

Movies for a scientific mind

It will be a good year for films about science, judging from the screenings at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, held in Park City, Utah, last month. Aside from environmental documentaries, some of the more intriguing films on offer examined the human mind.

The documentary *Boy Interrupted* chronicled the life of a teen with bipolar disorder who jumped to his death after his parents took him off lithium, and *Over the Hills and Far Away* followed a couple scouring Mongolia for a shaman to cure their son's autism. Two fiction films, starring Kevin Spacey and Chazz Palminteri, told the stories of psychiatrists negotiating their own mental breakdowns.

Some of the best films got inside the twisted minds of fighters. *Bronson* made theatre of the psychopathic exploits of a British prisoner, and the documentary *Tyson* wove the musings of the boxer into a portrait of an exquisitely vulnerable man. Not all films reached this standard. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, about a female anthropologist studying how men view sex, did not retain the cranky charm of David Foster Wallace's novel. *Adam*, in which a schoolteacher falls for a young engineer with Asperger's syndrome, was stiff and preachy. Yet it won the Alfred P. Sloan prize for films depicting scientists.

"For a screenwriter it's always so much easier to tell a story about the perils of science than about incremental progress," said Jeffrey Nachmanoff, who co-wrote the 2004 global-warming thriller *The Day After Tomorrow* and who served on the Sloan prize jury. The festival was remarkably free of such sensationalism.

An unusually strong presence of science fiction included a coincidental pairing of movies about astronauts encountering their own cloned replacements. Although the Japanese *The Clone Returns Home* was rather slow, its British counterpart, *Moon*, directed by David Bowie's son Duncan Jones and starring Sam Rockwell and Kevin Spacey, was more entertaining. If one accepts their premise — that doctors will eventually be able to duplicate not just bodies but minds — these films raise questions about medical ethics and the origins of identity.

One astrophysicist expressed frustration that none of the 118 films at Sundance depicted an ordinary scientist at work, but not all agree. "I don't make such a distinction between pure science and science fiction," replied John Underkoffler, science adviser on the films *Minority Report* and *Iron Man*. "At their best films convey ideas, and the guise isn't so important."

Jascha Hoffman is a writer based in New York. ■

Q&A: Getting under Darwin's skin

Charles Darwin's relationship with his wife Emma is the subject of the film *Creation*. Actor **Paul Bettany** describes portraying Darwin's turmoil over his daughter's death and religious conflict with his wife.



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Was it difficult playing such a famous man?

It was a real honour and horribly frightening in equal measure. Often when I prepare I must scratch around for research, but with Darwin there is almost too much material. He was such a prolific writer and there has been so much written about him that no matter how much I read, I felt that I hadn't done enough.



Paul Bettany as Charles Darwin in *Creation*.

Did your experience of playing the ship's surgeon in the 2003 film *Master and Commander* help you?

I found it really useful having spent time in the Galapagos Islands making that earlier movie. I was able to draw on a real place in my memory. *Creation* is set during the writing of *On the Origin of Species* 20 years after Darwin returned from the Galapagos. The film is about his procrastination and the reasons for it — his inability to write, it making him sick, the death of his daughter, the effect that had on his relationship with his wife, and their different means of dealing with it.

Scientists are often portrayed as being emotionless, so how did you draw out his intense grief following his daughter Annie's death?

People say he looked at his children like they were projects. But I think that this was a sign of the utmost love and respect. Science was his life. So of course he was going to involve his family. For him, science was an act of love, and study was an act of love. I don't think that science is a dry, dusty thing for scientists.

Was it easy playing opposite your wife, Jennifer Connelly, as Emma Darwin?

We got a lot for free in terms of the physicality that real married people have with each other. When you are trying to produce a relationship on screen that doesn't actually exist between the actors,

there is a temptation to look at or touch each other more, whereas there is an absent-minded closeness between Jennifer and I in the movie.

How did you handle the conflict between Darwin's agnosticism and his wife's strong Christian beliefs?

Darwin was a social conservative who had a revolutionary idea, and it was very difficult for him. He couldn't help seeing how the idea fitted like a glove everywhere he looked, in the indifferent cruelty of nature. When their child died, he went to science and she went to religion. And the thing that he was working on was potentially going to take her solace away. So it is incredibly moving and dynamic to play.

How did they convey their feelings?

Charles and Emma had a fantastic system of writing. They were in the same house but would write each other letters to discuss things. They were brutally honest with each other about their feelings. Even so, Annie's death was very difficult for them to discuss.

Any plans to play him again?

I would love to play the old Darwin, simply to be able to say I've had the biggest beard in cinematic history. ■

Interview by **Adam Rutherford**, *Nature's* podcast and video editor.

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