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Scientist as star . . .

Posted on September 23rd, 2008 by earlehollland

I've always been a sucker for science fiction on television.

I was eight years old when *Science Fiction Theatre* first appeared at our home, 12 when *Rod Serling* first introduced *The Twilight Zone* as his own "fifth dimension," and 15 when *The Outer Limits* first took over my television set. Like thousands of other kids of that time, science (fiction) offered mystery and wonder and surprise in a world plagued by cold-war fears.

Along with 1950s-genre movies, these shows offered the public their only picture of what scientists were like, and what they did. Scientists were portrayed as being the cause of problems as often as they were its solution.



The opening scene of *Science Fiction Theatre* set the tone for dramas of this kind. The camera slowly panned around a laboratory-like room showing "sciencey" devices like *oscilloscopes*, *Tesla coils*, telescopes and microscopes, flasks and such with bubbling solutions . . . you get the picture . . . before the host's baritone voice explained:

"Hello. I'm your host, Truman Bradley. Let me show you something interesting . . ."

Now, a half-century later, science fiction still maintains its niche on television and, while the special effects are routinely phenomenal, the stories are formulaically the same. And the start of the fall television schedule – with new shows like *Fringe*, *Eleventh Hour* and *Primeval* – brings back a recurring question:

"Is the depiction of science offered by television and Hollywood good or bad for science."

For the last dozen or so years, organizations like the *American Association for the Advancement of Science* and the *National Science Foundation* have tried to get a foot-in-the-door with both screenwriters and TV producers to try to influence their depiction of science and the folks who do it. Needless to say, any success has been marginal over time.

Shows like *Numb3rs* and the *CSI* series do seem to be promoting and supporting science in their dramas. *Numb3rs* allows its stars, several of whom are mathematicians, to aid the FBI and keep the world safe. The *CSI* programs all depict science as being as essential to solving crimes as guns and badges. In these programs, scientists are obviously smart, and

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reasonably social . . . almost like real people.

And real scientists like that.

What they tend to like less is the idea that the science always works. In real life, it often doesn't. And that's okay. Most scientists admit that often more is learned from failure than it is from success.

But are such depictions really "good" for science? That depends.

If TV programs, or movies for that matter, are expected to accurately depict the way science happens, then the answer is no. The pace of good science is far too slow for the needs of modern drama. And a happy ending is never assured.

But if simply whetting the interests of viewers towards more science is enough, and that appetite spurs them onto learn more about research, then the TV folks and moviemakers are doing a good job. The spark that these programs light in viewers' minds may lead to new career decisions, or at least a better appreciation of science.

Maybe we ought to be satisfied with that. *Earle Holland*

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[Jeff Atkinson](#) // Sep 23, 2008 at 9:00 am

Where did you get your blog layout from? I'd like to get one like it for my blog.

[earleholland](#) // Sep 23, 2008 at 11:16 am

The excellent staff in the New Media office at Ohio State provided the layout for this blog. WordPress does have a number of standard layouts that are available. __EH

[Michael Payday](#) // Sep 23, 2008 at 11:46 am

Just wanted to let you know that I am a huge fan of Fringe, the new show on FOX. It kind of reminds me of X-Files in a way- only the government conspiracies and extra terrestrials are replaced by a mega corporation and mad scientists. Interesting to see how scientists are both good and bad in this show. I think it really helps the field in at least sparking curiosity and imagination. Perhaps that is the kind of interest

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needed to get children to grow up wanting to be a scientist.

Ryan // Sep 26, 2008 at 12:21 pm

I would add Heroes to this list of current television doing a. Granted, it is a bit more fiction than science, but the show portrays the classic struggle with choosing whether a discovery is an advancement of science or potentially a stimulant for Earth's early demise. Should the origin of these unique individuals be found and if so, should it be used to give normal people unique abilities.

[earleholland](#) // Sep 26, 2008 at 12:31 pm

One of the fundamental aspects that all such programs raise is that the questions involved are never simple. They aren't "yes-no" questions! In essence, then, they accurately depict a large part of science in that each answer yields multiple follow-up questions, and each of those questions depend on multiple factors. In itself, that reflects the ongoing discovery within all of science. But unfortunately, most viewers of TV and movies want neat situations where challenges are met and solved and all endings are happy. That doesn't always happen in the real world of science!

[ArianaText](#) // May 13, 2009 at 10:43 am

Thanks for posting, definitely going to subscribe! See you on my reader.

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