Parallel session 7: PCST as a performance: looking for new audiences?

SCIENCE CONSULTANTS, FICTIONAL FILMS, AND THE "WAR GAMES EFFECT"

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Abstract

Scientists often consult on Hollywood films because they believe that fictional films will heighten awareness of their research areas. Fictional films are very persuasive promotional tools because scientists and filmmakers create representations with the purpose of convincing audiences that these images accurately reflect the "natural world." In addition, these representations are embedded in a narrative framework designed to encourage this belief and further the impression that the scientific scenarios are plausible. Fictional film's ability to create images of "scientific possibilities," both positive and negative, convinces scientists that "realistic" depictions will enhance funding opportunities and promote research agendas.

Key words: Film, Scientific Promotion, Representation

Many scholars have demonstrated that scientific popularization often functions as a promotional activity. Scientists who consult on fictional films are engaged in a mode of popularization that has a unique capacity as propaganda. By helping craft scientific images in high profile Hollywood films, scientific organizations and individual science consultants are able to focus the public's attention on a particular scientific issue or area. Many consultants perceive the intensely popular medium of Hollywood films as a great way to promote their science and draw the public eye to their research. By helping to construct more "realistic" depictions scientists increase the rhetorical power of a film's message.

It is fictional film's ability to create an image of "scientific possibilities" in the audience's mind that leads scientists to believe that "realistic" depiction can lead to higher funding levels. In a previous article (Kirby 2003), I explore how film acts as a "virtual witnessing technology." Fictional cinema is particularly useful as a virtual witnessing technology because scientific representations in film are embedded in a narrative framework designed to highlight the representation's "reality" and to make opaque its construction. Joel Black (2001) highlights fictional film's ability to make people believe they have witnessed "reality," saying that it is film's nature to "make things explicit – to reveal or display the world in an evidentiary sense that is beyond the capability of traditional representational or art media" (8, italics in original). Film, then, can work as a powerful virtual witnessing technology because of this evidentiary element.

Often, consultants will proclaim that the film on which they are working highlights an issue that requires more funding. Near-Earth-Objects (NEOs) permeated the scientific and cultural climate in 1997, the year two asteroid/comet impact films, Deep Impact (1998) and Armageddon (1998), went into production. These films provided an opportunity for science consultants, all of whom had a stake in the NEO debate, to promote the hypothetical dangers of NEOs. Joshua Colwell, for example, believed that his consulting work on Deep Impact would help inform the public about the dangers of comet impacts, "The fact that the movie made an effort to portray all this realistically helps convey this message to the public and raise awareness of a real issue" (quoted in Bradley 2001). Colwell believed that realistic film depictions of disaster scenarios would raise public awareness and could provide a means for preventing these disasters. Joel Black refers to this belief as the "War Games effect" after the 1983 film. Black claims that filmmakers are "playing (or banking) on the notion that by presenting these doomsday scenarios in a fictional form, they are preventing them from happening (24, italics in original)." Like Colwell, many consultants see their role as enhancing the War Games effect. They believe that the more realistically a subject is visualized in a fictional world, the more motivated the public will be to fund scientific research in order to prevent the event from occurring in the real world. Consultants working on the disaster film Twister (1995) stress the importance of creating realistic scenarios in heightening public awareness about the dangers of tornados. From the scientists' perspective, the only way to avert this danger, of course, is to learn more about tornados and that requires more research support for meteorologists and storm chasers. For Deep Impact this promotional strategy worked as the publicity surrounding these two films, and their impact on public opinion, played a major role in the development of a U.S. NEO agency (for example see Anonymous 1998).

While the concept behind the War Games effect is to create highly plausible depictions of disasters in order to arouse fear in the audience, scientists can also create realistic filmic images of "scientific possibilities" with the intention of stimulating desire in audiences to see these events become realities. Consultants on Contact (1997), for example, believed that realistic depictions of the SETI program promoted positive visions about the search for extraterrestrials. Consultants felt that if this vision could excite the public about SETI they would be more willing to fund this controversial endeavor. I refer to film's ability to inspire as the Destination Moon effect after the 1950 film whose authentic depictions convinced people that space travel was a real possibility and not just the cartoonish fantasies seen in Buck Rogers. NASA, for example, is well aware of the Destination Moon effect and views fictional consulting on films such as Apollo 13 (1995), Mission to Mars (2000) and Space Cowboys (2000) as an excellent vehicle to promote its agency's mission and scientific projects. Although the War Games effect is about creating anxiety and the Destination Moon effect is about creating desire, they are actually two sides of the same coin. The realistic presentation of scientific scenarios within a cinematic framework can convince the public of the validity of scientific ideas and foster public excitement about research agendas.

References

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