Foreword by Petter Ogland

"Il semble que la science-fiction représente la forme normale de mythologie de notre époque”
Michel Butor, La crise de croissance de la Science-Fiction, 1953

Gerry and Sylvia Anderson’s science fiction television series *Space: 1999* was produced between November 1973 and February 1975. It became an instant hit upon its release and was shown in more than 100 countries. Although it was still not as successful as anticipated in the UK and US, partly because it was not shown on the major TV networks, it has been argued\(^1\) that both the series as a whole and individual episodes had an impact on the science fiction genre in terms of influencing *Star Wars*, *Alien*, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. A less well-known example of how *Space: 1999* influenced the science fiction genre was the Norwegian 1978 mini-series *Blindpassasjer* (“Stowaway”) written by Professor Jon Bing at the Research Centre for Computers and Law within the University of Oslo (UiO) and anarchist science fiction writer Tor Åge Bringsværd\(^2\). Bing and Bringsværd were among the leading figures in Norwegian science fiction in the sixties and seventies, and were among the founding members of the *Aniara* science fiction society at UiO. In the context of the radical intellectualism and political activism that swept academia in the late sixties and early seventies, *Aniara* was an important Norwegian forum for discussing technology and society. As pointed out in a 1996 keynote by Professor Kristen Nygaard, Director of the Information Systems Group at the Department of Informatics, one of the creators of the Scandinavian tradition of information systems research:

> How many of you read science fiction? Do you read science fiction in order to become a better researcher? You should, and if you get unnerved and irritated by the impossibility of what is described, you should read on. You should read on and reverse your attitude: “If this is the truth, what are the consequences? What has now become possible on the next page?” The best science fiction employs the least amount of gadgetry, and explores worlds resulting from one or two crucial factors being different from what we are accustomed to.\(^3\)

Obviously, not all kinds of science fiction are equally adept for providing inspiration on how to support the labour union perspective when researching how to develop information systems. Although Robert A. Heinlein is sometimes described as one of the BIG THREE in science fiction literature, along with Asimov and Clarke, Nygaard would dismiss Heinlein as fascism. Gisle Hannemyr, who worked closely with Nygaard and inherited his science fiction library, draws a parallel between Heinlein’s qualities as a writer with questionable political views and Nobel Prize laureate Knut Hamsun who was an outspoken admirer of Adolf Hitler and saw the German occupation of Norway as an opportunity for aligning national interests\(^4\). Heinlein may have been a brilliant science fiction writer, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that his political views would be consistent with those of information systems researchers concerned with participatory design, workplace democracy and concerns for how new technology should remedy social injustice.

Isaac Asimov, on the other hand, was one of Nygaard’s favourites, especially in terms of providing inspirations for understanding the network society. Nevertheless, although Asimov was a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, he was unhappy about what he considered an “irrational” viewpoint taken by many radical political activists from the late 1960s and onwards. For Nygaard, on the other hand, political activism was an important aspect of doing information systems research, and although he did not commit to the Marxist-Leninist views of friends like the political activist and

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2 Some years ago I found an interview on the internet, probably related to the 2007 release of *Blindpassasjer* on DVD, where Bing or Bringsværd mentioned *Space: 1999* being an inspirations for the series, along with *2001* and *Star Trek*. Unfortunately I have not been able to relocate the interview.
3 Nygaard, K. (1996). “Those were the days or heroic times are here again?” *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 94.
4 Personal communication, December 2014.

science fiction writer Tron Øgrim or the Maoist views of some of his PhD students⁵, he was deeply concerned with technology and social justice. In these aspects he saw Ursula K. Le Guin’s environmentalism and use of critical theory through a feminist perspective as an important inspiration for thinking about how to do information systems research.

One definition of Science Fiction (SF) is that it is fiction based on imagined future scientific or technological advances and major social or environmental changes⁶. Given this definition it is not surprising that films like Kubrick’s 2001 were of great importance both for politically engaged researchers like Nygaard and for the information systems community in general⁷, but the UiO science fiction society Aniara was primarily concerned with written science fiction as science fiction films were seldom shown on Norwegian cinemas and even less frequently on Norwegian television. The policy of the Norwegian Broadcasting Company in the sixties and seventies was to provide the viewers with a sound balance between education, information and entertainment. Although a few science fiction films like Truffault’s Fahrenheit 451 and Tarkovski’s Solaris were shown due to their importance as cinematic works of art, the consequence of having to make serious considerations when selecting what to show on TV resulted in popular science fiction being ignored. However, for those living in the most densely populated parts of the eastern part of the country, it was often possible to watch Swedish television. The policy of the Swedish Broadcasting Company was similar to the Norwegian policy, but having two TV channels and more liberal views on what was worthy of presenting to the public, this resulted in the occasional showing of science fiction. The first science fiction television series shown on Swedish television was the German series Raumpatrouille in the late sixties. The second series to be shown was Space: 1999 through the release of 10 episodes from the first season between May and July 1976 and another four episodes from the same season in December 1977⁸.

Considering the potential vacuum experienced by Aniara members in terms of only having heard and read about popular series like Doctor Who and Star Trek, it is not surprising that Space: 1999 made an impact on Bing & Bringsværd and others. As Nygaard was a next door private neighbour to Bing in the centre of Oslo, and they were in regular contact, it is not unlikely that Space: 1999 may have been mentioned as part of the conversation, although Nygaard does not mention Space: 1999 in his writing and nor does Hannemyr remember him talking about it. Regardless of whether Nygaard indulged in the series or not, in more recent years Space: 1999 has become an important reference in information systems research on Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) design⁹, Intelligent User Interfaces (IUI)¹⁰, and as a didactical tool for illustrating scientific theories and procedures and igniting debates among university students about scientific ethics, application and advocacy¹¹.

In terms of political relevance for information systems research, Space: 1999 has been identified as a cultural landmark in terms of how it reflects the historical demarcation point between the post-war period of economic growth and the disaster decades to follow¹², and the ideology of the television series articulates many of the political ideas and challenges that Scandinavian information systems research.

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⁵ In her 1996 PhD dissertation Leikny Øgrim refers to the discussion she had with Nygaard on scientific rationality and dialectical materialism, finding the differences of opinion stimulating and useful.
⁶ http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/science-fiction
researchers and intellectuals in general were struggling with. A unique feature of *Space: 1999* was that it analysed the cultural, social and historical context of the Edward Heath government in the UK, characterised by high unemployment rates, high inflation, industrial stagnation, mining strikes, conflicts in Northern Ireland and heated debates about joining the European Economic Community (EEC), plus the world-wide context of oil crisis, Watergate and Vietnam. It is a series that told stories about the future projected from a Western civilisation that was starting to question the technology optimism and dominant political views of the recent past.

In 1996 Pierre Fageolle tried to encapsulate these characteristics of *Space: 1999* by connecting the story of one of the final episodes of the first season with the quote from Michel Butor about science fiction being the mythology of our time, repeated on the top of this foreword. The writings of Fageolle are also extensively used by Keazor (2012) as he develops an eight-step argument about the relevance of *Space: 1999* for understanding the early seventies when Nygaard and other information systems researchers were using a *Space: 1999*-like ideology as a foundation for defining problems, designing solutions and interpreting the results. However, as Liardet has recently pointed out, the ideology embedded in the *Space: 1999* mythology is not only interesting as a way for understanding the past and present, it can also be seen as relevant for shaping the future:

S’appuyant sur une interprétation de qualité et une reconstitution plausible d’un univers futuriste (pour l’époque), COSMOS 1999 regroupe une vraie richesse thématique articulée, comme STAR TREK à laquelle elle fut souvent compare, autour d’un message humaniste empreint de valeurs universelles – la paix, le respect, la tolérance et l’acceptation de l’autre dans toute sa différence – agrémenté d’une introspection psychoanalytique inédit sur le petit écran, donnant toute sa puissance à un genre longtemps mésestimé, la science-fiction, ayant acquis la dimension d’une véritable mythologie moderne.

Science fiction often deals with a projected future, and when that future is eventually reached, one can observe the differences between the projection and the reality. How good was *Space: 1999* in predicting the realities of the actual year of 1999? Clearly most of the future events told from the 1974 perspective of when the series was made never happened in real life. But, as Ursula K. Le Guin points out, the purpose of science fiction is not necessarily to predict the future but rather to present possible future trajectories that can evolve as consequence of decisions we make today. In this way, Orwell’s 1984 is essentially about 1948, Kubrick’s 2001 is essentially about 1968, and Gerry Anderson’s 1999 is essentially about 1974. From an information technology perspective this is quite striking. Although the computer system they use on Moonbase Alpha was far more advanced than anything seen in 1974, the way it has been extrapolated from 1974 state-of-the-art technology is partly based on what one thought would be achievable through mainframe computer technology and partly based on the script writers’ lack of knowledge about computer science and information technology.

The reason Orwell’s 1984 and Kubrick’s 2001 are still considered important works of film and literature is because they are concerned with the political implications of technology on society though the projected level of technology that the makers of these works could come up with at the time they were made. This is a central point in John K. Balor’s book “SPACE: 1999 – the 40th anniversary celebration” by the way this second episode by episode (ExE) commentary and analysis by Online Alpha differs from the first ExE by being more focused on political subtext. This focus helps in explaining *Space: 1999* on a deeper level and thus clarifies what Fageolle, Keazor and Liardet hint at in terms of how the series can be seen as an equally important or perhaps an even more important mythology for the modernity of today than the mythologies developed by Orwell and Kubrick.

Unlike the books by Fageolle, Muir and Liardet, giving overviews and explanations of *Space: 1999* according to how the series is understood by different individuals, “SPACE: 1999 – The 40th anniversary celebration” by John K. Balor offers a step-by-step argument about the relevance of *Space: 1999* for understanding the early seventies when Nygaard and other information systems researchers were using a *Space: 1999*-like ideology as a foundation for defining problems, designing solutions and interpreting the results. However, as Liardet has recently pointed out, the ideology embedded in the *Space: 1999* mythology is not only interesting as a way for understanding the past and present, it can also be seen as relevant for shaping the future.

15 “How America’s Leading SF Authors are Shaping Your Future,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, (May 2014), http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-americas-leading-science-fiction-authors-are-shaping-your-future-180951169/
anniversary discussion” reflects the views of a group of people who are quite often in strong disagreement on how the series should be understood. Due to the nature of discussion and debate, the book also shows how individuals may disagree with themselves, how they change views as a consequence of debate, or how they persist on clinging to given views regardless of evidence in support of contrary positions. With many themes and ideas being discussed, using references to different theories and examples, many of the gaps left vacant after the 1997-98 discussion are filled. However, as is often the case in such situations, the filling of certain gaps also makes new ones visible. In terms of giving a definitive explanation of Space: 1999 through the lenses of critical theory and related perspectives, the book should be seen as indicating the top of an iceberg. In other words, despite making important contributions to ongoing discussions, the book should also be read as an explicit call for further study and debate.

In his foreword to the book about the first ExE discussion, Henry Keazor addresses the relevance of making the Online Alpha discussions available for a wider audience as the discussion approach is one of several important approaches that can be of use for disclosing the many sides, facets and contexts of a phenomenon like Space: 1999. Among the many different theoretical lenses and perspectives needed, he mentions a spectre of traditions going from film and media studies over history and sociology to literature and philosophy. In the writing of the foreword to the book about the second ExE discussion, I have wanted to add yet another approach to Keazor’s list, namely the action research approach as exemplified in the way Nygaard was advocating the use of science fiction of the Space: 1999-kind as inspiration and tool for diagnosing, designing, implementing and evaluating.

While it is easy to go along with Fageolle’s use of structuralist means for producing a method of understanding the philosophical, political and psychological aspects of Space: 1999, and then see how Keazor’s use of art history gives meaning to the series both in the context of 1974 and today, in order to see what this means in practical terms I believe the action research approach, exemplified in the works of Nygaard and colleagues within the Scandinavian tradition of information systems research, adds further dimensions to what we mean by Space: 1999 being a modernity-mythology for today.

Although Kristen Nygaard passed away in 2002, his legacy lives on. In a 2014 international workshop on innovation in information infrastructure, Professor Francesco Lanzara from the University of Bologna started his presentation of research on interfacing the national law systems within the European Union (EU) by paying tribute to Nygaard’s political analysis and activism with regards to the EU. In this context several episodes of Space: 1999 would be interesting for reflection, including “Black Sun”, “Guardian of Piri”, “Earthbound”, “Collision Course”, “Death’s Other Dominion” and “The Infernal Machine,” as they all deal specifically with the complexities and conflicts between computer-centric and people-centric perspectives, but of greater value is the series as a whole in terms of being a vessel for making the political analyses and debates of 1973-75 relevant in a contemporary context, as illustrated by this book covering the 2013-15 commentary and analysis of Space: 1999 by the Online Alpha community.

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