The original *Planet of the Apes* was released in 1968, but the influence of the film continues to permeate popular culture. By Brian Pendreigh

Spectacular action sequences and fearsome warriors in an exotic variation of medieval armour fill the screen. But this is not your average Hollywood adventure film, for the soldiers in question are gorillas. Or, rather, actors made up to look terrifyingly like real gorillas, using the latest breakthroughs in cinematic make-up.

Throw in Mark Wahlberg, star of *The Perfect Storm*, and Tim Burton, the visionary director behind *Edward Scissorhands* and *Batman*, and you have the most eagerly awaited film of a summer awash with blockbusters.

Burton's 're-imagining' of *Planet of the Apes* opens throughout Britain on August 17. The reappearance of the warrior apes should come as no surprise. The original film, in which astronaut Charlton Heston lands in a world where intelligent gorillas hunt backward humans for sport, was one of the biggest hits of 1968. There were four further big-screen instalments and two television series. The film set the fashion for sequels that persists to this day. There have been no new adventures since the mid-Seventies, but the popularity of *Planet of the Apes* has grown, rather than faded, in the intervening years, and its influence has permeated all areas of popular culture.

Repeated references to the film on *The Simpsons* have given it a high profile among a new generation. When Homer Simpson is chosen to become an astronaut, he tells a press conference: 'The only danger is if they send us to that terrible Planet of the Apes.' In another episode, bit-part actor Troy McClure stars in a *Planet of the Apes* musical, whose lyrics include the line, 'I hate every ape I see, from chimpan-A to chimpan-Z.'

In cult television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the heroine's sidekick, Xander, reprises Heston's cry of 'It's a madhouse!', but another character interrupts to identify the film before Xander can finish.

Films, too, have been queuing up to establish their hip credentials with references to *Planet of the Apes*. The mischievous Austin Powers travels back to the Sixties in *The Spy Who Shagged Me*, and claims that the future will be run by 'darn dirty apes'. In *Josie and the Pussycats*, a film about a young female pop group that opens in British cinemas the week after Burton's movie, one character has a monkey named after the scheming orang-utan Zaius.

Nor are the in-jokes and homages confined to show business. When veteran astronaut John Glenn went back into space in 1998, an e-mail swept around the world urging everyone to dress up as apes when he returned to fool him into thinking the film's plot had come true.

Before *Planet of the Apes*, science-fiction films had a poor reputation established by a string of risible B-movies such as *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*. It was a genre aimed at rowdy, popcorn-throwing, cat-calling audiences rather than those who wanted to be emotionally wrung, intellectually challenged or scared wireless.

The success of *Planet of the Apes*, and 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, however, prompted studios to consider other big-budget sci-fi films. It is no accident that it was Twentieth Century Fox, the studio that made *Planet of the Apes*, which backed *Star Wars* and *Alien*. *Planet of the Apes* also laid the foundations of modern film merchandising. Its blitz of toys and other items only really took off at the end of the series, but it whetted the appetite for George.

Primal screen: A scene from Tim Burton's *Planet of the Apes* (opposite); and (above left) Charlton Heston, Kim Hunter and (above) Maurice Evans in 1968
It was made at a time when people were questioning established values.