

# *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes, or Yawn of the Planet of the Apes*

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*Directed by Matt Reeves; written by Mark Bomback, Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver*

*Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* is the eighth installment in the *Planet of the Apes* film series, which began in 1968. The new film is largely grim, empty-headed and tedious. What can one say about a film that invests considerably more time and money into making computer-generated apes look and sound believable than its human characters?

The visual effects, the transformation of San Francisco into a post-apocalyptic wasteland, the use of human actors to portray apes, etc., only go so far. Evidently elements like story, drama and real emotional depth count for very little among a significant layer of Hollywood directors and producers, but of course that has been the case for some time.

Then there is the unhappy fact that the major studios have apparently run out of ideas. So we are subjected to sequel after sequel, remake after remake, and now the latest trend of “reboots.” No one bothers to tell the producers involved that the latest installments of *Batman*, *Star Trek*, *Transformers* and other “new,” generally deplorable films are based on childish stories to begin with.

But what’s worse is that now these films have to be updated to be “hard” and “cynical” to match what Hollywood believes is the “popular” mood today. In reality, the makers of these movies promote backward and misanthropic conceptions that prevail within their own circles.

The original *Planet of the Apes* (1968), directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, with Charlton Heston and Roddy McDowall, was fairly silly, but it was not mean-spirited and had a certain humor to it. Moreover, it dealt with serious matters such as racism, nuclear warfare and repression. Its treatment of those issues was perhaps not

the most successful, but the film seemed sincere coming in the midst of the Vietnam War, inner-city riots and the general turbulence of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Franklin Schaffner had risen to prominence in the 1950s working on some of the most distinguished live television drama and current affairs programming. He directed the original CBS teleplay of *Twelve Angry Men* in 1954, for example, as well as 248 episodes of *Person to Person*, the famed interview show hosted for six years by journalist Edward R. Murrow. Schaffner was also responsible for *The Best Man* (1964), *Patton* (1970), *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971) and *Papillon* (1973).

The last sequences of the original *Planet of the Apes* in particular, in which a decaying Statue of Liberty washes away into the sea, are deservedly among the most iconic images of 1960s science fiction film. It seemed to suggest that America, at least its public image of strength and invincibility, would not last for very long, and indeed it has not.

Now the latest *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* carries on where the forgettable *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Rupert Wyatt, 2011) left off. Ten years have passed since a simian virus, not unlike the avian flu, has decimated the world’s population and condemned the survivors to a sort of pre-industrial existence. Caesar (played by Andrew Serkin), a hyper-intelligent chimpanzee, leads a colony of apes in the woods outside San Francisco free from any harassment by humans who are thought to have disappeared from the city.

An encounter in the woods between humans—led by Malcolm (Jason Clarke) and wife Ellie (Kerri Russell)—and the apes sets off a predictable chain of events that leads to conflict between the ape colony and

the survivors of San Francisco, who are immune to the ape virus. The humans want access to a hydroelectric dam that will provide long-term power to the city, but Dreyfus (Gary Oldman), a leader in the human camp, and Koba (Toby Kebbell), Caesar's second-in-command, are mistrustful of each other's species and war is all but inevitable. By the time the climactic showdown commences the viewer doesn't particularly care which side wins.

That however doesn't stop the filmmakers from inserting what they view as "subtlety" and "nuance" into the story, including a power struggle between Caesar and Koba that has echoes of Shakespeare no less! Attempts are made to show that apes and humans are not so different, after all, and how it's wrong to experiment on animals, and so on and so forth. None of this is the least bit insightful or moving and, in fact, many scenes are (or ought to be) simply embarrassing to everyone involved.

The action is predictable, the dialogue mostly puerile and none of the characters (least of all the people) are fully developed. No one in the human camp even questions why apes are able to ride horses, fire machine guns and even speak broken English! We have seen this film and its plot "twists" over and over again, which makes it often excruciating to watch.

There was a time when critics would simply overlook a film like *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, or maybe even warn readers or viewers to avoid it. No longer, especially if it threatens to make money. This is the sort of film, heavy on special effects and light on nearly everything else, that the "critics," who should know better, actually recommend.

So we are told that *Dawn* is "one of the most intelligent and entertaining big-studio releases of the summer so far" (*Slate*), which isn't necessarily saying very much. And how "This just might be the most engrossing, the smartest and the most daring 'Apes' movie ever put on film," according to movie critic Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which, again, might not rise to the level of a great compliment.

Then there's Tim Tobey, of the *Daily Telegraph*, who wrote, "There's evident patience and intelligence to the filmmaking all over, as well as an engagement with genuine ideas about diplomacy, deterrence, law and leadership. However often it risks monkey-mad silliness, it's impressively un-stupid." There's a tagline

for you: Impressively un-stupid!

So long as big conglomerates and lack of ideas dominate cinema, audiences will continue having to endure this sort of thing.



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