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PLANET OF THE APES!
Monte Hellman’s Corman Days!
Cronenberg! Wishman! Polanski!

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Front: Maurice Evans as Dr. Zaius in PLANET OF THE APES (1968), now available on VHS and DVD from 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

Inside: The Dawn of Man from 2001 A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968) available on VHS and DVD from MGM Home Entertainment.

Back: The Oscar-winning Brundlefly designed by Chris Walas and his EFX Crew for David Cronenberg's THE FLY (1986), now available on DVD from 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.
Darwinism and pulp fantasy collide in the PLANET OF THE APES films, a short-lived but immensely popular big screen series derived from the novel LA PLANÈTE DES SINGES by Pierre Boulle (THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI). The saga begins traditionally in PLANET OF THE APES (1968, 111m 55s) with three astronauts crash-landing on a desolate planet consisting of rocky crags and arid stretches of desert. Eventually they discover a grassy area populated by primitive, non-verbal human beings who are promptly hunted down by apes on horseback. One of the astronauts, Taylor (Charlton Heston), suffers severe throat damage during the attack and is hauled off to the nearby ape city, while his companions disappear in the shuffle. Unable to communicate, Taylor is locked away in a cage and studied by two romantically-involved chimpanzee scientists, Dr. Zira (Kim Hunter) and Dr. Cornelius (Roddy McDowall). Their supervisor, the orangutan Dr. Zaius (Maurice Evans), expresses only disgust toward humans, but Zira in particular prizes her new specimen and nicknames him “Bright Eyes.” Taylor soon demonstrates his abilities by writing messages on paper and even regains his
Stranded astronaut Taylor (Charlton Heston) finds a sympathetic ear among chimp scientists Cornelius (Roddy McDowall) and Zira (Kim Hunter) on the PLANET OF THE APES.

voice, a development which puts him on trial before the ape council. He also becomes attracted to one of his fellow human captives, Nova (Linda Harrison), and determines to escape from the ape city and discover the true nature of his surroundings. Zaius insists the ape law, determined by a series of sacred scrolls, is correct in its identification of apes as superior beings to humans, but both he and Taylor must face harsh realizations during their eventual showdown.

An unlikely but much needed hit for the ailing 20th Century-Fox studios, PLANET OF THE APES marks a rare moment in which all the necessary elements came into alignment. Heston pulls off a gripping performance, laced with his trademark ham-bone touches during some frequently quoted lines of dialogue ("Get your stinking paws off me, you damned, dirty ape!" and "It's a madhouse! A madhouse!"). The screenplay immediately betrays the involvement of writer Rod Serling, whose affinity for moral allegories, stranded space travelers, and thought-provoking twist endings from THE TWILIGHT ZONE serves him well here. Hunter, Evans, and McDowall are all effective and believable in their difficult roles, augmented as they are by facial appliances designed by Oscar-winning makeup artist John Chambers; in fact, they perform so well, it's a shame they may all be remembered best in years to come for acting behind monkey faces. Director Franklin J. Schaffner (PATTON) first established himself here as a major director and brought along his regular composer, Jerry Goldsmith, whose groundbreaking, experimental score still sounds fresh and invigorating after years of imitation.

The surprise box office reception of PLANET OF THE APES naturally dictated a sequel, so the studio mandated a cheaper, faster follow up. Heston initially balked at returning as Taylor but finally agreed to an extended cameo appearance, while James Franciscus took over as leading man in BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES (1970, 94m 46s), a production plagued by difficulties which would have sabotaged a lesser film. Helmed by TV director Ted Post, this entry finds astronaut John Brent (Franciscus) and his quickly dispatched companion landing near Taylor's ship after following his trajectory. John soon finds Nova, who haltingly describes how Taylor disappeared while exploring a mysterious range of mountains near the ominous Forbidden Zone. Brent falls into the hands of the apes (including the return of Kim Hunter and Maurice Evans), who are astonished to find another articulate human in their midst. The militant gorillas, led by General Ursus (James Gregory) are planning a military attack on a mutated, telepathic band of humans (including Victor Buono) who reside beneath the earth, and the tension between the two species quickly reaches a fever pitch.

More surreal and uneven than its predecessor, this film benefits from the returning cast members, and Franciscus makes an acceptable Heston substitute. (It's also alarming how much they look alike in their final scenes together.) The relegation of Cornelius to a minor character is regrettable, and the substitution of British actor David Watson
for McDowall (who was helming his directorial debut, TAM LIN, at the time) never really works. The various plot twists still pack a wallop, however, and only a science fiction film from the Vietnam era would have the nerve to pull off the white hot, nihilistic finale found here. Composer Leonard Rosenman provides an intriguing variation on Goldsmith's primordial musical themes, highlighted by the bizarre chorus of "Hail the Bomb" (which was given an ill-advised dance twist on the soundtrack album). While contriving a sequel to the first film may have been daunting, a plausible follow up to the second should have proven impossible. Nevertheless, producer Arthur P. Jacobs carried on with ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES (1971, 97m 23s), which drags the simians back to the present day (the early '70s, that is), thanks to the convenience of space and time travel. Off the coast of California, the military picks up a ship occupied by Cornelius (McDowall), Zira (Hunter), and Dr. Milo (Sal Mineo). At first, the apes play dumb within their cages, but Zira eventually speaks to her human counterparts, Dr. Dixon (PIRANHA's Bradford Dillman) and Dr. Branton (Natalie Trundy). Initially fêted as celebrities and treated to accommodations in the finest hotels, Cornelius and Zira come to understand the circumstances which led to humanity's downfall when the announcement of Zira's pregnancy triggers the worst self-protective instincts of the US government, personified by White.

Bradford Dillman helps Cornelius and Zira to protect their newborn from US Government thugs in ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES.
House science advisor Otto Hasslein (COLOSSUS: THE FORBIN PROJECT’s Eric Braeden). McDowell’s return to the series restores some much needed zest to this film, as his chemistry with Hunter really carries this entry. A pre-FANTASY ISLAND Ricardo Montalban also has a memorable supporting role as Armando, one of the apes’ primary benefactors, a function he would continue into the next installment. The inversion of the first film’s plot by placing the apes as the downtrodden minority is an effective concept, and the film never wears out its welcome. More consistent but less startling than its immediate predecessor, this is a worthy entry if not a spectacular one.

With the wheels set in motion to tell the entire back story, the next step was obviously CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (1972, 86m 37s). The series began showing its seams by this point, with virtually all of the action encapsulated in the title itself, but the provocative action which mirrors race riots and political uprisings during the 1970s affirms this as a worthy intellectual continuation of the original’s moralistic standpoint. Twenty years later, the son of Cornelius and Zira—hiding under the name Caesar (McDowell)—conceals his own ability to speak and laments the status of his fellow apes as household pets and slaves after a plague wiped out all the cats and dogs. When Armando (Montalban, in a brief reprise of his ESCAPE role) dies in an effort to protect Caesar, the articulate chimp is mutely relegated to a training program for all apes, and from within this underground system, he spearheads an imminent revolution, which has the simians violently confronting the armed guards of Governor Breck (Don Murray) in the bleached plazas of Century City, California. The nightmarish finale culminating in McDowell’s ferocious speech to his army is really the entire film’s raison d’etre, and as an ape-themed war film, it more than satisfies. Within the context of the series, however, one can’t help feeling the story has become stretched awfully thin, even during a brief running time of only 86m.

With BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES (1973, 86m 25s), the series finally succumbed to the problems which had gradually been tearing away at the entire series. The rapidly diminishing budgets and accelerated production rates guaranteed inferior results, though at least the resonance of the first film carries through here as the narrative comes full circle. Director J. Lee Thompson (CAPE FEAR) returns to the helm after taking over during CONQUEST, though he’s saddled with some bizarre casting choices which make the film impossible to take seriously today. The events of past films are summarized in the opening by the Lawgiver (John Huston in full HOBBIT mode) and set the stage for our final chapter. Following the ape revolt, Caesar (McDowell) strives to maintain peace between his fellow apes and the defeated humans. The creation of laws for the ape society results in strife between various camps, with General Aldo (Claude Akins) leading the primary naysayers. The humans, including MacDonald (ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13’s Austin Stoker taking over for CONQUEST’s Hari Rhodes), resent their own status and contemplate another revolt to claim territory of their own. More or less a reprise of the previous film without the grim atmosphere,
BATTLE never really kicks into gear and becomes unintentionally campy thanks to its ape players, including a highly unlikely Paul Williams (who receives an "introducing" credit, though he appeared in THE LOVED ONE almost 10 years earlier). Judging from the brief running time, Fox pushed for a fast edit which resulted in major plot threads being left unresolved or rendered incoherent, which the longer TV edit confirms. (When all five PLANET OF THE APES films were released in Japan as a laserdisc boxed set, the longer and more satisfying TV version of BATTLE was wisely included. Alas, not here.) As with all of the films in the series, this one provides food for thought and ranks better than many of its science fiction contemporaries, but one can't help wondering what might have resulted had the studio chosen to send off its flagship series in high style rather than a quick cash-in.

Not content with five films, Fox continued the tale of its futuristic apes with two unremarkable television series, PLANET OF THE APES (1974) and the animated RETURN TO THE PLANET OF THE APES (1975), the former featuring McDowall. Episodes of the first series were subsequently cobbled together as false movies and continue to run on the Sci-Fi Channel, causing no small amount of confusion among fans. Nevertheless, the series' reputation has persevered, with Tim Burton currently tackling a revisionist adaptation of his own for 2001. Fox's DVD box set, entitled PLANET OF THE APES: THE EVOLUTION, presents THX-approved versions of the five feature films, as well as a 126m documentary produced for American Movie Classics, BEHIND THE PLANET OF THE APES. All of the transfers were set into motion before Fox's much publicized switch to anamorphic, but the results are fortunately better than many had feared. The first film in particular looks stunning compared to the previous laserdisc releases, with generous 2.50:1 framing opening up the horizontal vistas without sacrificing any vital information from the top and bottom. The source material is in spotless condition, with impressive details and strong, vibrant, correct colors. (Earlier releases found the cornfield vegetation in the "capture" scene a silvery blue, rather than the rich green found here.) For some reason, Fox has not presented any of the Apes films in 16:9, though the excellent animated menus are; the transition from "Play Movie" to the movie itself is therefore very disappointing in each case, though otherwise, PLANET'S transfer makes for a very satisfying disc. The stereo mix has been rechanneled for Dolby Digital 5.1, with most of the rear separation focused on Goldsmith's score and occasional ambient sound effects.

The second film measures out even wider at 2.73:1, exposing much more on the sides compared to Fox's older, muddy-looking, incorrectly matted laserdisc (not the more recent issue) while losing some slivers of TV safe image from the top and bottom. Not quite as impressive as the first, this disc looks satisfying overall, but is also a much grittier film, loaded with grainy underground photography and apparently shot on several different film stocks.

The third, fourth, and fifth films are identically letterboxed at 2.50:1, slightly wider than the older laserdiscs and in noticeably

Caesar stands vigil at the bedside of his injured son in BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES.
better condition than ever before, though the darkness running throughout CONQUEST poses a few noticeable compression challenges during the last half hour. The second through fifth films feature limited surround audio tracks—except for ESCAPE, which retains its original mono track. All sound fine and free of distortion, no better or worse than one might expect from the period. The discs all feature scenic animated menus which swerve through vistas of the locales from each film, leading to similar extra features: theatrical trailers for all of the films on each disc, web links to the official Fox site for the series, and brief galleries of production photos highlighting the ape make up. The features contain English closed captioning, as well as English and Spanish subtitles and secondary French language audio tracks.

The documentary is presented full frame, looking very similar to its television broadcast, and makes up for the threadbare extras on the other discs. Hosted by McDowall (who died by the time the program aired on AMC), it features interviews with all of the surviving principal players, including Heston and Hunter. Various Fox executives (including Frank Capra, Jr.), writers, and producers recount the history of the series, with nearly all of the first hour devoted to the original film. The highlight is undeniably a screen test in which Heston interacts with Edward G. Robinson and James Brolin in early ape make up, though other gems include a glimpse of the ape-human hybrid child created for but never used in BENEATH and sometimes scalding accounts of the studio shenanigans which ultimately proved to be the series' undoing. —Nathaniel Thompson