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War for the Planet of the Apes (Movie Review)

Abstract

"This movie asks us to side with the apes, to root against the human army that they face, and to feel elated at the prospect of a planet full of sentient apes, without sentient humans."

Posting about a review of the movie *War for the Planet of the Apes* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/war-for-the-planet-of-the-apes/>

Keywords

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Comments

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War for the Planet of the Apes

 allthings.org/war-for-the-planet-of-the-apes/

Josh Matthews

July 21,
2017

Starring: Andy Serkis, Woody Harrleson, Steve Zahn, Karin Konoval, Amiah Miller

Directed by : Matt Reeves

Screenplay by: Mark Bomback and Matt Reeves

Music: Michael Giacchino

We're up to nine *Apes* movies now. *War for the Planet of the Apes* is the ninth, and the third in a recent trilogy that poses serious stories about zoo monkeys over-running civilization. This one, *War*, is so serious that it repeatedly refers to one of the bleakest of war movies, *Apocalypse Now*. Besides its explicit criticism of American patriotism and Christianity, its use of a Colonel Kurtz character, and its punning on the Kong-like apes as "Cong" (as in Vietcong), *War* even shows us this huge message on a tunnel wall, scribbled there so that we don't miss its point: "Ape-Pocalypse Now."

That slogan, if you think about it, has great potential for cheesy B-movie humor. Unfortunately, *War for the Planet of the Apes* has little of that kind of humor. This movie asks us to side with the apes, to root against the human army that they face, and to feel elated at the prospect of a planet full of sentient apes, without sentient humans. If *War* is a true prequel to *Planet of the Apes*, either Pierre Boulle's great novel or the famous 1968 movie with Charlton Heston, then its sentiments are shams. More on that later.

War is not a standalone movie; you need to see its predecessors—*Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014)—to understand its dramatic tensions. In those films we see the birth and rise of Caesar, the brilliant chimpanzee who becomes the leader of a large ape tribe. Caesar is the King Kong of the clan. He is the awesome alpha-male leader whose mere presence is inspiration enough for any anxious ape. Caesar wishes to live in the wilderness in peace, but he's hounded by human armies that want to exterminate him, and he's haunted by his guilt over Koba, the violent ape he had to kill in *Dawn*.

War opens with a human special ops force that attacks Caesar's apes, only to be wiped out by them. Caesar offers mercy and peace to the captured human soldiers, yet the human special-ops team comes back and murders Caesar's wife and oldest son. This causes Caesar to rage. He leaves his tribe, who are sojourning across a desert to a promised land, to avenge his murdered family members.

This begins a revenge-journey tale that, midway through, lapses into a prison-break movie. (Despite its title, *War for the Planet of the Apes* is not a war movie.) After following the human soldiers to a wintry mountain, Caesar and three ape warriors find an old quarantine facility that's also a massive fortress well-stocked with modern weapons. Here the human soldiers have holed up. They've also captured and enslaved Caesar's entire tribe, who are forced to build a wall around the fortress. Eventually Caesar himself is—Jesus-figure alert!—captured, whipped, and tied to a cross.

The counterpart to Caesar's Moses-Jesus is the human Pharaoh/Pilate, a character known only as The Colonel (Woody Harrelson). He wears sunglasses at night and imitates Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*. The Colonel is leading a rogue human-army, and he's building a wall to prepare for a battle against another human army. Caesar would like to kill The Colonel, who personally murdered Caesar's wife and son, but the entire ape tribe is enslaved. What to do?

The answer is to let nature run its course. Almost all humans in *War* are irrational and unmerciful. They will kill each other even though they are nearly extinct. One key plot point is that the virus that nearly wiped out all humans,

the Simian flu, has mutated. Now it makes all surviving humans mute. The Colonel kills mute humans, including his own son, to prevent this mutated virus from spreading. At one point he even declares, in a John 3:16 sort-of way, that he had to sacrifice his only son in order to save humanity.

Other than his god-complex, The Colonel has some good sense when rambling on about the “laws of nature,” as the movie later proves. At a gut-level, I really wanted to side with the humans. Watching this *Apes* movie is rather tough because, besides a mute human girl named Nova, there are almost no humans to care about. The apes have the voices in this movie; there is at least an hour-long stretch where they are the only ones talking, and mostly by sign-language. Other *Apes* movies have prominently featured humans to sympathize with, but *War* challenges you to take sides against your own natural inclinations and your own species.

Here’s what I mean. As a protagonist, Caesar is just an ever-glowing chimpanzee in the “uncanny valley” of film CGI. We are supposed to emotionally side with him—he’s by far the most fully human character—but my gut tells me that there’s something wrong here. He’s too real to love as a human person. Chimps, like all wild animals, should be respected because they are dangerous. Baby chimps are cute but adult chimps are aggressive. In the wild, they are cannibals who wage war on each other. Despite the movie’s science-fictional premise, I find it hard to accept the idea of these apes as merciful and peace-loving when they look as real as they do. My instinct clashes with my rational mind, which is still trying to take seriously the idea that these apes are ancient Israelites led by a noble Moses figure.

Moreover, the one human we are supposed to love, Nova, is an honorary ape. Adopted by the apes, she offers us several cute scenes of human-ape affection. Rather than gush at these scenes, I found them reprehensible. The whole premise of the *Planet of the Apes* series has been, to date, that humans devolve into slaves of the apes. In the 1968 version, they are herded as cattle, while the apes have formed a religious cult that conspires to repress scientific discovery. Given that *War of the Planet of the Apes* seems to want us to side with a planet dominated by apes, isn’t the horrific future as depicted in the 1968 movie what *War* is asking us to root for?

The emotional and moral messages of *War* are undercut and even annihilated by the arc of the nine *Apes* movies. So what if Caesar’s ape tribe makes it to the promised land? It’s clear that nature will win, in both the short and the long run. And what is “nature” in the *Apes* series? Never-ending cycles of power struggles, slavery, war, and tragedy. It is hard to accept the peace-loving points in *War* when it also affirms that the most dominant force in the universe is the inescapable cycle of violence in Nature. If that is a hard truth that we all must face, then The Colonel is the hero of this movie, the only one who strictly adheres to the logical conclusion of this truth.

But maybe I am taking this movie too seriously. The *Apes* movies are B-movies at heart. *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* is the only one that tries, and somewhat succeeds, to say something intelligent about intelligence. As usual, the most complex ideas are in the book, Pierre Boulle’s 1963 novel, which received a writing credit for *War*. Boulle, who also wrote the novel *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, deserves more attention as a writer. Next time I need an *Apes* fix, I might just crack open his book instead.