

Science Goes Hollywood

Selective Outrage over the Latest Movie Inaccuracies

This spring, Hollywood has ventured into two major public controversies over science with all-star films on human cloning and global climate change. Both movies grossly distort the basic science in question, but the reaction of the scientific community has varied, apparently depending on the political implications of the movie's message.

Godsend, which hit theaters in May, involves the cloning of a child who has died in an accident. What starts as a science fiction film devolves into a weak horror flick with a series of highly implausible twists and turns. The cloning of a child may well be a scientific possibility in the future—and just months before the movie came out, the first human embryos were successfully cloned in South Korea. But the movie flubs the basic scientific explanation of cloning, and adds on layers of pseudoscience—such as the genetic manipulation of memory, which in this case causes the cloned child to exhibit murderous behavior—that bear no relation to reality.

Scientists and others interested in the real-life cloning debate have been quick—and right—to point this out. “Since *Godsend* is based on a genuine change in

science (our newly developed capacity to clone animals) and then moves beyond it to the incredible,” Nobel laureate Harold Varmus worried in the *New York Times*, “it will leave most of the audience uncertain about the boundary between the plausible and the implausible.”

Concern about such confusion has, of course, been central to the ongoing public debate about cloning human embryos for research. Arthur Caplan, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Bioethics, expressed the concern held by cloning research advocates quite overtly: “The only thing this movie succeeds in bringing back to life,” he wrote in his MSNBC column, “is every stupid, erroneous myth that has sabotaged the debate over the value of using cloning for stem cell research.”

To help reduce any damage from the film to the political fight for research cloning, the scientific journal *Nature* quickly published an interview with the film's screenwriter, Mark Bomback, in which he assured all interested parties that his film should not be understood as a critique of science or an attack against cloning human embryos for research. “It

would mortify me if it was used to condemn stem cell research,” Bombback said of his film. “It is not a vehicle for right-wing propaganda and I do not think we should be limiting science in any way.”

Opposition to “limiting science in any way” is certainly overreach, and there are many very good reasons to be concerned about human cloning—whether for research or for producing children. But *Godsend* does not address those reasons, and it is perfectly understandable that scientists would react badly to a movie that stands to shape opinion about a public issue related to science by grossly misrepresenting the facts. For that reason, though, it is rather surprising that many scientists have not reacted in the same way to a film guilty of distortions just as great on a different issue: global climate change.

This spring, Twentieth Century Fox will release the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, which claims to portray the consequences of a sudden dramatic climate disaster brought about by global warming and the melting of the polar ice caps. The film depicts Earth’s climate going entirely haywire, with massive destructive storms, flooding, freezing temperatures, heavy snow, and countless casualties—all happening abruptly, and attributed to global warming caused by human activity.

The science underlying the film is at least as off the mark as that behind *Godsend*, and no scientist has said otherwise. But that has not meant that scientists have come out against the film or worried publicly about its consequences. To the contrary, a number of scientists have said the film is beneficial to the cause of global warming activism, even though it gets the facts wrong. “The science is bad, but perhaps it’s an opportunity to crank up the dialogue on our role in climate change,”

NASA oceanographer William Patzert told the Associated Press. Dan Schrag, a Harvard University paleoclimatologist, had much the same response: “My first reaction was, ‘Oh my God, this is a disaster because it is such a distortion of the science. It will certainly create a backlash.’” But then he gave the consequences another thought, and added, “I have sobered up somewhat, because the public is probably smart enough to distinguish between Hollywood and the real world.” Strange that those concerned about limits on cloning showed no such trust in the public’s intelligence.

The difference, of course, is that the scientists in this case believe that the factual inaccuracy will benefit a political cause they support, rather than one they oppose—a difference not of scientific fact, but political repercussion.

Environmental activist groups, who normally work hard to convince people that their warnings about climate change are founded in real science, also seem to be strangely cavalier in this case about acknowledged distortions of the facts. Indeed, a number of groups are planning a joint public relations campaign to build on interest generated by the movie. Moveon.org, the ubiquitous far-left advocacy group, plans to host a town hall meeting to coincide with the movie’s release, with appearances by former Vice President Al Gore, liberal activist and former comedian Al Franken, and environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

According to a Gore press release, “Millions of people will be coming out of theaters on Memorial Day weekend, asking the question, ‘Could this really happen?’ I think we need to answer that question.”

That’s all well and good, except that the honest scientific answer to that question is

“No,” while the answer that these activists and scientists hope to peddle is, to put it mildly, not the truth.

The credibility of the environmental movement depends on its claim to scientific veracity. If environmental activists and

sympathetic scientists are so willing to openly fudge the facts for political impact in this case, how can they expect their other projections and claims to be taken seriously?