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Have Magic Screen, Will Travel

The first two hour-long shows in the Bell System's new TV Science Series proved to be extremely ambitious. The first program, "Our Mr. Sun," which was shown last November, described how the workings of the sun made life on this planet possible; the second program, "Hemo the Magnificent," which was shown last week, described how the blood circulates and what it does. Although both programs were excellent once they got down to business, a good deal of dust was raised in the process. Too much was going on besides science.

The opening quarter of "Our Mr. Sun" was devoted to a story about two characters in search of what they called a "gimmick." The gimmick was supposed to solve the problem that the series itself faced—namely, how to blend instruction with entertainment. The solution, which was also employed in "Hemo the Magnificent," turned out to be a kind of dialectic or debate to the finish between the two characters, who addressed each other respectively as Dr. Research (played by Shakespearean scholar Frank Baxter) and Fiction Writer (played in the first show by actor Eddie Albert and in the second by actor Richard Carlson).

Dr. Research had at his disposal a Science Screen, upon which at his command of "roll four" or "roll six" a hidden projectionist flashed sequences to illustrate the point at hand. Fiction Writer had a Magic Screen, upon which he was able to summon the products of his imagination. These products were animated cartoons of grumpy turtles, dopey squirrels, and other Disney-type animals, as well as Mr. Sun, his side-kick Father Time, and other personifications of natural forces. The result was confusing, but worse, somewhere along the line the signals got crossed, for a certain anthropomorphism came to dominate *both* screens, with, for example, a cartoon figure repesenting hemoglobin on the Magic Screen and a crew of little men operating heart valves in a cartoon account of the circulatory system on the Science Screen.

In contrast, when the shows got away from this story within a story bit to tell us some of the achievements of science, the going was fine. Some of the film clips of actual phenomena, whether viewed in color or black and white, were fantastic: bright streamers of solar material that seemed to precipitate out of empty space to fall into the sun; red blood cells passing in single file through capillaries. If truth is stranger than fiction, this is the stuff that proves it. And some of the animated sequences at least demonstrated the possibilities of this medium as an aid in presenting technical material. Also laudable was the over-all effort to present scientific inquiry as an enterprise that has much in common with more familiar human pursuits.

Exciting as are the achievements of science, we are ready to agree that something in the way of a gimmick is still necessary. It seems to us, however, that the trick lies closer to hand. The subject matter of science differs from one branch to another, but the method of science, in its most general features, is always the same—and there is the gimmick. If scientific theories were presented in terms of that combination of reason and experiment that proves them true, the resulting account would not only be better entertainment, but would also provide a clearer idea of what science is all about.
—J. T.