

Monkeying With a Classic: Tim Burton's *Planet of the Apes*

By Tony Fonseca

Towards the end of Tim Burton's *Planet of the Apes*, in the “discovery” scene where Mark Walberg's character is going to inform the talking apes and humans alike of their interdependent ancestry, he tells his chimp Pericles, who has just dropped out of the sky Deus Ex Machina style to stop the bloody carnage between human and ape, “let's go explain evolution to the monkeys.” Perhaps in the imminent Director's Cut DVD release, Tim Burton can take viewers by the hand and explain movie classic evolution as well.

In such an interview, Burton would have to mention that movies are a reflection of their times, and that a remake of a classic better serves its audience if it makes some fundamental changes to the original, so that audience members will have some surprises, no matter how familiar they are with the storyline. In addition, if he were being totally honest with the viewer, Burton would point out that Hollywood has a tendency to “dumb down” stories, apparently under the impression that the average moviegoer cannot possibly follow a complex, twisted plot, nor can s/he pay full attention to a film unless it is loud and filled with over-choreographed battles, super flying monkeys, shocking love triangles, and predictable discoveries.

At least, this is the impression I got while watching Burrton's version of Pierre Boulle's novel. This is not to say that Burrton's remake didn't have its enjoyable moments; on the contrary, *Planet of the Apes* (2001) is filled with exquisite color, stunning cinematography, solid acting (particularly by Tim Roth as Thade, the film's villain, and Helena Bonham Carter as Ari, the heroine who takes pity on humans), and brilliant special effects. However, where Franklin J. Schaffer's original *Planet of the Apes* (1968) was introspective and speculative, leaving viewers with the final image of Charlton Heston on his knees in front of the sunken Statue of Liberty, lamenting what humans had done to themselves in their rush to destroy civilization, Burrton's version is simply an adventure tale that plays around with the idea of time travel and its effect on history, which in and of itself would be interesting, if it hadn't have been done a hundred times before and with more attention to detail in various *Terminator* and *Star Trek* films.

Burrton's film chronicles the adventures of Leo Davidson, a space station pilot who takes a research pod into a mysterious electromagnetic field ear Saturn's orbit, in an attempt to save his prize pilot chimp, who was sent into what turns out to be a wormhole in order to send information back to the space station crew. As it turns out throughout the entire movie, the chimp is a better pilot than Davidson, who ends up crash landing in a lake on a mysterious planet where apes speak modern English and build enormous cities. Humans in this brave new world are nothing more than primitive cave dwellers whose presence plagues the “superior” ape civilization as a sort of combination unruly underclass / stray

cat over-population problem. Davidson is captured with a group of humans, and is immediately branded a “trouble maker” by Thade, who realizes that this particular cave dwelling animal can think and reason.

Davidson ends up in the possession of a slave trader, who sells humans as pets and workers. Throughout *Planet of the Apes*, Burton and script writer William Broyles, Jr. intermingle two metaphors in portraying the treatment of humans by the apes-- slavery / racism and animal cruelty. Davidson is sold to Ari, a human rights activist who realizes that he represents what she has always believed humans are capable of. He becomes a “house human” in the care of Ari and her senator / father, along with Daena, the human cave dweller who becomes the third side of the pseudo-romantic triangle. Through these three characters, Burton and Broyles play with the themes of racism and miscegenation, juxtaposing an attraction between Davidson and Ari based on intellect with one between Daena and Davidson based on physicality. This “love triangle” allows the film to showcase the resentment felt by a minority female towards a female of an oppressor majority race, especially when the two vie for the attention of a minority male. This is done cleverly and with subtle humor, and is one of the high points of the film.

Related to this theme of slavery and its production of racism, is the call for animal rights which the film emphasizes. This comparison, of course, isn't new--it was frequently made by 19th century apologists for the South's “peculiar institution.” Ari is at heart an animal rights activist. Stories are told throughout the village of this simian version of “the crazy cat lady,” of how she always cared for humans and took strays into her home as a small child, of how she as an adult makes every effort to curb the slave trade in the city, often through borderline terrorist tactics. It is ultimately Ari who aids the humans in their discovery of Calima, the apes' version of The Garden of Eden. There, in the place where the first ape began their race in “the time before time,” Davidson discovers that his hot-headed unauthorized launch into space to save Pericles is ultimately responsible for all life on the ape planet. It is on the sacred grounds of Calima that the final battle between humans and apes takes place.

Despite their almost capitulating to a sappy and contrived ending, where humans and apes alike learn suddenly to love one another, Burton and Broyles pull one more card out of their sleeves. In homage to the original *Planet of the Apes* and in true dark fantasy form, the film ends with Davidson back on Earth, where he again discovers that his actions have produced dire consequences; he has again determined history, this time by his actions on the ape planet.

Burton's version leaves viewers with the image of Wahlberg on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, discovering that somehow his actions in helping to unite humans and apes on the unnamed Planet of the Apes has led to the taking over of Earth by Apes. But what could have been a brilliant surprise ending falls flat because Burton and Broyles never foreshadowed this possibility in the film. In fact, Thade's regiment doesn't even know how to use guns, much less travel through space and time. Even given their newfound familiarity with old space ships and guns, it is highly unlikely that in the span of one

ape's lifetime they could suddenly master a technology that is centuries, if not millennia, beyond their grasp.

Though it is an entertaining movie (Danny Elfman's score is absolutely brilliant, and the costuming and stunt work is flawless), ultimately, Burrton's *Planet of the Apes* falls short of greatness because it is a message of personal responsibility, mainly that of Davidson, and it is mired in its own obsession with flawed theories of time travel and alternate history. There is no resonance with the audience, no horrific realization that we share the blame for humanity's having lost the Earth, as in the 1968 version. It seems that Hollywood has decided that in 2001, viewers are incapable of empathy, deep thought and the realization of complicity.

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