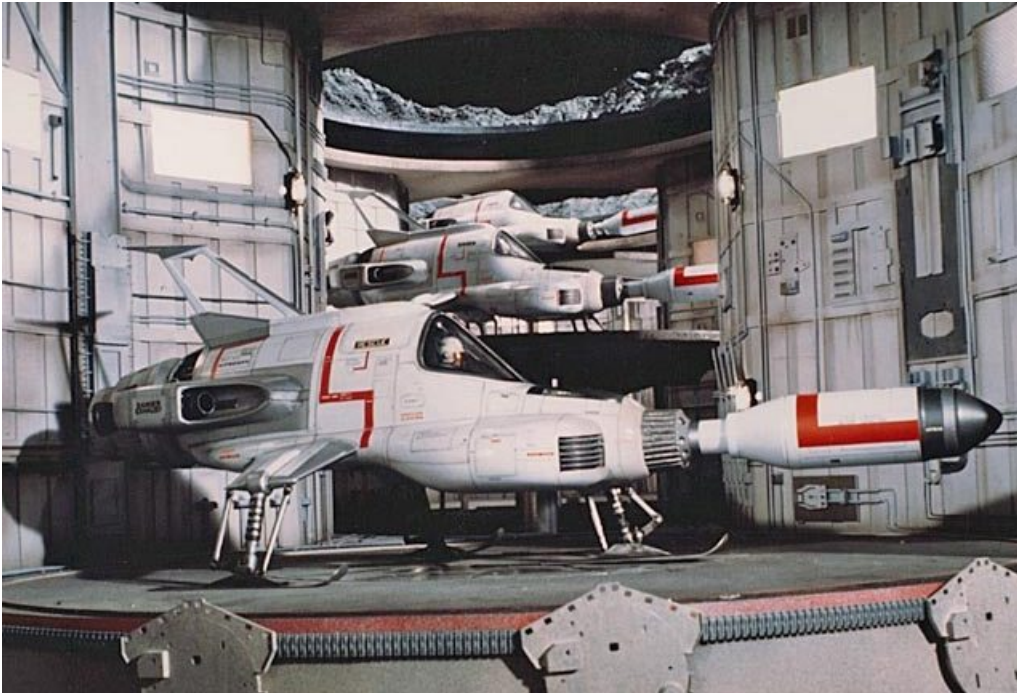


By January 4, 2008



In the ten years that his production company had been profitably making marionette series such as *Thunderbirds* and *Captain Scarlet*, Gerry Anderson was dreaming about making a real TV show with live actors. The series had been collectively heading that way anyway, with increased realism in the character physiognomies in *Scarlet* and *Joe 90*, and the experimental, partly live-action 1969 Stanley Unwin vehicle *The Secret Service*. But it was the live-action Gerry Anderson film, the 2001-inspired *Doppelganger* (1969, US title *Journey To The Far Side Of The Sun*) from which inspiration –and UFO principals Ed Bishop and George Sewell- would be drawn for a new and more adult-oriented saga of alien invasion.

The Set-Up

Set in 1980 (and made in 1969/70), *UFO* followed the reliable Anderson formula of a top secret and well-provisioned earth defence network, the ominous but coolly-named SHADO (Supreme Headquarters Alien Defence Organisation), a worldwide but US-led military coalition with its strategic headquarters hidden under a film studio in London, and it's American Commander-In-Chief, Ed Straker (Bishop) masquerading part time as the joint head of the studio.

The secret menace SHADO fought against was a dying race of liquid-breathing aliens intent on harvesting usable organs from the earth-people that it abducted during sneak forays into our atmosphere in discreet centrifugal spacecraft.

The defence fleet consisted of S.I.D. (Space Intruder Detector), a sentient satellite that would make initial sightings; three missile-carrying Interceptors on a lunar base comprising the first line of defence; a roving, bipartite submarine called Skydiver, the nozzle of which was a fighter jet that could detach from the sub and counter-attack UFOs that got through into the Earth's atmosphere; and the all-terrain SHADO-mobiles, armoured and laser-bearing trucks to hunt down landed aliens where co-ordinates were available. There were a number of other ancillary and support craft in SHADO, including a floating lunar transporter, an Earth-moon shuttle, a 747-scale troop carrier and a very snazzy helicopter, not to mention Straker's sleek (but, sadly, brown) car with the fly-up doors.

Angst

It is reported that the anguish of Gerry Anderson's failing marriage to – and impending divorce of – Sylvia Anderson (the voice of Lady Penelope in *Thunderbirds*) informed the preternaturally dark tone of *UFO*. The show dealt extensively not only with the pressure of Straker's command but with his personal life. In a genuinely harrowing story arc which threatened the 'closed episode' structure of the series, the writers explored the accidental death of Straker's son in a freak car accident after the otherwise stony-faced chief had enjoyed a happy 'divorced dad' weekend with the lad, in the episode *A Question Of Priorities*.

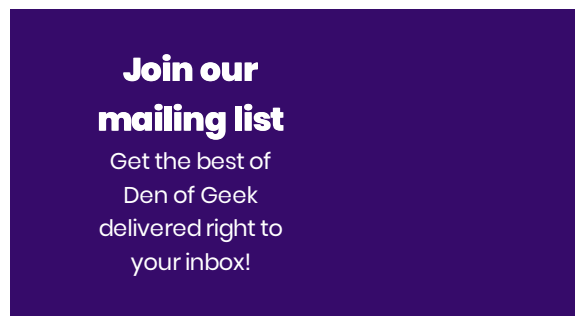
Straker relives this nightmare under literally tons of pressure, stranded in a wrecked Skydiver at the bottom of the ocean, in the disaster-episode *Sub Smash*. Interestingly, the 'recap' footage is not part of the kind of cheap 'round-up' episode that employs series segments to fill one episode's runtime, but a single, intensely painful fog of sorrow as Straker lies dying.

Scheduling UFO

The show dealt –admittedly often quite clumsily- with racial and gender issues, as well as drug abuse and the emotional effects of death and loss. This made scheduling it a nightmare for the networks, since in many ways it retained a lot of appeal for the same children who had enjoyed *Thunderbirds* and other Anderson puppet series: superb special effects and model-work from British effects maestro Derek Meddings; very cool alien and future-tech hardware; fights in space, on earth and in the earth's atmosphere; and tense and well-written

dramatic situations.

In the mid-1970s in the UK, *UFO* was shown at 11.00pm weeknights; in the nineties, Bravo showed it at 6pm, as did the BBC (who had leased the show from Carlton) a few years later, though the Beeb also showed it on Saturday mornings! The episode *The Long Sleep* – which dealt with a hippie girl who cannot tell if the alien abduction of her boyfriend was real or an LSD hallucination – has always been excluded from pre-watershed showings, whereas other episodes have either been edited for violence or scheduled diversely for their own problematic content.



Style

If you know nothing else about the show, you probably know about the purple wigs of the moonbase operatives, three rolling, tightly-clad and attractive women led by the truly stunning Gabrielle Drake as Lt. Ellis. Though a welcome sight for male viewers, it must be admitted that even Melody, Harmony and Rhapsody in Captain Scarlet had more credible appearance than the Moonbase gals, and these gaudy fashions were not merely ‘of their time’, but one of the many remnants from the less inhibited ‘SuperMarionation’ days.

Back on Earth, SHADO-couture was

thankfully more neutral, with Straker and the officer-class plumping for Nehru jackets, while ground staff sported fairly close-fit white trouser-and-top combos.

For some unprecedented reason, the submariners in Skydiver all wear what can only be described as very loosely-knit string-vests, and in the case of some of the female personnel there, this doubtlessly led to further scheduling conundrums for the networks.

Production Design

UFO features some of the strongest production design ever seen in a Gerry Anderson show. Skydiver is the crowning glory in a series crammed with amazing vehicles; its sleek and sexy lines are recognisably military yet divinely futuristic. The Sky1/Diver separation routines, in which the captain – somewhat in defiance of naval tradition – slides down a crawlspace into the jet-fighter component and abandons his crew in order to engage UFOs in terran skies, are ingenious and very well executed, with some of the best incidental music in a show that is quite outstanding in this respect.

The moonbase interceptors are agreeably non-aerodynamic (given their locale), though their unique single-torpedo design means pilots have only one chance for a kill. The SHADO-mobiles are equally impressive, though matching miniature terrain vehicles to live-action footage was often problematic, particularly as few full-scale partial mock-ups were allowable in the budget...

Special Effects

Whether considering the acting, writing, scheduling or pacing, there is absolutely nothing consistent about *UFO*, and the quality of effects work ranges from best-of-Hollywood standard to *Thunderbirds* level; many apparently quite mundane shots were handled by Derek Meddings for budgetary reasons, and they don't always match the location work. The sea-level shots of a surfaced Skydiver are cool, but not convincing, since water scales notoriously badly. Daytime 'flying' shots are a hard sell too; there are rarely any strings visible, but depth is lacking in many of the set-ups. Yet you can never acclimatise, as in the midst of this prevalent standard will come a special-effects plate so astonishingly well-done that it would challenge current technology.

Cast

Leading man Ed Bishop was not only in the *Doppelganger* film that led to *UFO*, but was the voice of Captain Blue in *Captain Scarlet* and had already trod impressive sci-fi territory as the pilot who takes Heyward Floyd to the moon in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. An American actor resident in Britain since the late 50s, Bishop was a credible and commanding lead in a series for whom the US market was always intended to be vital, and whose set-up comfortably justified a transatlantic cast.

The role seemed to constantly require Bishop to be in a rage, and the actor later said that he welcomed the few occasions in *UFO* that afforded him a chance to be more cheerful, such as Confetti Check AOK, which examines the formation of SHADO and the

early and happier days of Straker's doomed marriage.

Straker needed support in a challenging command role, and it came in the form of the much more even-tempered Colonel Alec Freeman. Freeman was played by the implacable George Sewell, who was unavailable for the second part of *UFO*'s 26-episode run and was replaced by Wanda Ventham, reprising a walk-on role earlier in the series.

Recognising the need to include a younger male character, the producers wrote the suave Michael Billington into the episode *Exposed*, as test-pilot Paul Foster, who discovers the existence of SHADO and is consequently invited to join the organisation.

Billington was once a candidate for the role of James Bond, and in fact played Barbara Bach's lover, killed by Bond in the pre-credit sequence of *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977). Whether due to his inexperience, bad direction or bad lines (he seemed to get more of those than most of the cast), Paul Foster remains the least convincing character in *UFO*. A hot-headed seventies hunk, his ability to fly any of the sea, ground, air or space vehicles in the SHADO fleet within mere months of his induction is also a bit of a credibility gap.

As Lt. Ellis, Gabrielle Drake demonstrated a promising breadth of ability in rising above her ridiculous sexy attire to convey a credible working woman, and that promise was realised in a distinguished stage career that all too rarely saw her on our TV screens again, and usually in supporting roles. Fans inspired by her unearthly physiognomy can

fully satisfy their curiosity in Val Guest's otherwise-irredeemable *Au Pair Girls* (1972).

Dancer Peter Gorden is seen in some episodes as Sky1 pilot Captain Carlin. His range as an actor seems very limited, and this may be why his character, after an initial build-up, was not pursued further.

UFO more or less followed a single-episode structure, with few continuous story elements, and it remained relatively easy for the networks to shuffle the series as needed. Consequently each episode usually features prominent guest roles, and the role-cast of the series includes Stephanie Beacham, George Cole and even Moneypenny actor Lois Maxwell, once again keeping vigil in the secretary's office.

Music and sound design

I have already voted *UFO*'s title sequence the second-best of all time after *Thunderbirds*, but for me it is actually the most exciting show opening ever. Rapid-fire editing combine with Barry Gray's melodic and insistent refrain – which reappears constantly in the series' incidental music without ever becoming tiresome – to generate real anticipation. By contrast, the show closes with a slow, Kubrickian pan away from the Earth, accompanied by eerie Ligeti-style music that ensures the creepy atmosphere of the show is retained to the last.

The sound design deserves special mention for originality, and the indescribable siren of the UFOs themselves are especially unworldly and frightening.

Reception

UFO was a huge hit in Los Angeles and New York upon initial stateside transmission in 1972, fully two years after its befuddled reception by the British public, and backer Lew Grade ordered another series. However, so confusing was the demographic for the show, and so piecemeal its audience, that the second series remained in development hell for a couple of years. When audience research unearthed that viewers most enjoyed the episodes set on Moonbase, a second series was drafted with the intention of Ed Bishop resuming his command on an expanded lunar colony.

Ultimately these plans were to evolve into the unrelated *Space: 1999*, with bankable *Mission Impossible* star Martin Landau as the new American face of Gerry Anderson live-action sci-fi.

Conclusion

UFO remains enormously popular worldwide, with a particularly vigorous fan-base in Italy. There has never been a show quite like it, and there probably never will be again. It caught perfectly the depressive and fatalistic zeitgeist of 1970s cinema, with relentlessly bleak endings and a hell of a lot of suffering on the way to them. It mixed inventive scripting with frequently trite dialogue and vice versa; it put highly charged emotional, adult situations in the hands of actors who were often wearing absurd purple or platinum wigs; it couldn't be relied upon in any way, not even in terms of finding it in the TV schedules, but it kept you off-guard in a manner that few other shows have ever achieved, intentionally or otherwise.

It also demonstrated a wonderful invention, with 'amnesia injections' pre-figuring the 'memory blasters' of the Men In Black, for members of the public who stumbled across SHADO's secret. The endless hydraulic platforms that were so necessary for the immobile puppets in Gerry Anderson's previous series are still there in UFO, like an Anderson hallmark. For that matter, they are still there in the launch pads of the Eagle transporters in *Space:1999*. Well, if it ain't broke...

The notion that a military-industrial organisation would want to keep the fact of alien threat from the public rather than exploiting it seems quaint in the current climate, but then the show, for all its cynicism, is the product of a pre-Watergate, pre-9/11 era, and it provides little enough reassurance in any case.

A superb DVD edition is available from Carlton, with a transfer quality that surpasses all expectation. You can see just how much blue eyeliner Ed Bishop has on, and even find out odd facts about the movie output of the Harlington-Straker film studios that hid the SHADO headquarters. Did you know that Straker remade *Citizen Kane* in 1980 as a box-office bomb? Listen and learn, Hollywood.

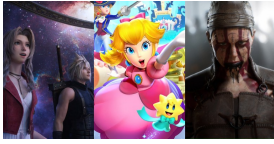
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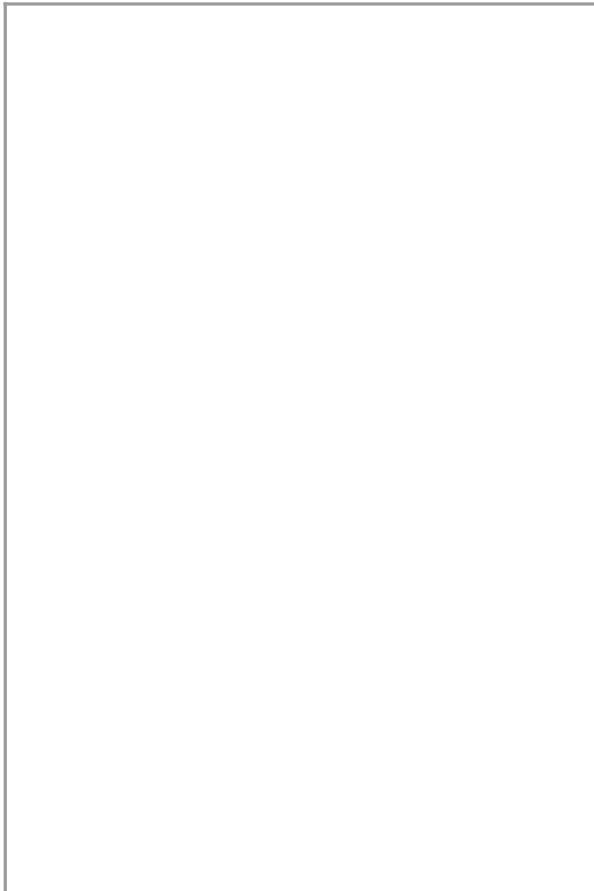
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