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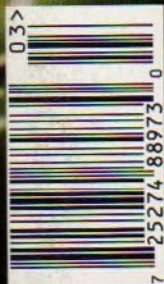
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VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3

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## DUSK-TO-DAWN MARATHON

### *Monkeys on Horses* **THE PLANET OF THE APES CYCLE**

by **PETER  
FLYNN**



**C**ontemporary pop culture has lately shown an increasing predilection for raiding yesterday's cookie jar. It's not surprising, then, that amidst the countless morsels re-exposed in the light of the 1990's retro-cult—from "Scooby Doo" to "Mission: Impossible"—the **Planet of the Apes** pentalogy has finally been re-examined (1998, the year of the original film's 30th anniversary, saw a marathon on television's American Movie Classics and re-releases of all five films by CBS/Fox Home Video). Spanning five feature films (from 1968 to 1973), two TV series and a host of comic-book and merchandising spin-offs, the **Ape** phenomenon is not only a rare gold mine of moon-race, Cold War, Vietnam, and civil rights zeitgeist, but also one of the most satisfyingly intelligent pop-cult fantasies ever produced. Hurling across time from the future to the present to the future again, the **Apes** cycle reversed traditional Darwinian evolution and (worse still) doubted Kennedy's predictions about America's technologic future. Dystopian at best, the Ape films took contemporary social fears and allegorized them as an endlessly repetitive cycle of racial oppression and self-destructive bloodlust.

The series began with **Planet of the Apes** (1968), produced for Twentieth Century Fox by Arthur P. Jacobs from the novel, *Monkey Planet* by Pierre Boulle. Regarded as something of a risk—by the late 1960's the science fiction genre was on a definite downswing—it nonetheless proved one of the biggest money-makers of the year. Capitalizing on the original's success, **Beneath the Planet of the Apes** was rushed into production and released in 1970. Realizing all hopes for a successful franchise, **Beneath** led Fox to release three more follow-ups in rapid succession: **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). While generally regarded as inferior, all four sequels nevertheless managed to develop Boulle's original conception and to create an elaborate and wholly successful national (anti-)myth. Together, all five films represent something unique in American pop culture—an effective blend of mainstream escapism, counter culture politics, and transglobal marketing.

**PLANET OF THE APES** 1968, dir/Franklin J. Schaffner, wr/Rod Serling. Charlton Heston, Roddy McDowall, Maurice Evans, Kim Hunter, 112m/color, CBS/Fox Video • The original—and undoubtedly the best of the series—sees astronaut Taylor (Heston) land in a futuristic Wonderland ruled by apes. Hunted down and caught, Taylor and his two surviving (though ill-fated) shipmates are subjected to the inhumanities of the ape kingdom, a hierarchic society of orangutans (administrators), gorillas (soldiers), and chimpanzees (scientists), in which humans are beaten, caged, and experimented upon. The basis for such treatment: all humans are dumb—"human see human do" a gorilla comments at one point. Understandable, therefore, is the threat Heston's tall, powerful, Aryan physique poses to the society's apeocentric world-view. Is Heston proof that humans are not the animals they are believed to be? Or worse still, is Heston the possible missing link that unites the modern ape with his primitive human ancestor? In either case, the apes' natural recourse is to castration, lobotomy, and taxidermy—a fate Heston narrowly avoids through the intervention of Zira (Kim Hunter) and Cornelius (Roddy McDowall), two friendly and scientifically radical chimpanzees. Escaping

to a region the apes term the Forbidden Zone, Taylor encounters the Statue of Liberty half buried in the sand by the ocean's edge. The sudden climatic realization that Taylor has never left the Earth—that humans did indeed precede the apes and destroy their civilization—is shocking, yet at the same time strangely welcome. For all along, the parallels between the ape society and our own have been all too pointed. The clever screenplay is by Rod Serling (of "Twilight Zone" fame) and Michael Wilson, the once blacklisted writer of **A Place in the Sun** (51). Jerry Goldsmith's primal, richly chaotic score contributes greatly to the film's atmosphere of anarchy and temporal/racial disorder (see CD review, VE 3.2).

### **BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES**

1970, dir/Ted Post, wr/Paul Dehn. James Franciscus, Kim Hunter, Maurice Evans, Charlton Heston, 108m/color, CBS/Fox • Any attempt to outdo the original **Planet** is a weighty task. Yet **Beneath the Planet of the Apes** is an admirable effort that, surprisingly enough, succeeds as often as not. With Heston reduced to a marginal (yet crucial) role—a pre-credit sequence shows Taylor mysteriously disappearing in the Forbidden Zone, not to reappear until the film's close—**Beneath** leaves the leading man honors to James Franciscus, a poor man's Heston, if you will. In an unfortunate case of déjà vu, Franciscus retraces his predecessor's footsteps from Earth's past to future, runs afoul of the apes, and encounters Zira and Cornelius (this time around, David Watson), who help him escape to the Forbidden Zone. But to keep things from becoming too familiar, **Beneath** throws some ingenious ingredients into the mix. For one, the ape city is on the verge of martial law, with the increasingly powerful gorilla militia bent on invading the Forbidden Zone (a none-too-veiled allusion to the U.S. incursion into

Vietnam?). Awaiting the invasion is a race of underground telepathic mutants, who happen to be holding Taylor captive, and who also—in the film's cleverest turn—worship the last remaining doomsday bomb as a god (indeed, it has even been erected in a now-subterranean St. Patrick's Cathedral). But in keeping with the spirit of the movie's forerunner—and establishing a pattern that would extend until the series' final entry—things do not go well. Taylor's detonation of the bomb puts an end to the whole affair—and not a moment too soon. Writing credits go to Paul Dehn, who would more or less helm the rest of the series. Ted Post directs in an efficient, if unremarkable, manner.

### **ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES**

1971, dir/Don Taylor, wr/Paul Dehn. Roddy McDowall, Kim Hunter, Ricardo Montalban, 98m/color, CBS/Fox Video • If destroying the Earth gave an impression of closure to the series, it was certainly misleading. **Escape from the Planet of the Apes** is the series' curve-ball, abruptly altering its mood and trajectory. What had been a dystopian nightmare (in which contemporary social issues were played out in a futuristic fantasy world) would now become

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encounter the same reactions of fear and loathing their human counterparts met with in the first two films. Cornelius' and the pregnant Zira's fates (Milo is unfortunately disposed of rather quickly) foreshadow mankind's eventual downfall and supersession by apes (allusions to the story of Christ—and the birth of a new (simian) order—are all too apparent); Cornelius and Zira are hunted down and eventually killed, but their son remains hidden—courtesy of kindly circus owner Armando (Ricardo Montalban)—paving the way for the series' final two entries. While ostensibly a reversal of the earlier two films (here the apes are the aliens), *Escape* fails to grasp the complexities and sardonic humor that laced both *Planet* and *Beneath*. Still, McDowall makes a welcome return as Cornelius, and Kim Hunter (again as Zira) radiates tremendous charm through the monkey make-up.

**CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES** 1972, dir/J. Lee Thompson, wr/Paul Dehn. Roddy McDowall, Don Murray, Ricardo Montalban, 87m/color, CBS/Fox • J. Lee Thompson was past his prime when hired to take the reins of the last two *Ape* films, yet arguably his work here was the best of his post-Hollywood days (before his slump into Charles Bronson cheapies). *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* is the most political (and savage) of the *Ape* series, with Thompson perfectly capturing the primal rage and brutality of the ape revolution. It is 1991, and—in the eighteen years that have elapsed between *Escape* and *Conquest*—a plague has wiped out the Earth's entire population of cats and dogs. In their stead, apes have been adopted as household pets. Over the years, they are taught to perform menial tasks—from mopping floors to delivering mail—quickly becoming slaves fed to an oppressive service economy. Enter Caesar (played by Roddy McDowall), the son of Cornelius and Zira, now 18 and possessing all the fervent nationalism of Malcolm X. (A contemporary of urban race riots and large-scale civil rights protests, the film consciously reflects the work of black liberationists.) What Dehn's screenplay often fails to achieve, Thompson's direction compensates for in the film's brutal climax. The angry rush of apes running through the streets, the sea of seething gorilla faces filling the frame, the steady shots of armed riot police nervously waiting, all contribute to the film's central themes of rage, tension, and the inevitability of violent revolution. And yet, if by the film's close, hu-

mans no longer subjugate apes, racial domination (now ape over human) will nonetheless continue. So much for happy endings.

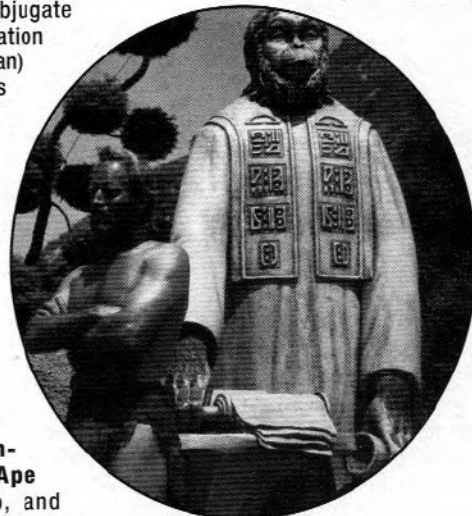
### BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES

1972, dir/J. Lee Thompson, wr/John & Joyce Corrington. Roddy McDowall, Claude Akins, John Huston, 96m/color, CBS/Fox •

In retrospect, *Conquest* was the *Ape* series' manifesto, and

could easily have made a fitting conclusion to the cycle. As it

was, 20th Century Fox commissioned one final entry, *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, a ramshackle effort that, while not without interest, is the least satisfying film in the series. Rejecting Dehn's original concept—human/ape race-relations as an endless loop of violence and counter-violence—Fox opted for a more optimistic conclusion, hiring the writing talents of Joyce and John Corrington to bring the series full-cycle. Caesar—now leader of an Eden-like community of apes who have acquired the power of speech—attempts to bring about harmony between the apes and their former masters. Thwarted by the resentful General Aldo and his gorilla militia—who see more use in humans as target-practice—Caesar must also contend with the human remnants from a recent nuclear war who are intent on invading the fledgling ape city. Once again, human-ape relations flare up in violence. But what separates *Battle* from its predecessors is its willingness to propose a peaceful resolution—in the film's closing moments, the ape Lawgiver (John Huston) talks of peace and harmony between human and ape while at his feet a young girl and chimp playfully wrestle. If all roads up until now led to Armageddon, a more hopeful route that offers an alternative to the future visited by Taylor in the series' first outing is presented here. The *Ape* cycle's energy came from a feverishly chaotic drive toward disorder, a mad roller-coaster ride through the sociopolitical turmoil of the period. Unfortunately, this conclusion is just too neat and tidy.



#### Pictured:

*Opposite:* Taylor (Charlton Heston) gets a monkey welcome wagon in *Planet of the Apes*.

*This page top:* Heston in a promotional shot for *Planet of the Apes*. The film's amazing art design is by Jack Martin Smith (*Doctor Doolittle*, 67, M\*A\*S\*H, 69)

*Right:* Human roundup time in *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*.

