

## The Scientist: NewsBlog:

Science on the silver screen

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Festooned with jiggling eyeballs, threatening skeletons, and impaled floating heads, Feo Amante's horror thriller [website](#) seems an unlikely place to catch up on science. But sandwiched between the "Scary Top 10" and "Big Horror," movie and science buffs alike can check out "Science Moments," short critiques of the use, or lack thereof, of science in film.

In 1998, Eddie "Feo Amante" McMullen Jr. started the website as a platform for struggling horror and thriller writers like himself to publish online and build name recognition. Kelly Parks, McMullen's brother, joined the fray as a movie reviewer, and his first critique was of the 1998 flick [The Faculty](#). Parks found himself unable to resist mentioning a part of the film where a normal-sized human morphed into a "giant mother alien monster:" a clear violation of the Conservation of Mass. That review was the birth of the "Science Moment," a [collection](#) of about 150 critiques on the website, primarily written by Parks.



"I'm a lifelong science geek," says Parks, whose analyses range from why there can't be sound in space (tisk tisk *Star Wars*) to why a [virus-infected](#) zombie should die if you blast out its heart (why should you have to shoot it in the head?). Thanks to a background in aerospace engineering and an insatiable appetite for biology literature, Parks rarely finds himself lacking the requisite knowledge for a critique. But he claims to be nothing more than an "educated layman" who occasionally consults online resources. "But not Wikipedia," he adds.

After ten years of "Science Moments," McMullen and Parks are experts on the science faux pas that plague movies. "There are so many movies that seem to think [evolution](#) is a mystical force that makes life forms work their way up the ladder, steadily higher until they become intelligent," Parks laments. He cites *X-Men* as an example. "[The narration] keeps referring to the 'next stage of evolution,' like it works to make life more advanced, more complicated," he says. "That's not the case at all." McMullen agrees, pointing to another common error; a lack of appreciation for the time it takes for evolution to occur. In *Jurassic Park*, a scientist, played by Jeff Goldblum, warns his companions that the dinosaurs cannot be controlled; "The history of evolution has taught us that life will not be contained. Life breaks free. It expands to new territories." His warning comes only hours before the dinosaurs escape. "Jeff Goldblum's character keeps saying, 'Life will find a way.' *By this afternoon?*" McMullen wails. "Maybe if you give it a couple hundred thousand years," adds Parks.

Parks says that another recurring problem with movie science is the physical impossibility of fully-functioning, [giant animals](#). "There's all these giant insects, giant reptiles," he says, "I frequently have to invoke the [square-cube law](#)." If a lizard suddenly grows to ten times its size (thanks to chemical radiation or some toxin), its body wouldn't work anymore, Parks notes (see his review of [THEM](#) for more). McMullen interrupts his brother's description to defend [Godzilla](#). After a few moments of rapid-fire arguing, the brothers reach a compromise: The radioactive reptile is "totally exempt from all laws of nature."

Although Parks rarely finds the opportunity to applaud film science ("Maybe one movie every three years," McMullen guesses), he is quick to point out that bad science doesn't affect a movie's ranking on the website. *Star Wars* is a good example, he says. "The science is wrong from beginning to end--[George] Lucas doesn't know a galaxy from a hole in the ground--but he's still a great story teller." And Parks doesn't write "Science Moments" for movies like *Lord of the Rings*, which are fantasy from beginning to end. As long as a movie is internally consistent, he says, it's fine. Similarly, if today's science is not sophisticated enough for a movie, says Parks, a little futuristic hand-waving is OK. "*Star Trek* makes up technical sounding terms all the time to compensate. I have no idea what they mean," he laughs, "but at least [the writers] acknowledge the issue."

So which flicks do these film buffs recommend for both scientific accuracy and entertainment value? *Five Million Years to Earth* (also titled [Quatermass and the Pit](#)), a 1967 British film about an alien spacecraft discovered in London, is Parks' choice. Without giving away the ending, Parks vouches that the film's references to evolution "tie in with the supernatural in a believable sci-fi way." McMullen recommends John Carpenter's 1982 [The Thing](#), a horror/thriller in which a shape-shifting alien assumes the appearances its victims after they're dead. "It's an awesome movie," agrees Parks. "The science is just right."

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