INTRODUCTION

POLITICAL EXILES
AND AMERICAN LIFE

LATE ON THE EVENING OF OCTOBER 29, 1947, two distinctly out of place figures abandoned their hotel in Washington, D.C. out of fear that their rooms had been bugged and took to the “empty streets of that mausoleum city.” They were Joseph Losey and Bertolt Brecht, the latter the world’s leading playwright, author of Das Leben Galileos, which Losey had directed for the stage. Brecht was in the national capital because he had been subpoenaed to appear before a congressional committee the very next morning to give whatever assistance its members required on the question of the communist influence in Hollywood. Losey was there to support him as a friend. During the next day’s hearings, Brecht smoked cigars and dissembled freely, aided by a translator whose English was almost as unintelligible to the committee as his own, and by the committee members’ utter unfamiliarity with his work. When it was all over, Losey accompanied the playwright on the train as it sped north to New York. It was then that Brecht turned to Losey and likened his experience of appearing before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) “to a zoologist being cross-examined by apes.”

Twenty years later, Brecht’s acid remark was dramatized in Planet of the Apes, the 1968 science fiction classic in which a panel of orangutan politicians cross-examine a human astronaut played by Charlton Heston. There was no larger connection between Brecht’s observation and the scene in the movie except the fertility of the historical moment, when politicians who could not have cared less about the work of high-brow literary types nonetheless professed a deep concern about popular artists, their ideas and their influence. Confrontations between pols
and artists peppered the news early in the Cold War, which was bound to give rise
to ironies of all kinds, including the hauling up of the author of Galileo for ques-
tioning on his political beliefs—not to mention its recapitulation twenty years
later with screenwriter Michael Wilson. He had been subpoenaed by a congress-
sional committee four years after Brecht, refused to testify and was placed on the
blacklist until the late 1960s. Planet of the Apes was Wilson’s first major credit
since he was allowed to return to work, and he made the most of it, transforming
Rod Serling’s action fable into an allegory on the blacklist itself.

Planet of the Apes takes on two political themes at once. The first and more
obvious one concerns the social responsibility of the scientist and the reciprocal
obligations of the state toward new scientific knowledge, the very themes Brecht
had addressed in Galileo. The point of this theme was to warn against the dangers
of nuclear war. The role of the gagged scientist is here taken by the astronaut Tay-
lor (Heston) and begins with his capture, along with dozens of other feral humans,
near the place where his spacecraft has crashed in the year 3978. During the drag-
net in the fields, Taylor is shot in the throat by a gorilla, and the injury leaves him
unable to speak. In that regard he is no different from any of the other humans in the
film, who for some unexplained reason have no capacity for speech or any
other kind of vocalizing. It is only when Taylor recovers his voice that his imme-
diate captors, a pair of chimpanzee scientists, realize that they have an unusual
specimen on their hands and bring him to the attention of the orangutans, the au-
thorities who fund their research.

For reasons they cannot understand at the time, the chimpanzee-intellectu-
als’ extraordinary discovery, which they regard as a major contribution to their
culture’s zoology, is not welcomed by the orangutan ruling class. Taylor and the
chimp scientists who are now acting as his legal defense grow even more deeply
puzzled when they find themselves facing the three-member orangutan Tribunal
of the National Academy, chaired by the “President of the Assembly.”

On the pretext that Taylor’s rags stink, the chairman (played by James Whit-
more, unmistakable even through rubber facial appliances) pointedly orders that
Taylor be stripped naked. Then the chimpanzees rise to make their first challenge:
the tribunal has not explained the purpose of the hearing, they point out. “At the
very least, this man has a right to know whether there’s a charge against him.”

“This exhibit is indeed a man,” interrupts Dr. Maximus, one of the three
orangutans on the tribunal. “Therefore it has no rights under ape law.”

Whitmore presses the legal point on one of the chimpanzees, Dr. Zira. “In all
fairness, you must admit that the accused is a non-ape and therefore has no rights
under ape law.”

Dr. Zira: “Then why is he called ‘the accused’? Surely, your honors must think
him guilty of something!”
Dr. Zaius: “It is not being tried, it is being disposed of. It’s scientific heresy that is being tried here.”

Zaius (played by the accomplished British actor Maurice Evans), who simultaneously holds the title of Minister of Justice and Defender of the Faith, explains the charge: “Learned judges, my case is simple. It is based on our first article of faith, that God created the ape in his own image, that He gave him a soul and a mind, that He set him apart from the beasts of the jungle and made him the lord of the planet. The second truth is self-evident. The proper study of apes is apes, but certain cynics have chosen to study man, perverted scientists who advance an insidious theory called evolution.”

By this time, even the casual viewer will have presumably gotten the point that this allegory is a satire on contemporary American society. Wilson seized on the opportunity created by Serling to recast the orangutans, with their rich leather vestments and carefully combed hair, as the very sort of southern politicians and their allies who had subpoenaed Brecht and Wilson; they were smooth men with ideas rubbed smooth by the ages and alert to any flicker of insurrection.  

The filmmakers worried that talking simians would not be taken seriously by the movie audience. Indeed, Wilson’s lampooning of the southern, anti-evolutionist polls on the House Committee on Un-American Activities was apparently buried so deep that no one noticed it. Even the biographer of Pierre Boulle, the French novelist who wrote the novel on which the film is based, missed it. In the movie version, wrote the biographer, “All philosophical inquiry and all social criticism have been ignored.” But Wilson cut deeper into recent social events than mere mockery. The satire is finally sharpened when orangutan tribunal member Dr. Maximus growls at the chimpanzees: “Let us warn our friends that they are endangering their own careers by defending this animal.”

The chimps exchange glances at this first explicit reference to the fact that their jobs might be in jeopardy because of their defense of the human. But did Dr. Zira’s eye have a knowing glint? If so, perhaps it was because the actress in the monkey suit was in reality Kim Hunter, who had been named in the red-baiting publication Red Channels and blacklisted for four years in the mid-1950s.

It is at this point that Planet of the Apes blocks the doors, allowing no escape from the fact that it is also a film about the Hollywood blacklist, a social fantasy that relies on the tradition of “the grotesque” to speculate on the fate of a society that gags its artists and intellectuals for political reasons, forces them to confess and recant and suppresses their role in history. Beneath the dark humor are even darker allusions to anti-Semitism and the fate of friendly witnesses (artists spared the blacklist after they agreed to “name names” before the committee), issues that had never been raised before in a popular film and would have to wait until well into the following decade to be dealt with more directly (if still discreetly) in Sydney
Pollack’s and Arthur Laurents’s *The Way We Were* (1973) and Martin Ritt’s *The Front* (1976), films that will be looked at in some detail later in this volume.

That Taylor and his two astronaut companions are regarded as dangerous intellectuals is made clear in a scene in which Taylor finds one of his comrades, Landon (Robert Gunner) with half his head shaved to reveal a lobotomy scar. The scene works fine as a plot point, but without the key to the story, its deeper meaning is lost. After spotting Landon, Taylor cries out, “They cut him!” After receiving reassurances from Dr. Zira that the chimpanzee scientists had nothing to do with the surgery, Taylor whirls around to confront his orangutan tormentor, Dr. Zaius: “You cut out his memory, you took his identity, and that’s what you want to do to me!” In other words, Landon is, metaphorically, a friendly witness, a man who has had his memory removed by force. Taylor is correct: That’s exactly what they want to do to him—cut out his social and political identity.5

It is interesting, finally, to note that the animus of Dr. Zaius against the two chimp scientists rests on the fact that each of them is on the verge of a discovery that will pose a threat to the whole orangutan system. Cornelius (Roddy McDowall) is a kind of postdoctoral student in archaeology whose excavations have unearthed evidence of an ancient human civilization, thus challenging the historical claims of the ape religion. Meanwhile, Dr. Zira has determined that there is no physiological reason why the humans should be mute, meaning that suppression of human speech has been orangutan cultural and political policy for centuries and that ape culture will no longer be able to claim divine uniqueness.

And so Dr. Zira is indicted as a troublemaker, which was what Zaius was after all along. This is the political point on which the story turns. Zaius admits to Taylor, “Your case was preordained. You made it possible for me to expose” the chimpanzees. In Wilson’s inner narrative, then, there was another warning accompanying the larger one against nuclear war contained in Serling’s famous ending, when Taylor finds the ruins of the Statue of Liberty. The inner warning was addressed to the liberals of the Cold War: you may think they are after Communists, but in fact they are after you.

*Planet of the Apes* had an evolution of its own. It was so successful that it became a minor branch of the entertainment industry, an early example of multi-level marketing with no fewer than four film sequels, three full-length adaptations for TV, two TV series (one in animation), a series of comic books issued by Marvel and Gold Key, another series of graphic novels, dozens of action figures and a full-blown movie remake by director Tim Burton in 2001 that relied on Boulle’s novel, which Wilson and Rod Serling had all but discarded. This success meant that science fiction would no longer be restricted to B-movie budgets and cheap special effects. Most of the themes of outsider/insider cleverly exploited in *Alien Nation* (1988),
among other features, had already been explored here; even the omnipresent "alien" faces of actors in films and television, notably Star Wars (1977) and its innumerable knockoffs, owed much to Planet, which won an Oscar for makeup.

Planet was the second epic and grandly commercial film adapted from the pen of Boule. The first was Bridge on the River Kwai (1957), one of the most admired films of its era, with seven Oscars, including best picture and best director and, most ironically, best screenplay for Boule (a flat impossibility since he neither wrote nor spoke English). Bridge was a realistic drama set in World War II about a military martinet (Alec Guinness) who seeks to drive his mostly British fellow prisoners in a Japanese POW camp to complete an engineering project of some potential use to the enemy, while unrestrained patriots (perhaps they are also militant anti-fascists) plot to destroy it and finally succeed in the last moments of the film.

These two movies had a key figure in common: the co-writer of both screenplays was Michael Wilson (1914–1978), whose footprints will be seen leading off in all directions in the chapters that follow. An Oklahoma-born and Berkeley-educated writer for several remarkably New Dealish Hopalong Cassidy features of the 1940s and well known as a Hollywood Marxist, Wilson made his name as the script genius behind A Place in the Sun (1951), the Oscar-winning adaptation of novelist Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy and considered by Charlie Chaplin to be the best movie in Hollywood history. Wilson's career trajectory seemed to end there, however. For more than a decade afterwards he remained a blacklisted writer, and to the end of his life never recovered his professional standing. Although he was credited for Planet of the Apes, he received no screen acknowledgment at the time for his work on Bridge on the River Kwai nor for the hugely successful Lawrence of Arabia (1962). That would only come decades later, after his death.⁶ One of the few screenwriters with three films among the hundred "American Best" chosen by the American Film Institute, Wilson's artistic contribution remains little understood, just as the category of screenwriter (or teleplay writer) is still, for the most part, the most misunderstood and underrated creative pursuit in American media culture.

We can learn more and find an otherwise invisible line connecting the dots by considering Wilson's collaborators. A Place in the Sun was a solo effort, but his co-writer on Kwai was Carl Foreman (1914–1984). Chicago-born son of Russian Jewish immigrants, novice lawyer and sometime carnival barker, Foreman broke into the business by turning out scripts for the Bowery Boys before eventually becoming the key writer for liberal producer Stanley Kramer, notably contributing all or part of Champion (1949), Home of the Brave (1949), Young Man With a Horn (1950), The Men (1950, memorable as Marlon Brando's debut film) and Cyrano de Bergerac (1950)—and one of the recognized all-time classics of American cinema, High Noon (1952). These tales of tortured manhood, of racial conflict at the heart
of American dilemmas, of war's unending human damage, of individual courage and of love gave sophisticated audiences of the mid-century heightened expectations of film's dramatic possibilities just before these possibilities and Hollywood's Golden Age collapsed from McCarthyism and declining receipts.

Foreman was another of the major casualties of the cultural repression; he was literally chased off the set as High Noon was being completed. Removing himself abroad, he retreated from writing. After his uncredited contribution to Bridge on the River Kwai, his most notable film work (apart from serving as president of the British Film Institute) was as producer of Born Free (1966), which may rightly be called the first major cultural artifact of the "animal liberation" movement that would soon embrace the fate of dolphins, whales, great apes and all manner of persecuted and endangered species.

Wilson's other collaborator (for Planet) happened to be an even more influential figure in popular culture, but one who rose out of the much different milieu of mid-century American liberalism, Rod Serling (1924–1975). A local radio host in the later 1940s following his military service, Serling had moved into the creative vacuum of early video drama by the haste of his pen. After some early efforts, his teledrama Patterns (1955), written for the Kraft Television Theater, surprisingly was able to etch images of corporate corruption (softened by the promising possibility of internal reform) in a medium in which sponsors often demanded and usually won script changes in the very middle of production. "Patterns" won Serling the critics' admiration and an Emmy, which was followed by four more Emmys and a Peabody within a career that was shortened by a fatal heart attack.

No one fresh to television and lacking either film or theatrical credits better exemplified the contemporary critical hopes for uplifting workaday Americans' dramatic tastes. Serling admitted accepting serious compromises in the bargain. But it could also be said that Serling successfully outlasted the rise and fall of television drama's Golden Age (usually dated around 1950–1960, but for our purposes better extended to 1966 or so) better than anyone else, through shrewd adaptation and by the grace of his one enduring success. That most singular television program might be rightly called the precursor to the Planet of the Apes, the original: The Twilight Zone (1959–1965).

Bringing science fiction's capacity for political and ethical themes to television as no previous effort had managed, Serling all but announced the end of McCarthyism as the dominant note of the culture. His weekly dramas pointedly asked viewers to consider alternatives in their habits of thinking, perhaps even in the ways they lived. Television has never seen anything like it again, nor, sadly, did Serling himself. By the time cable competition had forced a greater explicitness, ending with the outright abolition of the networks' standards departments,
the shock effects of *Twilight Zone* were long gone and the huge network audiences with them. Serling had done his best work just in time.

Serling was better suited to the small screen even when, as in the film version of *Patterns* (1965) and his signature proletarian-pug drama, *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1962), he successfully oversaw a teleplay's translation into Hollywood terms. His *Seven Days in May* (1964) offered a political shocker of the type that only the victims of the Hollywood blacklist were likely to have made previously, about the rise of a right-wing generals' cabal to overthrow the American presidency and generally have things their own way. In the aftermath of continuing questions about the Kennedy assassination, but even more in the coming bipartisan project to win the Vietnam War no matter how many lies had to be told to the public and how many millions of lives destroyed, *Seven Days* was a few years too early but, like *Twilight Zone*, arguably helped prepare the way for the dissent to follow.

The disconnect between Wilson and Foreman on the one side and Serling on the other was not only or even primarily attributable to the fact that the older men had been Communists during their early careers. The Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s had made its converts primarily by preaching antifascism and support for the Roosevelt administration as well as rallying the troops behind a global victory for the Allies, along with taking strong moral stands and vigorous action on such domestic issues as racism, anti-Semitism and the need for unionizing the film industry. Had he been ten years older, Serling might have moved within circles in sympathy with the patriotic wartime Communist Party or signed the kinds of petitions later considered proof of subversion. He certainly shared the blacklistees' passions for depicting themes of race, empire and the threat of nuclear war, although no evidence has turned up that he asked blacklist survivors to write the relatively few scripts that he didn't write himself for *The Twilight Zone*. He belonged to a different generation and a different crowd.

Serling nevertheless did the kind of thing in television that Hollywood blacklistees and their writing partners, including protégés and repentant friendly witnesses, likely would have done in the absence of the blacklist. Some actually managed to do the same sorts of things despite the blacklisters and long odds—in a dozen or so more and less memorable TV series from the 1950s to the 1970s as writers, directors or producers—without ever being able to consolidate their successes or recuperate anything like a radical milieu either in New York or Hollywood. These series would include television's first "quality" show, *You Are There*, and the early drama series, *Danger*; the first British-originated show to be successful in the United States, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*; the foremost social drama series of the middle 1960s, *The Defenders* and *East Side/West Side*; the laconic, hip hits of Warner Brothers television, *Cheyenne*, *Maverick* and *77 Sunset Strip*; and the all-time detective favorite, *The Rockford Files*. 
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2. These were, after all, men whose political power largely derived from the fact that great numbers of their citizens were prevented from voting. For a brief account of Wilson’s intentions in turning Rod Serling’s original screenplay into a satire, see Joe Russo et al., Planet of the Apes Revisited (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), 33–34.


4. Hunter said she was removed from the blacklist after an unidentified person wrote a letter to Planet producer Arthur Jacobs telling him that he would be provided the reason for Hunter’s blacklisting in exchange for $200. The person’s boss was said to have been upset that the blackmail had been put in writing and removed Hunter’s name from the list. Russo, Planet of the Apes Revisited, 50.

5. Any lingering doubts about Wilson’s allegorical intentions are resolved by a rarely noticed bit of dialogue, when an older chimpanzee researcher complains to Dr. Zira that he is little more than a “vet” in her laboratory: “You promised to speak to Dr. Zaius about me.” Dr. Zira: “I did. You know he looks down his nose at chimpanzees.” Older doc: “But the quota system’s been abolished! You made it. Why can’t I?” The mention of a “quota system,” underscored in Zaius’ own later slur against the chimpanzees as “perverted scientists,” are references to the numerus clausus, the academic practice of limiting the number of positions available to particular ethnic groups, notably Jews, that was once practiced formally in Germany and more informally in the United States.

6. Wilson also wrote Friendly Persuasion (1956), starring Gary Cooper, a much-admired account of a pacifist Quaker’s soul-searching over the Civil War, but received no credit until 1996, when several of his key credits were restored posthumously. Thanks go to Becca Wilson for allowing us to examine the original scripts of these and other films (made or never made) in the Michael Wilson Collection, UCLA.

7. “Author’s Comment,” following script for “Noon On Doomsday,” in A. S. Burack, Television Plays for Writers: Eight Television Plays with Comment and Analysis by the Authors (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1957), 353–59. The sponsor of the television drama series, The U.S. Steel Hour, which broadcast the play, insisted upon various changes and Serling submitted, adding that he believed that a central point, the
evil of prejudice, still received serious treatment. See also William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 201-204, for a retrospective look at the significance of the controversy around the show.

8. Two comparable films were written by semi-rehabilitated blacklistees: *Fail-Safe* (1964), by Walter Bernstein, had an American president cowed by the military into dropping a hydrogen bomb upon New York City to prevent all-out nuclear war; and *Executive Action* (1973), written by Dalton Trumbo, featured a military-backed plot to seize the presidency.