

THE LEGEND OF THE
PLANET
OF THE
APES

**OR HOW HOLLYWOOD TURNED
DARWIN UPSIDE DOWN**

BRIAN PENDREIGH

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DARWIN UPSIDE DOWN**

BY BRIAN PENDREIGH

B**XTREE**

This book is dedicated to the memory of Ham



First published 2001 by Boxtree
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 0 7522 6168 1

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

Typeset by seagulls
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham PLC, Chatham, Kent

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During ten years as film correspondent of the *Scotsman*, Brian Pendreigh helped persuade Franco Zeffirelli to shoot *Hamlet* in Scotland, wrote about *Braveheart* when it was still at the script stage and was there on its night of triumph at the Oscars three years later. He became a full-time freelance film journalist in 1997 and now writes regularly for the *Sunday Times*, *Guardian* and the Scottish press.

Previously he was a feature writer and reporter on the *Scotsman*, during which time he accompanied the Royal Marines to Central America, swam with sharks, took part in experiments in the paranormal, regressed to 'past lives' under hypnosis, and filed copy from Edinburgh District Council meetings. He overcame his fear of heights by crewing on a sailing ship and had one of his pieces selected for a school exam paper by the Scottish Examination Board. It was about what seagulls think about people in outdoor swimming pools and was written on a day when its author was stuck for inspiration.

His books include *On Location: The Film Fan's Guide to Britain and Ireland*, *Mel Gibson and His Movies*, *Ewan McGregor* and *The Scot Pack*. Awards include Ainsworth Film Journalist of the Year, in 1995 and 1999. His favourite film is *The Magnificent Seven*.

He lives in Edinburgh with his wife Jenny, children Ewen and Catherine, and almost half a million other people, most of whom he does not know.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I started out on this book, I was like Taylor in the film – I did not know what I would find out there. I knew enough to believe *Planet of the Apes* merited a book; I was intrigued by the concept of the film, its continuing popularity and its influence; I knew Edward G. Robinson had been involved at one stage, but I had no idea just what else I might find. That I managed to uncover so much new material so long after the event reflects the degree of cooperation I received from (almost) everyone involved. Even Richard Zanuck, head of Twentieth Century Fox at the time of the original, managed to take time off on the set of the new *Planet of the Apes* film, which he was producing.

First and foremost, however, I would like to thank Mort Abrahams, associate producer of the original film, for a series of interviews over the phone and face to face in Los Angeles. He gave freely of his time to talk me through the film from writing and casting through production to the sequel. He also provided priceless insights into the character of his colleague, the late Arthur P. Jacobs, whose vision and commitment kept the project alive when every studio in Hollywood turned it down.

Secondly, a huge debt of gratitude is due to Cynthia Becht and her helpful staff and volunteers in Archives and Special Collections at the Charles Von der Ahe Library, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, in which Arthur P. Jacobs's papers, photographs and illustrations have been deposited – including sixty-five feet of boxed records from his production company, Apjac. After more than thirty years, memories of individuals proved fallible, to say the least, and the contemporary letters, memos and other papers in the collection were a gold mine. Together, personal recollections and contemporary records shed light on each other and formed the basis of a fascinating story, full of ambition and intrigue, with a cast of characters as rich as many a novel.

Thanks are due not just to Mort Abrahams and Richard Zanuck, but to several others who played key roles on the original film and its sequels – actresses Kim Hunter and Linda Harrison and actors Lou Wagner and James Gregory, who spoke to me despite having being debilitated by a stroke; to John Chambers, who won an Oscar for his make-up design and who saw me in

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

hospital in California; to art director William Creber, who played such an important role in the look of the film. Ted Post, who directed *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, welcomed me into his home in Brentwood and entertained me with the memories of a lifetime in film, television and theatre. Frank Capra Jr took time off from running Screen Gem Studios in North Carolina, where *Dawson's Creek* is filmed, to talk about the other three sequels, on which he was associate producer.

Director Franklin J. Schaffner and writers Rod Serling, Michael Wilson and John T. Kelley are all dead now, but a special thanks is due to those who worked on the film in the first half of the sixties, before it arrived at Twentieth Century Fox, who shared none of the glory of the film's triumphant release and legacy but who helped me understand the tortuous process of trying to knock the project into shape and find backers. They are directors Blake Edwards and J. Lee Thompson (who later directed *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* and *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*), writer Charles Eastman and artist Don Peters. Thanks to Lisa DeMatteo, Charlton Heston's publicist; Kimberly Wire and Hilary Clark in the Los Angeles press office of Twentieth Century Fox and Stephanie Wenborn and Milly Swain in the London office; to Eileen Peterson, unit publicist on the new *Apes* film; and to Terry Martin, who runs Time Machine Collectibles (www.timem.com) and the official websites of several *Apes* stars, including Linda Harrison (www.lindaharrison.com/indexn.html) and Lou Wagner (www.louwagner.com/).

I am especially indebted to Terry Hoknes, organizer of the International Planet of the Apes Fan Club, who provided me with copies of the television programmes, his *Ape Chronicles* fanzine and his memorabilia database. And to Luiz Saulo Adami, organizer of the Brazilian fan club, who generously sent me a copy of his book *O Unico Humano Bom é Aquele que Está Morto!* (The Only Good Human is a Dead Human!), a second unpublished book, *Man Has No Understanding!*, and photographs from his personal collection. Thanks also to Brian Penikas, the distinguished Hollywood make-up artist, *Apes* fan and organizer of the Apemania re-enactment troupe. And to all the other fans who provided an insight into their passions – John Roche, editor of *Simian Scrolls* fanzine, 'Andrew', Dave Ballard, Christopher S. Brown, Jack Krueger, 'LordTZer0', Alan Maxwell, Dean Preston,

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Alexander Ruiz, Robert Thorpe, 'Tim' and 'Urkorules'. You know who you are ... I think.

Thank-you Rod Serling expert Gordon Webb, assistant professor of television and radio at Park School of Communications, Ithaca College, New York; Mark Kratzner and Diane Steele, who helped track down Don Peters; staff at the Arts Library Special Collections of the Young Research Library, UCLA, where I was able to inspect Twentieth Century Fox's original production files; the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles; and the National Library of Scotland.

Thanks to Dr Christopher Welch, principal lecturer in astronautics at Kingston University, Surrey, for his patient explanation of time dilation, special relativity and other scientific matters; to Professor Nick Barton, Edinburgh University; Professor Richard Byrne, professor of evolutionary psychology at St Andrews University; Professor Peter W.H. Holland, professor of zoology, at Reading University; Dr Jamie Stevens, Wellcome Biodiversity Research Fellow at the Department of Biological Sciences, Hatherly Laboratories, Exeter University; and Dr D.W. Yalden, senior lecturer in zoology at Manchester University; for their expert views on whether apes really could turn the tables on mankind; and to the Media Resource Service and AlphaGalileo, the Internet press network of experts on science, medicine and technology.

I am also indebted to AOL; to my agent Giles Gordon at Curtis Brown and his former assistant Susie Brumfitt; to Ewen McDonald, who once more brought his indexing skills into play; and, last but not least, to Jenny Pendreigh, who transcribed interviews, assisted in research and was ever present with help and advice, and to our two children, Ewen and Catherine, who sat with me while I watched every single *Planet of the Apes* film and television programme. Over and over again.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE END

*What will he find out there?
His destiny...*

And so Charlton Heston leaves the apes behind and rides off in search of his destiny, accompanied by the primitive, mute beauty Nova. Their dark-brown mount walks and occasionally canters, across beach after empty beach, until they come upon a huge structure, half-buried in the sand, a building, or perhaps a statue. Heston, naked but for a loincloth, dismounts and looks in horror at the edifice that towers above him. A tiny figure, with waves breaking on his bare legs, Heston is framed between huge, dark, shadowy spikes. 'Oh my God,' he gasps. 'I'm back.' And then he hangs his head, as if he can bear to look no more. 'I'm home ... all the time,' he concludes, slowly and painfully. 'We finally really did it.' His voice wells up with a terrible anger. 'You maniacs.' He drops to the ground and pounds the wet sand with his fist in a futile gesture of despair. 'You blew it up. God damn you. God damn you all to hell!' And the surf sweeps in around him, wiping away the violent disturbance he has made in the sand.

Finally the camera pulls back from Heston, square-jawed hero of *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*, standing, virtually alone on a beach, on a distant planet, where apes rule and humans are hunted for sport. The camera retreats along the beach to reveal the top half of a statue poking through the sand, a familiar crowned head and an arm holding aloft the torch of freedom and welcome. The Statue of Liberty is instantly recognizable, in its symbolic glory, and now its ultimate shame. What its appearance in the sands means is that spaceman Charlton Heston has travelled hundreds of years into the future, but has gone ... nowhere. The Planet of the Apes is Earth in the year 3978. Man has come full circle from those ancient days when Heston collected the Tablets on the Mount, led the species out of the wilderness and smashed the chains of slavery and oppression.

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This is the planet that spawned Ben-Hur, El Cid and Moses ... now ruled by apes.

That final scene was one of the most effectively shocking in the history of cinema. *Planet of the Apes* was filmed in 1967, during the Cold War, when the world lived in the shadow of nuclear apocalypse. Despite the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, that scene of Heston on the beach remains one of cinema's most dramatic and chilling, and one of the most surprising for any viewer unfamiliar with the story. In its day the appearance of the Statue of Liberty played like the revelation that Norman Bates's mum was really just Norman in a frock or that Bruce Willis in *The Sixth Sense* was dead all along. It was to become one of the most famous scenes in cinema, so much so that when Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment issued the *Planet of the Apes* films in a boxed set they had Heston and the Statue of Liberty on the cover; Greenpeace used the monument on a poster, declaring: 'Do nothing, and nuclear testing will eventually come to an end'; and in an episode of *The Simpsons* cartoon series, when Homer is chosen to become an astronaut, he tells a press conference: 'the only danger is if they send us to that terrible Planet of the Apes.' Then he recalls the full impact of that scene on the beach. 'Wait a minute ... Statue of Liberty. That was our planet. You maniacs. You blew it up. Damn you. Damn you all to hell!' That was not the first, nor the last reference to *Planet of the Apes* on *The Simpsons*, one of the most cineliterate shows on TV, and a barometer of American popular culture.

In that famous ending lay the beginnings of a phenomenon, and a legend. There were to be four sequels; two TV series – one live-action, one cartoon; comics; novelizations; and a huge range of merchandising tie-ins, from bubblegum cards and mugs to waste-paper baskets and ape masks – long before George Lucas accepted merchandising rights as part of his deal to make *Star Wars*. In another *Simpsons* episode Troy McClure stars in a *Planet of the Apes* musical, whose lyrics include the wonderful line 'I hate every ape I see, from chimpan-A to chimpan-Z.' In the popular TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Xander reprises Heston's cry of 'It's a madhouse, a madhouse,' but Willow interrupts to identify the source of the quote before Xander can finish. There are references to *Planet of the Apes* in the seminal 'Generation X' movie

Reality Bites; the Robin Williams comedy *Mrs Doubtfire*, in which a puppet orang-utan complains that humans got the best roles; and *The Spy Who Shagged Me*, when Austin Powers travels back to the sixties and claims that in the future the world will be run by 'damn dirty apes'. These films and programmes were all made in the nineties, twenty years after the last of the sequels and the television programmes. Those final efforts were hampered by restricted budgets, which showed in the make-up and shortage of extras. The writers were beginning to run out of ideas and the symbolism of Heston and the Statue of Liberty seemed to have been replaced by the cutesy appeal of the Halloween mask and the dollar sign. Nevertheless, *Planet of the Apes* would not go away. Quite the reverse, with the phenomenon gathering pace again throughout the nineties.

In the original film Heston and his colleagues hibernated in capsules while they travelled through space at close to the speed of light for eighteen months – which, due to the vagaries of 'Dr Hasslein's theory of time' (an apparent variation on Einstein's thoughts on relativity), was the equivalent of 2,000 years on Earth. They woke up to find a planet ruled by apes. The 1993–4 season of the American TV show *Saturday Night Live* featured Heston falling asleep in his dressing room and waking up centuries later to find the TV studio run by apes, with simian versions of regular characters. And in 1998 *Planet of the Apes* became the subject of an elaborate Internet joke when veteran astronaut John Glenn went back into space on a ten-day mission. While he was away some bright Earthling thought up the idea that everyone should put on ape suits for his return and he would think *Planet of the Apes* had come true. 'It swept across the vast expanse of cyberspace like an electronic firestorm, jumping from private mailbox to joke forum to Usenet newsgroup until it seemed to engulf the entire World Wide Web,' reported CNN. 'By most accounts, it ranks as the most popular joke in Internet history.' One Californian web designer received the joke from fifteen different people and the message itself quickly began to evolve. Danyel Fisher, a graduate student of computer science and folklore at the University of California, began researching the origins and spread of the joke. 'Where other folklorists talk about hundreds of years of diffusion, I talk about hours of spreading,' he said. He found several musical

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versions, some of which fitted the tune of the New Seekers' song *I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing*:

'I'd like to see the world dressed up
In ape suits black and grey,
So when John Glenn comes back from space
He thinks he's far away.'

Not everyone embraced the idea, however. 'I have recently received several messages from some "very amusing people" suggesting that when John Glenn comes back to planet Earth the entire human race dress up in ape suits,' wrote one Mark Bakalor, in a communication that wound up in Fisher's e-mailbox. 'It's all fun and games when it comes to fooling John Glenn but no one seems to be thinking about the consequences of your "silly joke". What happens when the apes see that they've taken over the Earth? You think they'll be happy to go back to their little forest enclaves and sit around with homely scientists picking bugs out of their fur? I don't think so. If I were them I'd be mad and I'd start to figure a way to get even. Believe you me, you don't want to be on the business end of a gorilla wedgee [whatever that is]. Also what happens the next time the Earth is actually taken over by apes? Then the astronauts come home and laugh at all the monkeys and say, "great gag". But within minutes they're ambushed, captured, neutered, and sent to work on a banana farm. Then who's left to save the Earth? Not you Mr Funny Pants. You'll be busy building tree cities and ape mobiles at spear point. But I guess it's all just a goof to you. I just wish people would think before they decide to contact everyone they know with idiotic e-mail.'

And they said Americans had no sense of irony.

During the nineties devotees launched fanzines and set up sites on the Internet entirely devoted to the *Planet of the Apes* films and spin-offs. Brazilian fan Luiz Saulo Adami spent more than ten years researching and writing his book *O Unico Humano Bom é Aquele que Está Morto!* (The Only Good Human is a Dead Human!), which was finally brought out by a local Brazilian publisher in 1996. It was followed two years later by an American guide to the value of *Planet of the Apes* collectibles. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum of intellectual respectability,

American academics carried out heavyweight studies into various aspects of the series. Wesleyan University Press published Eric Greene's well-researched and thought-provoking, if occasionally overbaked, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics, and Popular Culture*, which argued that *Planet of the Apes* was 'perhaps the most sophisticated treatment of racial conflict Hollywood has ever produced', and the film merited a chapter in James F. Iaccino's *Jungian Reflections Within the Cinema: A Psychological Analysis of Sci-Fi and Fantasy Archetypes*. The chapter was entitled *Planet of the Apes: The Evolution of an Archetypal Shadow Species*, prompting the question, in the words of that immortal inquisitor Griff Rhys Jones, 'Wot's that then?' 'The Jungian shadow can best be described as the person's 'dark, inferior side' which is more animalistic than human, more bestial than civilized,' writes Iaccino. 'At times the shadow can assume an outward identity so that it can display its primitive, demonic urges for all the world to see. The trickster figure is one such shadow projection. This character delights in playing malicious jokes on people and shows no remorse in whatever dangers he has inflicted upon humanity. One of the more common representations of the shadow trickster is that he is simia dei, or "the ape of God", to highlight his negative subhuman nature. The science-fiction series *The Planet of the Apes* is an excellent extension of the shadow trickster. Here the apes of God are actual simians ...' Indeed.

While the film developed a dedicated fan base and a certain academic kudos, the wider truth was that it had become an inescapable part of popular culture, even for those who had never seen it. And some were pleasantly surprised when they did. Reviewing the film on the Internet Movie Database in 1999, one ordinary, non-Jungian viewer, 'Pates' from Boise, Idaho, wrote: 'No one I know under 40 had seen this film, though we all joked about it as being a stereotypical "bad" film, based on rumours, the title, and clips seen here and there. Finally one weekend, when I was working until 2.00 am, I went home and there was a sequel on late-night TV, during the 30-year *Planet of the Apes* marathon. It made me curious about the original and I tracked it down. I have to say it blew me away! The film is philosophical, creative, absorbing and scary. Excellent commentary on religion and just about everything else. I strongly recommend it to anyone who has not seen it. So far

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I haven't even been able to convince my friends to see it because there seems to be such a strong prejudice against it and some sort of entrenched belief it must be bad; in fact it is one of the finest films I've seen and I can see why it is a classic. If you enjoy films that make you think, you simply can't dislike *Planet of the Apes*.'

There is no doubt that 'Pates' represents many younger viewers who regard the whole notion of *Planet of the Apes* as camp, a notion based on Halloween masks, cartoons and comics, rather than the original film, which was a major commercial – and critical – success at the time of its release in 1968. By the turn of the millennium *Planet of the Apes* had established itself as a mainstream classic, a cult hit and a joke – all at the same time. After years of rumours and speculation about a new film, involving the likes of Oliver Stone, James Cameron and Arnold Schwarzenegger, Twentieth Century Fox began shooting a big budget 'reimagination' of *Planet of the Apes* at the end of 2000. It would be directed by Tim Burton, who previously brought a dark, offbeat sensibility to *Batman* and *Edward Scissorhands*. Mark Wahlberg, the star of *The Perfect Storm*, was taking over from Heston as principal *Homo sapiens* and the simian cast included Tim Roth and Helena Bonham Carter.

Planet of the Apes is a brilliant concept that truly does – to exploit an old cliché – work on various levels. On the one hand it is a straightforward and colourful action-adventure film, in the style of *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and a slew of traditional westerns, with goodies and baddies, and apes instead of Indians, their costume and make-up readily lending themselves to childish imitation. There are some who would claim it is no more than that. Richard Zanuck, former head of Twentieth Century Fox and producer of the new film, insists the twist ending in the original was chosen purely on dramatic grounds and was not intended to deliver any sort of message. And Charlton Heston wrote in his autobiography, *In the Arena*, in 1995: 'I'd volunteered for my own war as we were supposed to do ... I'd also given God heartfelt thanks that two atom bombs had cancelled my scheduled inclusion in the invasion of the main islands of Japan, with a projected cost of a million American lives and twice as many Japanese.' Not exactly an endorsement of nuclear disarmament. 'The object of the picture was entertainment,' says Zanuck. 'We weren't trying to send any

profound messages, most of which have been concocted and interpreted as time has passed ... and were never really particularly intended. I mean, we wanted to show an upside-down world where apes were in charge and humans were the slaves, so to speak, but we were going for that idea on an entertainment level. We weren't trying to send a message or preach any social statement.'

It is certainly possible to read too much into the film, poring over the videos and finding deep and multiple symbolism in every scene. Eric Greene, in his book, notes that 'Nova finally speaks in *Beneath* [the first sequel]... She is shot and killed by a gorilla. Message? Beautiful women should just be beautiful – and keep their mouths shut.' But everyone is killed in *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*. So how does that mass slaughter fit in with the silent women theory? It doesn't. Elsewhere Greene writes: 'The threat of castration by apes, who were traditionally associated with darkness, sexuality and, by extension, femaleness, suggests that there was also a crisis of masculinity built into *Planet* ... Indeed, the final shot of the film shows him [Heston] fallen in front of a giant woman who is both darker and stronger than he.'

Far from debating the social, political and racial implications of the film, prospective backers were worried audiences would simply laugh at the idea of apes running the world, any world. It is one thing to carry off such an idea on the printed page, but quite another to manage it in the more literal medium of the cinema. Producer Arthur P. Jacobs trooped round every Hollywood studio without success. Even the personal involvement of Charlton Heston, one of Hollywood's biggest names, was not enough to convince studio bosses that viewers would take it seriously. It was while Jacobs was producing another film for Twentieth Century Fox that he persuaded Zanuck to at least put up the money for a screen test to see if the ape make-up might work. By this time another major Hollywood name was expressing an interest and he was prepared to have himself coated in fur to play an ape. Edward G. Robinson, star of many gangster classics, was ready for what could be the most challenging role of his career, as an orang-utan. Like many of the principal players in this drama, Robinson is dead. But the screen test he recorded with Heston survives and Robinson is remarkable in it. 'We wrote a long dialogue scene, you know, so you could see their faces

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moving,' Jacobs later recalled. 'Well, Dick liked it and said he wanted to show it to Darryl [his father, the legendary Darryl F. Zanuck, who ran the studio from its inception in the thirties till the fifties and was once again part of the Fox hierarchy]. So we brought it to New York. Jesus, there were nine guys in that screening room, watching the test. If any one of them laughed, we were dead.' No one laughed.

Robinson's health was failing and he never did appear in *Planet of the Apes* (though ill-health is just part of the reason why he never made the film, as we shall discover in the course of the story). But his screen test helped persuade Twentieth Century Fox to go ahead with an expensive project that might still make them the laughing stock of a Hollywood that was already in fast decline. Ironically, Jacobs's other film was another big movie about talking animals. But whereas *Doctor Dolittle* flopped, *Planet of the Apes* was a hit, grossing more than \$25 million from its initial US release against a cost of less than \$6 million. Its success led to demand for a follow-up, despite the opposition of Heston, who thought a sequel would reduce *Planet of the Apes* to the level of the Hardy family, the subject of a series of popular and inoffensive comedies in the thirties and forties. The success of the sequels rewrote the Hollywood rulebook and, for better or worse, set the fashion for action 'franchises' for three decades. *Planet of the Apes* spawned a fashion not just for sequels, but for science-fiction films set in a post-apocalyptic future, including *The Omega Man*, with Heston, and, of course, *Mad Max*; and for sci-fi that was more than a parade of people in weird costumes (a phenomenon that reached its self-deprecating nadir with a homicidal human carrot in *Lost in Space*) – sci-fi that also raised social, political and religious questions.

To suggest *Planet of the Apes* is no more than a clever and imaginative action-adventure film is to ignore its origins in the 1963 novel *La Planète des Singes* by Pierre Boulle, the French writer whose other work includes *Le Pont de la Rivière Kwai*. He won an Oscar for the script of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, without writing a single word of it, which must surely have amused an author noted for his sense of the absurd. *La Planète des Singes* was intended as satire and widely compared with Voltaire and Swift, specifically the section of the latter's *Gulliver's Travels* in which the hero visits a land ruled by horses. Most of the characters and many dramatic

incidents in *Planet of the Apes*, as well as the central premise, came from Boulle's novel, though not the final scene. *La Planète des Singes* was adapted as a screenplay by Rod Serling, a former paratrooper who created *The Twilight Zone*, the pioneering early sixties science-fiction TV series that mixed high drama and flights of imaginative fantasy with serious philosophical questions about the nature of man and his place in the universe. It specialized in time warps, and the appearance of the Statue of Liberty in *Planet of the Apes* is characteristic of the twist endings in the series. As a Jew, Serling had first-hand experience of racial bigotry in the land of the free. The second credited writer was Michael Wilson, who won an Oscar for *A Place in the Sun*, an indictment of American morality. He adapted *Le Pont de la Rivière Kwai*, but had to forego his screen credit, and a second Oscar, after being blacklisted during the McCarthy witch-hunts for his left-wing politics, an experience that coloured his views of his fellow man.

In *Planet of the Apes* Heston's character's status is debated in a lengthy 'courtroom' sequence that recalls both the Scopes Monkey Trial – the case of the Tennessee schoolteacher who was arrested in the 1920s for teaching Darwin's theory of evolution, filmed as *Inherit the Wind* with Spencer Tracy – and also the infamous Dred Scott judgement of 1857, when the US Supreme Court ruled that slaves, and the descendants of slaves, had no constitutional rights. Darwin's theory that man evolved from the apes remained controversial in schools, in America and elsewhere. The controversy was further fuelled in 1967, the year in which *Planet of the Apes* was shot, when Desmond Morris published *The Naked Ape*, arguing that man may have evolved from the apes ... but he had not evolved very far. Man, according to Morris, was still an intrinsic part of the order of primates, particularly in his sexual and social habits. Boulle made the point in his novel that chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans were all supposedly equal, though on page and screen the practice seemed at times to depart from the ideal, reflecting the reality of human life on twentieth-century Earth. The United States was riven by racial conflict, and the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968 sparked race riots. Racists have long been accustomed to bracketing Africans with apes, with football thugs treating black players to monkey chants and showers of bananas. And in Spike Lee's *Do the*