

FANGORIA Flashback: "PLANET OF THE APES" (1968)

Written by Tony Timpone

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Before STAR WARS birthed generations of fanatics, before STAR TREK caught on in syndication, before HARRY POTTER made kids read books again, 1968's seminal PLANET OF THE APES launched the first fanboy phenomenon. A box-office smash, the original movie spawned a series of '70s films, TV shows, a merchandising tie-in bonanza (I still save pennies in my Dr. Zaius bank), a misguided Tim Burton remake and this summer's reboot RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (previewed in this month's Fango #305). The first movie, the one that started it all, still swings from the highest vines as one of the greatest classics of celluloid science fiction. PLANET OF THE APES begins a special one-week engagement (with a gorgeous new 35mm Scope print) at New York City's [Film Forum](#) (209 West Houston; [212] 727-8110) from July 8-14.p>

Directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, PLANET OF THE APES remains a cinematic milestone, with a plot even familiar to those who haven't ever seen it. A group of astronauts on a deep-space mission get flung 2,000 years in the future and wake up on a strange world ruled by intelligent simians. One guy is shot, the other lobotomized and the wounded mission captain Taylor (pre-NRA Charlton Heston), temporarily mute like the rest of the backward terrestrial human "savages" they discover, winds up in the care of sympathetic chimpanzee scientist Zira (Kim Hunter) and beau Cornelius (Roddy McDowall). When Taylor begins speaking, the ramifications open up a firestorm of controversy and debate in ape society, with Taylor's manhood literally hanging in the balance...



Of course, besides John Chambers' marvelous makeups (which won him an honorary Oscar and inspired a generation of FX artists), a brilliantly scathing and satirical screenplay by TWILIGHT ZONE's Rod Serling and LAWRENCE OF ARABIA's Michael Wilson (derived from Pierre Boulle's novel MONKEY PLANET) and Shaffner's exciting action scenes, most remember PLANET OF THE APES for its jaw-dropping shock ending. Though in retrospect, said ending also represents one of the biggest storytelling flaws of all time. SPOILER ALERT: In case you didn't know, the big twist is that Taylor does not realize that he has actually been on old planet Earth all along until he discovers the mangled Statue of Liberty buried in the stand at the end, this despite the fact that all the apes speak and write English throughout the film! I know, it took me a few viewings before it struck me too. But it's a testament to Shaffner and the screenwriters' great work that the audience makes one of the biggest leaps of faith in

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movie history and overlooks the startlingly obvious, just like Taylor does. Jerry Goldsmith's avant garde (and Oscar nominated) score and DP Leon Shamroy's dizzying and off-kilter camerawork (especially in the early Wasteland scenes) help fool us by capturing an otherworldly alien mood.

As a kid, my favorite PLANET OF THE APES scenes were the human hunt in the beginning and Taylor's first escape attempt. Seeing the film again today, what stands out the most is the blistering trial scene overseen by the shallow-minded orangutans, which mirrors the real-life Scopes Monkey Trial (inspiration for INHERIT THE WIND). Dr. Zaius (Maurice Evans) wants to bury the truth that apes evolved from humans, as the film's science vs. religion/creationism vs. evolution debate rages and continues as a relevant allegory for today. I also never noticed what a creep the misanthrope Taylor comes across as in APES' early reels.

Untarnished by its increasingly juvenile sequels, PLANET OF THE APES retains its power and has hardly aged a day. Whereas in the '60s Americans feared we'd "blow ourselves up" (X-MEN: FIRST CLASS exploits these retro concerns), today it's the dirty-bomb-dropping terrorists and ongoing Middle East conflicts serving as the pertinent nightmares for Apocalypse worrywarts. Watch for PLANET OF THE APES revivals in a city near you, including as part of Go Ape! marathons like [Exhumed Films](#) upcoming show on July 31 in Philadelphia.