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(10) Back-ups of data holdings must be made regularly and kept in a separate building.

(11) The main database should be computerised with a planned policy to process backlogs of data within a reasonable time.

(12) Provision must be made for storage of archives (such as maps, record cards and other manuscript records). It should be the aim of an ERC to maintain all archives to the standard set out in BS5454 (British Standard recommendations for storage and exhibition of archival documents).

(13) An ERC must employ at least one appropriately qualified full-time biologist (or geologist) who has clear responsibility for environmental recording. Adequate premises, training and funding support must be provided (this could be someone with only partial responsibilities for environmental recording).

(14) Data must not be acquired by illegal means. It must have been acquired in compliance with all current species and habitat legislation. This includes the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and subsequent reviews and updates, CITES and local, national and international species and habitat protection laws.

(15) The ERC must be registered to comply with the Data Protection Act, 1984.

(16) An ERC must provide data recording facilities for all taxonomic groups of plants, animals and fungi.

*Steve Garland*

*Bolton Museum & Art Gallery*

## **“THERE IS AN INEXORABLE CHRONOLOGY TO THESE DISASTERS” : MUSEUMS IN MYSTERY, SCIENCE FICTION AND HORROR MOVIES**

Sally Y. Shelton, Director, Collections Care and Conservation, San Diego Natural History Museum

After the penetrating, intellectual discussion of murder in the museum (Shelton, 1996), which did for museums and mysteries what the Huns and Goths did for literacy, democracy and progressive urban planning, my colleagues and I turned our attention to catching glimpses of the museum community in films. This is harder work than you might think. In looking at mystery, science fiction and horror movies (or, to use the highly educated technical term, creepy

movies), which I did by mutual agreement (something to do with matching personality types to genres), you have to watch the whole movie and suppress the gag reflex. It's not all that different from what we normally do, anyway. In fact, suspense, speculation and horror are familiar to all of us who deal with annual budgets these days.

I concentrated in particular on mystery, sf and horror movies of the past fifty years, which means that my black-and-white vision is now highly overdeveloped (if that is really the term that I want to use). I consider colourisation a horror in itself. This gave me an opportunity to compare literary and film treatments of museums in suspense settings, watch the kind of movies that the video warehouses will pay you to take for a week (or, better yet, forever), and to begin work on another study suggested by a colleague: matching movie snacks to appropriate genres. For example, my colleague suggests, the atmosphere of vampire movies and their ilk is much enhanced by eating chocolate-covered cherries. I haven't taken this line much further, especially since I kept running into a number of giant-spider plots for which I have no snack suggestions at all. Nor am I interested in hearing any, though it has been mentioned that Raisinets are fly-like...

The title of this paper is “There Is An Inexorable Chronology To These Disasters”, a line uttered by the curator type in *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* that describes everything about this presentation nicely. This movie, by the way, takes the award for the most pompous dialogue ever contrived and sets the standard for several of the themes discussed below.

One way in which movie portrayals of museums differ from literary portrayals is in the staffing of a museum. In analysing this, we found that there were recurring and predictable stereotypes of people in particular job types, and that in turn made the part they played in the plot predictable. Curators were far and away the most likely to be murdered, while directors and trustees were the most likely to be murderers and frequently needed to be under house arrest. This year's assignment was much easier because there are very few job types in Hollywood museums. By going to the movies, we seem to have rid ourselves of everyone else altogether (except a few directors and trustees up to no good) and are left with the curator, the security guard and the occasional student. (Students in the movies never actually study very much of anything. They are there to advance the plot by superior logic - superior because they do not actually have their degrees yet and so have more common sense - or by starting new careers as existentially challenged individuals.) This all puts quite a strain on the curator, who now has to take on many responsibilities not in the original job description. The security guard is just there to get strangled, crushed, shot or gassed, which must tick off the union something fierce. The student is there to expose the curator, who usually has some vice that needs exposure. The student's chances of being killed or becoming a hero are roughly equal. That leaves the curator to manage the museum, the collection, the exhibits, the evil results of his nefarious research, and the reporters and police. No wonder these places never get cleaned up.

The typical museum person in a creepy movie is a curator, or at any rate a curatoroid, and can be classified as follows:

- This person is the authority for the museum. More often than not, there is no director, no supervisor, no supervisee, and no staff members other than the security guard, who will probably have to be replaced soon. It's not the worst job in the world, though, as there are seldom any visitors unless there is a doomed reception planned. (You'd think that, after the first time the giant spider wrecks a reception, you'd change tactics, or caterers....)

- This person is male. Until fairly recently, women in suspense/horror movies incorporating a museum-related setting were typically selected on the basis of their abilities to (a) shriek, (b) fall down while running, (c) prop up someone else's research, (d) wear clothes that are far too small.

- This does not mean that this curator is anyone that a woman or any other human being would want to be. The curator is hardly ever a good, well-socialized person contributing to the development and successful resolution of the plot. No. This person tends to be an older version of the geek from high-school chemistry class. The best he can possibly be in the eyes of Hollywood is comic relief, unless he is Harrison Ford, in which case he gets to be cute and unethical. As one colleague of mine found out from a group of schoolchildren, the only people who lived with dinosaurs are curators.

- This person is having a bad hair day. Almost canonical. If he is not having a bad hair day, he is Cary Grant and has wandered into this genre by mistake.

- This person is wearing at least one of the following:- a lab coat (for no good reason), tweeds, a really spectacularly bad tie, Buddy Holly glasses, or the dreaded safari outfit. As we found in examining literary mysteries, the safari suit is the omen of sure and imminent death. In the movies, the safari suit will kill you unless it is fetchingly ripped in several places to expose your charms to the audience, in which case you may well live. There is no such thing as a safari suit that stays intact on a live curator throughout the movie. Nor is there any real reason for wearing one except to identify someone as a Hollywood curator.

- "Curator" is a term used loosely here for a person found in very close proximity to exhibits, collections, or sites. His true role with regard to these is hardly ever made clear. He certainly tends to act as if he owns them, though this can't fairly be written off as fiction. If the collections are destroyed, he has a 50/50 chance of dying, too. Actual curation as we might understand it is rarely portrayed. Movie curation tends to consist of long, incestuous, loving caresses of objects; objects used as a sort of obsessive interior decoration scheme; and theft.

- This person's collection has no coherent collecting plan or priorities. It appears to have been developed by plundering estate sales, sheer random acquisition sparked by shorted-out synapses in the collecting lobe of the brain, or mono-maniacal greed on a scale last seen in the collapse of the silver market. It is all displayed together on open shelves. It is usually dusty. Dust, in fact, is one of the hallmarks of a Hollywood museum.

Another notable feature of museums in creepy movies is the almost universal inferior quality of their lighting systems. Light is almost nonexistent in these places. Even when the hero (sometimes the student, never the curator, occasionally the guard in the next-to-last act of his existence) tries to add light, the best he usually does is to cast more shadows. These museums have darkening systems. It's a conservator's dream come true. You can leave light-sensitive artifacts out in the open in these museums for centuries. This may account for the near-total lack of visitors to these museums (perhaps they are tired of caroming off walls and glass panels that they just can't see). It also neatly accounts for the fact that people can work in these places without ever noticing the giant cobwebs, glowing eyes too far off the floor, or lab equipment apparently salvaged from the last fire sale of the Atomic Energy Commission and just lying around making ticking noises.

Common themes in these movies include wax museums, living fossils or mummies, and giant anything. Wax museums, fossils and mummies parallel Victorian exhibition priorities, which seems to be the era to which Hollywood assigns all museums, philosophically speaking. Jack the Ripper was Victorian, too. Giants don't show up in force until film makers start worrying about radiation. As far as giant arthropods go, the more the square-cube law can be violated, the better.

People frequently tell me that the problem with natural history museums is that they are full of dead things. Come on, let's be honest. That's not an issue in the movies. The problem with these museums is that they are full of things that won't stay dead. You can't turn your back on wax figures (or any other kind of mannequin), butterfly collectors, mounted skeletons or anyone hired to take care of the tarantula collection in the basement. If anyone really wants to figure out how to reanimate non-living tissue, he should start at one of these museums. They seem to have the secret down cold; in fact, it is a real nuisance.

Wax museums, giant arthropods, and remnants of vanished life forms. Take these away and you don't find many museum-related features in the suspense/horror sections. Wax museums have been depicted from early times onward in the history of film making. There seems to be something perversely fascinating about a museum full of wax humanoids (and, always, one live evildoer). They're not often used as setting for farces or frolics, they are grim and deeply shadowed places.

Insects are disproportionately represented (or maybe it is proportional, considering their abundance). As in literary mysteries, I found that butterfly collectors are the most unbelievably evil individuals, unless they are helping Jodie Foster identify a death's-head moth. It's odd that insect collectors are viewed with such suspicion, because insects and other arthropods are almost universally represented as villainous influences. If you can't keep your unshielded radiation equipment separate from your insect collections, you have to expect some adverse consequences. Whether because of above-ground weapons testing in the South Pacific, long term radiation exposure tests in Nevada, or just a general cultural dread, the creepy movies of the '50s fused fear of radiation with fear of arthropods. This gave a

tremendous amount of exposure to the problems faced by all those researchers who created and then had to accept the consequences of giant spiders, ants, bees, mantids, and other creatures not noticeably better in the large economy size.

Dinosaurs are especially popular, especially as full-skeleton mount props that are absolutely inevitably knocked down, or as reanimated creatures with severe attitude problems.

Also suspect are works of art which are avant-garde, large, heavy, glowing or spiky (they are either potential murder weapons or the monster in its dormant phase, mistaken for postmodernist art by the illuminati at a reception), any body tissue from anything found in or near a polar icecap, anyone who is a dealer in anything, and the curator. If the curator is also a dealer, he is the villain and will be killed, lose his collection and die, or trade in something that opens portals to unpleasant supernatural regions.

No one seems to understand for a second why the museum or collection exists, and listening to the curator's explanation won't help a bit. If only one person in the film has an annoying voice, impenetrable foreign accent or derailed train of thought, that person will be the Hollywood curator. How many movie curators sound like Brainiac, William F. Buckley, or Rasputin? The curator does not tend to be a friendly sort. Even the innocuous ones assume that everyone shares their obsessions (and obsession seems to be about the only reason for collecting that Hollywood can grasp). The curator never explains his rationale in populist terms and has no interest in (and may have a positive aversion to) public knowledge and use of the collection.

A major recurring theme in these movies is what I call the There Are Things Man Was Not Meant To Know syndrome. The more intelligent the curator, the more intellectually abstruse his area of expertise, the more likely it is that he (or someone speaking about him, often in the past tense) will use some variant of this phrase, often breaking the fourth wall and speaking directly to the audience very solemnly, "There Are Things Man Was Not Meant To Know". Chances are, these people have just found out about at least one of these things the hard way, losing innocence, trust, a lab, a student in the lab, and/or a couple of suburbs. I find it fascinating that this essentially anti-intellectual, anti-research message (which is essentially the Frankenstein message) can be found up until the Second World War, drops off, picks up again except for physics and chemistry-related topics for a while after the war, then resurges in top form in the fifties and sixties. Biology is always not meant to be known, as are palaeontology and archaeology. Don't open the box. Don't work with anything dead for any amount of time, ever. Don't ever move your lips while reading the runes on the artifact. In fact, don't ever read anything in runes, a foreign language, or letters that glow in the dark. Don't even read them to yourself. Don't irradiate small invertebrates in the desert. Don't pry. Don't be solitary. Regular guys are better than curators and usually get the girl (screaming in her torn safari suit, if something else hasn't got her first), and it's all because they don't get into Things Man Was Not Meant To Know.

Another feature guaranteed to bode no good to anyone is the manuscript, archival collection, or codex. Old books are

never in the film for a casual reason. Old books in the archives or the Mysterious Temple Ruins under seven tons of marble or cement are there for very good reasons.

Documentary artifacts are not included in the film for their depth of historical information and importance to scholarship. No. If you find a manuscript, chances are that (a) it is so valuable that someone will shortly be killing you to get it (another example of death by greed), (b) it is a source of information so arcane, so powerful, that reincarnated or undead Aztecs, Vikings, Dynastic Egyptians or aliens will shortly be killing you to prevent you from revealing Things Man Was Not Meant To Know. It will crumble to bits or be burned in the last frame.

This brings up another common feature of museums in creepy movies: the most common plot resolution or catharsis is to destroy the subject. It's not enough to find out what is going on and to stop whoever is responsible. The wax museum is required (by a little-known clause in the Screenwriters Guild by-laws) to burn, with slow-motion footage of the humanoids turning into pools of wax [Truth Is Stranger Than etc.: This actually happened to the wax museum in Arlington, Texas, which did in fact burn down. Apparently, the fire in some of the rooms was hot enough to melt wax, but not enough to burn fabric, so that Elvis and Michael Jackson wound up as very well-dressed pools of wax].

If there is an exhibit, it will be trashed, something that happens so often that I wonder what the source of hostility really is. Dinosaur skeletal mounts are commonly reduced to Tinkertoy piles. If an object was taken from the dead, any kind of dead, they want it back...and will not stop at merely getting it back, but may do a little deconstruction of you as well. If you took it, you get to be dead, too. This applies to skeletons, mummies, pre-Columbian artifacts, and anything frozen. Never poke or irradiate anything to make sure that it is really dead. If you didn't take it, but worked with the person who did, arranging to give it back may involve the complete destruction of the site or building, which I think is ungrateful. Giant insects have to be killed by the military because the curator can't be trusted, or has been eaten. If an object was used as a murder weapon, it is never seen going back to its original place in the museum. What happens to them all? Is there a museum section in the police evidence room?

One science fiction author pointed out to me that, in *The Time Machine*, the museum is far more interesting than the war between the Morlocks and the Eloi because the museum is the one element that suggests a group with history, cohesion, and a sense of future. He also suggests that the dark side of museums in creepy movies turns on the freak show aspects of Barnum's museum and sideshows, and that the all-too-common destruction of exhibits or collections as part of the plot resolution is a symbolic attempt to erase the past.

Clearly, the creepy movies embody much of our cultural ambivalence about museums and collections, about the role of science and research, and about the ethos of saving the past for the future. Though in some ways these are the most speculative and least documentary of the movies we have discussed - I have yet to find a portal to hell in the basement,

objects labelled in glowing runes, undead and peevish fossils, or the like - in some ways the societal attitudes that haunt us come through most clearly here. There is a sense of distrust, a certainty that academic accomplishment needs to be put in its place, a conviction that scientists-cum-curators are doing strange things unknown to the public (things that must be exposed). And I really want to find a movie of suspense, speculation or horror in which the collection itself is not a sombre or horrifying element. There is never any perceived risk of doing too little research, opening too few doors, taking too few chances. There is, in short, little rationale for a museum at all except as a dimly-lit staging area for a continuing anti-intellectual diatribe.

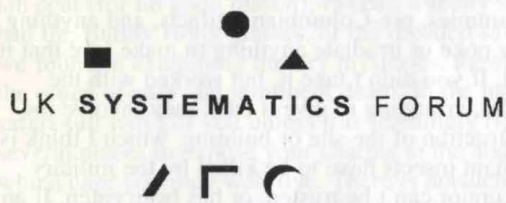
It's the public's image of us that we see on the screen. If we don't like what we see, we need to educate the public more or to start writing our own movies with a museocentric point of view. Or both. Curators-cum-scriptwriters are urged to apply.

### References

Shelton, S. Y. (1996). Murder in the Museum: A Case of Natural Selection? Proc. internat. Conf. on Value and Valuation of Nat. Sci. Collns. Manchester April 1995 (in press).

## Internet and World Wide Web Pages

An appeal for all surfing BCG members to send the editors any addresses of relevant pages of likely interest. We can publicise them through the Newsletter.



### UK Systematics Forum

The UK Systematics Forum was set up in February 1994 to promote coordination and communication between the major UK collections-holding institutions. The Office of Science and Technology announced, in January, its intention to fund the Forum for a further 3 years.

The main aim of this new phase of funding will be to develop a national strategy for systematic biology research. This will be formulated by consulting the key players in the science:— the producers, user sectors and policy makers, to

produce a workable strategy with consensus from all parties concerned. Commitment to the strategy has already been expressed by the Directors of the UK's largest collections-holding institutions at a recent meeting at which the Government Chief Scientific Advisor, Professor Sir Robert May, welcomed the initiative and gave his support to the activities of the Forum.

Further information on the Forum's activities can be found on our Home Page at URL: <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/uksf>. It includes information on the *Directory of UK Systematics Expertise* as well as reports on meetings such as the *Specialist Collection Managers Groups*. The page will be regularly updated with reports on progress and acts as a contact point for anyone wishing to input to the group's activities.

Contact E Watson 0171 938 9522

## Curators' Job-Share Register

Dear Colleague,

Job-Sharing has increasingly been recognised by employers as an efficient and effective way of working and hailed by many as the way of working for the future. The reality today, though, is rather different and as potential job-sharers we are still faced with having to find suitable job partners ourselves or often accept less favourable terms.

The Curator's Job-Share Register, open to all Curators in the UK, provides an essential first step; by putting potential job-sharers in touch with one another it should encourage and develop career progression when full-time employment is not an option.

The Register can be called upon at any time: whether you are looking for a long term job partner to share an existing full-time job, or a partner to suit a particular advertised job. The only thing it can't do is find the job itself.

The Register is run totally voluntarily, out of a commitment to provide potential job-sharers with a much needed service. An initial fee of £2.50 allows members to be notified by first-class post five times, after which a further fee is payable.

For an information sheet and subscription form please call Francesca Alden on 01582 467 220 (evenings only, please. Seven days a week between 19.30 and 21.30).

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