

Space 1999: the problem with Victor Bergman... – by Lee Russell

When I was a boy I really enjoyed watching the TV series 'Space 1999'. I was fascinated by space exploration and the 'realism' of an Anderson creation featuring real people made a strong impression on me.

At that time creating a moonbase seemed like an obvious next step towards mankind stepping out properly into space and colonising the solar system.

I think many people still see the Moon as a viable next-step into space but I've long moved away from that idea. The Moon is a harsh place to survive on, a poor analogue for the other planets or moons that are better candidates for a colony, and even though its gravity is low, it still presents a gravity-well that makes it a poor candidate for a way-station... why stop there when remaining in an orbit could take less fuel?



As with all of the Andersons' creations, the machinery looks functional and you could imagine it working... in space.



For example, the Eagle spaceships look like viable, adaptable workhorses for many kinds of missions.

For tasks around Moonbase Alpha they are believable, but the series didn't work so well when they had it flying into planetary atmospheres... it's not aerodynamic, looks very underpowered for direct lifting from the surface like a rocket, and lacks the ablative shielding that it might otherwise need for a landing.

Unfortunately, the more the Eagles are used like that in the programs, the less believable they become...

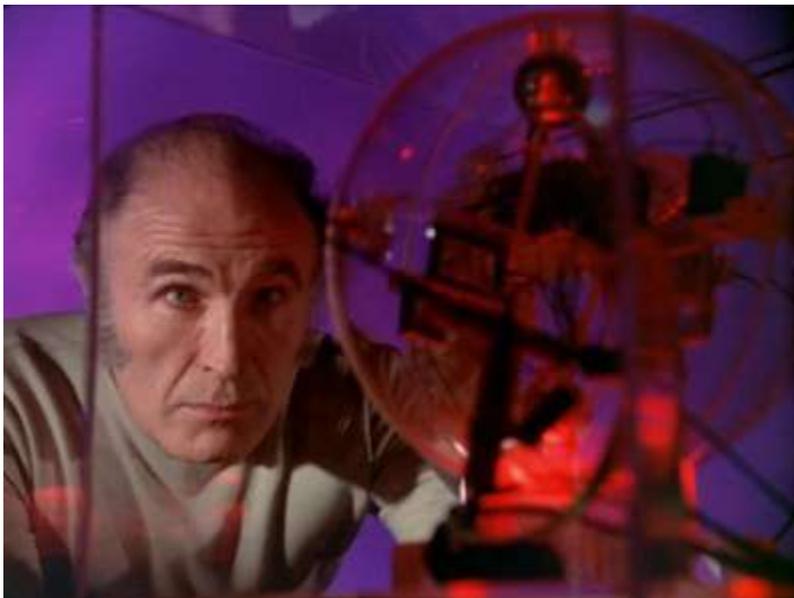
Which brings me onto the the problem with the character of Victor Bergman, base scientist...

Bergman was acted very convincingly by Barry Morse. I have complete respect for the energy and empathy that he put into the role. However, the scripting for Bergman was not convincing, and that's where the character's credibility breaks down.

As a boy watching the show I wanted to be Victor Bergman.

My friends wanted to be an astronaut or Commander Koenig, but I was struck by how great it would be to have all the answers, to have Koenig's ear, and be able to solve the massive problems now facing Moonbase Alpha after it streaked away into space on 9th September, 1999.

The trouble is, watching the show years later as an adult, Bergman looks like a shaman, a bit of a fool spouting pseudo-science at best, when he's not frequently confessing to not having the answers.



Here's a couple of examples: firstly from **Episode 1 – “Breakaway”**:

Koenig: “All right, no virus. Then what is it?”

Bergman: “John, **I just don't know**. It looks very much like radiation, but...”

Koenig: “But what?”

Bergman: “There is no radiation.” < *what?* >

and then later...

Bergman: “Hmm. Look at this. It's a monitoring device from the old Area One. It was used to record the magnetic output from the < *Bergman fake science alert!* > **artificial gravity system** there. When the area was closed down it had nothing to record for five years but now look at it.”

Carter: “A twenty-fold increase in the magnetic field.”

Bergman: “And that's before it burnt out. We've been obsessed with radiation. Wrong. This instrument's given me a lead. < *Bergman fake science alert!* > **I think we're facing a new effect**, arising from the atomic waste deposited here over the years. **Magnetic energy outputs of unprecedented violence**. < *That's not a very scientific explanation, is it?* >”

Koenig: “Magnetic energy responsible for the flare-up at Area One?” < *looking unconvinced* >

Russell: “Magnetic energy causing brain damage?” < *looking like she doesn't believe a word of it* >

... later:

Bergman: “Area One burnt itself out in a < *Bergman fake science alert!* > **magnetic subsurface firestorm**. < *a what?* > What worries me now is that the same thing could happen at Area Two.”

So in episode 1 we're given a pretty good idea of what to expect for Bergman: sometimes he doesn't know, and what he says he does know can be pretty unscientific with healthy dollops of pseudo-sci-verbage verging on the hope for magic!

Episode 3, “Black Sun” is even worse. It becomes clear pretty quickly that Alpha is heading towards a black hole. Somehow we're asked to accept that this is a previously undetected black hole lying close to Earth... *sigh*....

Initially the Alphans don't know what the Black Sun is. Bergman disappears into his study where he completes some calculations faster than Alpha's main computer < *of course he does!* > and discovers a danger that must be reported to the Commander... he rushes back to Main Mission just in time to see astronaut Ryan's Eagle torn apart by shearing forces across some kind of horizon... and then he tells Koenig...

Bergman: “If anyone's to blame, it's me. I suspected it hours ago.”

Koenig: “A Black Sun.”

Bergman: “Right. So, what are we going to do about it?”

Koenig: “What can we do? We'll all be dead in three days.”

... so Bergman goes off to have another think and work with the computer...

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... when he's finished 'thinking' he tells an assembled group of Alpha's senior staff that...

Bergman: "It's gravitational pull can become so immense that just a hatful of the stuff can weigh several Alphas. But it doesn't stop there. The gravitational force goes on getting stronger so that nothing, not radiation, not heat, not even light itself can escape..."



... then "... as you know, < *Bergman fake science alert!* > **these eight anti-gravity towers stabilise our gravity here inside Alpha.** < *yeah, right* > And we're going to use them to < *Bergman fake science alert!* > **create an entirely new force-field effect... We're going to re-program our main unit generators so that instead of negating the pressure from the black sun, it will simply reverse it.** < *Presumably powered by an endless supply of unobtainium* >

So if the Black Sun is a neutron star (or similar) we're being told that the Moon and Alpha stands a chance of passing through it? **I don't think so!**

And if it is actually a black hole, that not even light can escape from, we're to believe that they can pass through it? **I don't think so!**

Unless the Black Sun is something else, with the mass of a black hole but without a core? That they can pass through? **I don't think so!**

Undetected near-Earth black holes, working faster than the computer to 'save the day', anti-gravity, new force-field effects... it's all in a day's work for Alpha's science-shaman!

Fortunately I was impressed enough by Bergman to get a science degree myself... so something came from it... and it was (still is) quite exciting! Just don't expect realism!

There's more from Lee Russell at www.russellweb.org.uk and  @LeeJ_Russell

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