religious epics and their scientific successors were connected and consider the relationship to real-world discussions and developments.

Charlton Heston's stardom can be used analytically to trace this transitional period. He had a definable screen presence prior to 1968, and the new science-based characters that he played from 1968 onwards merged with this existing roster of biblical and historical figures that Heston had previously embodied. He starred in several award-winning and highly regarded religious epics; he played both Moses and God in *The Ten Commandments*, a man on a religious journey who witnesses the crucifixion in *Ben-Hur* (Wyler US 1959), and John the Baptist in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (Stevens US 1965). Heston thereby became something of a religious icon himself, with the actor's Christianity an important part of his presence in these movies as well as in his public persona as a celebrity. Heston recognised that when he 'got all

of those folks through the Red Sea', he took on a new religious persona that he furthered through his public professions of faith (177). Heston's 'screen image [was] so widely venerated' that his pronouncements took on an epic religiosity almost automatically (Ross 272). But during what could be considered Heston's second golden age of genre cinema, the actor played less clearly marked religious figures: a misanthropic astronaut in *Planet of the Apes*, a biochemist who cures a zombie pandemic in *The Omega Man* (Sagal US 1971), and a policeman trying to expose state-sponsored cannibalism in *Soylent Green* (Fleischer US 1973).

Throughout his 60-year career, from religious epics to sf to parody to politics, Heston was a star whose reception shifted according to not only the persona created in the films he made, but also other aspects of his career. Richard Dyer argues that audiences have 'foreknowledge' of established stars when they go to see their films, including name, appearance, and the sound of their voice, among other things that 'signify that condensation of attitudes and values which is the star's image' (126). For Heston, his star persona was constructed through his films, his faith, and his political activism, which were expressed onscreen through the films he chose, the interviews he gave, and the issues he chose to promote through charity, protest, and later spokespersonship. But an understanding of Heston's star power in the late 1960s and early 1970s does not need to be filtered through an 'emphasis on the extra-textual', as 'it is the audiences' understanding of the specifically cinematic pleasures of genre and performance which needs to be foregrounded' in this version of Heston (Geraghty 195). Despite later changes to reception of Heston's work, the biblical and historical epics of his earlier career provided such a patently iconic visually, aurally, value-laden base that the later sf films could not help but build upon them.

My focus in this essay will be on how that persona carried over elements of the classical biblical epic into the new science-based sf and I argue that, whether intentionally by the filmmakers or retrospectively by audiences, the religiosity of Heston's established persona was inescapable and that it became an inherent and often integral part of the films he was cast in after 1968. This paper is not intended as an apology for, or revision of Heston's later right-wing political affiliations and activities, but rather an attempt to specifically analyse the star in the historical moment of the 'new art' sf films made from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s (Cornea 82). His transition from biblical epics to sf anti-hero represents the way in which the role and interpretation of science changed in post-classical cinema.ⁱⁱ I will consider

the shift from sacred to science-based narratives and explore how religion was utilised visually and rhetorically across a cycle of films that challenged and commented upon scientific advances.

Charlton Heston: The Voice of God?

Michel Mourlet penned the most famous description of Charlton Heston in an article for *Cahier du Cinema* in 1960:

Charlton Heston is an axiom. By himself alone he constitutes a tragedy, and his presence in any film whatsoever suffices to create beauty. The contained violence expressed by the somber phosphorescence of his eyes, his eagle's profile, the haughty arch of his eyebrows, his prominent cheekbones, the bitter and hard curve of his mouth, the fabulous power of his torso: this is what he possesses and what not even the worst director can degrade (234).

Charlton Heston's star image for audiences in the late 1960s and 1970s was formed in the 1950s and 1960s, as the actor became a household name associated with Judeo-Christian epics.

The 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments* was a remake of Cecil B. DeMille's own 1923 film of the same name. But this later re-visioning by DeMille extended the breadth of the narrative by using historical and Midrashic texts to recreate a complete story of Moses.ⁱⁱⁱ In the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Hebrew Torah, little information is given about prophet's life between being rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter as an infant and leading the Israelites out of slavery. The pre-production research and script drafts aimed to present an unabridged story of Moses including the untold intervening years. DeMille and Twentieth Century Fox promoted *The Ten Commandments* as both religious *and* historical truth. Charlton Heston's star persona was utilised by the filmmakers to 'dramatise and construct Hollywood's particular idea of History' and a particular idea of Moses (Sobchack 'Surge and Slendor' 24). DeMille initially cast Charlton Heston because he reminded him of Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses^{iv} — but the popularity and iconic status of the film ensured that Charlton Heston not only played the character of Moses but *became* Moses for an entire generation of moviegoers (see fig.1). That particular Moses was, as Slotkin suggests, a 'a larger-than-life abstraction of chivalric honor'

(505). In the body and person of Charlton Heston, epic heroes struggled against obstacles and even corrupt institutions to reveal enduring truths.



Figure 1: Moses-Heston parting the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments*

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Heston became part of the landscape of the religious epic. Pauline Kael remarked in her 1976 book *Reeling* that Heston had ‘a godlike-insurance-salesman manner that made him inhumanly perfect for fifties spectacles’ (386). He seemed to become each character he played, and each character became part of Heston’s persona. Kael claimed that Heston’s work in biblical epics ‘destroyed his credibility’ in the action-packed movies of the actor’s second golden age (386), and that his dominant star persona, as the unambiguous hero, undermined attempts to frame Heston as an everyman. Having famously played God, it became a running Hollywood joke ‘that if God came to earth, most moviegoers wouldn’t believe it unless He looked like Charlton Heston’ (Clements). As Ed Leibowitz noted in a 2001 article on the actor, it was practically impossible for the actor to be fully ‘liberated from *being Charlton Heston*’ (64); the roles that defined his career also formed his perceived personality.

By 1960, Heston’s mere presence was ‘almost enough to turn any movie into an epic’ (Wood 174), and his towering physical presence and commanding voice were often commented upon by film reviewers. Despite making more than 100 films in his 60-year career, working through two major historical eras of Hollywood and across several major genres including sf, disaster/adventure, film noir, and war, Heston did not ‘become a strong force in the star system until 1956’ when he played Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (Raymond 18). He went on to build ‘a substantial public identity’ that was closely associated with his personal Christian faith and his work as

a star of biblical epics with major roles in films including *Ben-Hur*, *El Cid* (Mann US 1961), and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (18).

Heston's politics were also always part of his celebrity. Although he is now remembered for his right-wing agenda, Heston did not start actively supporting the Republican Party until 1968, when he voted for Richard Nixon. Although he was not a member, Heston did support the Democratic Party and he was an enthusiastic advocate of presidential candidates Adlai Stevenson (1952 and 1956), and John F. Kennedy (1960). As his religious epic persona developed across the 1950s, Heston supported the causes of the liberal administration despite his personal conservatism. He was a vocal supporter of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, but his commitment to social equality was always informed primarily by his reverence for the US Constitution and its amendments; a reverence that would later underpin his avid adherence to US citizens' Second Amendment rights ('the right of the people to keep and bear Arms').

Heston was indeed perceived as a prominent 'Hollywood activist' in this period, his involvement with the civil rights movement dating back to May 1961 when he joined protesters picketing a whites-only cafe in Oklahoma City (Ingraham 20). On 28 August 1963, at the 'March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom' where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous 'I have a dream' speech, Heston was part of a celebrity contingent that marched alongside hundreds of thousands of protesters from across the US. Heston even read a speech by African-American activist and novelist James Baldwin. Later that day he joined Baldwin, Marlon Brando, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and Joseph L. Mankiewicz in a roundtable discussion moderated by CBS News' David Schoenbrun to discuss civil rights; the show was filmed by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and later broadcast around the world. The presence of a visible and vocal celebrity delegation at the 1963 demonstration and in the news reporting of the event marked it as different from the protests that had come before. It showed that prominent cultural figures wanted to stop simply paying 'lip service to the equality of man' and become an ally to the cause by using their celebrity status to promote the issue of inequality as an American, rather than simply a 'Black problem' (Heston qtd Luper 136).

For audiences in the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, Charlton Heston was therefore not seen as a gun-toting hardline Republican, but as a prominent liberal supporter of the civil rights movement, a campaigner for gun control,^v and a major fundraiser for Planned Parenthood.^{vi} Heston only 'gravitated to the right' following

the ‘fracturing of the Democratic Party in 1968’ (Ross 9), eventually becoming a registered Republican and the NRA spokesperson that those born after 1970 are more likely to recognise.

Sf for a new generation

Sf was ‘the first distinctively Post-classical Hollywood genre, and as such occupies an important place in industry history’ (Langford *Film Genre* 184). This cycle of cynical science-centred cinema responded to a new era in US history that was defined by unpopular and politically caustic struggles abroad and on US soil. Historian William Chafe notes that ‘by 1968 [US] society was almost at a point of cultural and social civil war. As that year unfolded virtually every conceivable conflict exploded into public view’ (169). *Planet of the Apes* and the sf films that followed it revealed a society in transition, one in the midst of an identity crisis, with internal conflicts that were explored on screen through frightening post-apocalyptic dystopias and near-future nightmares that seemed practically unavoidable.

The Hollywood industry also went through major changes during the 1960s. The Production Code that had in part defined the classical period, and the Production Code Association (PCA) that had attempted to restrict content through pre-production script reviewing and post-production edits lost its grip over Hollywood output. This set of industry-wide moral guidelines and the association that attempted to uphold them had been adhered to in varying degrees since 1934. However, during the late-1950s and early 1960s filmmakers progressively incorporated more adult content in their films, such as the overtly sexualised *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder US 1960) and the shockingly violent *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn US 1967), thereby successfully challenging ‘the antiquated and increasingly irrelevant’ Production Code (Langford *Post-classical Hollywood* 113). By the official end of the Production Code in 1968, it had become effectively powerless and was subsequently replaced by a ratings system. This transformation therefore offered ‘a brief window of opportunity when an adventurous cinema emerged’ (Neale 91). The films produced in this period did not depart massively from the style of their predecessors, but did allow for experimentation, and the transformation of existing genres.

Just as the biblical epics had run in cycles of popularity since early narrative cinema,^{vii} sf had cycled back into Hollywood’s favour in the 1960s. But these were no longer the films of the ‘golden age of science fiction cinema’ and its anti-communist

paranoia (Booker 48). *The Thing from Another World* (Nyby US 1951) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel US 1956) had both played upon fears of communist invasion. This new wave of sf articulated a fear of ecological disaster and overpopulated dystopian futures. Their themes indicated a shift away from the conservative Cold War politics of the fifties, instead seeking out political and social change. Low-budget films emerging from the counterculture, such as *Easy Rider* (Hopper US 1969), had proved to be popular and inspired studios to rethink their funding strategies. SF films soon followed this ideological trend: *Silent Running* (Trumbull US 1972) was made because Universal executive Ned Tanen wanted to experiment with funding a range of films 'with counter-culture credentials' (Kermode 10). Films from this dystopian sf cycle were 'bleak warnings from the counterculture' that claimed that continuing on the path of excessive consumerism, societal prejudice, and nuclear armament would lead to humanity's extinction (Geraghty 41).

As Vivian Sobchack notes, movies are 'a continuous inscription and interpretation of American experience through time and in the world' ('Beyond Visual Aids' 293). Cinematic genres and cycles therefore reflect the concerns of a nation while challenging and commenting upon cultural discourses. The sf stories of the 1960s and 1970s essentially served 'the same function' as the biblical epics (Ruppersberg 37): they provided a continuation of epic spectacle while offering a metaphorical space to explore issues pertaining to American societal tensions. Both of these genres also offered opportunities for technological advancement. The epics were enhanced with widescreen that changed the scope and scale of the image, and sf filled these expansive spaces with spectacular special effects that ultimately energised the genre and transported it from the drive-in to the mainstream.

Charlton Heston's sf films responded to a growing anxiety about the sciences and environmentalist concerns regarding the future of the Earth. Malicious use of science, medicine, and technology results in bio-warfare and a cult of albino mutants in *The Omega Man*, nuclear apocalypse and the evolutionary rise of the apes in *Planet of the Apes*, and overpopulation, starvation, and cannibalism in *Soylent Green*. The human race survives in some form in all of these narratives, but it is either found in an overpopulated, depleted, or even an almost inhuman form. Murray and Heumann theorise that these films, as part of a wider eco-film cycle, embraced 'the memory of an environment and ecology that no longer exists on their Earth – an eco-memory' (92). The rhetoric of these films thus 'rests on nostalgia', as they look back to an

almost mythical past where humans and nature co-existed in harmony (18). These films drew upon a sense of nostalgia for a natural world that has been irrevocably damaged following overpopulation, pollution, and a squandering of natural resources. The sf films of this period promoted ‘a more critical and ideological agenda as the fit between “believability” of events and audience knowledge and credibility [narrowed]’ (Brereton 164). Their eco-dystopian theme is interwoven with a religious discourse: science and technological innovation create the apocalypse, and salvation comes in the form of Charlton Heston.

Rhetorical references to religion

References to religious traditions and practises were purposely incorporated into all three of Heston’s sf films. *Planet of the Apes* uses religion as a narrative device that was designed to reduce the cost of the production, but which ultimately developed a science/religion dichotomy that explains the ape’s retrogressive science as a result of religious interference. *The Omega Man* includes a dangerous religious cult whose zealous rejection of technology and avid acceptance of their disfiguring viral infection stands in stark contrast to the rational scientist Neville. *Soylent Green* has a more positive response by positioning the church as a sanctuary that survives the apocalypse and helps the beleaguered humans of New York through their daily trials, while the malevolent Soylent Corporation utilises religious rhetoric to disguise the true purpose of their euthanasia clinics. This apparent merging of religion and science was not new to the sf genre, as Golden Age films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* had explicitly incorporated religious analogies.^{viii} But this new wave provided a more sophisticated approach to religion, which has a more central role in each of these films. The consistent incorporation of religion and science indicates the interconnected nature of these two spheres within US culture and on US screens following the religious epics’ fall from favour.

The early script drafts of *Planet of the Apes*, produced by Rod Serling between 1963-1966, provided a relatively close adaptation of Pierre Boulle’s futuristic satire *La Planète des Singes* (1963). But Serling’s vision was deemed too expensive, so Michael Wilson was employed to redevelop the script once the film was green-lit by Fox in 1966. In Michael Wilson’s April 1967 draft script of *Planet of the Apes*, the Statue of Liberty is described by Dr Zaius as a ‘graven idol worshipped by an ancient tribe’ as he orders a gorilla sniper to kill the human protagonist (144), originally

named Thomas.^{ix} The Statue, as one of the most potent icons of the US, is interpreted here as a graven idol, possibly referencing the Golden Calf that symbolises the corruption of the Israelites in Exodus,^x and therefore also the corruption of the ideals of hope, freedom, and equality that were under scrutiny by the protests and movements of the era.

Michael Wilson relocated *Planet of the Apes* from the utopian ape metropolis imagined by Boulle and Serling to a technologically retrogressive – and therefore more budget-friendly – society with a blind devotion to faith structured around a Moses-inspired prophet called the Lawgiver. The religious component of the film became a prominent narrative element, and the ape university-based scientist characters envisaged in the novel and early adaptations were forced into the lower classes and became fearful of voicing their convictions and research findings in the face of religious retribution. One of the major themes to emerge from the rewrite was the science/religion dichotomy and the presentation of a flawed society that has allowed government and religion to merge (Chambers 2016). The state-sanctioned suppression of research and scientific advancement by religious institutions is the core issue that *Planet of the Apes* attacks.

Religion takes a distinctly hostile role in *The Omega Man* as well. The events of the film follow an imagined Chinese-Russian war in which biological weapons released a virus that kills or mutates the human population. The film's protagonist, scientist Robert Neville, injects himself with an experimental vaccine for the virus that makes him immune to the plague and therefore targeted by 'The Family': a 'medicalised cult' where members are recruited (infected) and de-programmed (cured) through medical practice. 'The Family' is simultaneously an illness that must be treated and a new religion that has an initially unbeatable medicalised recruitment strategy (Laycock 89). It considers Neville a target because of his reliance upon the scientific advances that brought the virus into existence. Malicious use of science, medicine, and technology in the film's imagined biological warfare creates these creatures, and indirectly their post-apocalyptic Luddite cult.

Whereas *Planet of the Apes* and *The Omega Man* frame organised religion as corrupt, insular, and dangerous, *Soylent Green* does not place religion and science in opposing positions. *Soylent Green* is the only one of Heston's sf films in which he does not play a scientist. He plays a police detective who fights for the truth in a dystopian future beset with rampant commercialism, political corruption, and

ecological decay. The film imagines a corrupt and overpopulated New York in the year 2022, suffering from pollution and poverty with only the church to offer charity (and perhaps, a sense of morality). Science and technology only exacerbate the problems, and death is welcomed by those who choose to end their lives – although they are unaware that their corpses will be processed into ‘food’. Specifically, the Catholic Church offers refuge, its nuns and priests providing medical attention and shelter. When Thorn finds an orphaned child, he automatically takes him to the church as a recognised sanctuary. The church is also the only institution that does not profit from the people who come to them, unlike the life termination clinic that is ostensibly a wing of the Soylent Company, who take the deceased and process them into Soylent Green.

All three of Heston’s sf films express the idea that Earth has been corrupted, and there are clear rhetorical references to the creation story and ideas of a fall from grace, destroying Eden, and humanity looking back to a time when food was plentiful, and nature was benevolent. For example, in *Planet of the Apes* Taylor refers to having brought a ‘new Eve’ on their mission – but she doesn’t survive their journey. As he and his chosen mate Nova ride off into the Forbidden Zone, there is a moment of hope that they will begin a human colony as a new Adam and Eve, before the crushing realisation that Taylor has been on a post-apocalyptic Earth. In *Soylent Green* a starving population in the confines of the concrete jungle views even New York’s relatively near past as Edenic. Earth, in its natural state, is held in reverence and it is humanity’s exploitation of both natural and scientific resources that leads to the apocalypse rather than an external force (either alien or divine). Conrad E. Ostwalt argues that twentieth-century visions of the apocalypse are distinct from ‘the familiar Judeo-Christian view of the end time’, as what he terms the ‘modern apocalypse’ can be understood as a ‘response to the desperate sense of crisis’ the later part of the century fosters (Ostwalt 61). The films under discussion here all imagine a human-made apocalyptic moment where humanity and human cultures as we would recognise them have been obliterated (*Planet of the Apes* and *The Omega Man*) or what we would consider human has been lost (forced cannibalism in *Soylent Green*).

Near-future humanity as depicted in this series of dystopian films ruins the world by destroying the environment and forcing those who survive into demeaning and reprehensible actions. In all three films, Heston is both a survivor and a saviour who works to conserve humanity morally as well as physically.^{xi} Heston’s characters,

drawing upon the actor's persona as a morally upright and religious man, attempt to save humanity and avoid the literal end times. The 'modern apocalypse' therefore aligns itself with traditional apocalyptic literature, as 'transfers the messianic kingdom from a new age heaven to a second-chance earth' (Ostwalt 62). In *Planet of the Apes*, Taylor rides off with Nova with the potential for a second-chance human race; by exposing the devious actions of the Soylent Company, Thorn provides hope for an alternative future; and in *The Omega Man*, Neville's sacrifice allows for the last humans to escape 'The Family' and go forth to discover and inoculate future survivors.

Sacrifice and messiahs

In his book *Hollywood Left and Right* (2011), Steven Ross terms the actor 'Moses-Jesus-Heston', adroitly recalling the undeniable religious connection that the actor brought to his later secular film career. Heston's post-classical 'characters saw the light, knew the truth, and could lead the masses' through a variety of dystopian futures in an effort to save humanity (295). *The Omega Man* offers the most overt presentation of Heston as saviour figure when his character's blood saves humanity from extinction.^{xii} In *Soylent Green*, he saves humanity from literally consuming itself by unveiling a criminal conspiracy. And in *Planet of the Apes*, his survival at the end of the film is humanity's precarious reprieve from extinction. The use of what Claire Sisco King terms a 'sacrificial victim-hero' is often used in films to 'emphasise the onscreen violence' and to give the film meaningful resolution in the hero's death (3). During the late 1960s and into the 1970s, male sacrifice became a means of metaphorically achieving 'national rebirth' following the United States' conflicts at home and abroad during the peak of the Cold War (47). Heston's post-apocalyptic sf sees the main character fighting for survival as the representative of a failed or failing humanity, redeeming humanity through his own sacrifice.



Figure 2: The closing shot of *The Omega Man* shows Neville in a crucifix-pose surrounded by his sacrificial blood that will ultimately save humanity

This self-sacrifice takes on an overtly religious tone in *The Omega Man* when Neville becomes a distinctly unsubtle Christ-figure as it is revealed that his blood will save humanity (fig.2). *The Omega Man* offers several visual references to Christ to further explore the position of religion within the narrative. Neville is a Christ-figure to be mocked by ‘The Family’ as a figure of both fear and derision. In one scene, Neville is strapped to a wooden fence in a crucifixion pose by the The Family and threatened with immolation (fig.3). In a similar fashion to Taylor in *Planet of the Apes*, the scientist character is left powerless in a future-world where religion is followed blindly, and an acceptance of scientific truths and advancements is considered blasphemous. As an atheistic man of science, he threatens the cultists’ recruitment and ultimately their future. The film’s closing shots further confirm the reliance upon religious imagery to incorporate science and vilify religious dogma.



Figure 3: ‘The Family’ ties Neville to a fence, and threatens to burn him at the stake. The image combines references to the crucifixion with puritanical witch trials.

Heston's star persona is central to the reading of *The Omega Man* as his work as a religious epic star is referenced and extended by the use of Christ imagery. The attempt to save through sacrifice is most clearly seen in *The Omega Man* and gave the actor's existing persona a messianic dimension. After discovering that Neville is immune to the plague, one of the uninfected humans named Dutch (Paul Koslo) exclaims: 'Christ, you could save us all!' – highlighting Neville's symbolic Christ status and his role as humanity's saviour. As Tony Shaw remarks, Neville contravenes the portrayal of 'scientists as troublesome idealists or villainous obstructionists of the state' by being a progressive saviour who relies on scientific knowledge (112). Neville thereby combines the roles of secular scientist and Christ figure, developing a vaccine as a doctor that is ultimately delivered to humanity through sacrifice as the cult leader Matthias martyrs him with a spear to his side, like the soldier piercing the side of Jesus.

In *Soylent Green*, death is a commercial endeavour. In an investigation into the death of the CEO of the Soylent Corporation, Thorn steals an oceanographic report that shows that plankton – the world's primary food source in 2022 – is running out. Thorn's elderly roommate Sol Roth (Edward G. Robinson), who is notably the only Jewish character in the film, is able to interpret the data and ultimately reveals the true ingredients of Soylent Green. In response, Sol chooses to end his life at a euthanasia clinic; in one sense he sacrifices himself so that Thorn can get the evidence he needs to prove that Soylent Green is made of corpses, but Sol also just wants to escape a world that he barely recognises any more. Euthanasia is offered by a cult of sorts who frame the decision to end human life as 'going home'. The people who work at the facility wear long white robes and the patients go to their death surrounded by nature films (Fig.4) and pastoral music. A dream-like nostalgic ending to a life defined by starvation, pollution, overpopulation, and depression.



Figure 4: Sol Roth in his last moments of life immersed in images of nature

Heston is not visually marked as a Christ-figure in *Soylent Green* as he was in *The Omega Man*, but he does continue to embody the messiah figure by putting himself in danger in order to save humanity and its future. As Mark Jancovich has remarked, Heston's image of masculinity comes from the 'capacity to suffer, not to conquer', and he suffers alongside the other humans, even though his messianic attempts are not always successful. Sacrifice is a major theme in the film, as the capitalist cycle that allows for the production of the Soylent Green product relies on people's willingness to choose death. Neville's sacrifice in *The Omega Man* is represented as messianic, and Thorne's work as an officer of the law and ultimate death exposes the evils of the Soylent Corporation, hopefully saving humanity from continued cannibalism.

Conclusion

Charlton Heston was an epic actor who went from literally playing God in *The Ten Commandments* to playing 'god' as a messianic scientist in his later films. Across Heston's science fiction turn his characters attempt to save humanity from plagues, nuclear apocalypse, and self-destruction. *Planet of the Apes*, *The Omega Man*, and *Soylent Green* are connected by their tragically fallible (anti)heroes played by Heston, characters who built upon the actor's classical star persona that was underpinned by religious and historical characters. Heston was a bankable epic star, recognisable to many audiences as the hard-willed 'god-like hero' of the 1950s and early 1960s (Kael 108). Heston's defining interpretation of Moses was central to his persona for a 1960/70s audience and the expectations for a Hestonian hero.

But Heston's image as the morally upright, actively Christian, all-American hero was out of step with the anti-authoritarian movies he starred in. His move into science-based cinema was a calculated one intended to negotiate a place for the actor in this 'new' Hollywood that attempted to appeal to a newly recognised audience that responded to countercultural themes. Classical epics were seemingly usurped by dystopian sf movies that rejected the institutions, traditions, and cultures that classical, censored Hollywood upheld. Science was the new God of post-classical Hollywood, with films that concerned themselves with science-based issues, including the consequences of nuclear war, ecological catastrophe, overpopulation, space travel, and uncontrolled science and technology.

Filmmakers used Heston as a moral figure whose ethical code was either out of step with a future-world (*Planet of the Apes*, *The Omega Man*), or missing and desperately needed (*Soylent Green*). Heston's sf trilogy retained religion and also promoted a scientific narrative; while the dominant genre changed, religion and science continued to be interwoven, thereby reaffirming the connection between them in American society. Post-classical Hollywood was not a huge departure from its previous years in terms of style, and studios were concerned with balancing their established audience – for whom Heston was a hugely popular star – with an emergent baby-boomer audience who wanted to see a revolutionised US, both onscreen and off. By using Heston as a 'Hollywood Moses' in politically motivated movies, filmmakers and studios found ways to retain their audience while also cashing in on new cultural and scientific trends and advances.

ⁱ The first 'golden age' of sf is said to have occurred in the 1950s identified by the sheer volume of films produced in Hollywood. A new sf cycle began between 1968 and 1977– this series of dystopian films bridged the gap between the invasion narratives of the 1950s and the sf fantasies and horrors of the late 1970s and 1980s. See Joan F. Dean. 'Between 2001 and *Star Wars*'. *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 7:1 (1978): 32-41; Christine Cornea. *Science Fiction: Between Fantasy and Reality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Post-classical Hollywood was a period of US cinema from the mid-to-late-1960s to the mid-to-late-1970s, defined by a generation of filmmakers whose work reflects the political and cultural conflict in US culture. Other terms used to describe this period is New Hollywood, the Hollywood Renaissance, and the American New Wave. See Jim Hillier. *The New Hollywood*. London: Continuum, 1992; Geoff King. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002; Barry Langford *Post-classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style, and Ideology Since 1945*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Midrashic texts are a form of rabbinic exegesis of Jewish scripture. They offer an early Jewish interpretation of the Torah, including histories, commentaries on specific laws and principles, and clarifying religious law. See Michael Fishbane. *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012.

^{iv} Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Moses* (1513-1515), sculpture, Church of San Pietro, Vincoli, Rome.

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- ^v Heston endorsed President Lyndon B. Johnson's Gun Control Bill Legislation (11th July 1968). A statement that was authored and signed by Heston, Kirk Douglas, Hugh O'Brian, James Stewart, and Gregory Peck. See 'Gun Control 1968', Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers Records, Margaret Herrick (AMPAS) Library. Box 16/folder 167.
- ^{vi} The Hestons were among the largest single private donors to Planned Parenthood in the 1970s. In an interview with Laura Anne Ingraham in 1986, Heston was asked why he supported and funded Planned Parenthood, and he responded: 'Because I consider the population problem the most serious problem facing mankind in the world today. On the other hand, I am opposed to abortion. This puts me in a difficult position. But I do consider all other goals of Planned Parenthood to be worthwhile' (20).
- ^{vii} See Derek Elley. *The Epic Film: Myth and History*. London: Routledge, 2014; James Russell. *The Historical Epic in Contemporary Hollywood*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007.
- ^{viii} *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was about a visit from a benevolent and wise alien intelligence with the character Klaatu following a Christ narrative beginning with message of salvation for humanity only to be betrayed, killed by the authorities, and then resurrected. See Robert Torry, 'Apocalypse Then: Benefits of the Bomb in Fifties Science Fiction Films'. *Cinema Journal* 31:1 (1991): 7-21.
- ^{ix} John Thomas was the original name of the main character. It was not changed to George Taylor until a revision made on June 22 1967. Michael Wilson, *Planet of the Apes* [Shooting Script], 2.
- ^x 'The Golden Calf', Exodus 32:1-6, *The Bible: New International Version* – the Golden Calf is an idol made by Aaron in the absence of Moses who has gone up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.
- ^{xi} *Planet of the Apes* has a human population, but Taylor is distinctly different from them as he speaks and reasons. He is the last of his kind after the other astronauts he lands with are killed or lobotomised. As saviour here, he is a new Adam who could potentially bring the human race back from their devolved present.
- ^{xii} *The Omega Man* was an adaptation of Richard Matheson's 1954 book *I am Legend* in which the main character not only dies but also becomes the last remnant of an old human race. His declaration 'I am legend' refers to his future role as a legend, for those born infected, of a former iteration of the human race. *The Omega Man*, on the other hand, ends with the character's sacrifice providing a new hope for the future.

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