

## Consumed by their Creation: Mad Scientists of the New Millennium

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**Abstract:** Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Jurassic Park* kicked off a cycle of films that struck a cautionary note about the possibilities of science: "Don't play God!" This paper examines the "creature features" of the millennial period, focusing upon the suspicion of science and scientists that was generally on display. This paper will bring into the discussion a wide range of such films in focusing upon the portrayal of scientists, the manner in which gender provides an intersection between the science fiction and horror genres, and finally how this intersection is indicative of the creature feature's ambivalence toward scientific advancement. The examination of mad scientists will constitute the bulk of the paper, split into discussions of the "bad" scientist and the "good" scientist. The former category includes the Ahab character, the profiteer, and the romantic, while the latter category includes the outsider, the scientist-father, and the married science couple. In the depiction of these characters and others, the message is clear: don't distinguish yourself too greatly, advancing too far down the path of scientific achievement, as bio-engineered sabertooth tigers and boa constrictors roam the landscape, punishing humanity for attempting to play god.

Film genres can be slippery to define, none so much as the science fiction genre. Perhaps due to the often-imaginative nature of the narratives, where many of society's rules can be broken, numerous sub-genres can be identified, such as ones that involve space exploration, manipulated reality, and the monstrous alien threat. Of interest to this study are "creature features" representative of a sub-genre that generally highlights societal fears of progress and takes a particularly critical view of scientific advancement, often identifying transgressive gender

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roles and/or sexual desires as metaphorically indicative of societal corruption. For the purpose of this study, included in the sub-genre will be creatures whose harmful ministrations can be at least partially blamed on human intervention, whether it be due to genetic manipulation, medical alteration, or being freed from pre-historic slumber. Not included in this study are natural, unaltered, although often dangerous, animals that engage in destructive conflict with society. By this litmus, films such as *Piranha* (dir. Joe Dante, 1978) and *Anaconda* (dir. Luis Llosa, 1997) do not fall into this category, whereas *Alligator* (dir. Lewis Teague, 1980) and *Reign of Fire* (Rob Bowman, 2002) do. Important literary pre-cursors to the contemporary fear of rapid, scientific discovery include, among others, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) and H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). In a time and place of runaway industry, it is no surprise that the Victorians would have been suspicious about the potentialities of scientific advancement in the face of harmful changes to the environment and the workforce. A bizarre by-product was the drive by many religious groups to explain recently discovered dinosaur fossils as hybrids between humans and fallen angels, indicating their unwillingness to admit that scientific exploration was introducing knowledge that redefined, among other things, the veracity of the Judeo-Christian Bible.

More recently, and cinematically, the 1950s saw a renewed concern over the interference of man in the affairs of nature. The *Gojira (Godzilla)* cycle in Japan and films by figures such as Ray Kellogg, Roger Corman, and Ray Harryhausen evidenced a fear of nuclear proliferation, with animals, due to radiation exposure, growing to monstrous proportions or developing supernatural abilities. The most recent manifestation of such fear-based cinema took place in the late 1990s and represents the nexus of several trends and events: firstly, the growth of cable television and the opportunities for niche programming, in this case the Sci-Fi Channel (first

broadcast in 1992, renamed Syfy in 2009); secondly, the arrival of affordable computer-generated special effects and their success in Stephen Spielberg's cinematic adaptation of *Jurassic Park* (book in 1990, film in 1993), which earned over \$900 million worldwide, sparking many imitators; and finally, the foregrounding of certain "moral issues" in late twentieth century scientific inquiry, precipitated by the cloning of Dolly the sheep and the viability of stem cell research. The stage was set for an abundance of films questioning the efficacy of rapid, scientific progress. There is much that can be said about this latest wave of "creature features"; this paper will engage directly with these cinematic texts in focusing upon the portrayal of scientists, the manner in which gender provides an intersection between the science fiction and horror genres, and finally how this intersection is indicative of this sub-genre's ambivalence toward scientific advancement.

The fundamentalist suspicion of science is nowhere more evident in this latest cinematic cycle than in the portrayal of scientists. In these films, scientists are portrayed both positively and negatively; those shown in a negative light can be grouped, loosely, into three different categories, although there are many different flavors and variations. The first is the Ahab character, a figure who has become unhealthily invested in his or her discovery or research. Unlike Melville's fanatical sea captain, however, the obsession here is not to kill but instead protect the creature, particularly if it represents the fruits of pronounced research. These characters lose the perspective necessary to identify the tipping point at which the beast becomes uncontrollable and a menace to the general public. Indeed, these films establish an anti-intellectual position whereby extreme intellect almost always equates to a lack of common sense and, therefore, judgment. Furthermore, these characters usually suffer from tunnel vision; they are often disinterested in anything external to their project, including sexual pursuits, seemingly

oblivious to the numerous attractive and available men and women who often populate these films. This single-minded fanaticism pre-figures their undoing; either perspective is never obtained, and they are consumed by their own creation, or it is gained too late and at a horrible price. Redemption is possible for this type of character but usually in the suicidal act of killing the beast or distracting it in order that others may escape. In *Python* (dir. Richard Clabaugh, 2000), Dr. Anton Rudolph (played by Robert Englund) lures the giant snake into an underground labyrinth, setting off a bomb and killing himself so that the small group of protagonists, all of whom are working-class, small-town types, can escape. Although the snake does not die in the explosion, Rudolph's sacrificial act allows the others time to set a trap of their own, one that will ultimately succeed in defeating the genetically-altered reptile.

The second type of scientist typically destined for death is the profiteer, an entrepreneurial character whose breakthroughs, whether genetic or archaeological in nature, are largely geared towards generating wealth and usually stolen from or based upon the research of others. Naturally, such a character is corrupt, sacrificing the checks and balances of the scientific method through bribes, theft, or even murder in furtherance of project success. Further evidence of selfishness often comes in the form of underlings who are callously, and sometimes knowingly, sent to their doom and the subsequent efforts to cover up these deaths. Unlike the Ahab figure, these profiteers are often open to worldly pleasure, indulging in liberal doses of alcohol and sexual activity, further clouding any leftover traces of judgment that may still exist. In the end, these characters are often killed by their own creations, poetic justice establishing as fatal flaws in design not only the motivation of acquiring wealth but also the attempt to control nature. In "Attack of the Sabretooth" (dir. George Miller, 2005), a shameless rip-off of Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990), bio-engineered sabretooth tigers break free from their theme

park enclosures during the grand opening, proceeding to eat a string of people that culminates in the homicidal and sadistic profiteer who heads up the project.

The final scientist in this grouping is the romantic character whose motivations are positive but whose ego generally interferes with common sense. Like the Ahab figure, the romantic is unable to identify until too late that the situation is out of control. The fatal flaws here are a desire to help the entire world and the hamartia that results from being a genius who lacks the moderate nature to proceed cautiously. Unlike the previous two characters, one who repents just before death and the other who dies unrepentant, this scientist often sees the light much earlier in the narrative, recognizing that playing god has come at a terrible price. In *Mosquito Man* (also called *Mansquito*; dir. Tibor Takács, 2005), which borrows liberally from *The Fly* (dir. Kurt Neumann, 1958; remade by David Cronenberg, 1986), Dr. Jennifer Allen (played by Musetta Vander) researches the mosquito-borne virus known as West Nile. In her reckless drive to find a cure, she accidentally creates a human-mosquito hybrid (played by Austin Jordan) that eventually escapes and proceeds to completely drain of blood anyone who crosses its path. Realizing her mistake, and infected with the same substance, Dr. Allen tracks down and attempts to kill the creature with the help of a simple, hard-working police officer (played by Corin Nemec). Scientists whose desire is the betterment of mankind but whose megalomania dooms their project are often given the chance for redemption, even if it means their own death. The same powers of genius that created the creature are subsequently marshaled it towards its destruction.

Not all scientists are hindered by a fatal flaw that requires their punishment: a second group exists. There are those who are either more cautious in nature or are grounded by a close bond with someone who acts as a check upon their genius. The first type is typically brought in

on the project fairly late in the game, often as experts consulted by the government after a clandestine experiment has gone awry. These characters, due to their natural disbelief, are more level-headed than those previously described. As they have less stake in the fate of the creature and survival is the only issue, they are better outfitted for making the best decisions. The *de facto* stance here towards science is one of careful consideration, with very few chances taken. Instead of pushing the boundaries, science is the careful and better yet *slow* acquisition of knowledge. Those who hurry their results step outside of their roles as scientists and are punished. In *Boa vs. Python* (dir. David Flores, 2004), herpetologist Emmett (played by David Hewlett) is hired by the government to track down a killer python by using his genetically-engineered boa constrictor as a tracker. Realizing that he cannot kill the python without harming his own snake, Emmett makes the difficult decision to destroy them both, ruining years worth of effort in developing a universal anti-venom but, in doing so, saving the Philadelphia area. Of course, the quintessential example of this character is Dr. Alan Grant in *Jurassic Park* (played in the film version by Sam Neill). Upon his arrival at the theme park, Grant sheds his status as disbeliever, but his cautious and studied approach to life, part of his identity as a scientist, are qualities that see him through the ordeal.

Another example of a scientist generally portrayed positively is the older man with an adult daughter. The father is a variation on the Ahab character; however, despite being rigidly focused and, for all intents and purposes, sexless, this scientist has an external balancing agent in the guise of his own flesh-and-blood. The latter character is often a daughter who, although extremely intelligent herself (and often a scientist of some repute), is more grounded than her father and therefore exhibits better judgment. Furthermore, there is a reminder to the audience that the father was not always so narrow in his focus. It is true that this character, somewhere

along the line, abandoned any aspect of sexuality in the advancement of his career. However, despite his status as a quasi-eunuch, his daughter is usually quite beautiful. Therefore, the dedication to craft and subsequent loss of sexuality obviously manifested themselves post-coitally. Ergo, despite this coupling's progressive bearing in that the female character from the younger generation, the daughter, provides the stability in their relationship, the implied, traditional message here is that sexual behavior is useful only for biological reproduction. After producing the attractive daughter for the film's working-class protagonist to fall in love with twenty years later, the scientist's fornicatory responsibilities are over and he can dedicate the rest of his life to what is truly pleasurable: enjoying the company of beakers and bunsen burners! An interesting twist on this formula appears in *King Cobra* (dir. David Hillenbrand, 1999). Dr. Irwin Burns transforms from a focused but cautious scientist into a more obsessive individual when his scientist daughter is killed by a cobra/rattlesnake hybrid named Seth. Dr. Burns' subsequent relationship with two of the other snake hunters several years later allows him to recuperate his paternal instincts and, in doing so, his sanity.

Finally, the "married science couple" also relies upon one another for balance and perspective. Any tendencies towards destructive obsession or romantic megalomania are kept in check by the very nature of their relationship. Indeed, professional squabbles often threaten their marriage. In *Boa* (also called *The New Alcatraz*; dir. Phillip Roth, 2002), paleontologist Dr. Robert Trenton (played by Dean Cain) wants a career dedicated to research and travel, while his paleontologist wife, Dr. Jessica Platt-Trenton (played by Elizabeth Lackey), wants a steady, teaching career. They are further divided on the subject of children; despite his desire for globetrotting from one research dig to another, he wants children while she does not. This tension, however, is just the edge needed to keep their brilliant, scientific egos in check, leading

both to survive when they are sent to a futuristic prison located under the polar ice cap in order to investigate a recently-thawed, pre-historic giant python. In the film's finale, the snake follows the couple and one other survivor, a Chechnyan terrorist, onto the getaway airplane. Dr. Trenton places a parachute on the creature and, when the ripcord is pulled, it is sucked out into the cold Antarctic night, taking the terrorist along with it. The implication of surviving such an ordeal is that it will strengthen the matrimonial bonds. Having endured the attacks of a gigantic, pre-historic snake during the middle of the Antarctic winter, issues such as career choice and child-rearing should be relatively easy to resolve.

These characters are in no way unique to this sub-genre, present in a modified but recognizable form in other science-fiction sub-genres. Furthermore, these low-budget films often draw heavily from other sources. Some of the story conventions are lifted directly from other genres, particularly the horror film. In this genre, pre-marital carnal knowledge does not automatically equate to death, but it is a very, very, *very* dangerous proposition. In fact, a mid-coital attack is not that uncommon in such films, as is evidenced by scenes in both *Sabretooth* (dir. James Hickox, 2002) and its sequel, *Attack of the Sabretooth*. In both of these creature features, the female participant is both the sexual aggressor and the first to die, while the male first cowers in fear when confronted with the creature and then flees for his life. This plot device is fairly uniform in such films and suggests a puritanical fear of pre-marital sexuality with a deep-seeded mistrust of women as the root of such non-normative behavior. In this misogynist scenario, women who initiate contact with men and take control in the pursuit of carnal pleasures are transgressive and must be punished. The beast stands in for societal judgment and the Eve character bears the brunt of the punishment, with Adam often paying the price a short while later. There are variations on this theme, however. In *Python*, although Theresa and Tommy (played



by Sara Mornell and a punkish, pink-haired Wil Wheaton) never consummate their relationship, he continually makes advances, attempting to circumvent her defenses. It is then no surprise that the snake kills Tommy while Theresa survives. In this instance, the overactive *male* libido is held accountable for transgressive sexuality, as Tommy pays for his pubescent fumbling with his life, destroyed by a signifier—the snake symbolic—that denotes not only phallic power but also the seat of suspicion over female sexuality. The sexual male represents the traditional structures of patriarchy from which the creature is excluded; the sexual male must therefore be destroyed. Conversely, the sexual female threatens to undermine the traditional structures of patriarchy that the creature, in many cases, seeks to vicariously inhabit. For the opposite reason, therefore, the sexual female must also be punished.

Several other horror film themes are also present in this genre. For instance, if you happen to find yourself standing over the edge of an abyss or looking down a dark corridor, do not, under any circumstances, linger behind for a few seconds while the group makes a hasty retreat. While you are pondering the depth of the chasm or the length of the corridor, the creature is bound to strike. Furthermore, if the creature is known to be behind you and a comrade is shouting for assistance in that general direction, stay with the group and go back to help, as the beast has undoubtedly used some invisible crawl space to move ahead of the group, setting some sort of ambush. Once again, the message employed in these plot developments is one of safety; do *nothing* to distinguish yourself and stay as close to the middle of the pack as possible. This mixing of the science fiction and horror genres is prevalent not only in the creature feature but also the “monstrous alien” sub-genre, as the *Alien* cycle indicates (dir. Ridley Scott, 1979). Abstracted to scientists, the message is clear: do not distinguish yourself too greatly, advancing too far down the hallways of scientific achievement. The traditional sexual

and societal mores prevalent in horror films mix with the suspicion of science as an agent of rapid and careless change, leading to this cycle of films that is distinctly cautionary in tone.

The rapidity of advancement in numerous scientific fields during the last several decades of the twentieth century, the most noteworthy of which involved breakthroughs in genetics, resulted in a society that was obsessed with new technological potentials while simultaneously concerned about the societal changes that would necessarily follow. An anti-intellectual distrust of the scientist, the creative force driving potential transformation, was the byproduct of this concern, manifesting itself in a cycle of films featuring scientific breakthroughs that, although potentially useful, usually resulted in catastrophe. Although many of these films lacked the production value and quality of Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*, they all had one thing in common: the scientists who populated the narratives were portrayed as obsessive visionaries whose genius is eventually exposed as a species of madness. Some of these characters, due to their myopia or greed, are beyond redemption and must be destroyed, such as the Ahab figure and the entrepreneur. Others, such as the romantic, do find redemption, although enlightenment usually comes at the expense of their life. Still others are fully redeemed and allowed to continue in society, although these scientists often enjoy an external check or balance, usually a spouse or relative or love interest. Even though characters inhabiting this latter cluster invariably survive to the end of the film, both scientist and society often pay a horrible price for the disruption that change brings to a static system, as bio-engineered sabertooth tigers and boa constrictors roam the landscape, punishing humanity for playing god.

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