



NEGATIVE DIALECTICS OF PROGRESS IN THE PLANET OF THE APES TRILOGY: FROM TECHNOPHILIA TO TECHNOPHOBIA

Abir Amezzaneⁱ

PhD Student,

Sultan Moulay Slimane University,

Beni Mellal, Morocco

Abstract:

The reboot *Planet of the Apes Trilogy*, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011), *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014), and *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017), begins with a recognizably technophilic promise: scientific innovation will overcome biological vulnerability. Yet the attempt to cure Alzheimer's disease produces the Simian flu, resulting in the acceleration of ape cognition and precipitating human civilisational collapse. This article argues that the trilogy stages a negative dialectic of progress in which the rational instruments designed to extend human life and our mastery over disease and nonhuman nature generate new forms of vulnerability, domination, and regression. By reading the films through the Frankfurt School critique of instrumental reason and William Leiss's account of the domination of nature, the article aims to trace a movement from technological confidence to technological fear. It focuses on Gen-Sys, animal experimentation, the pandemic, the persistence of weaponry after social collapse, as well as the visual reclamation of San Francisco by the growing vegetation. The trilogy does not simply condemn technology, nor is that the aim of this paper; rather, the paper aims to show how the trilogy questions a model of progress in which scientific capacity is detached from any ethical responsibility and organized around total domination and control. The trilogy's dystopian force lies mainly in demonstrating how humanity's attempt to control nature through science and technology ultimately contributes to its own downfall.

Keywords: Planet of the Apes; technological progress; technophilia; technophobia; instrumental reason; dystopia; domination of nature.

1. Introduction

Pierre Boulle's *La Planète des Singes* and the cinematic franchise it inspired have repeatedly unsettled the assumption that human beings occupy a secure and lucky

ⁱCorrespondence: email abiramezzane@gmail.com

position at the summit of social and biological life. However, the famous reversal at the center of this work illuminates how flawed this assumption is. When humans are reduced to the status of an inferior species while apes inherit political and intellectual authority, it opens the way for many supported readings concerned with race, empire, human exceptionalism, and cultural form, whose imagined displacement of human primacy has allowed successive films to register changing social and political concerns and anxieties. The 2011-2017 reboot trilogy renews this reversal by giving it a specifically biotechnological origin: human beings manufacture the conditions of their own displacement while attempting to conquer diseases.

The trilogy opens with confidence and optimism around technology and progress, rather than pessimism and technological collapse. In *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, scientist Will Rodman develops and introduces ALZ-112 at the company he works for, Gen-Sys, in the hope of treating Alzheimer's disease. This specific cure, or project rather, is quite personal and emotionally heavy for him, because his father suffers from the same disease he is trying to find a cure for. As he watches his mind deteriorate, he is anxious to get this out and make it work as soon as possible. The project is also institutionally gripping because Gen-Sys sees the commercial possibilities of a successful treatment. The film initially places biotechnology within a familiar narrative of progress: knowledge promises to reduce human suffering, prolong meaningful life, as well as enlarge human control over biological limitation. However, the stronger ALZ-113 strain brings devastating consequences and becomes fatal to humans while enhancing ape cognition. Why apes? Because apes were the subjects of testing for this particular "cure". Hence, what begins as therapeutic innovation becomes a pandemic catastrophe. For the two other parts, *Dawn* and *War*, they inhabit the post-apocalyptic ruins produced by such reversal.

Thus, this article argues that the films construct what may be called a negative dialectic of human progress: the means by which humanity attempts to master vulnerability become the exact means through which its vulnerability is intensified. The phrase does not imply that scientific advancement and knowledge are inherently evil or destructive. Indeed, the films repeatedly preserve the distinction between scientific capacity and the social purpose governing its use. Rather, the trilogy questions a conception of progress in which nature, animals, and even human life become objects to be optimized, controlled, or exploited without any adequate ethical restraint at all. In this respect, the films resonate with Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's critique of instrumental reason, in which Enlightenment rationality can become overwhelmingly entangled with domination when reason is reduced to calculation, utility, and control (Horkheimer and Adorno). William Leiss similarly argues that modern projects of mastery over nature cannot be separated from the social forms through which such mastery is pursued (Leiss).

Hitherto, existing scholarship has demonstrated the breadth of the franchise's political and philosophical concerns. Eric Greene reads the earlier films as American myths structured by phenomena such as racial and political conflict, while Thomas J.

West III shows how *Rise* unsettles hierarchies of animacy by encouraging affective identification with Caesar and challenging the privileged centrality of the human subject. More recent scholarly work has also continued to read and analyse the reboot films, delving into questions of race, contagion, and posthuman displacement (Ingram). Building on this highly critical field, the present article aims to concentrate on a narrower problem: the trilogy's movement from technophilia to technophobia and how this particular transition reorganizes the relation among scientific progress, domination, and ecological vulnerability. The films' warning is not that technology is dangerous, but that the intent behind it can be. The knowledge that leads to the creation of certain technology becomes dangerous when the capacity to act outruns the capacity to judge the purposes and consequences of action.

2. Progress, Instrumental Reason, and the Dream of Mastery

Let us start with the first part, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. This film establishes its technological optimism through the language of cure. Rodman is driven by the desire to prolong his father's life- a noble and selfless desire; he does not seek to create a weapon, nor does he imagine the destruction that his research will produce. His intent is good. He seeks to repair his father's deteriorating mind. This is important to establish because the film's critique would be considerably simpler if scientific catastrophe originated in explicitly malicious intention. In Rodman's case, disaster emerges from a convergence of personal grief and fear, institutional profit, experimental haste, and the assumption that biological processes can be made fully available to human control. The problem, therefore, is not merely the morality of one scientist; it is the structure of reasoning surrounding the project.

The company that Rodman works for-Gen-Sys- turns living beings into experimental means within that structure. Specifically, a female ape called Bright Eyes is chosen in this project and is valuable insofar as her cognitive performance can demonstrate the marketability of ALZ-112. During Rodman's presentation, Bright Eyes reacts aggressively in an attempt to protect her newborn. Her behavior is immediately interpreted as evidence of experimental failure, and she is killed before the true cause of her aggression is revealed. This scene alone condenses the film's critique of instrumental rationality. This innocent animal is not encountered first as a sentient subject but as a mere research object whose worth is determined by either the success or failure of the experiment. West's analysis of *Rise* is useful here because he argues that the film destabilizes precisely this hierarchy by drawing the audience in to identify deeply with Caesar and by challenging the boundary through which humans authorize themselves to classify and dominate nonhuman life (West 236- 53).

Rodman's subsequent decisions intensify the contradiction. He takes Caesar home (Bright Eyes's offspring) and develops a genuine emotional bond with him, yet he also continues to administer the experimental therapy to his father and later pursues a stronger strain when the first treatment loses effectiveness. His capacity for care therefore

exists beside a persistent belief that scientific intervention can overcome biological limits if only the technology is sufficiently refined. Caroline Aranha's warning to him, "You are trying to control things that are not meant to be controlled" (Rise 00:29:29), articulates the film's suspicion of domination and control. Her statement should not be reduced to an anti-scientific demand that disease should simply be accepted; rather, it identifies the ethical blindness produced when control itself becomes the measure of success.

Moreover, the trilogy consequently revises the familiar modern association between progress and increasing domination. Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment is relevant because it identifies a paradox within rationalization: the attempt to free humanity from fear through knowledge can reproduce domination when the world is approached principally as material to be administered. In *Rise*, the promise of liberation from Alzheimer's disease is unfortunately inseparable from animal capture, laboratory experimentation, corporate investment, and the acceleration of research; the therapeutic end does not erase the violence of the means. The film asks whether a civilization can call itself progressive when its technical sophistication expands more rapidly than its ethical imagination.

This is when Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* becomes highly relevant and provides an important literary precedent for this structure of creation and recoil. Victor Frankenstein's catastrophe does not arise simply because he creates life and tries to play God, as bad as that looks to non-secular institutions, but because ambition, secrecy, and irresponsibility shape his relationship to what he creates. *Rise* similarly refuses to locate failure in creation alone. Caesar is not a "monster" whose existence proves that knowledge should have remained forbidden. Indeed, the trilogy persistently grants him complexity, intelligence, loyalty, and political agency. The deeper failure lies with a human order that produces transformative power without accepting responsibility for the beings and consequences produced by it. The comparison therefore shifts the question from whether humanity should create to how humans that do create understand obligation. And that is an important shift.

This important distinction becomes explicit in the third film, *War*, when characters such as Colonel McCulloch tells Caesar that humans "*tried to defy nature*" and that nature has punished them for it and for their arrogance (*War* 01:19:34). Hence, McCullough interprets the pandemic as a moral judgement on human hubris. Yet his own response is further violence, further exclusion, torture, and militarized control. The trilogy thus refuses to allow technophobia to become wisdom automatically. Another important player enters the picture, and that is fear- fear of the consequences of technology can reproduce the same logic of domination that produced the catastrophe in the first place. Human beings move from confidence in control to terror at losing control, but neither position necessarily generates an ethical relation to the natural or "nonhuman" world-ironically enough.

2. From Technophilia to Technophobia: Regression

The closing sequence of *Rise* marks the decisive transition between technological optimism and technological fear. Hunsiker, unknowingly infected, travels through an international airport; the film visualises the quick and massive spread of the virus through global transportation networks. The sequence is especially effective because the infrastructure of modern connectivity becomes the vehicle of collapse. Commercial aviation, normally a sign of mobility and technological compression of distance, accelerates the circulation of the pathogen. The network that makes the modern world interconnected also makes it epidemiologically vulnerable. Hence, what can be noted here is that the film does not imagine catastrophe arriving from outside civilization. Catastrophe travels through civilization's own systems.

This feature distinguishes the reboot trilogy from the nuclear destruction associated with the 1968 film while preserving the franchise's longstanding concern with self-inflicted human disaster. The reboot relocates that anxiety into biotechnology, pharmaceutical research, global mobility, and pandemic concerns and vulnerability. This shift is historically significant: the films translate the older franchise's fear of nuclear annihilation into a twenty-first-century scenario in which biological innovation and planetary connectivity produce a different form of existential insecurity. Scholarship on *Rise* has accordingly treated the film as a cultural text in which dementia, biomedical research, and social sustainability intersect; for example, the Gen-Sys laboratory joins the private desire to cure illness to the commercial logic of pharmaceutical development.

When it comes to *Dawn*, this film begins after this promise is broken; the technological world has not necessarily completely vanished, but its meaning has changed. Human inventions such as electricity, weapons, abandoned buildings, vehicles, and communications equipment appear as remnants of a civilization whose technical achievements could not guarantee its continuity. Human survivors depend on restoring a hydroelectric dam, which could briefly reintroduce technology as hope rather than threat. This specific point is crucial to the article's premise or central argument: the films are not simply technophobic. Electricity permits communication and community; medicine is not mocked because it cures and heals; and tools are not condemned merely because they are artificial. What the films do is oppose the fantasy that technical power can substitute for ethical and political judgment.

The surviving humans increasingly experience technology through scarcity and militarization. By *War*, weaponry has become one of the most visible remnants of human technological capacity, creating a striking irony: biotechnology contributes to civilizational collapse; however, humanity continues to rely on technological resources to wage wars. The transition from technophilia to technophobia is therefore incomplete, since humans fear the biological consequences of their earlier scientific interventions while at the same time continuing to trust technology and misuse it as an instrument of coercion and control. While all of this is taking shape, the pandemic plays another role in reversing conventional ideas of progress and evolution; in other words, the apes have

now acquired language, collective organization, and increasingly complex and detailed social identities, while on the other side the infected humans slowly lose their cognitive abilities, their speech ability, and the capacities through which they have historically defined themselves as superior. This reversal definitely plays a pivotal role in exposing the fragility of human superiority and exceptionalism and destabilizes the supposedly fixed hierarchy between human and animal. As West's reading of Caesar's affective and linguistic development suggests, *Rise* encourages viewers to cross this hierarchy of animacy rather than simply mourn the loss of human supremacy. Hence, technophobia is the trilogy becomes more than a fear of machines or scientific experimentation; it develops into a fear of losing domination and superiority. Caesar embodies this reversal more than any other character in the films: his intelligence is given to him by human scientific intervention, but he uses that intelligence to challenge the very system that experimented upon and subordinated his species, and killed his mother.

3. What remains of the city and the Return of Nature

The trilogy's argument about progress is not confined to the dialogue or plot. It is inscribed into space as well. In the beginning, San Francisco is shown as a recognizable landscape of modern technological achievement: laboratories, roads, domestic architecture, the financial district, and the famous Golden Gate Bridge; all of these organize human movement and symbolize the built environment's apparent permanence. William Leiss's account of the domination of nature helps illuminate this imagery because the modern city materializes the capacity to reorganize environments according to human purposes. Yet *Dawn* returns to the same spaces after the collapse of civilization, making their deterioration visible. The buildings remain, however; the vegetation increasingly occupies them; roads and homes lose former function; the distinction between urban infrastructure and the natural landscape begins to collapse.

There is also a shot that showcases the transformation of Caesar's former home that is particularly revealing. In *Rise*, the Rodman house is bright, inhabited, and orderly, a domestic space where Caesar learns sign language and develops many of the cognitive abilities that later shape him as a leader. When he returns in *Dawn*, however, the house is decayed and overtaken by vegetation, much like the rest of San Francisco. The contrast does not necessarily suggest that nature is "taking its revenge" on humanity; but, in this case, it exposes how temporary human control over the environment really is. Houses, skyscrapers, roads, and bridges once were a symbol of technological progress and permanence; they are now symbols of a civilization that once was all about progress and growth. Caesar returns to the home where he once was domesticated and dependent on humans, but now as the leader of an autonomous ape community. The films therefore use the decaying city to reinforce their larger reversal of power, where human progress proves fragile, nature reclaims spaces once controlled by humans, and the species once confined within those spaces becomes free to inhabit them on its own terms.

This is where the trilogy's ecological dimension and its critique of technological rationality converge. Human beings repeatedly treat nature as something external that can be captured, exploited, experimented upon, improved, or subdued. Yet the post-pandemic landscape dissolves that fantasy of alienation from nature. Humans, apes, viruses, laboratories, and cities exist within the same material system, and intervention in one domain transforms the others. The films' dystopian imagination is important because it brings an ecological premise to the picture: it depicts what would happen if we continue to alienate ourselves from the natural world, the catastrophe that awaits if we continue to misuse technology. Hence, the problem is not necessarily an evil machine that is out to get us; it is an order of hierarchical domination that refuses to recognize interdependence.

However, and for this reason, the trilogy's technological pessimism should not be mistaken for nostalgia for a supposedly pure or pre-technological state of being; the apes themselves use tools, weapons, language, architecture, and forms of political organization. What changes is the ethical meaning attached to technical capacity. Caesar's leadership is tested by the questions of whether power will reproduce the violence from which the apes escaped. The films thereby relocate the question of progress from possession of advanced tools to the purposes for which power is exercised.

4. Conclusion

Across the three films, the movement away from technophilia is thus not a simple rejection of technology, but a critique of how technological progress becomes tied to mastery and control. Rise begins with a seemingly humane ambition: to treat Alzheimer's disease. Yet, this pursuit gradually becomes entangled with animal experimentation, commercial interests, and the belief that biological life can simply be controlled through scientific intervention. ALZ-113 ultimately reverses this promise: the cure becomes a pandemic, human civilization collapses, and the apes acquire the cognitive abilities that humans had long used to justify their own superiority. The later films complicate this further because technology does not disappear, nor is it presented as entirely destructive. Electricity in *Dawn*, for instance, remains necessary for survival, while weapons and military infrastructure show another side of technological power, one still built around control; even after experiencing the consequences of their own interventions, humans respond to their loss of domination and control by trying to get it back.

Ultimately, this reboot transforms the fall of humanity into a critique of the terms on which humanity defined its rise. Its negative dialectic of progress lies in the reversal by which instruments designed to secure human mastery expose the fragility of that mastery. The trilogy does not ask audiences to reject science. It asks a more difficult question: what counts as progress when greater technical power is not accompanied by greater responsibility toward other beings and the systems on which life depends? In the world of Planet of the Apes, the failure to answer that question does not stop progress. It turns progress against those who believed they controlled it.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Abir Amezzane is a PhD candidate at Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Morocco, affiliated with the doctoral research centre *Interactions in Literature, Culture and Society*. Her research interests include dystopian and utopian literature, speculative fiction, political thought, cultural history, and the relationship between literary narratives and contemporary political and ethical questions.

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