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A dramatic change in attitudes

Authenticity is good, dramatic truth is better. Walt Patterson looks over the Edge of Darkness.

You might not watch a television series called *Magnox*. But would you watch it if it was called *Edge of Darkness*? Fear of trouble from British Nuclear Fuels and the Central Electricity Generating Board prompted the BBC to insist that Troy Kennedy Martin find a different title for his six-part nuclear thriller. Kennedy Martin had used *Magnox* as the working title for his series. But the BBC Legal Department warned that *Magnox* was the property of BNFL and the CEGB, the trade name for the alloy used to contain nuclear reactor fuel. After much cogitation *Magnox* became *Edge of Darkness*.

Even without the looming presence of the nuclear heavies, the name of the series might well have been changed before transmission. To use or not to use the jargon word? It was a genuine and distinctive nuclear term, crisp and authentic, with a feel of the esoteric; for a documentary it would have been ideal. But to an average viewer of television drama, the word would be meaningless.

This dilemma always faces anyone attempting to tell a story in which technology – real technology, not science fiction – plays a prominent role. The story is fiction; can the scientific and technological setting be 'factual'? How is this 'factual technology' to be presented? How much does the audience need? How much can it assimilate? How authentic is 'authentic'?

The nuclear industry, for instance, has of late become extremely reluctant to co-operate with television teams. Accordingly, in one dramatic series in which I was involved, as a stand-in for a nuclear power station the television crew filmed exteriors of a brewery. On the other hand, the same series involved a key scene inside the power station – whose distinctive interior no brewery or other industrial setting could readily mimic. The solution entailed a costly full-scale mockup of the 'pile cap' on which the actors performed – although the actual hardware was an incoherent assortment of odds and ends from a technological breaker's yard.

Live action on this mockup was dovetailed electronically with shots of a precision model of the entire vast reactor-hall. On screen only the most acute eye could have discerned that the towering refuelling machine was not four storeys high but less than three feet. Was the spurious 'technology' in the scene 'inaccurate'? Of course. Technically it would not have worked at all; but dramatically it worked fine.

If the action involves technology and characters are technically versed, they must be expected to use technical language in conversation without accompanying glosses. The dramatist who allows them to do this, however, may lose his non-specialist audience, unless the technical terminology is just there as background colour.

Furthermore, genuinely accurate technical discussion is likely to be unintelligible to non-specialists, and therefore not only unilluminating but boring. In a dramatic context it must be used sparingly, if at all.

In *Edge of Darkness*, a related consideration arises. Neither Craven nor Jedburgh, the two central characters, is a scientist or engineer. What they say may therefore be scientifically inaccurate. It is

nevertheless in character. The technological entrepreneurs Bennett and Grogan have their own extra-scientific reasons for assertions that may be scientifically suspect; so do other participants. Science and technology are today embedded in a matrix of social and political choices and priorities that has long since eroded the traditional claims of scientific 'objectivity' or purity of motive.

Indeed many of today's most controversial scientific and technical issues arise from fundamentally different interpretations of the same common data – and from the different world-views that underlie the interpretation. This is the very stuff of drama; but non-specialist viewers must be given accessible entry-points into the controversy

Of dramatic necessity such entry-points may not do justice to the subtleties of the arguments. Those already familiar with the issues may be irritated by the consequent over-simplifications, and by what they see as inadequate or inaccurate representations of their real-life viewpoints in the mouths and actions of the characters in the drama.

A vivid case in point is the BBC's broadcast disclaimer that the fictional Gaia group in *Edge of Darkness* has any connection with the publishers Gaia Books. As the Gaia hypothesis becomes more widely known – not least because of *Edge of Darkness* – disputes about its practical implications will undoubtedly become more common.

Edge of Darkness epitomises key issues in the dramatic treatment of science and technology. Science or technology about which everyone agrees is *ipso facto* undramatic. At an obvious level, technological uncertainties – for instance safety hazards – can be the springboard for drama, or at any rate melodrama, as the endless series of disaster movies has lately demonstrated. Can a certain incident actually happen? Will it happen in the way portrayed?

But technology is a means to an end. The most powerful drama involving technology arises not from the technology itself but from those using – or misusing – it, their motives and objectives. In dramatic treatment of such material, the minutiae of technical authenticity are of subordinate importance.

More profound still is the question of the philosophical resonance of the science involved, and how it affects the lives of individuals in society. A dramatist is not an academic lecturer. A dramatist uses not only direct verbal statement but metaphor and allegory, like the black flowers of *Edge of Darkness* – language that is not normally considered scientific. Yet the greatest scientists have pictured the world as poetry; read Einstein.

In a dramatic context, what matters is the accuracy of observation and portrayal of people and institutions. What they do influences and is influenced by the scientific and technical choices and decisions the drama confronts. To do or not to do; that is the question.

Walter C Patterson was series advisor on Edge of Darkness. His latest book, Going Critical: an unofficial history of British nuclear power, has just been published by Paladin Books. Edge of Darkness is now being reshown in three two-hour bursts on December 19, 20 and 21.

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