And the winner is: not science

Portrayals of science in the cinema are growing in sophistication — but not exactly at the speed of light, says **Colin Macilwain**.

Some Hollywood stardust will sprinkle across the world of science this week, in the build-up to next weekend's Oscars ceremony in Los Angeles. Uniquely in the history of the silver screen, two of the leading contenders for Best Picture concern the lives of two great scientists, mathematician Alan Turing and physicist Stephen Hawking.

Both films have been widely praised. But unfortunately, in terms of shedding light on what made these scientists tick — or furthering the art of film-making — *The Imitation Game* and *The Theory of Everything* each leave a great deal to be desired.

The two films were produced in the United Kingdom, not in Hollywood. But they each feature a catalogue of clichés, of eccentric scientists and true love, well worthy of Hollywood in its gory heyday.

You may say that it is too much to ask — but I think scientists deserve to see major, fact-based feature films about science present their lives in ways that resonate, at least to some extent, with the world of science as it really is. Most of us can recognize the authentic when we see it; in the case of these two films, we don't.

It is ironic that although Hollywood has shown itself capable of producing, on occasion, complex, postmodern masterpieces such as 2004's *Crash*, film-makers here in the United Kingdom still churn out the sort of sentimental slop that British satirists used to make a living by sending up, a quarter of a century ago. (I refer younger and non-UK readers to the genius of the *Comic Strip* series.)

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The Imitation Game, Morten Tyldum's portrayal of Alan Turing, is the greater disappointment of the two. Benedict Cumberbatch's performance as Turing has been widely — and justifiably — lauded. But the script, unfortunately, portrays Turing as a dysfunctional, almost autistic, individual and trots through clichés of how a 'genius' treats his peers with all the finesse of a children's fable.

All we learn about the project to bust the German Enigma cipher in the Second World War is that everyone was doing it all wrong until our erstwhile, eccentric hero turns up, argues with everyone in sight and relentlessly ploughs his own furrow, whatever that may be (we are never told). The film is significantly weaker for saying almost nothing about the nature of the problem, or about Turing's role — relative to others, inside and outside the project's base at Bletchley Park — in the conception and implementation of what we now call the computer.

It also groundlessly alleges that Turing's homosexuality made him turn a blind eye to a likely spy at Bletchley Park — a piece of worthless and defamatory melodrama that seems gratuitous, given the ample material provided by Turing's real life story.

Greater emotional nourishment, at least, is forthcoming from *The Theory of Everything*, in which Eddie Redmayne skilfully carries the viewer into the world of Stephen Hawking, as his body is progressively ravaged by motor neuron disease.

Hawking is portrayed sympathetically but convincingly, and the film addresses the great issues of his life outside science — the impossible demands placed on his first wife, Jane, on whose memoir, *Travelling to Infinity: My Life with Stephen* (Alma, 2008), the film is largely based, and the lack of support offered to the couple from the outside world.

Some critics have said that the film ought to have been even harsher. The book on which it is based is a softer version of Jane Hawking's earlier memoir, *Music to Move the Stars* (Macmillan, 1999), now out of print. (Intriguingly, second-hand copies are trading on Amazon for several hundred pounds.)

I enjoyed and believed this film — but it makes only a cursory effort to describe or address Hawking's scientific trajectory. Given his status as perhaps the world's best-known living scientist, there is something unsettling about that.

Both films present a bombastic, simplistic and 'hero-takes-all' picture of science — a picture that is still promoted heartily through the Nobel prizes, and by much science writing.

I prefer the more jaundiced view taken by Paul King's family film *Paddington*, in which geographer Montgomery Clyde is expelled from his learned society for failing to kill and bring back bears that he has found in Peru.

As has been widely noted, both audiences and critical attention have been shifting from cinema to the smaller screen, as television writers adapt to a twenty-first century in which people are growing wise to the clichés foisted on them in the past.

A more-nuanced approach to storytelling has emerged in countless television series, from *Breaking Bad* to *House of Cards*. None of these, so far, is built around the world of science, but a similar intelligence shines through the world-beating science-based sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*. Trite as some of its scripts may be, *Big Bang* has a stronger grasp than either of these movies of how science really works, bouncing along on a melee of inspiration, treachery, serendipity and teamwork.

Big Bang's barrage of cameos, from the likes of physicist Brian Greene and even Hawking himself, speaks to its credibility and fan base inside the scientific community. Its appeal carries an important message, too: scientists are not circus freaks; they are just people, whose work lets them express their inner nerd. It would be nice to see something about science on the big screen that carried half as much conviction. ■

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