YOU MAY NOT LIKE WHAT YOU FIND:  
THE PLANET OF THE APES CYCLE

Midst the unflagging 90s epidemic of post-Boom, slack-fueled, Tarantino-inflected Seventies cyber-nostalgia, it's a shock to realize that arguably the era's most complex and outrageous popcult entity has been all but ignored: the Planet of the Apes cycle. To cast a cold eye back on the infamous SF pentalogy is to revisit, for me, a preadolescent compulsion and state of feverish Saturday-matinee geek-worship. Largely regarded then as the Nightmare on Elm Street and Friday the 13th movies were in the 80s — a seemingly neverending series of lurid fantasies meant exclusively for "monster culture" aficionados and the 5th grade readers of X-Men, Creepy and The Monster Times — the Apes films were hugely popular with their target audience. The phenomena didn't even end with the release of the final film, Battle for the Planet of the Apes [1973]; that summer, the notorious Go Ape! festivals ran amok, during which theaters would run all five films in sequence, starting at 11 AM. The series spawned two television shows and a kudzu jungle of spinoff merchandising, including models, action figures, masks, novels, comics, plates, bubble-gum cards, etc. That three out of the five films were simply wretched, directed by hacks J. Lee Thompson and Don
Taylor, only further justified their exile to the dodge-ball demographic.

For ten-year-olds (of which I consider myself then an archetype), the Apes movies were a snowballing, nightmarish spectacle of disorder and madness, in which the apes were convincing enough to disquiet us with realizing that, while not looking much like actors, they didn’t quite look like real apes either, and whose collected narrative fucked with both temporal logic and racial subversion in ways that could shock anybody weaned on post-Reagan-era Hollywood culture. [Each of the five films ends with a narrative Nagasaki.] Few adults, then or since, seem to have recognized the cycle as the radical pop culture apocalypse it still is, formally and thematically. It’s one of the few science fiction movie texts that rivals in sophistication the best SF literature, and it’s the only cinematic experiment with time travel that completes its own hopeless cycle on a planetary scale, an elaborate scheme worked out in the four sequels by screenwriter Paul Dehn. Most of all, especially when viewed today and in light of Hollywood’s still frustrated efforts to remake the first film (Oliver Stone and Arnold Schwarzenegger were both attached to the project for some time), the Apes films stand as the scariest, ballsiest, most breathtaking essay on racial conflict in film history.

Think about it: where but in film #4, Conquest of the Planet of the Apes (1972), has a movie ever dared to climax in a successful, implicitly global armed slave revolt? From the get-go, the series was a broad and hysterical parable on race relations; the first film emerged in 1968, knee-deep in civil rights dialogue and hippie-era liberalism. Directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, co-scripted by Rod Serling and Michael Wilson [from the otherwise trifling, and erroneously titled, Pierre Boulle novel Monkey Planet], Planet of the Apes (1968) was packed with glib Twilight Zonisms [the orangutan tribunal doing see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil; a gorilla guard muttering “Human see, human do”] and roughshod potshots at apartheid-think: an elder ape maintaining that only apes have souls, the observation that being clean-shaven makes a man “look less intelligent,” the Darwinian dread implicit in every ape’s reaction to stranger-in-a-strange-land astronaut Taylor [Charlton Heston], who, as chimp Zira [Kim Hunter] boldly asserts at one point, “must have sprang from our own.” (Remember the first word spoken by an ape, over a stack of human corpses: “Smile.”) She doesn’t know how right she is — neither do we, until the end — and every supremacist’s deepest qualm rears its head: of being the progeny of an inferior, less “divinely inspired” breed of creature, of having “other” blood run in your veins.

The movie laughed at every tribal instinct we’ve got, which may be another reason why, in an adult world where tribes are taken very seriously indeed, especially in the 90s, they remain cinema non grata. [The vacant phenomena of 80s slasher films have garnered more homages and academic consideration.] Recognizable American authority icons are routinely defiled: the Statue of Liberty; NASA (the nexus of anti-ape hysteria in Escape from the Planet of the Apes [1971, film #3]; human scientists, presidents and governors portrayed as bigoted scum. Even John Ford’s Monument Valley stands in for a nuclear wasteland — in a film about racial rancor, yet. [There’s no ignoring HUAC-roadkill Lew Ayres’ appearance in the last film as an orangutan who deems himself “the keeper of his own conscience.”] Still, what as children gave us the heebie-jeebies seems, in retrospect, relatively less fantastic. The apes, after all, were only a few hundred years behind the human civilization that Taylor left behind, and with their slave hunts, superstitions, medieval admixture of science and religion, and Nazi-like racial theories, seemed hardly any stranger or crueler than man at his most modern. Perhaps what remains most disturbing, and what may have been a larger part of our juvenile fascination with the films than we ever suspected, was the recognition of our de-evolved selves in the apes’ xenophobia, righteous ignorance and mythmaking. Both Planet of the Apes and the first sequel, Beneath the Planet of the Apes (1969), were intended as crude we’ve-seen-the-enemy-and-it’s-us metaphor; what doesn’t seem as intentional is the primal unease over otherness it musters within ourselves, regardless of race. Somewhere under the skin the central ordeal of Heston’s missing link is one we face only in our darkest dreams.

But, as a text, is it inherently racist? [Note, quiesly, the implicit IQ caste system stretching from the light-skinned heads-of-state orangutans to the pitch-black, thug-like gorillas.] What begins as an evolutionary switcheroo turns, as the series progresses, into a civil rights coun-
drum; can apes be equated with African Americans without setting off a sociopolitical H-bomb? Even if the apes themselves become oppressed, violently oppose their oppressors, and succeed in acquiring a social status (in *Battle*) at least temporarily just and peaceful? In 1968, perhaps not; today, most certainly — anyone remaking the first film today has his work cut out for him. Identity politics being the ethical quicksand they are, however, the *Apes* films read today like koans: contradictory, equivocal, cryptic. Within every deliberate liberal/ism lurks a reactionary instinct; every racist misstep is steepled in radical good intentions. They may be, when the smoke clears, the ideal film text for the coming century, the ultimate cross-country track on which to run the principles of political correctness against one another.

In the first two of the five films, the apes represent white Western Civ a few Galileos short of a Renaissance; it was with *Escape* that the tables began to slowly turn. Suddenly, the free-thinking chimpanzees Zira, Cornelius and Milo (Kim Hunter, Roddy McDowell and, briefly, Sal Mineo) are caged, victimized, characterized as freaks, and eventually as threats, by 1970s America. As was clear from the start, the *Apes* movies are a study in the hunger for, and transferral of, political power: within minutes of glimpsing the primitive humans in the first film, Taylor asserts that in a month “we’ll be running this planet.” Of course, the power is divided along special lines. In *Escape*, the weasely white-men-in-charge Eric Braeden and William Windom are ostensibly out to prevent the planetary decimation that ends *Beneath* [recounted by Zira as seen through Taylor’s resurrected ship’s window — the cycle’s only serious lapse of reason], but there’s an acute sense of irrational lynchmob fever right under the surface. There’s more than a whiff of Johannesburg in the final helicopter shot of Zira and Cornelius shot dead in an empty California naval yard, and perhaps a hint of Malcolm Little in the penultimate scene of the orphaned baby chimp burbling “Mommy,” suggesting an inevitable moment when the future will have its revenge on the past, thus creating itself.

*Conquest*’s only sympathetic human [beyond liberal circus-owner Ricardo Montalban] is MacDonald (Hari Rhodes), the governor’s black assistant and the film’s sole voice of conscience. “What’s with that guy, he an ape lover or something?” says one stormtrooper-ish cop when MacDonald stops him from beating an ape. “Yeah, don’t it figure?” is his partner’s reply. Though in a position of power, MacDonald bitterly weathers with tight lips and heady glover the reverb of a slave society, and even the governor is wary of his token staff member, calling him a “bleeding heart,” and proclaiming confidently, “All of us were slaves once, in one sense of the word or another.” Neither Caesar or MacDonald would agree, of course, and yet once the hellish revolt gets rolling [the imagery of gorillas swarming through the city’s nighttime streets is shuddery and wild], MacDonald is forced onto the MLK-like high ground. “By what *right* are you spilling blood?” he demands indignantly after
Ghosts in the Machine

Caesar's ape forces have succeeded in conquering the city. "By the slave's right to punish his persecutors," the messianic Caesar replies, and though Conquest makes a feeble, last-ditch effort to be pacifist [in a sorely unbelievable, tacked-on speech dubbed over close-ups of Caesar's eyes], the film supports him right down to the brickbats. We do, too; the panicked sops to flower power notwithstanding, the Ape movies are nothing if not a raw acknowledgment of racial antagonism. The facile lessons about the evils of race hate fall away in the face of a five-film-long exploration of the hopelessness of racial friction. In fact, the whole cyclical structure of the series, in which the roles of oppressor and oppressed are perpetually exchanged, suggests the circular motion of human history in grim detail. There's no small cynicism in portraying a rabid social dynamic that must and will lead to Armageddon over and over again.

The last film, Battle for the Planet of the Apes, affects a manageable degree of interspecies cooperation, but it's hardly a socialist-minded triumph: Caesar has established himself as no-questions-asked autocrat [with a son to continue the bloodline], and the Lawgiver [John Huston] regales us with a version of ape-human history that sounds objectionably mythic and revisionist. We're assured by this "greatest of all apes" that ape and man can live side by side in peace and harmony, but we remember the crazed future of the first film, and the uses to which the Lawgiver's teachings are eventually put, and we know it's all a lie. [If Caesar is Christ, then the Lawgiver is his collective Apostle, even to the extent of having his work corrupted centuries later.] Cheap B-movies meant for kids, the Ape movies knew then what many earnest, high-profile films about injustice and race relations don't today: that intelligence cannot housebreak our inner homunculi, seething with pigheaded pride and raw jungle hate; that intelligence will inevitably breed war and waste given half a chance. Battle's paramount tenet is that no ape shall kill ape — is it so much better that they kill men? Along which measurement do the moral lines get drawn, xenophobic separatism or quality of intelligence? Clearly, the former; as evil white man Don Murray puts it in Conquest, under a spay of gorilla gunbutts, "Man was born of the ape, there's still an ape curled up inside every man, the beast who must be whipped into submission, the savage that has to be shackled in chains. You are that beast, Caesar." By the time the world ends, with a Charlton Heston-instigated bang and not a whimper, the apes could say the same of men. In fact, orangutan zealot Zaius [Maurice Evans] does say it, in several different ways. And they're both right.

As films, roughly four-fifths of the Ape phenomena is pure dross, fashioned in different degrees of hackhood but maintaining the creepy cheapness that has empowered pop cult apocalypses from Metropolis to The Ten Commandments to Invaders from Mars to Night of the Living Dead. The first film is the most fluent and original work Franklin J. Schaffner ever did [compare the leaden Patton]; the sequels were somewhat carelessly chaperoned by Ted Post [on his way to low-rent 70s beaux like Magnum Force and Go Tell the Spartans], Don Taylor [as an actor, one of the gregarious PDWs in Stalag 17, and style-vacuum behind Damien: Omen II and 1977's The Island of Dr. Moreau] and J. Lee Thompson, who has become a paradigm for promising directors crashing into hack landfill, arcing from the early 60s with the stalwart The Guns of Navarone and the genuinely frightening Cape Fear to the post-Ape rockbottom of Charles Bronson japesies. If an individual, and not simply the entire operandi of media libido in the early 70s, must be credited with the distinctively wacko wallop of the Ape cycle, credit instead screenwriter Dehn, whose grand, nasty vision supports the whole cycle, and the plethora of design craftsman [including mask engineer John Chambers, for his subtle adjustments between human and ape physiology] who dared to make the much-loathed differences and even-more-loathed similarities between ape and human uncomfortably intimate and skin-deep. Try to imagine coming up with the visual and thematic conception of the cycle from scratch, and suddenly even the cruelly-made last entries seem formidable.

Perhaps most formidable is the claustrophobic bedlam that the time discontinuum creates, a process we see on a millennial scale but which few of the characters ever grasp at all. It's time travel as no-exit extinction, creating a resonant context for racial nihilism and man's mad sense of significance and destiny as well. There's no escaping the global whorl of cause and effect once it's put into motion. The first film merely leaves Charlton Heston, and us, on the beach with nowhere left to go,
while the second drove its combat-driven narrative (throwing nuke-worshipping mutants into the mix) right to Doomsday. The third, however, made ersatz sense out of what merely seemed an atomic scrambling of evolutionary logic by making Taylor's initial plunge through the time warp the event that changes everything — once his ship, on its preprogrammed course (!), enters the future, it opens the possibility of retreating into the past. Which it does, carrying Cornelius & Co., who proceed to inspire a revolution and the ape sovereignty that literally creates the scarred, "upside down" world Taylor finds thousands of years later. Chronologically, the "first" moment in real time is Heston chewing on a cigar in the first film's precredit sequence; the "last" is Heston setting off the bomb in the final moments of Beneath. Everything else happens somewhere in between. (Even the casting of Heston seems in hindsight like brilliantly triple-edged swordstroke.) It conforms to the films' sense of merciless irony that Taylor and his crew are sound asleep when the time stream is violated; the earth's future history is set on a permanently self-destructive course and no one knows what happened until it's too late. Even we don't fully understand the fatalistic ramifications until the fourth film. Intimations of damnation haunt every step of the films' timeline — however ignorant of the shape of history, nearly every character is helplessly overcome with panic. Just as the orangutans in the first film knew Taylor was trouble on a scale they couldn't comprehend, the jittery humans of both Conquest and Escape (including Natalie Trundy, who, as Mrs. Arthur P. Jacobs, holds the dubious honor of having played a human, an ape and a mutant at different points in the series) were dead-on in their cosmic paranoia. The signs were everywhere, even if we didn't notice them the first time around: the slave apes of Conquest even wear color-coded uniforms that subtly prefigure the ape fashions of Cornelius' day, first glimpsed four movies earlier. Mull that over: the weird, half-Egyptian, half-Mao earth-tone dress styles of the distant simian future began as totalitarian jumpsuits for the service population, circa 1991. Talk about "chickens coming home to roost," in Malcolm X's words. The manner by which the films are narratively constructed forces you to discount any respite from the relentless dialectic of oppression because it all leads to a genocidal auto-da-fé we've already witnessed.

The miracle of the Apes films is that such complex and dour textual issues dominate an otherwise preposterous manifestation of cheap trash culture, one that was from the outset unashamed and unfettered by art or conscience or responsibility. This is, of course, the gutsy, lowrent glory of authentic pulp. It's not a quality that can be recaptured in expensive remakes, no matter how strenuous the effort; if Planet of the Apes is indeed reincarnated, the brute nerve and chilling disorientation of the thing will surely be lost amid the acres of trod-upon eggshells. Of course, the remaining films will never be remade — they're too disreputable, too berserk. America prefers nerveless anodynes like Forrest Gump as prescriptive psychic histories of itself. Ruelfully, raw visions of everlasting heat-death seem to be a thing of the past.

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