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MORGENSTERN ON MOVIES

By JOE MORGENSTERN



Why 'E.T.' Wins Out Over 'Armageddon'

When science meets fiction, it's the story that counts
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The trouble with asking experts for expert opinions is that you might not get the opinions you're looking for.

I ran into this problem recently when I went to Caltech in Pasadena to hear a talk by Lisa Randall, one of the world's leading theoretical physicists. Her areas of expertise include particle physics and string theory, but she's also a formidably knowledgeable movie lover, and we've come to be friends on the basis of emailed back-and-forths about what's out there to be seen -- in theaters, not in the dozen or so extra dimensions that she writes about. At dinner after her talk, I raised the question of accuracy in movies about science. I'd been dismayed by "What the #\$*! Do We (K)now!?", a New Age documentary purporting to explain quantum mechanics, as well as by the liberties taken by so many FX-laden summer blockbusters, and I figured that she would validate my dismay. What, then, had caught her attention on the silver screen?

"Well," Lisa said cheerfully, "I really liked 'The Day After Tomorrow.' "

GREAT ESCAPES

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I was stunned. My review of the film had been pretty snuffy, and I told her so -- all that silly business about global warming transforming the climate in a matter of weeks, and slobbering wolves escaping from the Central Park Zoo to terrorize New York City.

"Yes, I know," she replied, "and global warming is a serious issue. But didn't you think the movie was fun?"

Here was a valuable reminder to relax and enjoy what's enjoyable, even when it isn't plausible. But our exchange touched on other questions as well: How much seriousness is in order when movies deal with science subjects, and how science is represented by what is, for better or worse, an entertainment medium.

The answer to the second part is relatively simple. Since the currency of the entertainment realm is emotion, movies about science play mainly, though not exclusively, to our fears.

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Two particularly hopeful -- and beautiful -- exceptions are Steven Spielberg's "E.T." and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," sci-fi spectacles that tell us we'll be perfectly OK when extraterrestrials finally come to call. "Contact" is hopeful, too, though awfully abstract in its melding of science and religion, while its illustrious precursor, "2001: A Space Odyssey," is magnificent in visualizing space travel, and possibly prophetic about the power of computers, though poetically muddled at the juncture where science meets the Star Child in a quasireligious rebirth.

Still, fear rules the sci-fi roost -- fear of asteroids (the idiotic "Armageddon"), of lava ("Volcano"), of artificial intelligence ("A.I.: Etc."), of DNA ("Jurassic Park"), of genetic contamination ("The Fly"), of Martians ("The War of the Worlds") of undocumented aliens ("The Thing"), of deep-seated global malaise ("The Core") and, of course, in "The Day After Tomorrow," fear of global warming.



As for seriousness in movies about science, it's a rarity -- one shining example is "Apollo 13" -- though not a necessity, despite the grumblings of some literal-minded scientists who, unlike Lisa Randall, wish that Hollywood would stick to the facts of modern physics. (An enjoyable collection of such gripes can be found online under the title of "Insultingly Stupid Movie Physics" at www.intuitor.com/moviephysics².) Oscar's home address may be the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, but the "Sciences" in the title refers to cameras, lenses, film preservation and the like -- it's still the Arts that count the most in science movies.

That's why "October Sky" failed to find a wide audience -- it was strong on rocket science but weak on star power and drama -- and why the bedazzlements of "Star Wars" and "Star Trek" found an audience the size of our planet. (Many scientists are dedicated Trekkers, but out of love for good stories and characters, not sound science.) "Capricorn One" was far from a great movie, but it was artful, and therefore memorable, in its puckish depiction of the first manned mission to Mars as a fake.

"Blade Runner" did poorly when it opened in theaters in 1982, yet such was the power of its art, and the singularity of its vision (film noir transformed into film jaune), that Ridley Scott's sci-fi classic has come to epitomize a future beset by dehumanization and poisoned by pollution. An equally bleak vision was couched in antic terms by "Dr. Strangelove." After a theatrical opening that broke no blocks, to say the least, Stanley Kubrick's black comedy provided a shorthand definition, still as useful as it is vivid, of the madness of nuclear war.

Indeed, the best examples of the genre recognize that science and entertainment are not incompatible. We know which ones they are, and we know how they can transport us to realms of adventure, and new levels of awareness -- older films such as "The Day the Earth Stood Still," "Planet of the Apes," "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" or "Brazil," more recent ones such as "Terminator 2," "Twelve Monkeys" or the first iteration of "The Matrix." Whether dealing with science directly or by reflected light, they give escapism a good name.

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