

An Overview of the Apes Series

by Gary Gerani

There is a peculiar institution in American moviedom known as the film "series." This frame-and-sprocket phenomenon starts off rather hectically when some shrewd Hollywood producer, overjoyed at the box office returns of his latest masterpiece, gambles on the hopefully-equal success of a sequel. If this also turns in a handsome profit, and public interest in the material continues to thrive, a series of such films may subsequently develop; each different in its own right, yet similar enough in theme and content to woo the original ticket-buying audience back for yet another look. And if the God of Fortune is really smiling upon our prolific producer, his movies may actually start a trend, and when this minor miracle happens, hooooo boy!!!

How many times has *Tarzan* wrinkled his loincloth while rescuing *Jane* (or some reasonable facsimile thereof) from hungry swamp gators? Can anyone realistically foresee a climax to the adventures of super-agent *James Bond*? And as we move closer to horror home, is there a chance — a remote possibility even — that the blood-stained careers of *Baron Frankenstein* and the blood-curdling *Count* will suddenly and finally reach their evil ends? Not in a month of Black Sundays!

This brings us, finally, to our hairy subject. In 1968, film producer *Arthur P. Jacobs* and *Twentieth Century-Fox* cordially invited moviegoers everywhere along on what they believed would be a brief-but-profitable visit to the PLANET OF THE APES. As anyone who worked on that pioneer film can tell you, it was a whirlwind of confusion in those last months before general release. The post production workers were busting their guts by the car load to assure *PLANET*'s premiere date several weeks ahead of another science fiction spectacular with understandably great expectations: Stanley Kubrick's multi-million dollar, 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY. The *Fox* publicity directors had literally gone ape in a wildly expensive campaign which proudly featured as its most astonishing asset the marvelously detailed and life-like simian heads worn by almost all the major cast members. What *Jacobs* expected from all this, the maddening publicity, the odd subject matter, the top-notch performers, all-in-all his strangest and most enigmatic project to date, is not hard to imagine in retrospect: he obviously desired to make a good movie, a solid film that would go over reasonably well with the critics (the ad campaign boasted "another major and important film by the man who wrote 'THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI', etc.), but in his capacity as an intelligent businessman as well as an imaginative artist, *Jacobs* understood that the film's ultimate success depended upon its overpowering values of escapism, an entertaining spectacle designed for the entire family. To this he added a genuine hard-core science fiction flavor, embellished by

the charismatic addition of *TWILIGHT ZONE*'s *Rod Serling* as co-scripter, who in turn accented the entire affair with his traditional (and well-received) bag of enigmatic twists. The final ingredients consisted of some acceptable, but not especially deep, moralizing, belly-laugh humor for the kids and, to break up the monotony during some of the more hard-to-swallow segments, a hefty dose of *Tarzan*-like action adventure to continually keep things moving at an exciting pace.

All these together, producer *Arthur P. Jacobs* thought, blended carefully, developed perfectly, exploited ingeniously, would produce a highly successful motion picture of which he could be proud. He probably never suspected that his perfect money-maker and its fast-multiplying progeny would someday join the pantheon of classic film series.

His name is TAYLOR, and he is an astronaut, commander of America's first STAR-FLIGHT. Here he is just a HUMAN.





Taylor, Dodge & Landon. Their star-flight had begun with such HIGH HOPES. Their hope is almost gone now. . . .

After release, everyone connected with APES Number One seemed content with the film's record-breaking premiere and positive critical showing (one reviewer, apparently a science fiction fan, even went so far as to proclaim PLANET the finest American movie ever made!). The film, which featured spectacle-star *Charlton Heston* as its hero and a cast of erudite actors nose-wriggling behind *John Chambers'* ingenious ape faces, maintained the basic premise of *Pierre Boulle's* best seller, without sacrificing its inherent escapist qualities.

Astronaut Taylor (*Heston*), crash-lands on a distant planet where evolution has seemingly reversed itself. Apes are the masters and man is a lower animal, to be hunted and, as the astronaut learns, ruthlessly exterminated. After winning some friends among the sympathetic chimpanzees, Taylor escapes into the "Forbidden Zone" where he discovers, much to his horror, that he is not in a distant solar system, but has accidentally penetrated the time barrier; he is on Earth in the distant future. The Planet of the Apes was once the Planet of Man.

The concept, although differing slightly in its denouement from *Pierre Boulle's* novel, is interesting and acceptable to even the severest science fiction critic. The film itself, however, is not without its share of cinematic deficiencies.

It begins well, with some marvelous point-of-view shots of the dying space ship plummeting headlong into a shimmering, glassy-surfaced lake. The trek across the

Taylor and Nova. At best, domesticated HOUSE PETS. At worst, wild beasts, ANIMALS, to be hunted down and killed without mercy.



heat-baked desert is also well filmed, and more point-of-view shots from behind craggy mountaintops and misshapen caverns prove excellent representations of unseen, watchful alien observers. The discovery of the waterfall and the subsequent bathing scene both feature some refreshing use of the hand-held camera technique to convey a more casual tone in the action, and *Jerry Goldsmith's* energetic music-scoring for the sequence adds a welcome touch of relief from the 'usually crass, percussion sounding soundtrack. The "wild hunt" episode that follows is very exciting and extremely well-staged.

Beginning first with a haunting alien bellow from some invisible source, the scene builds in momentum as the hapless human beings scurry madly about, stalked by an ominous, unseen horror that thrashes through the underbrush, encircling its prey. The sight of the apes on horseback is effective, and worthy of the finest moments of Boule's novel. But when the hunt concludes and the helpless specimens are carted home to Ape City, a sudden difference can be sensed in the mood and style of the film. The triumphant gorilla, posing immodestly with his human captives as a second simian snaps his picture is straight out of the novel, yet it forshadows the sillier, "Gimmicky" turn the movie has taken. A few minutes into the chimpanzee scenes confirm this change. *Leon Shamroy's* cinematography, alive and moving up till

now, suddenly stagnates in the face of the ape faces. The rooms in which apes appear are brilliantly lit so that the audience can relish every detail of the million dollar make-up. Editing, camera angles and movement all cease so as not to detract from the latex and rubber creations so well-heralded in the ad campaigns. Here is where *Jacobs'* commercialism stunts the enigmatic qualities and cinematic possibilities of his story. Scenes that should have been immensely powerful — Taylor's trial before the jury of orangutans, for instance — become curious oddities at best, intentionally humorous "fun" at the very worst. Intelligent satire, as in the novel, is abandoned completely in favor of a constant barrage of simian anecdotes ("human see, human do" etc.) with some rather thin moralizing about the "evils of man" thrown in between the action.

On the whole, it must be admitted, the film does retain the honest "feel" of the novel, but it is painfully clear that everyone involved subjugated themselves to the overpowering charisma of the special make-up and the entire novelty of the project.

Technically, *PLANET's* hefty budget afforded the same high-class treatment all other expensive productions enjoy. The Panavision screen, proving once again how superior a process it actually is in comparison to Fox's earlier wide image, Cinemascope, ideally projects the endless lost voids in space, the barren hopelessness of

In this climactic chase from PLANET OF THE APES, Taylor proves himself far, far MORE than the animal his captors had thought him to be.





Dr. Zira, a brilliant animal psychologist, specializing in HUMAN behavior. The one person to believe in Taylor and try to help him.

the long, empty landscapes and the excitement of the fearsome hunt. The pale, almost muted tones of Delux color, undoubtedly the worst color process among the majors, actually seem to benefit PLANET OF THE APES, the subdued spectrum adding an unspectacular, "realistic" look to the proceedings. (The three strip negative process known as Technicolor, for instance, just might have added to that creeping commercialism we spoke of earlier.) The dominant color throughout the film is orange. Orange landscapes, orange prisons, orange orangutangs with orange outfits, and orange (human) bodies brightly color the movie with radiating (if not sunburnt) brilliance. The film is also almost entirely an outdoor experience. The scenes inside the apes' caverns and huts are all brightly lit, and the most striking feature of *Heston's* briefly glimpsed space ship is its huge double windshield. Sunlight, outdoor locations and well-defined images form the overall visual character of PLANET OF THE APES.

What emerges, then, is a tightly-knit, fast-paced, action/adventure fantasy, thoroughly enjoyable despite its short-comings and well worth the ticket fee. Its popularity quickly grew to unexpected proportions, and several self-proclaimed psychologists over at Fox offered some rather curious explanations for the phenomenon.



Brent. Another astronaut. Sent out from Earth to rescue Taylor's missing starship. Only to be trapped by the same nightmare in BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES.

The most perceptive of these suggest the audience's unquestioned respect for the entrancing, anti-heroic character of the apes, particularly the chimpanzees; the younger viewers respond to this the same way they identify with their favorite animal cartoon characters, as personal (if impossible) friends removed from the strict rules and regulations of the "real" world. Adults, too, see the apes as exaggerated embodiments of their favorite childhood fairy tales, and it becomes quite clear in the later films that audience sentiment favors the apes, not the humans. It is this reversal of allegiances that is most accountable for the film's success.

But "success" was the key word; a sequel of some kind was the next logical step, and *Jacobs*, as logical and inventive as ever, started pre-production work on the PLANET OF THE MEN.

Jacobs himself was surprised at how easily this new project was progressing. With the important exception of *Roddy McDowell*, (who was busy with a film elsewhere) the original cast members were delighted to repeat their respective roles, although *Charlton Heston's* part was little more than an eagerly-awaited cameo. *Boulle* himself offered a screen treatment which *Jacobs* rejected after deciding it was "uncinematic", and *John Chambers'* make-up department hit home with improved, super-

flexible simian heads. The new film toplined *James Franciscus* as the astronaut sent into space (and time) to retrieve *Heston* and his crew. After the usual open-mouthed befuddlement, Brent (*Franciscus*), makes his way into the notorious "Forbidden Zone" where atomic-scarred human mutations add to his troubles. Finally, *Heston* reappears (he had been glimpsed briefly at the film's outset) and the two are caught up in a futuristic class struggle: apes vs. mutants. *Jacobs* himself takes credit for the ending, which, for abruptness and totality has few exceptions. Astronaut Taylor blows up the world, putting the problem-plagued Earth out of its misery and ending the series at the same time. History and *Jacobs'* bank account remind us that, fortunately for science fiction fans, such was not the case.

BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES, as it was eventually called, did almost as well at the box office as its predecessor, and in the money-tight movie business this is no slight achievement. Critically, however, it was a lame duck. The film simply overloaded itself with too many subplots, most of which were wildly fantastic to an almost ridiculous degree. It was hard enough to accept a planet ruled by apes, but seeing them in mortal combat with hideous mutant "superminds" against the threatening background of a "doomsday" bomb was too much.

Nevertheless, *BENEATH* had its positive moments. The "ape-ups," as mentioned earlier, were far more flexible than the first film's attempts. *Chambers* work on the mutants was nothing less than inspired, and the

special effects folks and art directors created a spectacular vision of demolished New York. As a matter of fact, *BENEATH's* production values were quite impressive, far ahead of anything that appeared in the subsequent films and occasionally even outdoing the first. But all these lavish designs were in vain, for as any fan of the series can tell you, *BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES* is the recognized turkey of the lot.

When news of a third APE project became public, many befuddled followers wondered how on Earth (no pun intended!) the storyline could continue. After conveniently disposing of the planet in *BENEATH* — and the series presumably along with it — it was no minor task coming up with a feasible solution. The answer, as it turned out, was positively ingenious. A trio of chimpanzees, realizing the end was near, travel backward in time to our not-so-distant future. The female, Zira, has a baby...and this gives the scriptwriters a chance to "remake" the original story, a story interesting and imaginative enough that it deserved a more detailed account. We see before our awe-struck eyes the very way the Planet of the Apes began, how Zira's child was destined to organize the full-scale ape revolt, how man was soon to play second fiddle to the simians. We learn marvelously juicy sci-fi facts, too: like how an alien disease destroyed all the dogs and cats on earth, thus forcing humans to adopt apes as their pets, and later, as their slaves. By having his chimpanzees go back into time, *Jacobs* breathed new and exciting life into an

In the Beginning. In CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES, there were Apes and there were Humans. The Humans RULED.





The Apes were well-trained, industrious, DOCILE. They were conditioned to be. Revolt was unthinkable.

already tired series. Now he had the chance to fully explore the only truly fascinating concept of the "APES" story—how it all came about. Jacobs added the baby-ape-from-the-future gimmick to *Boulle's* original premise, and the astonishingly inventive solution to *BENEATH's* cataclysmic climax earned *ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES* a special recommendation before the film had even been screened!

After the film was screened, it looked almost like some bizarre mirror image to the original film, with the humans in power this time and the apes on the lam. Production values were modest, to say the least, and most of the "spectacular" look of the previous films was noticeably absent, basically because this new APES was shot in recognizable locations, as the plotline demanded. (One does question the regrettable absence of the crash-landing of the apes' space-time ship at the film's start. Surely it would have generated some welcome excitement in a special-effects-less film such as this.) Anyhow, the flick concludes with the overly violent death of the amiable chimps, and the secret survival of their child.

Unlike previous films in the series, this one ends with a sequel in mind, and although the box office returns weren't the greatest compared to its predecessors, no doubt that a further chapter in the ever-growing APES saga was on *Jacobs's* agenda.

CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES — that eventual chapter — gets my vote as the finest film in the series, surpassing even the original APES. Scriptwriter *Paul Dehn*, the man responsible for the brilliant back-into-time gimmick of *ESCAPE*, skillfully takes that re-vitalizing force a step further in a surprisingly caring, honestly-meaningful screenplay that is seldom off target. The capable directing hand of *J. Lee Thompson* sparks violent electricity in the vocal confrontations, assured cinematic control in the battles. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the film is cinematographer *Bruce Surtees's* spectacular imagery. *CONQUEST* is truly the only "visual" entry in the series. The movie is quite cheap, cheaper than *ESCAPE*, and the entire film takes place in one bland location. But *Surtees's* roving camera evokes excitement and suspense totally absent from the

earlier efforts.

The story, simply, focuses on Zira's child, grown to maturity, as he organizes the first ape rebellion in what can only be described as a futuristic concentration camp for simians. We see the beginnings of man's domestication and eventual enslavement of the apes, his intolerance, hatred and inevitable downfall. Zira's son proudly chooses his own name—"Caesar"—and makes preparations for his earth shaking conquests. All the cuteness, the infantile puns, are gone. *Thompson* intelligently realized that the marvelous ape-ups were no longer a novelty to be dwelt on, and concentrates on developing character and biting character interaction. What emerges is an honest, unpretentious moral argument for the minority, and Caesar's final soliloquoy, lasting well over fifteen minutes, personifies the entire mood of this genuinely meaningful, thought-provoking study of the oppressed. All in all, an unexpected (and unrepeated) treat from APES factory.

It seemed impossible for *BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES* to meet the high standards of its predecessor. To begin with, an entire film seems to be missing in between the two. *CONQUEST* ends with the apes preparing a massive takeover; *BATTLE* begins with the takeover accomplished. We now discover that, unlike in the first movie, Man and Ape live together on a

basically cooperative basis, although the latter is clearly the dominating force. The "Battle," as heralded in the title, represents a last ditch attempt on the part of some local mutants (these are different mutants than the ones featured in *BENEATH*; they're a lot sloppier.) to recover the Earth in the name of Man. Caesar is still an excellent, intensely likable character and commands a strong, respectful presence. *J. Lee Thompson*, again directing, provides some exciting moments, but his dissatisfaction with the material is clearly evident. One thoughtful note: the film ends with a question mark. Can man and ape make it together on this Earth as brother, or will the planet truly become hopelessly divided? It is an honest question profoundly delivered, etched in penetrative symbolism and deeper meanings.

We now stand ready for the ultimate exaggeration of the "series" formula: television. CBS has made definite plans for a *PLANET OF THE APES* TV show come this fall, and a good guess is that it'll start off right where *BATTLE* ended, and hopefully explore that intriguing question. Whatever happens, the APES movies stand as an enjoyable excursion into fantasy, escapism, wild sci-fi, and finally—on a more serious level—race hatred. As you can see from my notes here, it is not a perfect series, but rather a strong, ultimately captivating force that may go on forever. Let's hope television adds to its longevity.



But it happened all the same. And Mankind fell. And the Apes ruled the Earth, for better or for worse.

