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CHARITON HESTON'S SCI-FI TRILOGY

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Charlton Heston unexpectedly became a 1970s big screen science fiction hero when he fronted a trio of classics - *Planet of the Apes*, *The Omega Man*, and *Soylent Green*. Brian J. Robb explores Chuck's science fiction credentials...



Don't miss it!

CASTING BY CHARLTON HESTON • LEIGH TAYLOR-YOUNG
SOYLENT GREEN CHUCK CONNORS • JOSEPH COTTEN
BROCK PETERS • PAULA KELLY • EDWARD G. ROBINSON
SCREENPLAY BY STANLEY R. GREENBERG • BASED UPON A STORY BY HARRY HARRISON
PRODUCED BY WALTER SELTZER • DIRECTED BY RUSSELL THACHER • EDITED BY RICHARD FLEISCHER
PGI METROCOLOR • PANAVISION

This image:
Chuck and his fellow
astronauts Charlton
Heston, Jeff Burton,
and Robert Gunner
crash land on the
Planet of the Apes
(1968)



CHUCK





AMMUCK!



Charlton Heston should have known he would inevitably feature heavily in science fiction cinema—after all, he was born John Carter, although not on Mars.

Before headlining a trio of 1970s science fiction classics, Heston was best known for his sword-and-sandal historical hero movies. Growing up in Northern Michigan in the 1930s and 1940s, Heston dabbled in community theatre before scoring a drama scholarship to Northwestern University. His acting ambitions were interrupted by the Second World War in which Heston served as a radio operator and aerial gunner in the US Air Force.

After the war, Heston and new wife Lydia, lived in New York where he played supporting roles on Broadway and appeared in early television productions, including drama anthology *Studio One*, broadcast from New York. Appearing in a TV version of *Wuthering Heights* earned Heston a movie contract when he was spotted by *Casablanca* (1942) producer Hal B. Wallis.


That led quickly to his first leading role, at the age of 26, in 1950 film noir *Dark City*, produced by Wallis. A couple of years later, he made his mark as the circus manager in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952), which won the Best Picture Oscar.

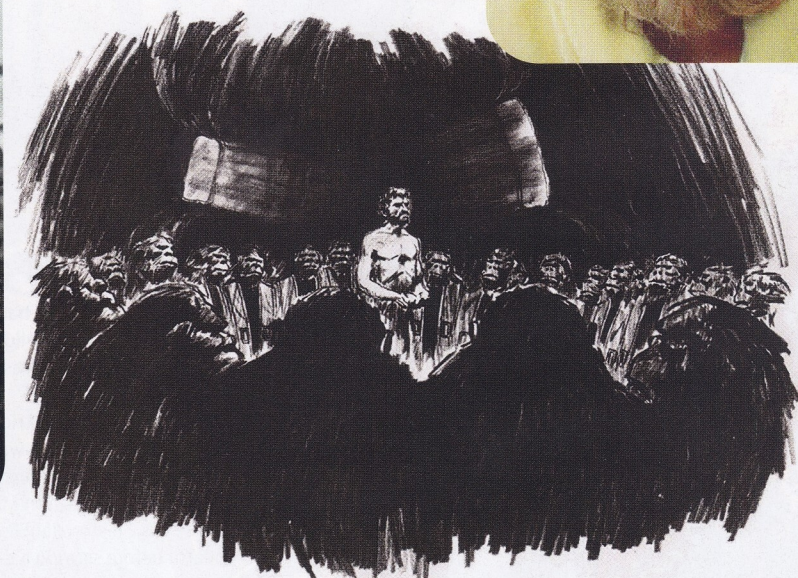
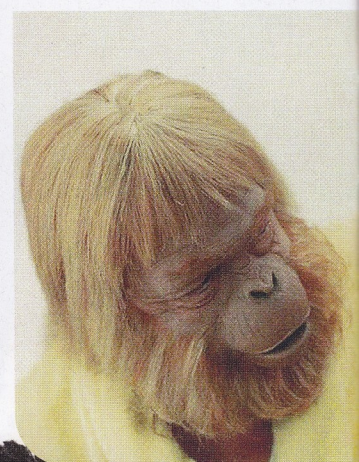
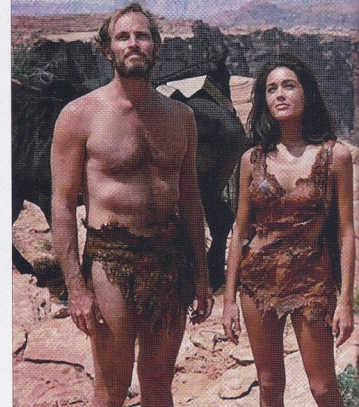
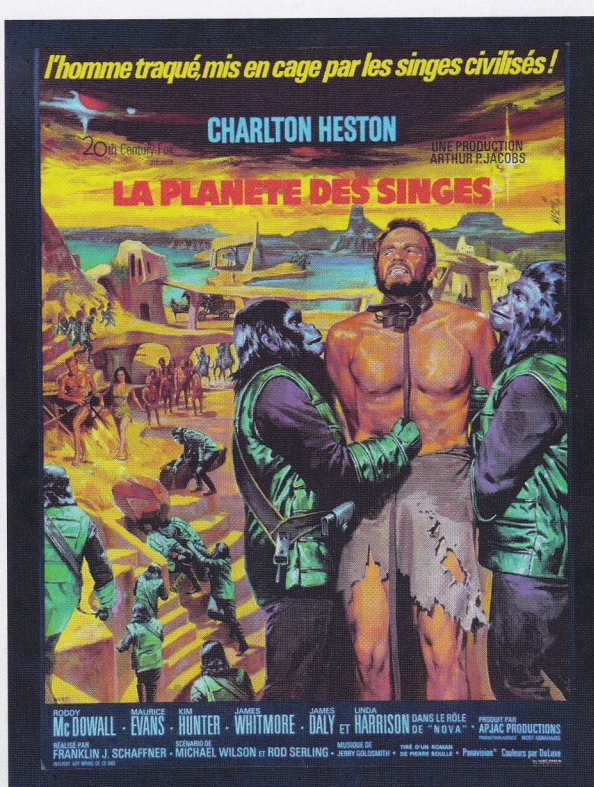
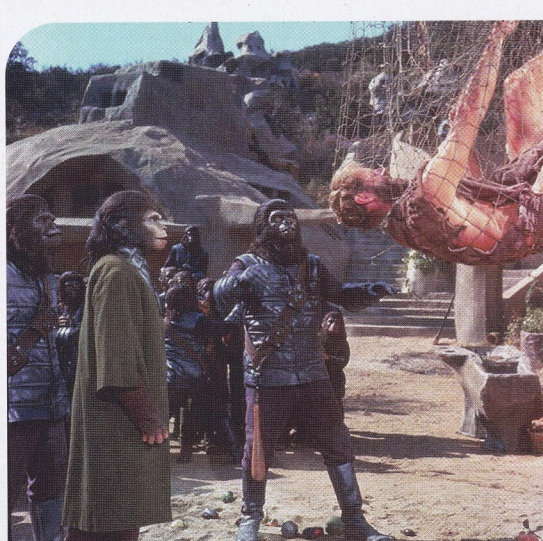
Heston quickly fell into playing regularly in Westerns (*The Savage*, 1952; *Arrowhead*, 1953), then the most popular cinema genre, and adventure movies—*The Naked Jungle* (1954) saw Heston battle killer ants, while *Secret of the Incas* (1954) served as the template used by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981).

The role that made Heston a Hollywood icon came in DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) in which he gave a 'big' performance as Moses (Fraser, his three month old son, played the baby Moses). A huge box office hit, *The Ten Commandments* brought Heston several nominations and awards.

Although he had originally intended to make his way as a stage actor, Heston was now committed to film. While still playing in the odd Western, Heston used his new-found Hollywood power to talk himself into the leading role in Orson Welles' noir thriller *Touch of Evil* (1958), even though the character was supposed to be Mexican. Another Biblical epic, *Ben-Hur* (1959), secured Heston's position as the go-to guy for widescreen epics, and the role won him a Best Actor Oscar.

The 1960s largely saw Heston build on both *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur* by playing in similar historical and adventure movies, such as *El Cid* (1961), *55 Days at Peking* (1963), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), and *Khartoum* (1966). The actor became indelibly ingrained in the public consciousness as the guy who played larger-than-life historical characters in larger-than-life performances.

His stint as president of the Screen Actors Guild between 1965 and 1971 gave Heston a taste of politics (he was largely a conservative Democrat at this point) that would later flourish in his membership of the National Rifle Association and anti-gun control views. Towards the end of the 1960s, however, Heston's box office clout was wearing out, with a couple of expensive box office flops like *The War Lord* (1965) and *Counterpoint* (1968). 



MAKING A MONKEY OF MANKIND

Towards the end of that decade, Charlton Heston was aware he needed an extraordinary role in an extraordinary film to restore his box office clout. Although he was open to considering almost anything, he surely expected salvation to come in the form of another Biblical epic or big-scale adventure film, not in the form of a far future tale of talking apes and end-of-the-world nihilism. That, however, is exactly what happened when Charlton Heston encountered *Planet of the Apes* (1968), the first of a blockbuster trio of science fiction movies that would give the actor a new all-action image for the 1970s.

The film had been mired in development hell for years. Producer Arthur P. Jacobs bought the film rights to Pierre Boulle's French-language novel *Monkey Planet* (*La planète des singes*) prior to its publication in 1963, believing the unique story could be his ticket out of his publicity role into film production. Initially, Jacobs had little luck touting the project around Hollywood—many executives simply couldn't get their heads around the idea of a movie about a future Earth inhabited by intelligent apes, and those who did could not see how the project could be brought to the screen convincingly.

When working at 20th Century Fox on *Doctor*

Doolittle (1967, an extravagant, imaginative movie that would prove to be a box office flop), Jacobs persuaded Fox production head Richard D. Zanuck to take a chance on *Planet of the Apes*.

Jacobs had a script ready, initially drafted by *The Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling (who was responsible for the 'it was Earth all along' twist) and revised by once blacklisted writer Michael Wilson (*The Bridge on the River Kwai*, 1957, also from a Boulle novel), but what he really needed to make the project viable was a big-name leading man who'd bring gravitas to the more fanciful notions underlying the world of the film.

Among those considered were Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Rock Hudson (science fiction thriller *Seconds*, 1966), and even Jack Lemmon, still regarded as a comic actor. Directors J. Lee Thompson (he eventually helmed two of the *Apes* sequels) and Blake Edwards came and went on the project. Finally, Jacobs decided to approach Charlton Heston, a man with a reputation for playing larger-than-life figures in out-there movies.

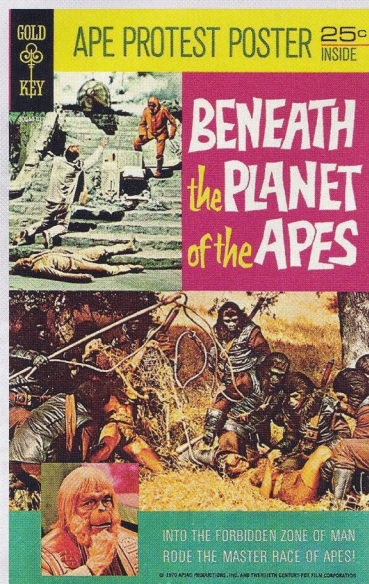
Heston was willing to meet Jacobs despite the fact that at this stage of his career he only entertained firm offers for fully-funded projects, and Jacobs was still trying to get his effort underway. Heston wrote in the detailed diary

that he kept throughout his career that Jacob's delivered a 'pitch for the film he wants to make of the Pierre Boulle novel *Planet of the Apes*.

It sounds marvellous to me and I haven't even read it yet!

When Heston did read the latest script, he found much he liked and could relate to in Serling and Wilson's work. 'I was intrigued by the project,' admitted Heston, '[by] the idea of it. [Jacobs] told me the story, showed me the pictures [storyboards, production concept art]. I was very intrigued and wanted to play in it. I empathised to some extent with [human astronaut] Taylor's point of view of the world—Taylor reflects my own views of mankind. I have infinite faith and admiration for the extraordinary individual man, but very limited expectations for man as a species. The idea that he welcomes the chance to escape the world, [then finds] himself cast in a situation where he is a spokesman for the whole species—[that] was a very appealing thing to act.'

Heston was particularly pleased to reunite with his director from *The War Lord*, Franklin J. Schaffner, who—like Heston—had begun his career in the early days of live television from New York. Schaffner—whom Heston had touted to



Jacobs for the job—first filmed a proof-of-concept make-up test featuring Heston (as Thomas, the original name for Taylor), Edward G. Robinson as Zaius, and James Brolin and Linda Harrison as Cornelius and Zira (Harrison, then the girlfriend of Fox boss Richard D. Zanuck, would feature in the movie as the primitive human Nova).

The scene and dialogue for the test was drawn from one of Serling's early screenplay drafts. It was this test, combined with the star power of Heston and the unexpected success of Fox's *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), that finally convinced Zanuck to give Jacob's dream project the green light. (Robinson would later drop out of the film due to health concerns; he and Heston would later re-unite on *Soylent Green*).

Released in April 1968, *Planet of the Apes* was an unexpectedly huge hit. Made on a limited budget of a little over \$5 million, the film made over \$30 million at the US box office, generating a considerable profit. Critics loved it, reading much into its commentary on the sorry state of mankind as the 1970s loomed, while audiences couldn't get enough of the hugely convincing ape make-ups and performances.

The *Los Angeles Times* called the movie 'a triumph of artistry and imagination ... it is at once a timely parable and a grand adventure on an epic scale'. John Chambers went on to win an honorary Oscar for his ape make-up, while the avant-garde percussion-driven score was Oscar nominated, as were the unusual costumes.

Jacobs knew a good thing when he saw it and immediately began work on a sequel. Heston agreed to appear, albeit with great reluctance, as long as his filming covered just one day and the character of Taylor was definitively killed off to ensure he didn't have to return again.

Beneath the Planet of the Apes (1970) might have seen the end of the Earth, but it was merely the jumping off point for a franchise that chronicled how the apes came to power over mankind in *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (1971), *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972), and *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973). There were two

TV series, one live action and one animated. A poorly received 2001 *Planet of the Apes* reboot by Tim Burton brought Heston back, this time as an ape elder. Although dormant for a while, the monkey movie franchise was revived in recent years in a new trilogy thanks to advances in motion capture and CGI technology.

Looking back on the film that launched his unofficial science fiction trilogy, Charlton Heston said of *Planet of the Apes*: 'I was quite delighted with the way it worked. It's not a profound film, but it is a good film. It makes some valuable observations on the human condition.' Maybe there was something in this science fiction stuff, after all...

LAST MAN STANDING

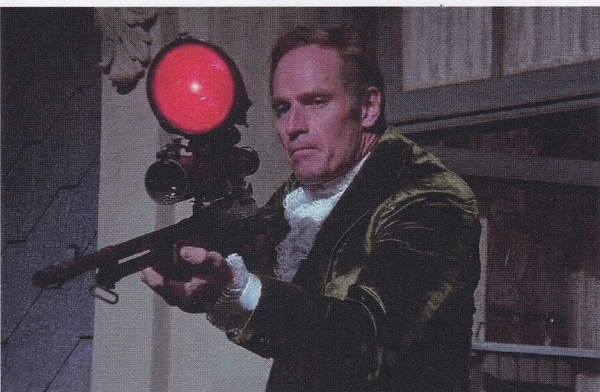
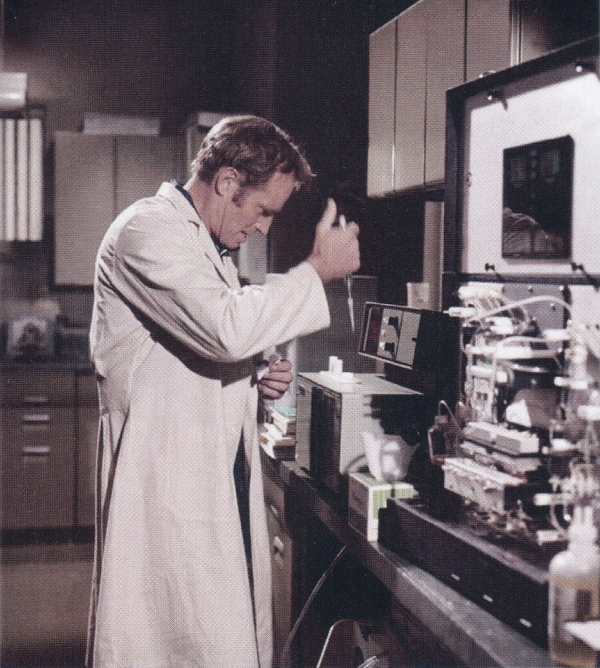
Despite the success of *Planet of the Apes*, Charlton Heston had never been a fan of science fiction in the movies. He liked it well enough on paper and had been an enthusiastic reader of *Astounding Stories* when younger, but he didn't see the genre offering a serious actor like him enough meat.

'I'd always been fascinated by science fiction,' Heston said, 'but ... the parts in science fiction film tend to fall into three categories: monsters, in which you are

Clockwise across spread from opposite, bottom: Chuck with Linda Harrison; with Kim Hunter and Buck Kartalian; with Kim Hunter, Roddy McDowall, Linda Harrison, and Lou Wagner; Makeup artist John Chambers and Maurice Evans; a pre-production storyboard

Below: "Mankind has been rather foolhardy" says Chuck. Or words to that effect





This spread: Chuck as Robert Neville, crucified for being the last man on Earth in *The Omega Man*. Anthony Zerbe as the evil Matthias

merely a vehicle for the make-up; the "pointers", who say "Hey, look at that!"; and the "fugitives", who are in the more horrifying films, in which they're running away from ... something. They really don't offer much creative satisfaction for the actor.'

After *Planet of the Apes*, Heston was back on the 'serious actor' beat, appearing in football drama *Number One* (1969), historical drama *The Hawaiians* (1970), and as Mark Antony in an all-star *Julius Caesar* (1970) with Jason Robards, Richard Chamberlain, John Gielgud, and Diana Rigg.

Nothing during this period was a hit, except for *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970), in which Heston had reluctantly cameoed. Maybe, the actor reckoned, he needed to find another Ape-like distinctive science fiction vehicle that could offer him a decent leading role. In *The Omega Man* (1971), Heston found the ideal part—the last man left alive on Earth!

Richard Matheson's 1954 pseudo-vampire novel *I Am Legend* had been filmed once before as *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), an Italian-American co-production featuring Vincent Price as Robert Morgan (Robert Neville in the novel). Matheson was so unhappy with this 'inept' version of his story that his screenplay was credited to pen name 'Logan Swanson'.

Matheson said: 'I was disappointed in the film, even though they more or less followed my story. I think Vincent Price, whom I love in every one of his pictures that I wrote, was miscast. I also felt the direction was kind of poor. I just didn't care for it.'

For the new version, screenwriters Joyce Corrington and John William Corrington wanted to move away from the concepts in Matheson's original that were played up in the Vincent Price version.

'It was all about vampires, and it just didn't feel right to do vampires [in the 1970s]. Germ warfare, chemical warfare was on my mind, so we used that as a way you could wipe out civilisation,' related Joyce Corrington in a DVD extra. She saw the central character Robert Neville as both 'the cold scientist, the killer, and the compassionate person who is willing to sacrifice himself, and through his blood save humanity'. How could Heston resist?

For much of Boris Sagal's film, Heston as Neville would have the screen to himself, the ultimate one-man show. The legend—according to a syndicated 1971 Marilyn Beck column—is that Heston first encountered Matheson's novel while shooting *Touch of Evil*, thanks to Orson Welles who passed the book on (although Heston's diaries suggest the book may have been George R. Stewart's 1949 novel *Earth Abides*).

Producer Walter Seltzer was putting together the remake at Heston's behest. Heston then watched the Vincent Price version. 'It's not really a good film,' noted

Heston of *The Last Man on Earth*. 'Vinnie was a wonderful actor, but I don't think this one was successful. It really wasn't very well written, in my opinion.' For the new version, Heston, Seltzer, and Sagal needed a fresh take. 'It seemed to us that we needed a new script. It is the same idea really. Everybody has a kind of awareness of what it would be like to be the last man on Earth. We arrived at a good version of the script, which centred on that.'

Liking cinematographer Russell Metty's work on both *Touch of Evil* and *The War Lord*, Heston and Seltzer hired him for what became *The Omega Man*. It has been suggested that Heston was keen on getting Welles to direct, but he was then tied up with his long-in-gestation movie *The Other Side of the Wind* (which only saw release in 2018). Matheson and Welles already had a connection, as the writer outlined: 'I met Welles when they were making *Touch of Evil* at Universal. He was there looking at a rough cut of *The Shrinking Man* (1957) and he narrated trailers for *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, as well.'

Heston was heavily involved in production decisions, as this diary entry from 5 October 1970 shows: 'While casting for *I Am Legend*, we saw a number of actresses.

This is always a hard time for me. I hate to be involved in these readings and interviews. No one remarkable came up today, though one girl is possible.'

In bringing the Matheson plot into the 1970s, the writers had determined to co-star Heston with a largely black cast, so the search was on for an actress for the romantic interest role of Lisa. Later in October 1970, Heston's diary noted: 'It should be an easy part, requiring only a certain swinging, pert quality, coupled with as much physical attractiveness as possible. So far, we've only come up with two girls that seem close.'

One who came close was Judy Pace, then known for her television and 'blaxploitation' roles in films like *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970). In the end, Heston and Seltzer settled on Rosalind Cash, then better known as a singer than an actress. Cash faced the intimidating prospect of featuring in a love scene with Heston, with the actor recording her unexpected reservations in his autobiography. *In the Arena*: 'It was in the 1970s that I realised a generation of actors had grown up who saw me in terms of the iconic roles they remembered from their childhoods. "It's a spooky feeling," [Cash] told me, "to screw Moses." For the main villain, leader of the mutant tribe, the star and his producer turned to Anthony Zerbe, largely a television actor in the 1960s who'd only recently begun appearing in significant film roles.

As with the Vincent Price movie, many liberties were taken with the story and characters in transforming Matheson's novel into a new film, prime among them transforming the plague that caused humans to turn into vampire-like creatures into a biological warfare element that turned them into nocturnal albinos.

Mixing that contemporary concern with the equally contemporary issue of 'black power' (in the Rosalind Cash character) was aimed at updating Matheson's concept for the 1970s. According to Heston, Sagal was not best suited to the material and there was tension between the director, star, and producer throughout the shooting.

Shot on a TV movie budget, and—it has to be said—in a zoom-heavy TV movie style, *The Omega Man* did well at the box office, grossing in excess of \$9 million. That came as a relief to Heston: '[*The Omega Man* was] a large hit in the theatres. It was high bloody time; of the four films I'd made in the previous two years, none had been huge at the box office.'

His performance in the central, largely solo role was welcomed by critics. 'If anybody has to be the last man in the world, I suppose it might as well be Charlton Heston. At least we know we're in good hands. He outmanoeuvred the apes in *Planet of the Apes* (1968), so why not send him up against the ghouls in *The Omega Man*?' suggested Roger Ebert in *The Chicago Sun-Times*. Once again, Charlton Heston had proof that 1970s science fiction was his saviour at the box office.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Producer Walter Seltzer certainly saw the sense in putting Heston into another iconic 1970s science fiction movie. After *The Omega Man*, Heston had returned to Shakespeare, directing and starring in a little-seen film of *Antony and Cleopatra*, opposite Hildegard Neil as Cleopatra.

Heston tried burnishing his action credentials with 1972's *Skyjacked!*, produced by Seltzer. A standard all-star ensemble disaster film, it did well enough (Heston would make a habit of disaster flicks, with 1974's *Earthquake* and *Airport 1975* following). The same could not be said for *Call of the Wild* (1972), a flop family adventure. He needed a new hit.

Seltzer found a new science fiction vehicle for Heston in the shape of the 1966 Harry Harrison novel *Make Room! Make Room!* which dealt with the issue of overcrowding and uncontrolled population growth. Seltzer had screenwriter Stanley R. Greenberg

CHARLTON HESTON THE ΩMEGA MAN



(*Skyjacked!*) expand the novel into a near future thriller, dispensing with Harrison's multiple points-of-view and filtering the new story through the eyes of future New York cop Frank Thorn. In the world of 2022 social disorder and food shortages are the order of the day, as the Earth's population outstrips the planet's resources. When Thorn investigates the murder of a wealthy member of society, he is drawn into a conspiracy that drives Soylent Industries, which controls the food supply for half the planet. The now well-known twist that 'Soylent Green is made out of people!' wasn't quite as impactful as the *Planet of the Apes* Statue of Liberty reveal, but it has nonetheless lives on in popular culture.

Heston brought an ailing Edward G. Robinson—with whom he'd shot the make-up tests for *Planet of the Apes*—into *Soylent Green* as Thorn's veteran friend who undergoes voluntary euthanasia in order to reveal the conspiracy that Soylent is using

It's the year 2022...

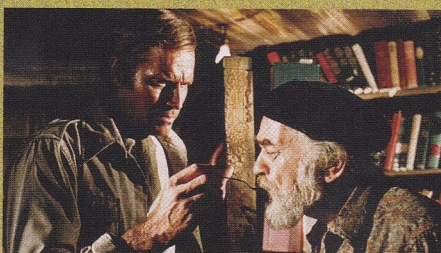
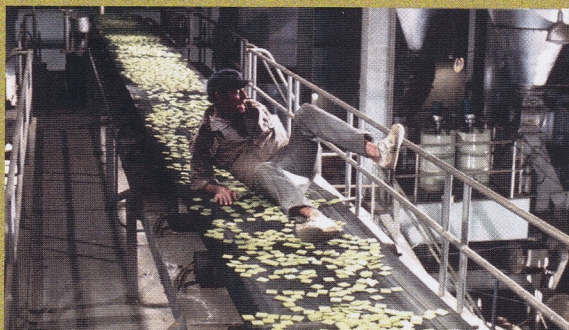
People are still the same.
They'll do anything to
get what they need.
And they need
SOYLENT GREEN.



SOYLENT GREEN

MCA Presents
CHARLTON HESTON • LEIGH TAYLOR-YOUNG • SOYLENT GREEN
CHUCK CONNORS • JOSEPH COTTEN • BROCK PETERS • PAULA KELLY • EDWARD G. ROBINSON
Screenplay by STANLEY R. GREENBERG • Harry Harrison • Walter Seltzer and Russell Thacher • Richard Fleischer
Produced by METROCOLOR • Released by MON

This page:
Chuck as
Detective Thorn
in *Soylent
Green*, seen right
with Edward G.
Robinson - it was
the great Eddie
G's final movie



human remains in the creation of the world's artificial foodstuffs.

It was Robinson's final film, and he's given a great send-off in a moving montage sequence in which his character is exposed to images and sounds of a lost natural world as he dies. Robinson, aged 79, died just two weeks after completing his filming.

Heston recorded in his collected journals: 'He knew while we were shooting, though we did not, that he was terminally ill. He never missed an hour of work, nor was late to a call. He never was less than the consummate professional he had been all his life. I'm still haunted, though, by the knowledge that the very last scene he played, which he knew was the last day's acting he would ever do, was his death scene. I know why I was so overwhelmingly moved playing it with him.'

However, Harry Harrison wasn't too taken with this film version of his novel declaring himself only 'fifty per cent' pleased with the movie. The entire Soylent human recycling scheme had been invented for the film, and Harrison wasn't too impressed by the

movie's sexual politics in which women were depicted as virtual sex slaves referred to as 'furniture'.

Director Richard Fleischer (*Fantastic Voyage*) handled the movie well, giving the standard investigative narrative a little more philosophical heft than might otherwise have been the case. *Variety* covered the movie with faint praise, calling it 'a good futuristic exploitation film'.

Each of Charlton Heston's science fiction 'trilogy' featured a downbeat take on humanity, with speculation on the chances of civilisation surviving into the future on the negative side. These movies were part of a downbeat trend for dark science fiction that encompassed *Silent Running* (1972), *Westworld* (1973), and *Logan's Run* (1976). Such films were the last hurrah for intelligent science fiction filmmaking before the onslaught of special effects driven spectacle unleashed by the success of *Star Wars* (1977).

In each film, Heston's characters come to a sticky end—he dies in *The Omega Man*, is seemingly mortally wounded in *Soylent Green*, and although he's alive at the end of *Planet of the Apes*, he's killed off in the sequel. Heston would go on to make many more films, including the limp horror *The Awakening* (1980), Bond knock-off *True Lies* (1994), and John Carpenter's *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994), right up to 2003 when he concluded his career by lending his voice to *Ben Hur*, an animated remake of his biggest hit. Heston died in 2008, aged 84.

Nothing after the 1970s matched Heston's career before that decade, and none of his films came close to capturing the zeitgeist in the way that his late-1960s, early-1970s science fiction trilogy did.

Like the best written (all three films came from literary sources) and most cinematic science fiction, *Planet of the Apes*, *The Omega Man*, and *Soylent Green* addressed contemporary issues in the guise of futuristic tales. The nature and place of mankind, as technology developed and the planet began to suffer lies behind each of the films that hit cinemas just as the ecological movement was beginning to make an impact.

That Heston—later a gun-toting NRA-supporting Republican—could front a trio of philosophical science fiction tales that might be thought of as liberal or even left-wing is all the more remarkable.

Heston was a more square-jawed and less ironic version of Doug McClure, but unlike McClure in his 1970s adventure movies, Heston played things straight, and those three iconic movies are all the better for it. 