

The future of science in film

Film is a universal language of modern societies. Larger-than-life images, stories, ideas, and characters portrayed in films can speak across the globe. This makes science and technology—which have shaped the modern world but remain little understood and poorly integrated into mainstream culture—a rich subject for film and a goldmine for filmmakers. From the mad scientist films of the '20s and '30s to the postnuclear dystopias of the '50s; and from the ecological disaster flicks of the '70s and '80s to the space adventures of recent years, films have periodically reflected society's hopes and fears about science. But we can do better when it comes to dramatizing the great, ongoing human enterprise to understand and enhance the world around and inside us.

Several recent Oscar-celebrated films, including *A Beautiful Mind*, *The Imitation Game*, and *Hidden Figures*, have entertained millions while offering the public a glimpse of path-breaking scientists whose lives and work they would not otherwise know or care about. And groups like the U.S. National Academy of Science's Science & Entertainment Exchange—supported by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and the Gordon and Betty Moore, Simons, and Alfred P. Sloan foundations—have offered expert consultations to over 2400 films and television shows with any scientific element, from *Contagion* and *Earthquake* to *Robocop* and *Black Panther*. Meanwhile, foundations like the Wellcome Trust in the United Kingdom and the Sloan Foundation in the United States have ventured directly into supporting filmmakers and dramatic films that realistically depict science and technology.

This January, the Sundance Film Festival—the premier independent film festival in the world—featured numerous science-related movies by international filmmakers (see page 1270). Although the overwhelming majority comprised documentaries, as usual, or science fiction films, a thriving genre not in need of philanthropic support, two strong narrative films with science stood out: *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, based on the inspirational true-life tale of a Malawi teenager who

teaches himself about energy and brings electricity to his village by building a power-generating wind turbine; and *The Sound of Silence*, a fictitious tale about an acoustical engineer or “house tuner” who tries to solve people's problems by rebalancing their home soundscape. New science screenplays receiving support for future development included fictionalized scripts about the British pioneers who created the first test tube baby; the first American woman in space and her role in solving the *Challenger* disaster; and a controversial African-American biologist who battles a drug company.

The future for fictionalized, high-quality scientific storytelling looks promising. Over the years, more than

2000 students from the nation's top film schools have attended a science seminar and submitted scripts to the Sloan Foundation about real people doing real science in the real world. Although these screenplays, like those featured at Sundance and other festivals, take liberties to dramatize some aspect of a story or character, they are judged for their scientific accuracy and authenticity by scientists sitting on panels alongside filmmakers.

Film schools, science organizations, and the film industry should encourage a new generation of film artists to tell realistic and compelling stories about science and technology. There is a deep reservoir of remarkable, untold scientific

tales and fascinating characters who explored the frontiers of knowledge as scientists, engineers, and mathematicians. And there are new, undiscovered worlds and characters to imagine with audiences hungry for such fare. These films may encompass the full range of thrillers, romances, action-adventures, mysteries, histories, biopics, epics, satires, comedies, and tragedies. And through such evocative and global cinematic forms, these works can reveal to the public the multitudinous figures who live, breathe, and struggle creatively in the great human endeavor of science that, for mostly better and sometimes worse, helps define who we are, where we came from, and where we're going.

—Doron Weber



Doron Weber
is the vice president of programs and program director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, New York, NY, USA.
weber@sloan.org



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