Rise of the Planet of the Apes and Social Consciousness

Rise of the Planet of the Apes (2011, Rupert Wyatt) continues a long movie franchise history of social commentary begun with the original science fiction classic *The Planet of the Apes* (1968, Franklin J. Schaffner). The first movie teemed with theological and political themes from race relations, to church and state struggles, to religion versus science debates, to the evolution and creation controversy, to issues of law and nature and finally nuclear fear. The apocalyptic masterpiece contains one of the greatest surprise endings in movie history with astronaut George Taylor (Charlton Heston) cursing humanity for its murderous tendencies in front of the ruined Statue of Liberty.

The original movie was followed by a sequel and three prequels that never regained the intrigue and depth of the first movie and were criticized for their plunge into movie mediocrity. *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* is based loosely on the 1972 prequel *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (J. Lee Thompson). Not an official remake, *Rise* moves away from the idea of a slave revolt that seizes power as the only recourse for the oppressed, to focus on the inherent danger of scientific transgression against natural limits.

A trailer for the recent ape flick repeats a recurring theme in the social criticism of new technology when it states: “Our greatest discovery will become our greatest threat.” The invention of a cure for neural disease leads to intelligence enhancement in other primates as an unintended consequence and creates a species of ape capable of competing mentally with human beings. The lead character Will Rodman (James Franco) believes he has discovered a cure for Alzheimer’s through a gene therapy method involving the injection of the virus ALZ 112 into chimpanzees, which allows the brain to heal itself at

the cellular level. The therapy has the side–effect of increasing memory, cognitive capacity and intelligence. When the experimental chimp attacks its handlers the Gen-sys Corporation scraps the project, but not before the chimp gives birth to a highly intelligent baby that Will adopts to save from extermination. The baby chimp is named Caesar (Andy Serkis) by Will's father Charles (John Lithgow), who also suffers from Alzheimer's and is temporarily cured by the virus–therapy. Will persuades Gen-sys to restart the program with a revised virus called ALZ 113 that drastically increases chimp intelligence, but proves lethal to humans.

After Caesar attacks a neighbor while trying to defend Charles, he is committed to an ape sanctuary where he devises a plan of escape and seizes the ALZ 113 for his fellow Simian inmates. The apes manage to escape from the prison, wreak havoc on San Francisco and overpower a police blockade on the Golden Gate Bridge in efforts to take refuge in the Redwood National Forest. Meanwhile, the ALZ 113 has been accidentally exposed to humans, causing a global epidemic. We are left to believe the apes will adapt and thrive in their new habitat as the human population is decimated by a new viral plague of its own making, thus giving rise to the "planet of the apes."

The movie is obviously not a prequel to the 2000 remake of the original, but a reboot, an attempt to restart the series with a different line of thought. It places the blame for the intelligent origins of apes on the technological tampering with genes in the search for a cure to neural disorders and the desire to enhance human intelligence. The film remains apocalyptic in its social criticism, but locates the new threat in biotechnology rather than nuclear weapons, as in the original series. The one voice of conscience, Caroline Aranha (Freida Pinto), who is Will's girlfriend and zoo veterinarian, tells him that the gene therapy "is wrong. . . . You are trying to control things that are not meant to be controlled." The film offers a warning regarding the overly optimistic

expectations of scientific capability to reverse the natural process of aging and dying. The ultimate negative association is made by comparing the experimental procedure of gene manipulation to the mythological character of Icarus, the man who flew too close to the sun and drowned after his wax wings melted. The allusion appears on a TV set in the background during the ape rebellion that reports on the Icarus manned space mission that was poised to enter the Martian atmosphere. We discover later through a newspaper headline, after the apes have escaped, that the rocket may be “Lost in Space?”

The latest installment in the franchise falls short of the original glory of the 1968 film, but foreshadows the arrival of more movies in the series, hopefully soon. These new movies will unfold linearly from this new starting point that centers on a social consciousness concerning the potential dangers of biotechnology, which has largely replaced nuclear paranoia as the source for our fears of the future and belief that science has spun out of control. This science fiction series continues to present a challenge to our thinking about the belief in the limitless potential of technological progress in an accessible and entertaining format.

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