MONSTERS • ALIENS • BIZARRE CREATURES

ANTHONY DANIELS IN THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

C-3PO from the INSIDE

VINCENT PRICE remembers AIP

INTRODUCING COUNT FANGOR

FRIDAY the 13th: A DAY for TERROR!

SHOCK FX SPECIAL: TOM SAVINI! ROB BOTTIN!

PLUS: Stephen KING... George ROMERO... QUATERMASS...
And too much to mention — see Contents p. 3!!!
4  Imagination, Inc.
Obligatory Anniversary
Editorial—you can skip this,
if you like.

5  The Postal Zone
It Came from the Mailbox...
and no one had the nerve to
send it back!

8  C-3PO from the Inside!
Anthony Daniels supplies the
robot's eye view of the mak-
ing of Star Wars and The
Empire Strikes Back.

10 SHOCK FX
SPECIAL
Rob Bottin:
Out of
"The Fog"

11 Tom Savini:
A Man of
Many Parts

12 "The Changeling"
Peter Medak, director of
"The Ruling Class" and "Joe
Egg," discusses his first excur-
sion into the realm of the
supernatural.

14 "Friday the 13th"
It's a day for terror, as the
producer of Last House on
the Left returns with another
feast of fear.

17 The Quatermass Saga
As Professor Q. reaches his
conclusion, author Nigel
Kneale and director Val
Guest comment on the mak-
ing of the Quatermass trilogy.

22 Vincent Price:
The Corman
Years, Part One
In an exclusive
two-part inter-
view, the elder
statesman of evil
recalls his part in
the making of
Roger Corman's
AIP Poe films.

26 Stephen King and
George Romero:
A Collaboration in Terror!
The two monarchs of
menace offer a glimpse at
their plans for the eerie 80s!

28 The Apes of Wrath
Because you asked for it! An
introduction to the
60s SF phen-
omenon, The
Planet of the
Apes.

31 Through the Halls
of Hammer
A concise history of the 60s'
leading horror studio.

32 Bound-In Bonus Poster:
Our Tribute to
Hammer Films!

45 Caroline Conquers
the Colonies
Fantasy films' femme fatale
returns with news of her
newest film role!

55 Count Fangor
Howard "Crypt-
 kicker" Cruse
with the first
adventure of
FANGORIA's fun-
loving fiend,
("Beats The
Munsters"
—American Mor-
tuary Monthly)

58 FantasticArt
From Bigfoot to Tolkien—
Doug Beekman is a fantasy
artist for all tastes.

62 Monster Invasion
Carpenter's Next; Sheena
swings again; and the
vengeance trail of Mad Max!

65 Classified Ads
Apes of Wrath

Between 2001 and Star Wars there was one true sci-fi phenomenon—
"The Planet of the Apes"

By SAMUEL JAMES MARONIE

As unthinkable as it sounds today, there was once a time when high-quality fantasy films were in desperately short supply.

The 1960s had almost gasped their last, and the decade had yet to provide filmgoers with anything in the way of memorable entertainment.

It wasn't until 1968 that the cinema experienced a small boom period, mostly featuring science-fiction offerings like 2001—A Space Odyssey, Barbarella, and a sleeper of a movie that took audiences by delightful surprise: Planet of the Apes.

Not only was Apes one of the year's most financially successful pictures, but it also spawned a quartet of sequels and fired up a legion of fans who remain zealously devoted to the series today.

The basic plot-line of the original film (and many of its follow-ups) is familiar to anyone the least bit familiar with the popular O. Henry "shock ending" style. A group of astronauts (headed by Charlton Heston) are returning to Earth from a deep-space mission and crash-land on what they believe is an alien world.

As the crew eventually encounter intelligent life forms, the Earthlings are stunned to find a role-reversal whereby articulate simians are the masters of the society and humans are savage creatures used for sport and scientific experiments.

Through a series of nightmarish adventures, the visitors ultimately come to realize that they have indeed arrived on their native planet, now a post-Armageddon world in which humans have regressed barely above the animal level. This discovery is capped in a powerful climax; as the camera pulls back, astronaut Heston is revealed crying out in grief amid the ruins of the Statue of Liberty.

Scarce a happy ending, but audiences loved it just the same.
Planet of the Apes performed so well at the all-important box-office that it became one of Fox’s highest-grossing films ever. Furthermore, it was shown that fantasy pictures could be done in a mature fashion and still prove a sound investment for the studio.

“Apes” Proponent

Apes would probably never have been made if not for the persistence of public-relations-man-turned-producer Arthur P. Jacobs. The late filmmaker had purchased the Pierre Boulle novel while still unpublished — and in French; the author’s agent gave Jacobs a verbal synopsis in English, and that was enough to convince him of its potential.

Eventually, a screenplay was commissioned, and with this tucked under his arm Jacobs made the rounds of various studios to obtain backing. He was rejected by them all — major and minor — twice. Disappointingly, he put the project aside to wait for just the right moment.

A couple of years later Jacobs was producing several features for Fox (The Chairman, Dr. Doolittle) and recalled the way-out story. He persuaded studio chief Richard Zanuck to let him make a “test reel” whereby he could dramatically present the man/beast conflict to skeptical executives.

The producer quickly fashioned a long talking sequence between actor Charlton Heston and a crudely made-up Edward G. Robinson to showcase his idea. He confided to a friend just prior to the screening, “If anyone so much as laughs — we’ve had it!” No one even snickered, and Zanuck gave him his blessings.

Everyone knew that if the film was to succeed, the concept of a simian society had to be absolutely convincing. Subsequently, no expense was spared to achieve this sense of believability.

An unprecedented $1 million makeup budget was allotted to costume wizards Dan Striepeke and John Chambers to develop the ape faces. Instead of conventional masks, the appliances were designed as custom-made sections that allowed for full dramatic expression.

Kim Hunter, Roddy McDowall and others were subjected to five-hour-plus makeup sessions each morning, followed by a full day emoting in front of hot studio lights. Eating was out of the question and an occasional cigarette was only managed through the use of a long holder.

The real test of the actors’ stamina, though, came during several days spent in the Arizona desert. Temperatures climbed beyond 120 degrees and the simian performers often found themselves on the verge of suffocation. Kim Hunter actually fainted from the heat exhaustion on more than one occasion.

But no one complained or asked to go home. McDowall, Hunter and Maurice Evans all remarked that they always believed strongly in Jacobs’ unique project and felt the hardships were a small price to pay in order to be a part of the team. Their dedication is even more evident in viewing the fine performances they turned in.

How to Make an Ape Planet

Creating an actual planet of apes was the job tackled by the film’s production designer, Bill Creber. While the original novel was set in a scientifically advanced community, this idea was rejected as being too complex for a film with an already hefty budget. Instead, Creber went with a primitive look that added to the picture’s bizarre nature.

Sequences featuring the spacecraft’s crash in the desert and the astronauts’ trek to civilization were filmed in portions of Utah and Arizona. A scene calling for the Earthmen to bathe in a convenient pool forced the moviemakers to construct an artificial one — complete with waterfall and man-made plumbing.

For the stone structures of the ape city, Creber utilized a form of polyurethane foam which could be shot out of a gun, molded and left to rise like bread dough. Reinforced with pencil-thin rods, the foam was later textured to give the convincing appearance of being hewn from boulders.

While Jacobs was extravagant with the film’s visual appeal, neither did he scrimp in the calibration of the shooting script. Authors Michael Wilson and Rod Serling contributed an excellent scenario full of Swiftian political satire and wit. Heston’s plea before the Ape Council is an especially moving segment that comes off as both entertaining and thought-provoking.

Planet of the Ape's and its sequels derived much of their popularity by appealing to the audience on two levels. Moviegoers who like message pictures found many philosophical tidbits examined through the strange role-reversal, while fantasy/adventure buffs were treat-
show from mediocrity. The video version was mercifully cut short in mid-season.
A cartoon version on Saturday mornings helped to keep the concept alive, and managed to succeed on that level. But many fans remain fervently loyal to the original Apes characters and hope the concept may someday be reactivated for more films.

One recurring story relates to how the Planet of the Apes series positively influenced the making of Star Wars. Rumor has it that when George Lucas presented the concept for his outer-space extravaganza, several Fox executives were favorably inclined to the project because of the ape-like Chewbacca. Hollywood loves to repeat success stories, and the studio had already earned millions with their previous monkey-men scenario.

Whether or not we will ever see any further adventures on the planet of the apes is open to speculation. But while the jury is out, the Apes quintet is rerun constantly on local TV, and even the 13 episodes from the ill-fated TV series are available for viewing. The apes are not gone, and they’re most definitely not forgotten.

Even if there are not any more new entries, moviegoers may take pleasure in the fact that intelligent, well-produced fantasy films have always had an eager audience. And the Planet of the Apes series is one of the best examples of this following.

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**The Apes Saga**

**PLANET OF THE APES** (20th Century-Fox, 1968)

**BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES** (1970)

**CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES** (1972)

**BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES** (1973)

"PLANET OF THE APES"—An hour-long dramatic TV series aired on the CBS network from 9/13/74 thru 12/27/74 (13 episodes). Roddy McDowall, James Naughton, Ron Harper

"RETURN TO THE PLANET OF THE APES"—A Saturday morning animated cartoon series, debuted on NBC 9/6/75.