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CHUCK AMUCK!
CHARLTON HESTON'S SCI-FI TRILOGY

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ALPHA MALE
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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...
hampton 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 (1967).
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 emphasised to some extend 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—who 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 Sertling’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 Jacobs’s dream project the green light. (Robinson would later drop out of the film due to health concerns, as 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...’
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 'inexpert' 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 Shining 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.
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 proved 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 burningish 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. (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

Charlton Heston, Leigh Taylor-Young, Soylent Green

Like few other movies, Soylent Green: a science fiction trilogy featured a downbeat take on humanity, with speculation on the chances of civilization 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.