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**THE CAREERS
MAGAZINE FOR
SCIENTISTS**

Some say the movies are a mirror — but in the case of scientists, that reflection is in the funhouse style, distorting people into grotesque caricatures. I recently encountered a photo essay on scientists in movies, which offered more than a history lesson in pop culture. Its subtext showed how the perception of scientists is changing, perhaps offering a way to a better image.

The first 'mad' scientist appeared in the 1926 Fritz Lang film *Metropolis*. Rotwang sported unruly hair, a disabled hand and a maniacal approach to research. The character reflected myths about science — that it was the result of obsessive individuals who didn't care about science's effects on society. This perception isn't new in art: the principal theme in Goethe's *Faust* also shows the dangers of pursuing bookish knowledge.

But movies have a way of overplaying that danger. In Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, the monster was described as "beautiful" — a positive result in aesthetic terms for science. But movie depictions of the creature have been uniformly menacing, with the malevolent side of the monster overtaking the gentle.

More modern movies still show scientists as clueless about the implications of their research. *The Nutty Professor* turned comic actor Eddie Murphy into an overweight and out-of-control Mr Hyde. And yet some scientists are finally being displayed as maverick heroes, fighting to get their ideas out when the establishment is trying to contain them. For instance, Jodie Foster, the heroine of *Contact*, defies government forces to get in touch with extraterrestrials.

This bodes well for the future, as many scientific ideas are now being distorted by these establishment forces — such as stem cells, evolution and global warming. If real-life scientists continue to rage against the establishment machine and tell the public how science can help solve problems, rather than create them, they are more likely to be depicted as benevolent characters on the big screen. Perhaps in the process, they will encourage more people to consider scientific careers, and attract the funding to pay for them.

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