

Greystoke: the Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes

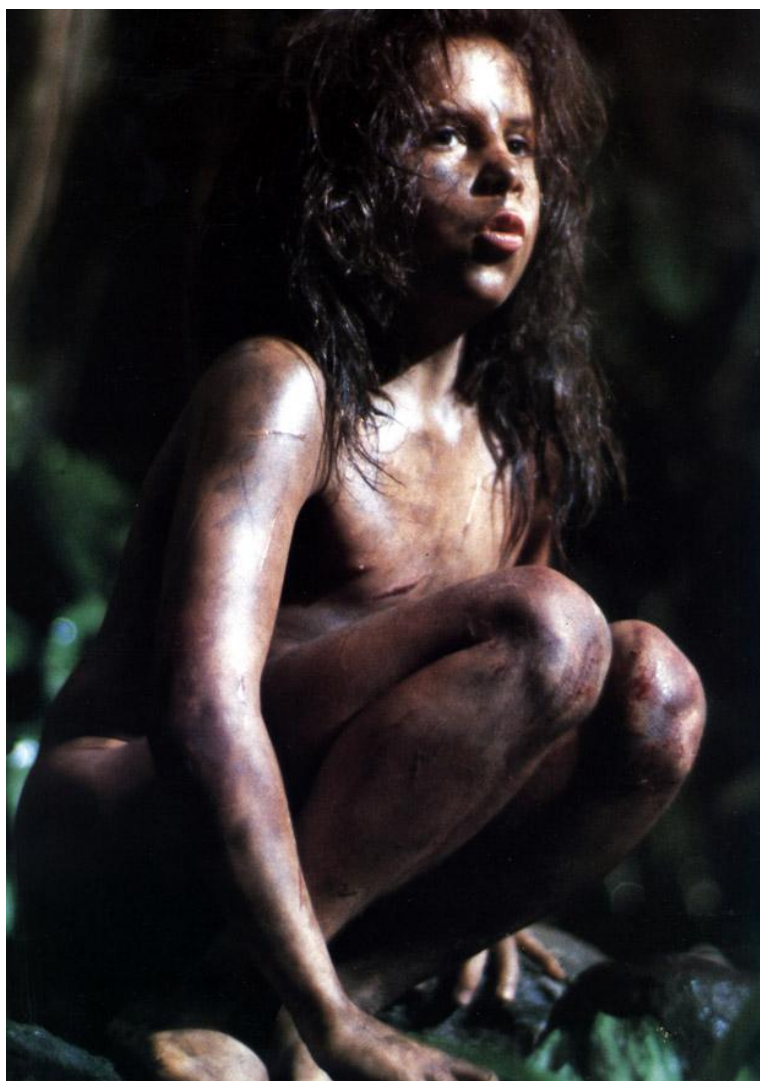
UK : 1984 : dir. Hugh Hudson : Warner : 129 min
 prod: Hugh Hudson & Stanley S Canter

scr: P.H. Vazak (Robert Towne) & Michael Austin : dir.ph.: John Alcott

Eric Langlois; Daniel Potts; Peter Kyriakou

Christopher Lambert; Ralph Richardson; Ian Holm; Andie MacDowell; James Fox;
 Cheryl Campbell; Ian Charleson; John Wells; Nigel Davenport; Nicholas Farrell;
 Paul Geoffrey; Richard Griffiths; Hilton Morag; David Suchet; Ravinder; Paul Brook;
 Tristram Jellinbeck; Tali McGregor [and as the principal apes:] Elliott W Cane; Ailsa Berk;
 John Alexander; Christopher Beck; Mak Wilson

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ♂	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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It was a long time coming, for such an obvious notion – filming the original Tarzan story as an epic drama, rather than a jungle Western. And it was the first film since 1922 to touch, however briefly, on the boyhood of the hero. Left: Daniel Potts as the enfant sauvage,, age 10.

Source for all stills unless otherwise indicated – lush Warner Bros press brochure

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Retelling of Tarzan tale, liberally adapted from Edgar Rice Burroughs' original. The infant son of a shipwrecked couple is raised by apes, discovered at manhood by a Belgian explorer, and returned to civilisation – and his doting grandfather (Richardson, who's just wonderful in his final screen performance). At its best in the jungle scenes, with Rick Baker's incredible makeup effects; more sluggish back in Britain, and hampered by all-too-obvious signs of pre-release cutting. Leading lady MacDowell's voice was dubbed by Glenn Close. Expanded 135 minute version available on home video. Shot in Super Techniscope. *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"In the 1880s, an English lord and lady are killed in Africa, and their son is brought up by apes. An absurd attempt to treat the story seriously after 70 years of hokum, this meandering chronicle, cut down from something much longer and even less endurable, has men in ape suits, an eye for unpleasant detail, and Ralph Richardson sliding down the stairs on a tray. The attempt to moralise at the end is emetic. Academy Award nominations: Ralph Richardson, Best Supporting Actor; Best Adapted Screenplay "

"A unique mixture of pomposity and ineptitude.. in the second half the movie simply loses its mind, and dribbles to a pathetically indecisive conclusion."
– Pauline Kael, **New Yorker**

The Film Yearbook vol. 3 review:

"Ostensibly a tell-it-like-it-really-was version of the old Rice Burroughs favourite – detailing just how the Lord of the Apes comes to be in the jungle in the first place, and what happens to him when he is returned by a Belgian explorer to his ancestral home in Britain – this is in fact a pretty empty, pretty overlong, and pretty pretty piece that is recognisably the work of the man who brought you "**CHARIOTS OF FIRE**". Again, there is the

indulgence in glossy production values (luscious sets, postcard photography, overworked score). Again, the "message" is driven home without a hint of subtlety. And again, that message is duplicitous: whereas on the surface the film appears to be an attack on the strait-laced morality, hypocrisy and general snobbery of the upper classes in England Past, on a deeper level the tone is infused with an awesome nostalgic affection both for tradition (in terms of the family, the aristocracy and the nation/Empire) and the general concept of Innate Superiority. In its own calculating way, indeed, the film is as two-faced and elitist as the characters it purports to castigate."

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"You haven't really seen Tarzan the Ape Man until you've seen this version, which makes the others look dowdy. You may ask how a baby could survive in the jungle, but the film is so persuasive that you're likely to react with awe and wonder as he becomes king of the place. The arrival of the explorers, and especially the subsequent visit to Scotland, provide more conventional entertainment, while the ending, if unlikely, is the only conceivable one. Christopher Lambert is Tarzan. The others include Ian Charleson, Ian Holm, David Suchet, James Fox and Ralph Richardson, some of whom suffered from post-production cuts. But all the magic seems to have been left in. *** "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"A visually sumptuous, serious retelling of the Tarzan story that attempts to turn the material in Burroughs' escapist novels into the stuff of classical fiction, with mixed results. Director Hudson painstakingly recreates the jungle atmosphere: and the later scenes of Tarzan's attempts to deny his heritage and become "civilised" are touching. However, the slow, deliberate pacing saps the story of its energy. Note: Andie MacDowell, who plays Jane, was dubbed by Glenn Close, who's better heard than seen. *** "

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"This lavish production is closer to the original Edgar Rice Burroughs story than its B-movie predecessors. It's also surprisingly fresh and

compelling. In 1886, the orphaned son of Scottish aristocrats is reared by apes in Africa and then brought to Europe. This moving film contrasts the exhilaration of jungle life with the suffocating constrictions of Edwardian "civilisation". Interestingly, the voice of McDowell was dubbed by Glenn Close. Academy Award nominations – Richardson, Best Supporting Actor; Robert Towne and Michael Austin (under pseudonym P.H. Vazak), Best Screenplay based on material from another medium. *** ”

The Time Out Film Guide review:

“What would it be like for a lost child of the British aristocracy to be reared by apes in the African jungle? Cue for some skilfully handled action and a vivid realisation of the ape community in which a man eventually becomes boss cat. The film changes gear when our hero returns to Edwardian Britain and his ancestral home, Greystoke. Torn between two cultures, confused by his love for Jane, desolated by the loss of his grandfather (man) and his father (ape) he undergoes... culture schlock. It is here that "**GREY-STOKE**" pops its valves, pushing a simple yarn to the point of philosophical overload. Rhetoric apart, the film offers some stirring entertainment, and a memorable ham sandwich from Richardson, allowed to steal the show as grandfather in what proved to be his last film.”

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

“As probably befits a film that cost \$33 million and took eight years to get to the screen, production on this mammoth Tarzan epic was a fraught affair. Respected scriptwriter Robert Towne removed his name and insisted on the pseudonym P.H. Vazak when he was taken off the film. Then, after casting fashion model and acting newcomer Andie MacDowell as Tarzan’s girlfriend Jane, director Hugh Hudson took her voice off the soundtrack and had all her lines re-dubbed by Glenn Close. To her undying credit, McDowell bounced back a couple of years later to become one of Hollywood’s brightest young stars. Beautifully shot and impeccably acted, the film’s main plus is that it sticks closer to the original Edgar Rice Burroughs novel than all the previous chest-thumping, vine-swinging Hollywood versions. But for all that, it’s a dramatically uneven picture. The first half works best, with the boy Tarzan being raised by a family of cute apes, and is on less sure

ground when adult Tarzan (Christopher Lambert) is brought back to Edwardian England. *** ”

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“One of the main points of "**GREYSTOKE**" is that the \$33 million pic adheres much more closely to the original Edgar Rice Burroughs story than have the countless previous screen tellings of Tarzan stories.

While a little obligatory vine swinging is on view, this is principally the tale of the education of the seventh Earl of Greystoke, first by the family of apes which raises a stranded white child and eventually accepts him as its protector and leader, then by a Belgian explorer who teaches him language, and finally by the aristocracy of Britain, which attempts to make him one of their own.

With the exception of the warm, slightly batty Ralph Richardson, nearly all the Englishmen on view are impossible, offensive snobs.

Christopher Lambert is a different sort of Tarzan. Tall, lean, firm but no musclemán, he moves with great agility and mimics the apes to fine effect.

Ian Holm is helpfully energetic as the enterprising Belgian, James Fox is the personification of stiff propriety, and Andie MacDowell (voiced by actress Glenn Close) smiles her way through as the eternally sympathetic Jane.

On a production level, film is a marvel, as fabulous Cameroon locations have been seamlessly blended with studio recreations of jungle settings.”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“Director Hugh Hudson made one of the few Tarzan movies to remain faithful to the books and original character created by Edgar Rice Burroughs. Tarzan, in one dramatic leap, goes from the dank, dangerous rain forests of West Africa to claim his rightful heritage – a baronial mansion in Scotland and a title as the seventh Earl of Greystoke. Rated "PG" for nudity and violence. ***1/2 ”

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"The most intelligent and perhaps the best filmic treatment of Edgar Rice Burroughs's classic pulp novels about Tarzan, the white child of noble blood raised by apes in the jungle, since Elmo Lincoln first brought the character to the screen in 1918.

The film opens with the shipwreck¹ that casts Lord Jack Clayton (Paul Geoffrey) and his pregnant wife Lady Alice (Cheryl Campbell) on the wild coast of Africa. They build a hut in the jungle, she bears a son, and shortly thereafter they both die. The infant is adopted by a clan of apes, with whom he grows to manhood, after which his ape mother is killed by pygmies. They also wipe out the first white men that Tarzan (Christopher Lambert) has ever seen, a party of hunters. He saves one of them, a wounded Belgian, Captain Phillippe D'Arnot (Ian Holm), who teaches him to speak English.

Eventually Tarzan returns to civilisation with D'Arnot and goes to his ancestral home in Scotland, Greystoke Manor. There, his grandfather, the sixth Lord of Greystoke (Sir Ralph Richardson), tries to integrate his heir into upper-crust society.

The film is beautifully photographed and marvelously acted, with Lambert showing remarkable subtlety and emotion. Richardson, in his final film role, is even better; he carries much of the second half of the film when the story starts to sag. The special effects costuming by Rick Baker is superb and his actor-apes are so expressive and natural that it is almost impossible to tell them from the real apes that appear in the scenes with them².
***1/2 "

NAMBLA Bulletin vol.4/6 – July '83 – media note:

" **"GREYSTOKE, THE LEGEND OF TARZAN"** is a major motion picture due this fall. There's going to be an extensive merchandising effort, and an ad pushing this features a very handsome, long haired boy of about 8, nude, riding an ape... "

NAMBLA Bulletin vol 5/4 – May '84 – media note:

"...Another movie with a 12 and a 5, playing the same person at different points

in time, is **"GREYSTOKE"**. The young Tarzans romp in the first half hour only... "

Excerpt from **NAMBLA Bulletin** vol.5/5 survey of Tarzan's boys:

"...The current **"GREYSTOKE"** movie has come full circle, with young actors playing Tarzan as a boy nude: Daniel Potts at age 5, and Eric Langlois at age 12..."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide" or "The Films of the Eighties"]

¹ *No it doesn't*

² *Inaccurate in several details, but we'll let them pass*

The first thing to note is that at no point in the film does anyone mention the name "Tarzan". Quite what the apes call him is not clear, but "Tarzan" it is not. All of the criticisms in the *Film Yearbook* review are entirely valid, but still one cannot help but admire the result. Nostalgia for the Edwardian family/aristocracy/empire is not self-evidently wicked, and in my own experience social egalitarians are generally elitists in sheep's clothing. The charge of seeming to decry what it secretly reveres is on the button with "**GREYSTOKE**" however. That's an old disease in Hollywood.

The intention was clear – applying epic grandeur to revitalise a story which cinema has debased to the level of a jungle Western, to produce if you will a "**GODFATHER**" of Tarzan movies. The goal was laudable enough (though Halliwell seemed to feel not), and similar revitalisations have been achieved with considerable success by other films (Tim Burton's "**BATMAN**", for one), but despite all its effort and dignity "**GREYSTOKE**" lands on the screen like a lead zeppelin, even in its truncated form, and the question then is – where did it all go wrong?

The script is pleasingly articulate, the cast admirable, the cinematography ravishing, the score noble and period-sensitive, and the make-up effects for the gorillas so well done that a highly intelligent Dutch woman I knew in 1984 insisted firmly that these were trained apes, not actors in costume. Newcomer Christopher Lambert is dashing and Byronic, no silly concessions are made to connect with the great American audience, or to appease the gods of Political Correctness, and to top it off the film avoids the cop-out of a happy ending. When it did so much right, how did it fail so decisively (because fail it most certainly did)?

Many a hopeful remake of the classic Dickens tales – "**OLIVER TWIST**", "**A CHRISTMAS CAROL**" – fail precisely because of over-familiarity with the story and characters, but no Tarzan film since the silent era has ever told this story as it was written, so that argument cannot apply here. Part of the explanation perhaps is the accident of timing. Cinemagoing trends are notoriously faddy, and the major genres – Westerns, Musicals, War films, Science Fiction – have all had their fat and lean periods. Had "**GREYSTOKE**" been released in 1994, and not ten years earlier, perhaps it might have enjoyed a more favourable response. Commercial film-makers must give the audience what it wants, not count on it to want what they give it.

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There are many interesting asides to this treatment, most of which it has to leave unexplored. The Africa it shows us is the Victorian-eye-view of the Dark Continent, full of murderous natives and volcanoes spewing rivers of lava. The Europeans are irredeemable imperialists who, as the narrator D'Arnot tells us, "view Africa and all things African with a heartfelt contempt". The apes are not the placid creatures of the "**GORILLAS IN THE MIST**" convention, but the brutal, aggressive beasts they were commonly understood to be in Rice Burroughs' day (indeed, John's own father was beaten to death, though he never learns this, by the gorilla he later comes to accept as his father).

When D'Arnot leads John back to the civilised world, the first place they encounter is a deeply sinister trading post peopled by malevolent outcasts and fugitives – "This is not the world John," he reassures his companion, "just the edge of it". And there is the faintest, but unmistakable, hint at a homosexual relationship between D'Arnot and John, most overtly expressed when D'Arnot is leaving Greystoke and John races after his coach in tears. He pulls a ring from D'Arnot's – little – finger and places it on his own – little – finger. (For the uninitiated, in pre-Wolfenden days a ring on the little finger was one of the secret signs homosexuals used, at any rate in Britain, to declare themselves to one another.) Only one token member of the "lower classes" figures at all on the Greystoke estate, and he is, as Richardson superfluously confides, "a bit soft in the head". He is seen to prance and cavort

like the apes back home, and quite naturally seeks the protection of John from James Fox, submitting to him just as the apes did.

Any script passing through the sieve of the film industry today would not be allowed to depict Africa as a nest of murderous savages, or portray an endangered species as violent and competitive, or infer parity of status with the apes to a retarded house-servant, or hint at a homosexual relationship for its romantic hero. That this script does so without giving offense only demonstrates the pains it has gone to in capturing the sensibilities of its period. Jane is not remodelled as some prototypical emancipated woman (and there are no other women to speak of in the story), John does not speechify for American consumption about the evils of aristocracy, D'Arnot does not reappear with a wife to jettison any misgivings about his sexuality, and the caning of the young native boy as D'Arnot and John arrive at the outpost is not consigned to the cutting room floor on the logic that we don't condone beating of children anymore. Such subtextual references have not been "adjusted", as they very often are now, to contemporary sensibilities. The film attempts, in effect, to adopt a neutral stance, equating ape society with British aristocratic society and expressing no great preference for either. The rhetorical device does not quite succeed, but it was admirably attempted.

Warner Brothers had a similar commercial mishap to this one in 1975 with Stanley Kubrick's "**BARRY LYNDON**" [qv]. Again the photography was breathtakingly beautiful, the period detail fastidious, the pacing slow and in keeping with the tempo of the age, the script was intelligent and witty, the cast superior. And it bombed at the box office, notwithstanding the name of Kubrick. There are similarities in the way Warners promoted both properties as top drawer items, but they failed to persuade the public.

See also "**BADKONAK-E SEFID**" and "**BASHU**" - both recent Iranian films, and subject index under **ARAB WORLD / MIDDLE EAST**.