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Marketing the Macabre: Treatment of the Dark and Gruesome in Michael Crichton's Science Fiction Disaster Novels

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"Once again, a certain affect is produced (by science fiction) - only rather than wonder, it is one of fear and horror"

- Sheryl N. Hamilton.

"(Science fiction) movie is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess"

- Susan Sontag

In the second decade of the twentieth century, fiction took a radical departure from the accepted norms current in the European and American continents. Both thematically and structurally, creative writers in their works experimented a great deal in order to portray the complexities of contemporary life in its multi-dimensional facets. The Novel, which is a peculiar form of expression of the inert conscious and unconscious (sometimes even the subconscious) ideas, heavily relied on innovative and confusing techniques to cater to the needs of the reading community. Literally, it became fashionable to break new grounds in order to stun the literary world and make the readers realize that a new era in creative literature is to be ensued soon. In their endeavors to shock, puzzle and even dismay the reading public, these writers appealed to every kind of mental faculty of their readers to catch their attention. It is not surprising in this scenario that many earlier practiced literary genres are revived and established even with a greater vigor and impetus.

Science fiction, along with its other half fantasy, is such a genre which has been revitalized and treated with more sophisticated techniques than earlier. With the advent of new scientific discoveries and inventions, the imagination of fantasy writers was further triggered to give it a new direction. This new mode of writing, this literature of the change was baptized much later in 1920s as science fiction, often abbreviated as SF. Sam Moskowitz thus defines it;

> Science fiction is a branch of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the 'willing suspense of disbelief" on the part of its readers by utilizing an atmosphere of scientific credibility for its imaginative speculations in physical science, space, time, social science, and philosophy.[1]

Science fiction is not a new literary phenomenon altogether as such elements are to be found in many earlier literary works by writers like Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Voltaire, Mary Shelley and others. But writers like Edgar Allen Poe and Jules Verne, with their acute knowledge of the then science, practiced this literary form with a view to induce a sense of wonder and awe. Verne was especially influenced by Poe and he toyed with Poesque short forms before he turned to the novels which he called *Voyages Extraordinaries*.

But it was H.G. Wells who did much to popularize this new form with his ingenuity and skill. He is a pivotal figure whose influence on SF tradition is so great as to be incalculable. In the words of Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin, "Mary Shelley planted the flag on the new territory, but Wells explored them, settled them, and developed them."[2] But it must be admitted that real SF boomed and bloomed in America in the first quarter of the 20th Century. Though much earlier SF in America was criticized as brash, emotionally dry and a commercial form printed on pulpy yellow pages, today it is one of the most respected genres thanks to Hugo Grensback and other editors of the pulp magazines. With this astonishing start, SF continued to flourish in the hands of writers like Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Theodor Sturgeon, Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin and others. Today, SF in America is enjoying a great vogue because of the spirit of adventure and the wonderful themes which remain uncommon in the entire province of creative literature.

Since SF draws from popular culture, the writers of these stories are chiefly concerned with evoking the feelings of awe, fear and wonder by employing a variety of themes suited for the purpose. The thematic dichotomy is evident in the very icons SF seems to adhere: Rockets, spaceships, space habitats, robots, monsters, aliens, and time machines. But to induce the feeling of chilling terror, many SF writers use the disaster strategy. This is especially evident in SF movies, a category which has been considered as a sub-genre[3]. Since the 1980s, SF movie in the hands of directors like Steven Spielberg, James Cameron, Barry Levinson and others has brought a revolution in cinema. Surprisingly enough, SF movie in Hollywood has tended to become a multi-billion-dollar affair. Michael Crichton, who is our chief concern here, is himself a script writer and a movie-maker whose stories amalgamate

the hard science apparatus and the ideas beyond the bounds of the possible. Many of his disaster SF novels have been filmed and did a record-breaking business in America and in rest of the world. This paper attempts to indicate some of the strategies employed by Michael Crichton in his disaster novels to induce a sense of fear thereby enhancing its commercial value.

Crichton is one of the best-selling authors in America. He is a prolific writer whose bulk of creative writing includes both fiction and non-fiction. The titles of some of his novels are, *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), *The Terminal Man* (1972), *The Great Train Robbery* (1975), *Eaters of the Dead* (1976), *Congo* (1980), *Sphere* (1987), *Jurassic Park* (1990), *Rising Sun* (1992), *Disclosure* (1994), *The Lost World* (1995), *Airframe* (1996), *Timeline* (1999), *Prey* (2002), *State of Fear* (2004), Next (2006) and *Pirate Latitudes* (2009). Of this formidable list, only selective novels will be taken for analysis in order to pin-point the crucial role of macabre and the effects it induces. As stated earlier, SF invokes the sense of wonder by employing shocking and awful elements in its plot. However, Crichton's aim in the treatment of fearful and gruesome is somewhat different than many earlier writers. He is the real champion of science and he does what he thinks best to popularize modern science. But science has two-edges; it can be used for constructive as well as for destructive purposes.

But the constructive use of science is definitely not the subject-matter of Crichton's SF. Of course, he favors the use of modern science and technology for the benefit of mankind. But he does that in a characteristic fashion, by showing the night side of life. What he tries to bring home is that science, when carried to an extreme, tends to become a source of havoc and destruction. It is here only that we come to know of Crichton's humanitarian approach to SF. After all, the function of all art is to help us understand what humanity is. While considering the scientific elements in SF, Ben Bova thus sums up the ultimate role of SF;

> "This (Science) is a two-edged weapon, of course. It is necessary to warn as well as evangelize. Science can kill as well as create; technology can deaden the human spirit or lift it to the farthermost corners of our imaginations. Only knowledgeable people can wisely decide how to use science and technology for humankind's benefit. In the end, this is the ultimate role of all art: to show ourselves to ourselves, to help us to understand our own humanity."[4]

Each of Crichton's disaster SF aims at making us realize the grim realities involved in our science-centered activities. But realities are not well-understood by simple moralizing. A

child does not understand that touching the fire is hazardous until it gets its finger burnt. In the case of grown-ups, at least the projection of disasters through extrapolation can help attain wisdom. Most of Crichton's books exploit the well-worn formula pioneered by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*: the scientific hubris leads to disaster. In *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), Army scientists in search of biological warfare agents endanger humanity by bringing back a space virus that infects a town. In *The Terminal Man* (1972), the epileptic protagonist goes on a murderous rampage under the influence of computerized mind control. In *Sphere* (1987), a bunch of scientists goes to investigate a spaceship at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean and meets a tragic fate in the hands of manifestations caused by the dark elements of their unconscious. The Frankenstein/reanimation theme is even more explicit in *Jurassic Park* (1990), a novel in which a new form of life is recalled.

In a way, Crichton's disaster SF can be considered as a parable of human tragic error. In *Sphere*, for example, the allegory is more explicit as the dark, macabre elements of the human unconscious are characteristically embodied in different manifestations. These manifestations in the form of giant squid, jelly fish and sea snakes cause havoc and claim many lives. Throughout the novel, the dark and gruesome atmosphere is made to prevail to play with our fears. This psycho-thriller, in a fashion of medieval morality play, gives us the thesis that suppressed dark elements of the unconscious can prove vulnerable if not tamed. Moreover, a need to restrain the imaginative power is also expressed symbolically asserting the hazards involved in it. The sphere in the novel is an astonishing discovery altogether. Its pattern was arresting. The protagonist Norman Johnson feels increasingly certain that "this was a pattern never found on Earth. Never created by any man. Never conceived by a human imagination."[5] It grants its visitors the power to make thoughts real. Harry Adams, the mathematician, Beth Halpern, the team zoologist and Norman Johnson, the psychologist visit the sphere and attain the power to make their thoughts real. The novel examines the psychological workings of the human unconscious, especially in relation to a mysterious other. It also explores how humans respond and interact with monsters, benign or deadly, that are conjured up in the ocean.

In fact, Crichton's use of the ocean is metaphorical; it stands for the human unconscious (This ocean/unconscious link reflects Jungian psychology). In *Sphere*, none of the military and government crew members survive the horrendous attacks of the killer jelly fish and giant squid. One at a time, they and Ted Fielding, the astrophysicist of the civilian team, fall victim to actual embodiments of monsters manifested by the unconscious of the

team members. They die in agony, screaming in terror, with expressions of horror on their faces. Only three members of the scientific civilian team manage to survive, and they are plagued by nagging tension and fear.

The unresolved fear in the minds of the characters helps Crichton to build up a sort of bleak and murky atmosphere. It is further intensified when the shock of first human loss in the form of Jane Edmunds occurs. The monstrous jelly fish cover her whole body and she dies screaming in terror. Many deaths, like Jane Edmunds', have been portrayed by the novelist to evoke a chilling terror. Apart from the portrayal of gruesome deaths, Crichton also seems to be adept in creating terrifying ambience in his novels. This is how he is able to enhance the curiosity of his readers thereby making them involve positively in the whole proceedings. All his disaster novels follow this typical Crichtonesque plot making science or technology become a threat either to the whole humanity, or to the specific individuals involved. Considering the human fascination for horrible, Crichton deliberately employs frightening situations in his plots. In *Sphere*, for instance, Beth's putting of dynamites all around the habitat in a frustrated state of mind makes the readers tremble with fear. Moreover, the 'time lock' situation further increases the tension with the ticking of the clock and the readers' expectations are swayed like a pendulum.

All successful horror fiction proves the paradox that people enjoy being frightened. The popularity of Crichton's novels and the frequency with which they describe and evoke listlessness at the most nerve-racking moments suggests that people occasionally enjoy being numbed by a rollercoaster-like overload of fear. In Crichton's fiction, horror is induced by many intricate human predicaments. According to James Whitlark, human boredom in Crichton's fictions represents "the most profound experience of horror, he treats the readers to it, as he habitually does, in best selling works– themselves presumably purchased to allay that condition."[6] Thus Crichton utilizes fear as a commodifiable object for commercial as well as for social purposes.

Repeatedly, Crichton's scientific scare stories put forth the influence of technology on the human condition. In each of his disaster SF, the objects of fear vary in accordance with the science he engages in. In *Jurassic Park* (1990), for instance, he is concerned with genetic engineering technology that can prove vulnerable if not used wisely. John Hammond, the rich business Mogul, erects a theme park at a remote island of Costa Rica with genetically engineered dinosaurs in it. This novel is a brilliant demonstration of science run amok theme. In depicting the many dinosaur species, Crichton's precise speculative powers are quite

evident. Indeed, the portrayal of T-Rex and Velociraptors is the real source of horror in the novel. Especially during the tour of the park, the havoc caused by huge T-Rex and the killings of some of the men are the chilling events. The mathematician Ian Malcolm is seriously wounded and Dr. Alan Grant, along with Hammond's grand children is missing. Due to power failure, the dinosaurs are out of control and ultimately break in the main park. In such dismal condition, the park's computer operator Denis Nedry manipulates in the computer system and steals the frozen embryos of different dinosaur species.

Sheer size and methods of hunting of these prehistoric animals is also pretty much scary. But more interesting is the method with which procompsognathus hunted their prey. Paleontologists believe that these carnivores were scavengers. They depended upon the dead animals as their food, or more specifically, they hunted only crippled animals. Before killing their prey, they used to blind it with dilo saliva spat on eyes. In *Jurassic Park*, Dennis Nedry meets his death at the hands of these animals. Usually, Crichton portrays death-scenes in a chilling manner. The following description of Nedry's death amply confirms this:

> And then there was a new, searing pain, like a fiery knife in his belly, and Nedry stumbled, reaching blindly down to touch the ragged edge of his shirt, and then a thick, slippery mass that was surprisingly warm, and with horror he suddenly knew he was holding his own intestines in his hands. The dinosaur had torn him open. His guts had fallen out.[7]

In fact, Crichton specializes in appalling situations. Many of his novels abound in macabre and benignly frightful scenes. It is because he deals with horror; the component usually employed in SF. John Hammond is also killed by procompsognathus. But his death is reported with too less horrible intensity.

As a genre, horror literature is meant for escapism. Blurbs on Crichton's books offer his readers as flights into thrilling terrors: a microbe from outer space threatening death, killer dinosaurs, an alien sphere making the thoughts real and time travel back into the medieval France. These sensational subjects are the genre's formulae to allow the readers an early take-off. The review on the back cover of Jurassic Park "Techno-thriller with teeth" sets the tone of the horrors and prompts us to read it. In this novel, he takes historians to tasks for falsifying history and creates an alternate history by employing an SF paradigm. This novel combines all the ingredients that make Crichton's books a compulsive reading. Technically, this novel is a neat reversal of plot of the previous novel *Jurassic Park*. The chief scientific

premise of the novel is the phenomenon in physics called quantum mechanics. Taking help of this complex theory, he portrays time travel to juxtapose the past with the present.

The very idea of time travel back in the medieval feudal France is nerve-racking. David Lampe is fully justified in calling *Timeline* as a "modern gothic novel" commenting on "modern scientific and capitalistic assumptions."[8] Crichton's first and foremost concern behind disaster technique is to pinpoint the technological hubris and the fatal consequences involved in it. However, the disasters in his novels also serve in creating great suspense, wonder and awe. Like his previous novel *Sphere*, *Timeline* also uses 'time-lock' situation in order to evoke suspense. If the protagonists fail to accomplice their goal by the final moment of a predetermined time, then all hell is going to break loose.

Despite Kramer's strong objection, Baretto takes modern weapons in the past. Unfortunately, Gomez and Baretto both are killed by the galloping soldiers. However, before taking his last breath, Baretto presses his ceramic marker in order to return in the present time. The grenade explodes and the machine is destroyed. Thus the graduate students, along with their professor, strand in the middle age with the destruction of the machine and the transit site. This incident gives the author chance to lengthen the story in order to weave more situations in the main plot. Apart from 'time lock' narrative device, plenty of plot twists and horrendous death scenes are the chief sources used to chill the readers. The description of Gomez's dead body, the duel between Sir Guy and Marek and Chris' killing of a medieval soldier are some of the hair-raising scenes of the novel.

Inducing horror in readers is one of the many features in Crichton's fictions. However, many a time, Crichton induces horror by displaying a complex and profound experience of some of his characters. In his novel *State of Fear*, for instance, Crichton explores environmental issues like global warming. He concludes that we know little about every aspect of the environment. We even do not know how to conserve and protect it. But a more important issue is that he openly criticizes the West for preserving the economic advantages constituting modern imperialism towards the developing world. Thus, he underlines the dangers of mixing science with politics. Similarly, his novel *Next* deals with a number of issues like the black market in human organs, grave robbery, ownership of discarded tissue, gene patenting, court-ordered genetic testing, genetic discrimination, liability of sperm donors, scientific misconduct and embryonic stem cell research. He also vaguely hints at human cloning. At the end of this novel, Crichton sets forth a five policy recommendations for biotechnology law reform.

Admittedly, *Next* does not purport to be a textbook of genetics or a treatise on bioethics. It is, as are many of Crichton's other novels, a work of speculative fiction. However, a subtle danger exists when novels like *Next* presume to offer something more than fiction. At the very outset, Crichton conflates the distinction between fact and fiction when he states: "This novel is fiction, except for the parts that aren't". Like many didactic works, *Next* contains an abundance of scientific and policy "background" material. But in case of this novel, Crichton overdoes in regard to didactic digressions. With such devices, he blurs the line between fact and fiction. Hence, most of his novels tend to become science eventuality rather than science fiction. However, the prophetic nature of his SF is not as much a prime consideration here as is his use of fictional or purely imaginative.

To conclude, Crichton is successful in inducing the horrors associated with reckless use of science and technology among his audiences. He has very effectively marketed the fear factor for twin purposes: to teach and to delight. James Whitlark is fully justified when he says that "the popularity of Crichton's novels and the frequency with which they describe and evoke listlessness at the most nerve-racking moments together may (among other things) suggest that people occasionally enjoy being numbed by a rollercoaster-like overload of fear."[9]

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