

# WAS CAPTAIN BLACK REALLY RED?: The TV science fiction of Gerry Anderson in its Cold War context

Nicholas J. Cull, *University of Southern California*

It is night. Over ominous electronic chords the camera tracks up a dark city alley. Footsteps echo. We are looking through the eyes of an unknown assailant. A bottle falls, a cat screeches, the camera whirls round and lights fizz into life to reveal a figure in a scarlet uniform. Shots ring out but – unharmed – the uniformed man fires back at the camera. We hear the death moan of the attacker. The camera moves to a close up on the figure with the smoking gun. A dramatic seven-beat drum riff is heard on the sound track. These were the opening images not to a James Bond or Len Deighton cold war thriller but a children's television programme, *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons*, which premiered in the autumn of 1967. It told the story of a future war between Earth and the Mysterons of Mars, invisible beings with the terrifying ability to resurrect and control the dead. Plots regularly focused on the quest for the enemy within. Captain Scarlet's principle adversary was a rogue agent from his own side now possessed by the Mysteron enemy: Captain Black. In theme and substance this mirrored the adult cold war. Children watched and loved every minute of it.

*Captain Scarlet* was just one of the highly successful creations of producer Gerry Anderson. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s Anderson's science fiction was an essential part of the TV diet of British children. Associated toys, sweets, trading cards, books and comics like *TV Century 21*, *Countdown* and *TV Action* attested to and amplified that presence. To recite Gerry Anderson's teleography is a role call of British TV favourites: his series created with puppets using a process grandly dubbed 'Supermarionation' – *Supercar* (1960–62), *Fireball XL5* (1962), *Stingray* (1963), *Thunderbirds* (1964–66), with spin-off films in 1966 and 1967, *Captain Scarlet* (1967), *Joe 90* (1968) and his one flop *The Secret Service* (1968–69). Then came his live action series – *UFO* (1969–70) and *Space 1999* (1973–76) – with an adult target audience. All the while the earlier shows continued to play as repeats, becoming as much a part of their time as the Beatles or the Austin Mini.<sup>1</sup>

Given the prominence of Anderson's programmes in so many British childhoods and their coincidence with the middle years of the cold war, it is logical to consider the presence of the ostensibly dominant political story of the age within Gerry Anderson's output, more especially as Anderson's work regularly displayed what might broadly be termed cold war themes: super weapons, secret organizations and the threat from enemies within. Such an enquiry reveals an intriguing case. Anderson himself speaks of a conscious effort to avoid cold war stereotyping in his work. His cold war themes appear not because of any intrinsic intent to engage those issues for or against – in the manner of certain polemical episodes of Gene Roddenberry's contemporaneous *Star Trek* (1966–69) in the USA<sup>2</sup> – but rather because those themes were part of the adult culture which he was adapting for younger viewers. They were essential elements in the mix of what made exciting television in the years 1960–75. What is more surprising perhaps is the story that

*Media History*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2006

ISSN 1368-8804 print/1469-9729 online/06/020193–15

© 2006 Taylor & Francis DOI: 10.1080/13688800600808005

emerges as the real behind the scenes narrative in Gerry Anderson's work: his attempt to negotiate life in the presence of a superpower, but one other than the Soviet Union.

### Reading the Silence: Growing Up in Cold War Britain

No historian could dispute the centrality of the cold war in the political life of the West during the decades following the Second World War. Yet to browse through (or recall) the books, films and television programmes available to young Britons between 1960 and 1975 one is struck by its absence.<sup>3</sup> A future scholar with just these materials to consider would be forgiven for missing the fact that the cold war was happening at all. The dominant story throughout the 1960s and 1970s was clearly still the Second World War, and myriad comics, toys and adventure stories underlined this. Wartime evacuation seemed like the standard opening chapter of a children's novel. British boys dressed their Action Man dolls in Second World War uniforms and constructed Airfix kits of Second World War bombers. They read tales of daring Allied exploits in *War Picture Library* or *Commando* comic strip books and endlessly restaged Second World War battles in 1/72nd scale with packet after packet of tiny plastic soldiers (Paris; Connelly; Richardson; Ward; Harrison). Such adult culture as trickled down seemed regularly oriented towards remembering 'the war', from the feature films playing on television in the weekend afternoon to the weekly ritual of gathering around the box to watch the latest episode of *Dad's Army* (1968–77). Even in science fiction with a whole universe to imagine British storytellers looked back to the Second World War. The BBC's long-running series *Doctor Who*, launched in 1963, developed innumerable alien robotic races with Nazi characteristics bent on the conquest of earth, and the programme's protagonist became a veritable intergalactic Churchill rallying resistance (Cull *The Historian*).

By the same token the cold war was a notable absence. The closest thing most British boys came to cold war toys were kits of the Soviet MiG-15 (first issued in 1958) and MiG-21c (first issued in 1967). Airfix was slow to create models of aircraft associated with the delivery of nuclear weapons and produced no models of the modern Soviet army until the early 1980s. Previously, and somewhat perversely, their Modern British soldiers had been paired against their allies of 30 years standing, the Modern German Infantry.<sup>4</sup> It was as if children were being insulated from the cold war and denied the raw materials to enable thoughts of the cold war to enter their play.

The library was little different. George Orwell's fable *Animal Farm* remained in circulation as both a book and feature-length cartoon, and was widely taught in schools. However, beyond this the bookshelf was bare. There was no cold war novel equivalent to Ian Serrailier's Second World War story *The Silver Sword* (1956) and no cold war diary like that of Anne Frank. Factual books introducing history and even weaponry to young readers seldom engaged with issues of the cold war or the nuclear age. One exception was Ladybird's *The Story of Arms and Armour*, published in 1971, which charted the emergence of human weaponry from cavemen onwards. The final page presented a stark picture of a shattered landscape overshadowed by a mushroom cloud. In the foreground a bedraggled party of refugees is turned away from the entrance to a cave by an armed and angry occupant. The author, one Edmund Hunter, suggested that in the aftermath of nuclear war

humanity might well be driven back to the cave from which it had emerged so many thousands of years before (Hunter).

Children's adventure fiction occasionally reflected something of the cold war preoccupation with spies, sabotage and devastating weaponry. One of the most widely available was an adventure of the Belgian boy reporter, Tin Tin – *The Calculus Affair* (published in French as *L'Affaire Tournesol* 1956 and in English translation in 1960) – which dealt explicitly with rival nations, kidnapped scientists and secret weapons. An Associated Television series screened in 1972 called *Tightrope* followed the fortunes of a British sixth-former, catapulted into the world of cold war spies when he accidentally views a sinister TV broadcast by 'The Voice of Truth' aimed at his school. He is caught up in a race against time to foil an attack on a nearby American airbase.<sup>5</sup> There were even occasional attempts to introduce cold war warnings into stories aimed at younger children. In 1965 the animators Oliver Postgate (who wrote the text) and Peter Firmin (who drew the pictures) produced a story about their round-faced Viking-age king Noggin the Nog for BBC television called *Noggin and the Firecake*, in which the court inventor discovers the formula for a powerful explosive called Firecake, which falls into the wrong hands. By the time the story appeared as a story book in 1969 the Firecake had become explicitly nuclear. Postgate described its first detonation thus:

The earth shook like paper, the sky was a white flash and a pall of black smoke formed like a huge mushroom over the valley. As it cleared, the Nogs saw that the square rock in the middle of the valley was split right down the centre.

Firmin's illustration showed the mushroom cloud (Postgate and Firmin 12).<sup>6</sup> But such stories are notable for their deviation from the usual children's fare.

### **Adult British Cold War Culture, 1960–75**

While children's culture stepped away from the cold war, the subject was readily detected in adult culture. Fred Inglis has argued that in the era when a closed political class held the power to destroy the world, culture provided a mechanism for vicarious participation in the great moral story of the era. He cites James Bond films and the novels of Frederick Forsyth and his ilk. Inglis argues that 'softies' (himself included) got an analogous fix from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: 'Tolkien's irresistible appeal is that he successfully attaches the primary and all-enfolding myth of the epoch, the cold war, to a story that goes straight to the soft hearts and softer heads of a great slice of the population' (Inglis 282–93). As Tony Shaw has noted in his history of British cinema and the cold war, by the 1960s British films at the cinema and on television had moved beyond its earlier engagement with the orthodox world of the Red Menace to present alternative images including controversial images of nuclear destruction in Peter Watkins' *The War Game*, twisting the spy genre in *The Ipcress File* (1965) and spoofing it in *Carry On Spying* (1964) (Shaw). James Chapman has documented how British television at this time took up the spy theme with relish and a degree of satirical spirit in a cycle of adventure shows including *The Avengers* (1961–69), *The Saint* (1962–69), *The Champions* (shown in 1969), *Danger Man* (1960–67) and *The Prisoner* (1967–68) (Chapman *Saints*). Anderson himself – reluctantly – contributed to the genre with his live action drama *The Protectors*

(1971–73). By the end of the period Britain's crown prince of cold war, James Bond, had developed into self-referential parody (Chapman *License*).<sup>7</sup>

Adult cold war culture throws up three distinct themes. First, cold war technologies: nuclear and other secret weapons with the power to seal humanity's fate. Second the cold war self: the celebration of the secret life, hidden bases and clandestine organizations necessary to protect home. Thirdly, the cold war 'other': the implacable enemy beyond or enemy within. All will be analysed in turn, but first it is necessary to sketch in something of Gerry Anderson's life and background, and his own relationship with his era.

### Gerry Anderson's Background

Gerry Anderson was born in 1927 in North London. He left school at 15. When his ambitions to be an architect were frustrated by an allergy to the plaster used to model buildings, he turned to the film industry training as an editor in the government's Colonial Film Unit. He did his national service as an air traffic controller for the RAF and returned to work in films, eventually forming his own company to make TV commercials. Work proved hard to come by and reluctantly he accepted a job making puppet films for children. His early series were *The Adventures of Twizzle* (1957–58) and *Torchy the Battery Boy* (1958–59). He soon recognized the potential of this medium for creating exciting films and developed series of his own. He began with a fantasy western called *Four Feather Falls* (1959–60). Given the limits on the mobility of his puppets he soon realized the need for a dramatic conceit to allow the puppets to have adventures while still sitting down most of the time. This led him into the territory of fabulous machines and science fiction. The star of his breakthrough show was a flying car, *Supercar*. His series concepts developed exponentially from this point, with his fabulous machines reaching their fullest development in 1965 with *Thunderbirds* (Archer and Hearn).

Anderson was a partner in his own production company, AP films, and gathered a talented corps of professionals around him, including art director Reg Hill, director David Lane, director of photography John Read, special effects wizard Derek Meddings, composer Barry Gray, puppeteer Christine Glanville, and a team of enthusiastic writers including Dennis Spooner, Alan Fennell, Alan Pattillo (who also directed) and Tony Barwick. Anderson's output was heavily influenced by the needs of his commissioning patron, the ebullient Lew Grade, boss of ITC (Independent Television Corporation). Grade was, as Anderson recalled, a 'very kind man' who 'derived enormous excitement from all the work I did for him'. Their association lasted 12 years. Anderson exercised an unusual degree of editorial control over the output of AP films. Typically, he and his then wife Sylvia devised the format and characters for the programmes and wrote the pilot episode themselves. Anderson himself acted as script editor until the initial episodes of *Thunderbirds*. Although his later shows credit a script editor (for *Thunderbirds* it was Alan Pattillo and for most of the later series, Tony Barwick), Anderson retained an unusual level of editorial oversight over his series. Episodes certainly reveal the interests of specific writers, but above all they reflected Gerry Anderson's own passions, interests, hopes and fears (Bentley *Thunderbirds* 25–26).<sup>8</sup>

In July 2003, the author interviewed Gerry Anderson in some detail about his work including his response to the cold war. In this interview Anderson explained that while

inspired by some aspects of cold war technology, he believed that he had a duty to the rising generation to avoid perpetuating cold war stereotypes. Anderson took care to ensure that the villain in *Thunderbirds* – The Hood – was neither Russian nor German, but Malaysian: the lone inhabitant of a jungle temple, and hence remote from existing political categories. The Hood emerges from the series as an evil version of Yul Bryner in *The King and I*. Baddies in *Thunderbirds* tend to be corrupt businessmen, spivs and gangsters familiar from crime films. But more than merely avoiding negative stereotypes, Anderson's programmes sought to set a positive example. He included positive non-white characters: the Malaysians, TinTin and Kyrano in *Thunderbirds*, West Indian Lieutenant Green, African American Melody Angel and Japanese Harmony Angel in *Captain Scarlet*, and by analogy the mermaid, Marina, in *Stingray*. *UFO* and *Space 1999* also presented a multi-ethnic cast. This theme of anti-racism owed much to Anderson's own childhood in a mixed Jewish–Christian household, both experiencing anti-Semitism outside the home and seeing religion divide his home. He wanted his programmes to help.<sup>9</sup>

In the same progressive spirit, Anderson took an end to the cold war as a given in his work. In the pilot episode of *Joe 90*, scripted by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson themselves, the boy spy is seen stealing a top secret Soviet plane, but at the end of the episode the story is revealed to be merely the conjecture in the mind of an American agent, who explains that – of course – the cold war is history and Russia is now an ally.<sup>10</sup> Most of his puppet series were set 100 years in the future and assume the development of a world government and world security institutions, such as the World Aquanaut Security Patrol in *Stingray* and World Space Patrol in *Fireball XL5*, while *Captain Scarlet* strives to save the life of the World President on more than one occasion. Anderson's near future series, such as *UFO* (set in the 1980s) and *Joe 90*, also follow this trend. In *Joe 90*, for example, the boy hero works for the World Intelligence Network, which has subsumed the CIA, KGB and MI6. The principal comic associated with Anderson's series, *TV Century 21*, fleshed out what amounted to a future history of world union, though marked by such problems as a European nuclear war and British reluctance to join in the world government.<sup>11</sup> Anderson saw his essential political optimism about the future as quite natural for a young man who came of age in the era of the founding of the United Nations and crafted his programmes accordingly (Cull/Anderson).

### Anderson and Cold War Technology

Gerry Anderson grew up with a passion for aircraft. His elder brother Lionel had fought and died as a pilot in the wartime RAF (Archer and Hearn 17–18) and Anderson never lost the sense of awe he felt watching his brother roar overhead in a Mosquito. As an adult he created puppet shows that displayed fantastic technology and engaged with the all-important interplay between the machine and the human. The position of technology in Anderson's work can be ambiguous. Almost all the stories in *Thunderbirds* deal with the flaws in technology as some new invention goes wrong on its maiden voyage (like the Titanic) though often the key flaw is human greed. Rescue is provided by the potent intervention of brave human beings and technology working together. The effect is a wonderfully humanistic and reassuring vision of the future. When in 'Vault of Death' (written by Dennis Spooner) one hapless bank clerk is trapped in the vault of the Bank of

England or in 'Terror in New York City' (written by Alan Fennell) a camera crew is buried under the rubble of the collapsed Empire State building, fabulous machines and brave people swing into action without attention to the cost.

Gerry Anderson's programmes were closely tied to the excitement around the space programme (which was of course driven by cold war rivalry); more than this, the technological innovations of the cold war fired his imagination. Anderson's immediate inspiration for the elaborate rapid launching sequences seen in *Stingray* and the *Thunderbirds* was reading of how the US Strategic Air Command kept pilots permanently in their seats waiting to scramble (Cull/Anderson). The quick launch interceptor fighters featured in *Captain Scarlet* or *UFO* could also be seen as part of the world of DEFCON 3, while also glancing back to the Battle of Britain world of markers on maps and banter on the cockpit radio. Notably, in *Thunderbirds* an image of technology associated with the threat of cold war mass destruction – the rocket emerging from the hidden silo – was appropriated and deployed to save life rather than to take it.

Nuclear weapons and wider nuclear fears in general are much part of the world of Gerry Anderson. Three *Thunderbirds* episodes written by Alan Fennell touch on the theme: 'The Man from M15' deals with the theft of plans for a nuclear device. In 'Thirty Minutes After Noon' International Rescue narrowly prevent an explosion in a plutonium store that would devastate much of England. In 'Atlantic Inferno' a rogue nuclear torpedo ignites an undersea natural gas field. In the Dennis Spooner story 'The Mighty Atom' a fire at a nuclear-powered irrigation plant in Australia produces a radioactive cloud that menaces Melbourne. While in Donald Robertson's 'Path of Destruction' the danger of an atomic-powered tree-felling machine – Crablogger – exploding. In later shows nuclear dangers emerged as a favourite device of one of Anderson's favourite writers, Tony Barwick, script editor for *Captain Scarlet*, *Joe 90*, *The Secret Service*, *UFO* and *The Protectors*. In the *Captain Scarlet* episode by Barwick 'Big Ben Strikes Again' a nuclear device is hidden somewhere in London while in 'Treble Cross' the Mysterons capture a plane armed with a nuclear weapon.<sup>12</sup> In Barwick's *Joe 90* episode 'Arctic Adventure' a nuclear weapon has been lost at the pole, while in his 'Attack of the Tiger' a hostile Asiatic 'Eastern Alliance' plan to place a nuclear device into orbit. The premise, which Anderson himself devised, for *Space 1999* hinges on a nuclear accident. A nuclear waste dump on the moon explodes and propels the moon and the occupants of Moonbase Alpha out of orbit and off into the depths of space. Anderson's young viewers could have little doubt of the dangers associated with nuclear technology, whether civilian or military. Real fears were explored within the fictions on the screen.<sup>13</sup>

Non-nuclear military technology also figured in several episodes of *Thunderbirds*. In the Alan Fennell story 'Pit of Peril' a giant walking tank called Sidewinder falls into a giant fiery pit. An American General explains that Sidewinder is intended to help the army fight 'bushfire wars' (a topical problem in the opening years of the Vietnam conflict). It emerges that the pit was an old open cast mine used for dumping US Army war surplus material at the end of the Second World War; hence the episode functions as an allegory for the way in which the political residue of one war can dog a future generation. In 'The Imposters' by Dennis Spooner the *Thunderbirds* have to cope with the military declaring war against International Rescue. Scenarios like 'Atlantic Inferno' mix implied criticism of an 'innovation too far' in military technology with an unflattering portrait of the overly stiff and inflexible

military mind. The clash between civilian and military culture would provide a regular source of tension within the storylines of *Captain Scarlet* and *UFO*.

Other technologies within Anderson's work drew on wider themes in cold war culture. Susan Carruthers has noted the potency of brainwashing fears in the 1950s and their presence in later fictions such as *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *The Ipcress File* (1965) and even *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) (Carruthers). Anderson's 1968 series *Joe 90* was built around similar – if benignly deployed – technology. An inventor named Professor McClain develops a machine called BIG RAT (Brain Impulse Galvanoscope Record and Transfer), which can record the brain impulses of one person and then transmit them and the associated knowledge and skills to another. McClain's nine-year-old son, Joe, is small enough to sit in the prototype machine and becomes the recipient of numerous brain in-prints as needed to discharge various exciting missions.

### Anderson and the Cold War Self

Anderson's creations reflect the 1960s vogue for stories set in secret organizations with extravagant acronyms. WIN (World Intelligence Network) in *Joe 90*, WASP (World Aquanaut Security Patrol) in *Stingray*, BISHOP (British Intelligence Headquarters Operation Priest) in *The Secret Service* and SHADO (Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization) in *UFO*. The title 'Spectrum', the secret organization in *Captain Scarlet*, did not stand for anything, but suited an organization whose agents worked with colour-coded names and uniforms. The whole alphabet soup fitted the cold war world of NATO, SHAPE, SAC and the CIA, and played with the way the contemporary adult world worked.<sup>14</sup>

Anderson's stories unashamedly capitalized on the cold war cult of the secret agent whose skills defend the home from enemies unknown. His programmes were in many ways adaptations of the adult stories of James Bond, *Danger Man* and *The Avengers* for young viewers. Lady Penelope in *Thunderbirds*, *Joe 90* and Father Unwin in *The Secret Service* all worked as secret agents. Two *Thunderbirds* episodes – both by Alan Fennell – deal with British secret agents: 'The Man from MI5', features a British spy named Bondson, while a British intelligence officer named Southern needs to be rescued in '30 Minutes After Noon'. Conversations between Southern and his bosses are shown only by hats on a hat stand. Southern's hat is a trilby, tossed onto the stand in best James Bond fashion. In fact there are numerous scenarios in *Thunderbirds* that could be said to adapt elements in James Bond for a child audience, mixing spy stories with casinos, ski resorts and millionaire yachts. Such were the components of entertainment at the time. In a tribute to Bond actor Sean Connery, puppets crafted in his likeness appeared in *Thunderbirds* and *Captain Scarlet* (Bentley *Thunderbirds* 15, 96).<sup>15</sup>

One less obvious feature of the cold war self that ran through Anderson's work was the notion that appearance and reality can be two different things. In Anderson's world cliff faces fall away to reveal hangers; swimming pools retract to allow rockets to be launched; offices and entire buildings sink underground; weather-beaten shacks can conceal high-tech pursuit vehicles; headquarters can be hidden under a film studio and boys can be secret agents. Such themes certainly fit with the architecture and technology of the cold war with its bunkers under hills and control centres in mountains, but also built on an older tradition of the magical dimension within British children's culture seen

everywhere from C.S. Lewis's wardrobe, through Doctor Who's TARDIS to Harry Potter's platform nine and three quarters. On top of this there is something appealing to the child (with the ultimate innocent exterior) about complexity and power being concealed within. The producers recognized this danger of over-identification between audience and the events on screen and both *Captain Scarlet* and *Joe 90* began with warnings not to imitate the characters. Anderson himself prefers a more functional explanation of his penchant for the hidden: it sidestepped the need to create expensive exterior sets (Cull/Anderson).

### Anderson's Cold War Other

No cold war fiction would have been complete without an enemy and despite Anderson's care in his character development in *Thunderbirds*, cold war adversaries abound in his work. Enemy spies figured in the early Anderson series *Supercar*. *Fireball XL5* featured Boris Space Spy as a villain in certain episodes (teamed with Griselda Space Spy), bent on capturing the plans to the famous space vehicle.<sup>16</sup> While most of the villains in *Thunderbirds* are motivated by greed, the Hood is twice seen to be working for militaristic foreign powers (personified by the shadowy General X and General Bron in 'The Martian Invasion' by Alan Fennell and 'Edge of Impact' by David Robertson), bent on acquiring the secrets of International Rescue in one case, and sabotaging the enemy's air force in the other. An unnamed military power whose officers have Central/Eastern European accents is engaged in sabotage in Alan Pattillo's 'The Cham-Cham'. One episode of *The Secret Service* ('The Cure' written by Pat Dunlop) featured a rogue Russian spy named Sakov.

Several of the core political scenarios in Anderson's worlds mirrored the cold war. There is the Eastern Alliance in *Joe 90*. In *Stingray* Troy Tempest and WASP wage a war against an undersea race led by the cruel emperor Titan. The undersea people use agents able to pass as humans on the surface (the recurrent villain agent X-2-Zero looked and sounded like Peter Lorre). Episodes with an especially strong cold war flavour include 'Marineville Traitor' by Alan Fennell (author of spy themed episodes for *Fireball XL5* and *Thunderbirds*) in which Tempest arrests his own boss in the belief that he is a spy, only to learn that this is part of a ploy to draw out the real enemy within. In the episode of *Space 1999* by Bob Kellett called 'The Last Enemy' Moonbase Alpha drifts into the midst of a cold war type conflict between two planets in the same solar system. The episode is made more interesting by the fact that one planet is ruled by women, hence combining elements of cold war turned hot with the equally topical theme of the 'battle of the sexes'.

The cold war scenario is most fully developed in *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* in which the Mysterons of Mars wage what is referred to in the programme as a 'war of nerves' with Earth. They have the ability to rebuild destroyed machines and resurrect people to use them for their own ends. The Mysterons control one principal agent, the sinister Captain Black. Their tactic is cryptically to declare a target in advance, which the forces of Spectrum then seek to defend. However, their ability to resurrect and possess the bodies of the dead creates an ever-present danger of an enemy within, which is the stuff of archetypal cold war paranoia narratives on the model of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). The Mysterons are all the more terrifying because they are never seen. Two travelling rings of light indicate their presence. As the series unfolded, Captain Scarlet



and his colleagues learned more about the Mysterons and their purposes but they did not always win (Bentley *Scarlet*).

A cold war enemy also stalked the live action series *UFO*, which featured aliens from an unnamed dying planet in the vicinity of Alpha Centauri seeking to penetrate earth in order to steal human organs to prolong their own lives. The protagonists – members of an organization called SHADO – seek to intercept this invasion while keeping it secret from the public to avoid mass panic. The aliens from time to time make use of human agents. SHADO is obliged to hunt for moles (as in the episode ‘Flight Path’ by Ian Scott Stewart). By the second series the aliens had the power to possess human minds (explored in episodes like ‘The Psychobombs’ by Tony Barwick or ‘The Cat with Ten Lives’ by David Tomblin). Again it is the classic stuff of ‘enemy within’ paranoia (Bentley *UFO*).

Although both *Captain Scarlet* and *UFO* drew on the cold war, they also reflected a shifting of attitudes within the cold war. In *Captain Scarlet* the reason for the Mysteron’s aggression towards Earth is the unprovoked destruction of the Mysteron’s base on Mars by a team of Earth explorers led by Captain Black. This opens the issue of blame and invites reflection on the guilt of one’s own side. The episode ‘Dangerous Rendezvous’ written by Tony Barwick, hints fleetingly at least at the possibility of negotiation between Mars and Earth. Although the scenario in *UFO* is based on unprovoked aggression from the aliens, there are several episodes – also by Barwick – that explore the possibility of negotiation. In a remarkable first season episode called ‘A Question of Priorities’ a dissident alien attempts to make contact with SHADO, and in ‘Survival’ an astronaut stranded on the moon develops a rapport with an alien in the same predicament, like the Japanese and American pilot castaways in John Boorman’s *Hell in the Pacific* (1968). Barwick’s storylines reflected a yearning for détente and an alternative to the divided world.

### Other Stories

While Anderson’s series certainly reflected the cold war world in which they were made, they also tell other stories. As his shows developed, female characters played an ever more active role, developing from the mute mermaid in *Stingray*, through the capable Lady Penelope in *Thunderbirds*, to the female fighter pilots of *Captain Scarlet*.<sup>17</sup> But one story looms over Anderson’s work like no other: the shadow of the USA. Anderson’s life and work speak less of the power of the cold war than the power of the American market. Anderson spent his professional life in the quest for the holy grail of American sales. His first job in commercial film was re-editing the Gainsborough classic *The Wicked Lady* (1945) to make it ‘safe’ for American audiences (Cull/Anderson). Virtually his entire output was shaped to pursue American revenues and he is one of the first and best examples of a British television producer attempting to play the Americans at their own game. In the long run he lost, but even today he has not given up the fight.

Gerry Anderson’s big break in the British market came when he catered to the British taste for Americana: the fantasy western *Four Feather Falls* (1959–60). At this point Anderson’s production company – AP films – first came under contract to ITC, the entertainment conglomerate controlled by the irrepressible media mogul Lew Grade. Grade saw in Anderson’s work a product that could actually break into the American market. His programmes *Supercar*, *Fireball XL5* and *Stingray* did just that, achieving

network sales and subsequent syndication. The secret of Anderson's success was to obscure the explicit British-ness of his programmes.<sup>18</sup> In *Thunderbirds* British characters, Lady Penelope and her butler Parker, are subsidiary characters and conform to American expectations of Britain.

Anderson not only employed a company of American actors as his voice artists but also even went to the extent of having his scripts typed onto specially imported American size paper with American spelling. American themes seemed particularly prominent in *Thunderbirds*. Episodes regularly took place in American settings, and the very title was derived from Thunderbird Field, an airbase in Glendale, near Phoenix, Arizona, which Anderson's brother Lionel had mentioned in a letter home while training as a pilot during the war (Archer and Hearn 12). The airfield – in turn – took its name from a Plains Indian deity.<sup>19</sup> The format of an adventure story set around a lone father with a number of sons was derived from the long-running TV western, *Bonanza* (1959–73). Anderson's team even sculpted their patriarch – Jeff Tracy – to resemble actor, Lorne Greene who played the father in *Bonanza*. *Thunderbirds* aimed for American production values, and elements such as quick thriller editing, inventive and engaging camera angles (including extreme close-ups) and brassy, dynamic music all worked to create a high quality, exciting, American-style product in miniature (Cull/Anderson; Bentley *Thunderbirds* 16).

The power of the American market did more than call Anderson's programmes into life, it could bring about their demise as well. Despite the domestic success of the 50-minute long *Thunderbirds* episodes, the American networks failed to buy the programme. Anderson recalls the story:

When the *Thunderbirds* series was completed, Lew [Grade] went to America with the first few shows and screened them for the three American networks. At that time it was virtually impossible to get a network showing for British products. However, NBC's immediate response was 'we'll take it'. He got the same reaction from CBS. Lew returned to London cock-a-hoop only to be tannoyed on his arrival at London Airport (as it was known then) to find that there was a call from the ABC network to say that they had second thoughts and would take it as well. This really is a little known piece of cinema history. Unfortunately, Lew, with his unbounded enthusiasm asked for a price that was the highest ever asked by anyone for a children's programme, as a result of which NBC withdrew. Since it was America, as soon as the news leaked out the other two networks followed suit. Lew then put the show out on regional syndication (a group of local stations that had got together in order to afford better programming). This time Lew submitted a lower price, which was accepted. However, in the sales contract Lew stipulated that it could not be screened before 8.30 in the evening and no later than 10.00pm. This of course was prime time and not surprisingly the show failed. Although it was true that *Thunderbirds* did not have a wide distribution in America, it is equally true that it had the greatest reception of any programme made in this country up to that time.<sup>20</sup>

Bruised by the American network response Grade abruptly curtailed production of *Thunderbirds* and told Anderson to think of a new programme. Anderson responded with *Captain Scarlet*. *Captain Scarlet* was the first Supermarionation show to feature a British hero; *Joe 90* followed suit though with strong American supporting characters (Captain Blue in the first case and 'Uncle Sam' Louver in the other). Anderson then experimented

with an entirely local and idiosyncratically British product, *The Secret Service*, which was axed as soon as Lew Grade saw an episode. It featured the most idiosyncratic British performer imaginable, comedian 'Professor' Stanley Unwin, as a priest/spy, equipped with the power to miniaturize his assistant, who extricated himself from crises by speaking his own gobbledygook language of Unwinese. Grade did not get the joke and felt sure that Americans would not get it either.

Anderson's live action shows were also shaped by the US market. *UFO* had an American lead actor – Ed Bishop – and played well in the USA and Canada. The American office of ITC disliked the darker episodes dealing with the troubled home life of the principal characters but welcomed the heavier science fiction themes of the episodes set on the moon. They refused to buy a further season unless Anderson could guarantee no more earth-bound stories. The only way he could satisfy his American critics was to create an entirely new show set on the moon after it had been torn out of orbit and set hurtling off into space: *Space 1999*. Here again he worked for an American look to the programme and hired two American Stars – Martin Landau and Barbara Bain. By the second season he had acquired an American producer, *Star Trek* veteran, Fred Freiberger (Cull/Anderson; Archer and Hearn 211–24).

In the end, Anderson's attempts to create a British challenge to Hollywood science fiction TV were defeated when Hollywood upped the ante. The success of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) raised audience expectations of special effects simply too high for a small British studio to compete. Anderson's special effects man Derek Meddings had found ready employment on big budget films like *Superman* (1978) and the Bond pictures, while Lew Grade foundered with his ill-judged epic *Raise the Titanic!* (1980). None of Anderson's later productions – such as *Terrahawks* (1983–84), *Space Precinct* (1994–95), *Lavender Castle* (1996–98) – captured the imagination in the same way as his shows of the 1960s and early 1970s. To add insult to injury, *Thunderbirds* was even re-edited in the USA first to run in a half hour slot and then again so that the puppets appeared to interact with human teenagers to create a grotesque hybrid show called *Turbocharged Thunderbirds* (1994). Anderson joked that if he ever made his fortune he would buy every episode and destroy it (Bentley *Thunderbirds* 122–23).

Television programmes are tied to their time. They rise and fall according to the needs and interests of their audience. One generation's hit may leave a new generation unmoved. One of the remarkable things about *Thunderbirds*, *Stingray* and *Captain Scarlet* is their ability to transcend the time in which they were made and capture the attention of successive generations. In 1992, 14 months after BBC 2 began repeat screenings of *Thunderbirds*, Britain's children went wild for the programme. Parents brawled over *Thunderbirds* merchandise in the aisles of British toy stores. Whatever the topicality of elements in the original show, *Thunderbirds* has a life of its own.

The story of American intrusion into Anderson's creative process has two endings. In 2004 Universal pictures released a live action *Thunderbirds* film in which Gerry Anderson had no role and received no credit as creator of the original show. He sold his rights to *Thunderbirds* and almost all his back catalogue of programmes for £20,000 in the late 1970s. The new film combined the machines and characters from the old series with a story about youth and magical powers that was clearly aimed at the *Harry Potter* generation. The film flopped badly on both sides of the Atlantic, making only a fraction of

its estimated \$57 million budget.<sup>21</sup> The second ending is Anderson's own plan to make a new series of *Captain Scarlet* using CGI. To this end he purchased and outfitted Britain's first CGI studio. His new series premiered on ITV on 12 February 2005. Anderson spoke of his hopes that the studio will begin a new generation of British computer animation. His cold war with Hollywood goes on.

### Conclusion

Gerry Anderson's output during the middle years of the cold war displayed a significant presence of cold war themes. Their penetration into the realm of children's television is testament to their potency in the adult world. Indeed, Anderson's programmes were unusual in reflecting these ideas. Yet science fiction and fantasy are genres peculiarly open to pastiche, and far more open to the wider cultural climate than other sorts of story. Cold war ideas were an essential part of the fabric of the time and it was only to be expected that they would become the raw material of his fiction. The spy movie conventions are there because those are the stories and themes that his writers associated with exciting entertainment. It is more interesting and significant that Anderson sought to use his programmes to lift the horizon of his young audience beyond the immediate politics of the cold war to a better future of world government and international cooperation, and to include positive female and ethnic characters within his stories. By adapting and recycling key adult cold war narratives for his own purposes he was certainly not raising a new generation of McCarthy-ites. Rather, he was part of the questioning, twisting and tweaking of these stories happening elsewhere in the culture that reflected a desire to move beyond the bad old days of the 1950s. Captain Black can only be said to have been 'really red' in the most roundabout way, a pastiche of a parody of a cold war figure. By accident and design Gerry Anderson was doing his bit to make the cold war world a better place.

### Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Gerry Anderson for his generous cooperation with this piece of research, Tony Shaw for his input as a perceptive and patient editor, and members of the audience who responded to the public interview with Anderson at the XXth IAMHIST congress in Leicester and to the first presentation of these ideas at the Cold War British Popular Culture conference in London in September 2003. Clive Kennedy, James Chapman, John R. Cook and Karen Ford have also been part of the gestation of this piece. The author, like all researchers into Anderson's work, owes a debt to Chris Bentley and the work of the Fanderson organization.

### Notes

1. For an introduction to Anderson's work see the Gerry Anderson appreciation society – Fanderson – website <<http://www.fanderson.org.uk/fanderson.html>>.
2. Although the characterization of Klingons as an enemy in *Star Trek* enabled stories exploring cold war type challenges and dilemmas the episode 'The Omega Glory', written

by Gene Roddenberry himself, is a thinly veiled satire of cold war thinking. The Russian character of Chekov (introduced in 1967) was also a gesture against the cold war.

3. This analysis of cold war culture will focus on 1960–75, the central years of the cold war covering the period from the election of Kennedy to the signing of the Helsinki accords and coincidentally the years in which Anderson reigned in British children's television. This paper springs from the author's personal experience of the period. He was born in 1964.
4. When sold with adversaries as part of what Airfix termed 'Dogfight Doubles', the MiGs were in Egyptian and North Vietnamese markings, respectively, and paired anachronistically with an Israeli Mirage IIIC and a USAF O-2 Skymaster reconnaissance plane. American adversaries like the F-4 Phantom or A3-J1 Vigilante were not produced until 1971. The kit of the Avro Vulcan did not appear until 1983, as that aircraft was being phased out, although German rivals Revell produced an impressive model of the US Air Force's B-52 in the later 1960s. The launch dates are from <<http://www.airfixcollector.co.uk/index.html>>.
5. *Tightrope*, created by Victor Pemberton, ran for 13 episodes. For background see <[http://www.timeslip.org.uk/production/tightrope\\_ep1.php](http://www.timeslip.org.uk/production/tightrope_ep1.php)>. It also featured as a strip (with cold war themes) in the comic *Countdown*.
6. The mushroom cloud also featured, peeking over the mountains in the top right corner of the end paper illustrations for the hardback edition of all Noggin the Nog books, as the signifier of this particular adventure. Other Noggin stories dealt with issues of the day. The twelfth and final story in the saga, *The Icebergs* (1975) warned of global warming and climate change.
7. Anderson had one brush with 'James Bondage' drafting a treatment for *Moonraker*. The similarities between this script and the eventual film *The Spy Who Loved Me* resulted in Anderson preparing a law suit against Albert Broccoli which was settled out of court (Archer and Hearn).
8. Anderson's quote on Grade is from a letter to the author of 23 Feb. 2005. The analysis below suggests that Alan Fennell had a particular affinity with spy stories while Tony Barwick is responsible for a number of stories with vaguely anti-nuclear themes and others that suggest a yearning for détente in the cold war.
9. The author's interview with Anderson took place on 19 July 2003 as part of the XXth Congress of the International Association for Media and History. For a transcript of the public portions of this interview see Cull/Anderson in Cook and Wright. The author can attest that Anderson's presentation of positive characters with glasses – Brains in *Thunderbirds* and the title character in *Joe 90* – made it much easier to grow up wearing spectacles in the early 1970s.
10. This pilot *Joe 90* episode, 'Most Special Agent', premiered on 29 Sept. 1968, in the weeks following a major deterioration in cold war relations owing to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.
11. Fan Chris Bishop has used *TV Century 21* comics to create an online chronology of Anderson's universe, see <<http://www.spectrum-headquarters.com/chronology.html>>.
12. Other 'nuclear' episodes included 'Expo 2068', written by *Thunderbirds* voice actor Shane Rimmer, in which a stolen reactor core threatens the East Coast of the USA.

13. Benign uses of nuclear technology also abound. Stingray is a nuclear-powered submarine, nuclear aircraft and rockets feature in *Thunderbirds* and a two man nuclear submarine features in a *Joe 90* episode by Shane Rimmer: 'Big Fish'. The *Stingray* episode 'Trapped in the Depths' by Alan Fennell features a nuclear-powered fish farm. The presence of nuclear waste in *Space 1999* meant that one of the spin-off toys – the Dinky 'Eagle Freighter' – which was launched in 1975, came equipped with miniature cargo capsules labelled with the radiation symbol and the legend 'danger, waste material'. An 11-year-old girl's discovery of these capsules in her garden in St Albans in 1979 sparked a widely reported false alarm of the 'child finds nuclear waste' variety and necessitated a redesign of the toy. See <<http://www.space1999.net/~dinkyeagle/english/decal-1.html>>.
14. Similar imaginings elsewhere in popular culture included UNCLE in the *Man from UNCLE*, UNIT in *Doctor Who* and various organizations both evil and benign in the James Bond cycle.
15. The young Connery was the model for Scott Tracy and later his likeness was used for the disk jockey in 'Ricochet', the Zero X pilot in *Thunderbirds Are Go* (the first feature film) and for the character Captain Grey in *Captain Scarlet*. Scarlet himself was modelled on (and spoke like) the young Cary Grant.
16. The specific *Fireball XL5* episodes featuring Boris and Griselda were 'Flying Zodiac' (w. Anthony Marriott) and 'Spy in Space' (w. Alan Fennell).
17. Gender relations in Anderson's work are ahead of their time in some ways, however, *Thunderbirds* includes a number of episodes with gendered humour that now seems dated – as with the jokes about women drivers in 'City of Fire' (w. Alan Fennell). Sometimes the joke is at the expense of the sexist, for example, the British agent in Fennell's '30 Minutes After Noon' who has no idea that Lady Penelope is anything other than a 'beautiful woman'. The live action *UFO* with its depiction of the character Alex Freeman as an office 'lady's man' now seems like a museum piece. Anderson's *New Captain Scarlet* (2005) clearly shows the extent to which times have changed with many more female characters and characters who were male in the old series (Lt. Green) being re-imagined as female.
18. During the research for this paper the author has been struck by the number of British and American viewers who grew up watching these programmes who were unaware that Gerry Anderson was British.
19. For the Lakota – as one nineteenth-century informant recalled – the Thunderbird, *Wakinyan*, was 'The cause of thunder; a fabled bird, hidden in the clouds whose voice is thunder and the glance of whose eye is lightning. This spirit governs the weather, the clouds, and the rain and has little to do with the affairs of men. It may be invoked and pleased or displeased and will give good weather or bad as it sees fit' (Walker 119–20).
20. Anderson to author, 24 Feb. 2005. *Thunderbirds* was widely shown around the world and is fondly remembered in places as diverse as the Netherlands and Mexico as one of the first colour programmes.
21. The *Thunderbirds* (2004) movie grossed only £1.3 million in the UK and \$2.7 million in the USA on its all-important opening weekend; paltry sums when compared to the opening weekend grosses of £8.7 million and \$115 million for *Spiderman 2*, £7 million and \$86

million for *The Day After Tomorrow* and £23.8 and \$93.6 million for *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, its competitors that summer. For data see <<http://uk.imdb.com/title/tt0167456/business>>.

## References

- ARCHER, SIMON AND MARCUS, HEARN. *What Made Thunderbirds Go! The Authorised Biography of Gerry Anderson* (London: BBC, 2002).
- BENTLEY, CHRIS. *The Complete Book of Thunderbirds* (London: Carlton, 2000).
- . *The Complete Book of Captain Scarlet*. (London: Carlton, 2001).
- . *The Complete Book of UFO*. London: Reynolds and Hearn, 2003.
- CARRUTHERS, SUSAN L. 'The Manchurian Candidate (1962) and the Cold War Brainwashing Scare.' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 18.1 (1998): 75–95.
- CHAPMAN, JAMES. *License to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999).
- . *Saints and Avengers: British Adventure Series of the 1960s*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002.
- CONNELLY, MARK. *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2004).
- CULL NICHOLAS J. 'Bigger on the Inside . . . Doctor Who as British Cultural History.' *The Historian, Television and Television History*. Ed. Graham Roberts and Philip M. Taylor. Luton: U of Luton P, 2001. 95–112.
- CULL, NICHOLAS J./GERRY ANDERSON. 'Interview with Gerry Anderson.' *British Science Fiction Television: A Hitchhiker's Guide*. Ed. John R. Cook and Patrick Wright. London: I.B. Tauris, 2005.
- HARRISON, IAN. *Action Man: The Official Dossier* (London: Collins, 2003).
- HUNTER, EDMUND. *The Story of Arms and Armour*. Series 601 'Achievements.' Loughborough: Ladybird, 1971.
- INGLIS, FRED. *The Cruel Peace: Everyday Life in the Cold War*. (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
- PARIS, MICHAEL. *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2000).
- POSTGATE, OLIVER AND PETER, FIRMIN. *The Saga of Noggin the Nog, Vol. 6, The Firecake* (London: Kaye and Ward, 1969).
- RICHARDSON, PETER. *Achtung! Commando: The Ultimate Guide to Commando Comics*, Vol. 1–4 (Battle, East Sussex: Stiletto Books, 1999–2002).
- SHAW, TONY. *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State Propaganda and Consensus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).
- WALKER, JAMES R. *Lakota Belief and Ritual* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1991).
- WARD, ARHTUR. *Airfix: Celebrating 50 Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

**Nicholas J. Cull**, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California.  
E-mail: [cull@usc.edu](mailto:cull@usc.edu)

Copyright of *Media History* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.