

Lab Coats in Hollywood: science, scientists and cinema.

David A. Kirby

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From IBM to MGM: cinema at the dawn of the Digital Age.

Andrew Utterson

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The two Cinema titles have intriguing areas of overlap, containing the tensions and anxieties of not only their areas of focus but also in the approach taken to communicating such issues to a reading audience. The first examines how science in general including computers, is represented within the dream machine and the second, how computers are both represented and used for the manufacture of predominantly, popular entertainment.

Lab coats in Hollywood initially captured my attention - was this a long overdue analysis of the part played by chemists in the perfection of the image on the silver screen? (Or as one chemist has put it, "The alchemist makes entertainment out of silver!") However no, this is another story, slotting into the media studies shelf and examining the vicissitudes of the representation of science, aided and abetted by scientists cloaked as consultants.

The iconic, the indexical and the symbolic are not to be found

here as the author instead, using mostly field research into the protagonists, deconstructs what is 'real' about both the subtle and the bombastic presence of scientists in front of and behind the camera. The mission for engaging with Hollywood is clearly stated: "Any time a scientist discusses or portrays, scientific information, it is an act of persuasive communication and as such it can have an impact on scientific practice." Practice here means ability to practice, not methodology. The ethics of idea placement are not so much discussed as instanced within recent cinema history, when science teams were keen to promote their projects in the public eye, thereby gaining advantage from politicians and thus funding outcomes. Though Stanley Kubrick's *2001* established the idea of the PanAm airline in space, such exposure made no difference to their eventual demise but helped enormously to emphasize the corporate success enjoyed by NASA in the promotional stakes at the point of landing a man on the moon. Production anecdotes abound, for the most part recalling events in scripting, pre-production and the studio floor, including the final moments of wording a line of dialogue. Amongst the more engaging nuggets, it seems NASA spacesuit engineers learned a lot from film production designers engaged in inventing the look and feel of the actors' costumes, their style and appearance, the very definitions of the dream factories' appeal. Product designers' theories of form-into-function, for all the experts pioneering attitudes, lay well outside the remit of engineers inventing cutting edge space travel. The science accuracy in *Deep Impact* (1998) apparently, was good enough for the name to be used by NASA for a funded research mission completed in 2005.

Utterson's account of IBM's and NASA's involvement with Kubrick's *2001* are based on careful reading of the literature, (and thereby a very complete Bibliography), and the ramifications of the film's messages viewed from theoretical perspectives developed over the years since its making in the

mid-1960s. The musings of Minsky and Artificial Intelligence around which Kubrick posed some anxieties of the time about the computer, now moves more completely into discussions about evolutionary and ecological trajectories posed by less visible systems and not simply lumps of interface hardware decorating the sets. On this basis Utterson's preference is to discuss the latter sections of the film, (using earlier discussions of Godard's 1965 *Alphaville* to launch from), rather than the earlier sections where the tangibility and credibility of 'folk science' remain at the core of the audience experience.

He also gives voice to non-mainstream artists and the considerable experimentation taking place without significant budgets, often in collaboration with scientists working in commercial and government laboratories; outcomes ranged from abstract cinema to complex installations searching for expanded forms and into contemporary thoughts about 'future cinema'.

"Cinemas power as a virtual witnessing technology" is the term applied to the cinematic experience of being immersed in the images and the information contained in features such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2003). Kirby reports that it was the subject of audience studies to understand what kind of communication occurs when a topic like climate change is discussed on the big screen. Contrary to the studio approach of sneak previews and market research, this contemporary approach employs ethnographic methodologies to gather data sets useful for a range of purposes, such as determining if public attitudes to climate change are affected. Though the studies provided conflicting evidence, the film was promoted by Green groups and later, shots from it were used in Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) documentary; actuality and simulation are interchangeable when it comes to anxiety colliding with the physical world.

Kirby's book is no carefully prepared and arid academic tome. In fact it is the only one of the titles listed by LDR to garner a

one paragraph review with cover image in the Sydney Morning Herald weekend edition. The author is credentialed on the staff of the Centre for History of Science, Technology and Media at the University of Manchester. The film buff will enjoy this immersion in Hollywood gossip and it will be useful in the media studies classroom as a means of combining an understanding of pervasive stereotypes with the attractive and fashionable wackiness of much of the Hollywood entertainment masquerading as or bordering on informed scientific discourse.

For those pursuing a critical approach to cinema and with some interest in the continuing theoretical discourse, Utterson's book employs Conclusions at the end of each chapter and a final chapter so named, (also with a Conclusion), to assist the reader with navigating 'this particular cartography,' bringing focus for some to the historical discussions that precede. (Focussing on the grey 8pt typeface is a greater challenge in an otherwise well laid out book.) References to the futurist Marshall McLuhan throughout should for many rehabilitate him as 'the man of integral awareness', graphically showing the way with the image of Noah's Ark, the vessel adopted by Utterson to 'illuminate the screen culture' of today and tomorrow.