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**Damn Dirty Dames:  
Dissecting Difference in *Planet of the Apes***

DEAN CONRAD *and* LYNNE MAGOWAN

**[Sample Text]**

***Them and us***

In July 2014, Matt Reeves' motion picture *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (*Dawn*) was added to seven other movies, two television series, dozens of novels, graphic novels and novelizations, 120-plus comics, computer games and countless websites whose roots can be traced back to Pierre Boulle's 1963 French science fiction novel *La Planète des Singes* (translated by Xan Fielding as *Monkey Planet*, the English version which provides the references for this chapter). In a sense, Boulle's legacy is artificially inflated, as many of these narrative creations actually owe more to Franklin J. Schaffner's hugely successful 1968 movie *Planet of the Apes*—the first screen version of Boulle's book.

The witty introduction to Rich Handley's 2008 encyclopedic *Timeline of the Planet of the Apes*—an attempt to place all narrative spin-offs from Boulle's work into a definitive chronology—lists some of the franchise's wild and conflicting plot elements, including: "Android gorillas," "the simian Santa Claus" and "Martian apes" (*xiii*). Whilst Handley's full list presents challenges for those attempting to write about output generated by *Monkey Planet*, it also serves to highlight the durability of *Planet of the Apes*—and points to the innate strength and allure of its core premise.

Firmly rooted in the traditions of Jonathan Swift, *Monkey Planet* presents a classic dramatic "what if...?" scenario. Chimpanzee space travelers, Jinn and Phyllis, discover a message-in-a-bottle recounting the human Ulysse Mérou's visit to the planet Soror, where apes are dominant. This creates the setting for the simple: "what if the roles of apes and humans were reversed?" The basic concept translated well to 1960s' commercial cinema, with its requirement to communicate, develop and resolve a clear idea in five reels.

Screenwriters Rod Serling and Michael Wilson retain much of Boulle's satire and discursive irony; however, they also make much of the fear and revulsion generated by the novel's central theme—not least through what is possibly the most quoted line of the film, spoken by Charlton Heston:

TAYLOR

Take your stinking paws off me,  
you damn dirty ape! [00:57:34]

The allure of this mythos is simple: it scares the hell out of us!

Building on this theme, J. P. Telotte places the original film under the sub-genre heading of "...environmental matters: threats to the environment and threats to the human species itself" (104). The four-sequel series that follows, however, gradually loses focus on the central concept: in *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (*Beneath*, Post 1970) a Taylor substitute is menaced by a community of mutant humans; *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (*Escape*, Taylor 1971) inverts the original premise by bringing talking apes to 1970s' America; *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (*Conquest*, Thompson 1972) charts the rise of subjugated apes, leading to *Battle for the*

*Planet of the Apes* (*Battle*, Thompson 1973), in which inter-ape conflict, coupled with ape-human alliances, tends to dilute the notion of "them and us" that underpins the original concept. This dilution is carried into Tim Burton's 2001 "re-imagined" *Planet of the Apes*, which clearly sets out to develop themes of inter- and intra-ape politics. The result, according to John Walker, is less than successful: "... with its glum hero and turgid action, all it demonstrates is the poverty of Burton's imagination" (908). Indeed, many of the film's detractors complain about its failure to return to Boulle's binary "them and us" narrative.

### *I have a dream*

Popular, critical and academic attempts to define the symbolic "them" and "us" in *Apes* have overwhelmingly cited racial allegory: black humans vs. white humans. The significance of *Apes*, released at a pivotal time in the trajectory of the American Civil Rights Movement and just two months before the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., could hardly be lost on the critics and audiences. Indeed, retrospective commentaries on the original film series generally take notions of racial allegory as read. John Brosnan complains that "... the allegorical and satirical elements are so obvious and heavy-handed they set my teeth on edge" (153). Phil Hardy complains of *Escape* that "... the clichés fly thick and fast" (298), and John Clute and Peter Nicholls observe that the apes in *Conquest* succeed "...with the help of a sympathetic and all too symbolic Black man..." (259).

Academic treatment has been more circumspect, especially with regard to Schaffner's original film—perhaps in recognition of his screenwriters' attempts generally to avoid righteous hectoring. Hardy refers to their "...literate script ... full of delicate comedy in which rational ape confronts irrational man" (276). Ximena Gallardo and C. Jason Smith point up the movie's relationship with its contemporary, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), suggesting that Kubrick's film "...harmonises quite nicely with the less urbane *Planet of the Apes*..., which explores the devolution of the human species and evolution of the apes..." (13).

The obvious racial allegories of *Apes* still provide rich pickings for academic discussions, many of which cite Eric Greene's *Planet of the Apes as American Myth* as influential. These include Adilifu Nama's wider genre survey, *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*, which exposes symbolic, semiotic, cultural and historic themes to support his contention that *Apes* is "... American SF cinema's most powerful allegorical response to the conundrum of American race relations at the end of the turbulent 1960s" (127).

It is tempting to echo the many positive views of the original films, if only because, as Jason Davis points out, "...they invoked race and racial politics when other science-fiction movies left such issues off the screen" (254). However, it is also possible to argue that the original novel and films, if taken as racial metaphors, present a negative message. The apes in Boulle's novel have merely copied humans over generations, rather than developed or evolved by dint of their own skill and invention. This is prominently reflected in the 1968 film's medieval setting, replacing the cars, airplanes and other technologies of the novel. Whilst this was a budget-saving production decision, the screenplay consequently retains Boulle's narrow-minded, regressive and often dysfunctional ape society. Viewed in this light, the popular allegory positions Black as less capable than White. The effect is similar to arguably misogynistic science fiction films like *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (Protazanov 1924), *Queen of Outer Space* (Bernds 1958) and *Barbarella* (Vadim 1968), in which female-dominated societies are presented as dysfunctional and ultimately doomed.

Aware of the *Apes* films' potential for multiple readings, Nama is careful to use the term "American race relations," noting that it encompasses both the American Civil Rights Movement, framed as "Martin Luther King's utopian dream of racial harmony" (99), and the "... aggressive, confrontational ..." Black Power Movement. Nama knows also that the popular Civil Rights Movement came to encompass the interests of many minorities and oppressed groups, including Hispanic Americans, indigenous peoples, homosexuals and women.

### ***Forbidden Zone***

Whilst *Apes* clearly presents a useful, sustained metaphor for those commenting on difference using screen representation, there is surprisingly little evidence that creators of the original series had much interest in highlighting minority experiences beyond those of Black Americans. As Greg Littmann intimates in *Banana Republic*, racism, classism and speciesism are far greater preoccupations in these films than is sexism (136/7).

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### **[End of Sample Text]**

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