

Tuesday, July 15, 2014



## Monkey Business

Director Matt Reeves and cinematographer Michael Seresin, BSC, evolve with technology for *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*

By Iain Blair

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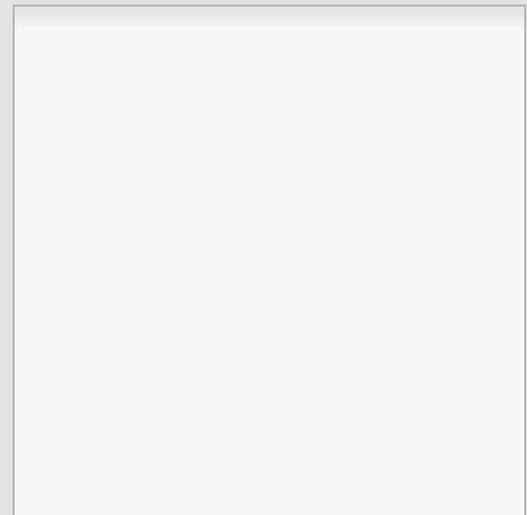
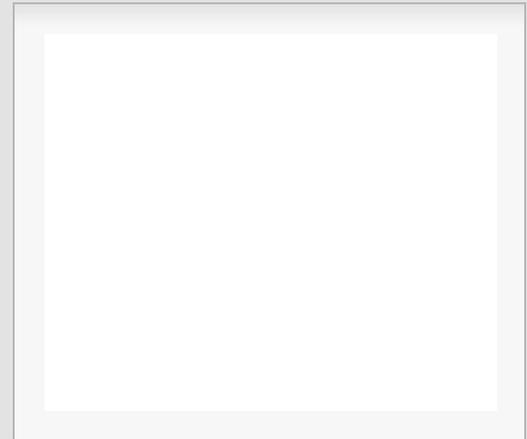
In 2011, the FOX reboot *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, starring James Franco, Freida Pinto, Andy Serkis and a bunch of genetically enhanced chimps who get ready to take over the world, turned into a critical and commercial success, scoring nearly half a billion at the box office. Three years later, *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, the sequel—and eighth film in the long-running franchise—picks up the story, and things look even grimmer for what's left of the human race. A growing nation of smart, evolved apes, led by Caesar (Serkis), is in charge, thanks to the devastating virus unleashed in San Francisco a decade earlier. But a small band of human survivors (including Gary Oldman and Keri Russell) soon clashes with the apes in a struggle that will determine who will emerge as Earth's dominant species.

Directed by Matt Reeves, who helmed the science fiction-horror hit *Cloverfield* (2008), about the arrival of a giant monster in New York City, and horror-thriller *Let Me In* (2010), the film was shot by Michael Seresin, BSC, the New Zealand-born director of photography whose eclectic résumé includes such films as *Bugsy Malone*, *Midnight Express*, *City Hall*, *Angela's Ashes* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.



Michael Seresin, BSC, on set.

"I chose Michael because I'm a huge fan of all his movies and the way he uses light," notes Reeves, who says he viewed the project as a chance to make "an epic ape western, and take that premise and realize it in a totally naturalistic, believable and visually expansive way. Right from the start, I wanted a soft-light feel and to take all the CG characters and put



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them in an environment that would feel more real. I didn't want that storybook, stylized look, or for it to feel or look like a fantasy. And Michael's approach to light has always transported me, so when I found out he was available, I just jumped at the chance to work with him. Plus, I needed someone of his experience, given what we were taking on."

"It's a hugely complex production, especially in terms of cinematography," reports Seresin, who at press time was back on the FOX lot still shooting pickups barely two months before the release date. "And the biggest initial challenge was that the decision to shoot it in 3D was taken a bit later than ideal. There wasn't enough time to shoot 2D and post-convert, so we had to shoot native 3D, which was a first for me. [The DP, who previously shot about half of Gravity, notes that the Oscar®-winning film was largely done 2D and post-converted, thanks to a more leisurely schedule.] So I called up a bunch of DPs who had shot 3D films and picked their brains about all the pitfalls, and they all told me that if anything can go wrong, it does, as it's so complex. Fortunately, I had a great team around me, which helped us pull it all together fairly quickly."



Seresin stresses that, "Whether it's 2D or 3D, the principles are the same—telling a good story with light and composition—so I went through the normal process of testing lenses and then incorporating those into the rigs."

The team then settled on the key elements of the camera package: 3ality Technica rigs (TS-35 with the SIP 2101), ALEXA Ms and Leica

Summilux-C lenses. "Once I had chosen the lenses, which for me are pretty much about resolution—some lenses are cool, some are warm, some are in between—the important thing is that they have the same quality throughout, so I can switch from one to another and keep it consistent, and the Leicas are incredible. And when you shoot 3D, ideally, you need the two lenses to be identical, or as close as possible."

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As a result, camera crews are also far larger than they used to be. "You have your traditional crew, and then you have all the tech guys, as well," he reports. "And while I don't like the term, it's probably more accurate to say you're 'capturing the image' rather than just filming something. All the new technology has really changed that side of it."

The film was shot with two main units, with the 1st always running two rigs, "as we were leapfrogging and shooting with one while the second was set up," he explains. "Sometimes, we had a third rig. Then, the 2nd unit had three or four rigs, depending on what they needed for a big action scene." Occasionally, they also used a 2D setup "for maybe five percent of the film."

*Dawn* marks the first collaboration between the DP and director. "Matt said he loved my work and aesthetic, and that my aesthetic would really work for this," recalls Seresin. "So I read the script, and he also sent me about 150 electronic pages of images, which was amazing and really gave me a visual point of departure. And then he told me that he'd love to shoot on film and do it all 2D, but that there was no time for post-conversion. So it had to be 3D."

Both Reeves and Seresin referenced Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* because of its shallow 3D. "We both loved that look and wanted to use the same 3D 'look' to maximum effect in the appropriate scenes," notes the DP. [At press time, with the cut still unfinished, this approach wasn't finalized.] "So the look we went for was a 2D film aesthetic—we didn't want it to look digital at all. And I generally don't like rules, so we shot a ton of tests, a lot of them for 3D, and we kept it really shallow." Close attention also had to be paid to all the VFX work being done by Weta Digital, who did all the visual effects on *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*.

After starting preproduction in January 2013, Seresin began principal photography in April, on location in Vancouver for a month, before moving to New Orleans and then the FOX lot for pickups. "It was around an 80-day shoot, all shot on location, which I love, though it wasn't easy with all the 3D rigs," he admits. "At one point, we started scouting on Vancouver Island, and we were tramping through the snow and rain, and it hit me how tough it was going to be, carting all the gear. I mean, we had more Apple computers than there is in an Apple store, and we were shooting in really inaccessible locations, in these quite remote forests. It would take two hours just to get in there and another hour to set up all the

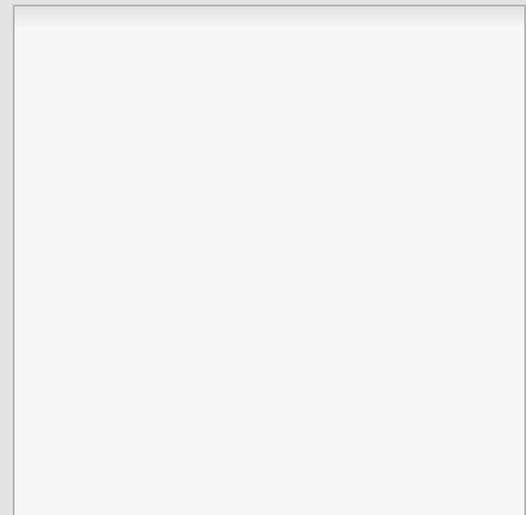
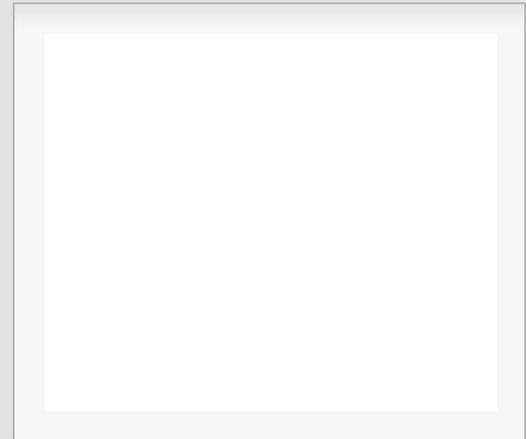


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To capture the ape performances in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, Weta Digital and Senior Visual Effects Supervisor Joe Letteri had 35 people on each unit, 50 or more motion-capture cameras and eight witness capture cameras that were constantly rolling on anything that involved an ape character.



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equipment—and until it's all set up and working, you literally cannot see a shot."

Seresin has high praise for his tech team and the other filmmakers, including production designer James Chinlund. "He did an amazing job and was the most filmmaking-friendly production designer I've ever worked with," he reports. "He was on the set every day, watching everything. Also on set, to capture the ape performances, Weta Digital and Senior Visual Effects Supervisor Joe Letteri had 35 people on each unit, 50 or so mo-cap cameras, and eight witness capture cameras that were constantly rolling on anything that involved an ape character.

"We had a pretty big 2nd unit who did some of the really big action stuff," adds the DP. "Matt and I would shoot through the day, and then most of the time we would go down and watch the 2nd unit doing the big stunt scenes and just keep an eye on it all because I don't like letting anything go."

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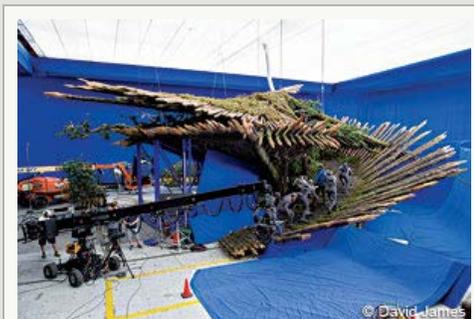
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It's a careful and thorough approach that Seresin has applied over the years, citing 2004's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* collaboration with director Alfonso Cuarón. "We had up to 10 units shooting that film, and I made a point of looking at all the dailies every day to make sure it was all unified," he notes.

Dailies on *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* were a little different, "as you basically see them as you're working," he explains. "When you're shooting 3D and the cameras are on remote-control cranes, you're far better off in terms of quality to just look at the image on the very best screen you can get, in this instance, a Sony BVM OLED screen supplied by Codex. So that became my eyes, and occasionally, I'd look at dailies, but they were never as good as what I had seen on the screen as you'd have your RAW files and your LUT. So you put your Look over the RAW file and you're set." The screen was an essential tool in Seresin's toolkit, "as in a way, I set the stop on that, the look, the contrast—everything," he states. "I mean, if you've got an 18mm lens 50 feet in the air looking at a set, I can't get up there and look through the lens. So this is the answer, and it worked really well."

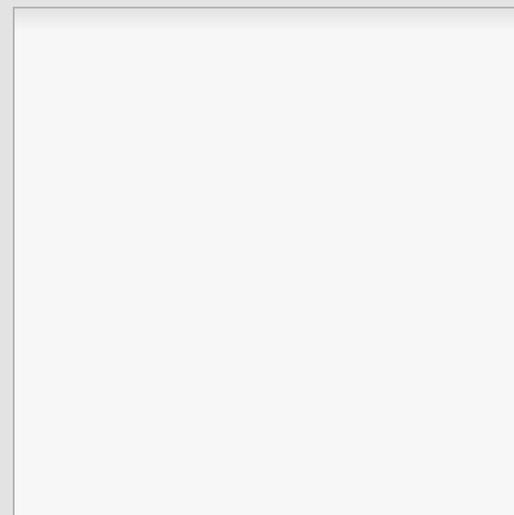
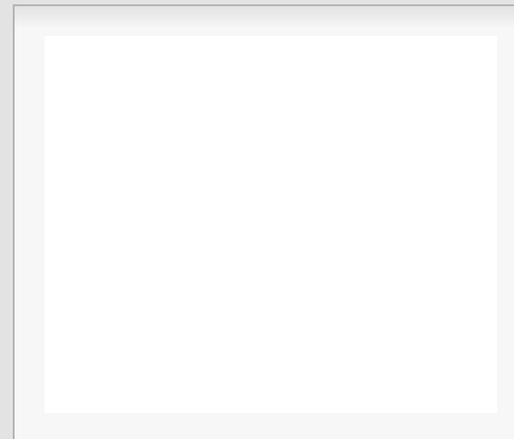


According to DP Michael Seresin, BSC, the film was a hugely complex production, especially in terms of cinematography. It also was the first time the cinematographer worked in 3D.

In terms of the film's look, the biggest challenge Seresin faced was establishing a consistent look despite shooting in such disparate locations as the cool rain forests of British Columbia and the heat and humidity of Louisiana. "The story all takes place in the San Francisco area, and we had gray skies and perpetual rain in Vancouver and then moved down to New Orleans where we had hot, tropical sun all day," he explains. "So we had to match all that, which was a major concern for me." One major sequence of the surviving human colony featured a massive set on half a city block in downtown New Orleans. It had to look gray and overcast, which was more of a physical challenge than a creative one for Seresin.

At press time, Weta was still delivering VFX shots, and Seresin hadn't started on the DI, which was being handled by Company 3 colorist Stefan Sonnenfeld, whose extensive credits include this summer's *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, *The Legend of Hercules* and the upcoming untitled Michael Mann film. "We're going to keep it within the aesthetic we decided from the outset, which is pretty low-key, quite dark, with a natural light," says Seresin. "Then with the scenes which are totally CGI, we'll try and incorporate that look into what we shot, where appropriate."

Sonnenfeld, who at press time had just begun work on the DI using DaVinci Resolve, reports that the look of the movie "will be pretty different from the previous film. We're going for a strong



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sense of context, but at the same time, there's a lot of amazing detail we're dealing with in the DI, especially with all the apes. There's also more desaturation in this movie than the last one, so it has a different feel and looks a bit more

contemporary. It's less 'pop-y' and colorful, and there's a nice blend of darkness and detail. So it's definitely a different style and look."

Looking back, Seresin calls his first 3D movie a great experience. "Filmmaking is hard, and it's the relationships that count in the end," he says. "We had a few hiccups here and there because it was the first time we had used the combination of the 3ality rigs, ALEXA Ms and Leica lenses, and there was a lot of basic engineering involved to get it all working smoothly. And all the guys at Fletcher Camera & Lenses, who supplied the ALEXAs and sourced the Leica lenses, did outstanding work."

Will Seresin shoot another 3D project? "Absolutely, although I don't know what the future holds for the format," he adds. "This is a really low-key 3D look, rather than in-your-face 3D, and I think that really suits the story. I'm very happy with the way it turned out."

**For more information, visit the Dawn of the Planet of the Apes website at [www.dawnofapes.com](http://www.dawnofapes.com).**

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