CHAPTER 2

The Moon as a Mirror to Man: Or, Lessons of Selenography (1969)

Note 2020: This was an English lecture at the international seminar "What after the Moon?" at the Trieste SF Film Festival in July 1969, where as one of a gaggle of SF writers and critics I watched the Moon landing. I translated it into Croatoserbian (published July 25) and lost the original, so this is a retranslation, probably less elegant than the original. On the epigraph: at that time I was much into the ironic delicacy of Laforgue, wrote on him and translated some of his poems into Croatoserbian. The chapter has been very slightly revised.

> Penser qu'on vivra jamais dans cet astre,
> Parfois me flanque un coup dans l'épigastre ….
> O Terre, o terre, o race humaine,
> Vous me faites bien de peine ….
> –Ah ! Je vous disais donc, et cent fois plutôt qu'une,
> Que j'avais le coeur mal, le coeur bien à la Lune.
> [Semi-prosaic translation: To think that we'll never live on this starry omen,/ Sometimes socks me straight to the abdomen/…/ O Earth, Earth, O human kind/ You give much sorrow to my mind/…/ Ah, I was telling you, a hundred times and soon,/ My heart was heavy, a heart in the ways of the Moon.]
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> Verse lines from Jules Laforgue, "Complaintes et imitations de Notre Dame de la Lune"

There is no doubt that a successful sojourn of people on the Moon will entail a great development of some specialized sciences, first of all astrophysics with geophysics and theoretical physics, then space medicine and medicine in general, etc. It is not necessary to dwell on this at length, not least because the specialists concerned won't fail to copiously remind us of it in their yearly requests for funds from governments and tax-payers in order to properly exploit these beautiful possibilities. Perhaps in the longer run it is more important that a successful

mastery of flights to the Moon is a precondition for any further exploration of our planetary system, and then, after some centuries, probably also of the nearest planetary systems of other Suns. And yet, even when these achievements are fully taken into account, acknowledged, and classified as an object of admiration, the basic question raised by the flight to the Moon remains: will the Moon be an inglorious repetition of the Renaissance discoveries that in the last instance led to a solidification and ramification of humanity's inimical division into nations and classes? In more general terms: *will the mastery over access to the Moon be used for material and moral liberation or enslavement of humanity*? Is the arrival on the Moon a utopian or an anti-utopian act?

This question about all our futures may be answered within various scientific and philosophical categories, but I'd like here to employ some lessons from *esthetics*, namely the Science Fiction (further SF) which dealt with travel to the Moon. Of course, literature is not science, so that even SF, although some of it claims to be based on extrapolating, has never been – nor does it pretend to be – a prophecy about the future of humanity. SF can therefore not be used in futurology in the same way a good historical novel may be used in teaching history. SF is not a "future history" but – as all literature – a sum of visions about potentially possible destinies of humanity; in the best case, SF could be a partial catalogue of imaginative possibilities, in this particular case, of the possibilities in using the Moon. *A question about the Moon implies an answer about Man*. The question "What after the Moon [landing]?" really implies: "What will happen to humanity, to each of us, if and when traffic with the Moon becomes something like a transatlantic flight?"

Such answers have often been given in SF from Lucian, the folk legends, Dante, and Ariosto on, I think most brilliantly in Cyrano's satire *The Empires and Provinces of the Moon* as far back as seventeenth-century rebellious libertinism. Since I've argued this at length in my book *Od Lukijana do Lunjika* (*From Lucian to the Lunik,* Zagreb 1964), perhaps it is at this moment most useful to look at the stances implied in the two best-known "Moon novels," Jules Verne's dilogy *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Around the Moon* and H.G. Wells's "scientific romance" *The First Men in the Moon*.

In Verne's vision the world is composed of discrete, physical, and quantified – in a word individual – units. The basic problem in this world is *how to link* such discrete units, people and their hardware – that is, locomotion or transport. Therefore, Verne's central interest is in *travelling*, as can be already read off the titles of his most famous works: in addition to the already cited Moon titles, for example, *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* or *Around the World in 80 Days*. The central literary device of Verne's is thus the fearless traveler euphorically identified with his transporting hardware – as Nemo with the "Nautilus" submarine, or Barbican, Nicholl, and Ardan with the "Columbiad" projectile to the Moon.

In Wells's vision, on the contrary, the world is not composed of elementary units but of continuous, biological, qualitative, collective, changeable processes. The basic problem for this vision is how to avoid the historical revenge for capitalism's sins against humans – that is, *the biological degeneration* of social functions and conscience (the software): as in a biological guise: as in the Morlocks and Eloi of *The Time Machine*, the Martians of *The War of the Worlds* or the Selenites of *The First Men in the Moon*. The central literary device of Wells's is the figure of the scientist as a suffering sorcerer's apprentice – the destiny of not only Cavor in the Moon but also the Time Traveler, Moreau, Griffin, and other protagonists of his most significant works.

Thus, Verne's horizon is as a rule closed in time, circular in space – his heroes return exactly to where they started from having changed nothing of importance – and primarily benevolent. It is as a rule (one significant exception will be mentioned later) bound by and to the Earth, so that the trip to the Moon is mostly a giant fair attraction, a kind of super-size merry-go-round where high up in the air funny and pathetic events come about for the consumption of the readers and watchers down below. The Earth is without any doubt the center of Verne's universe, and to cure the main ills of mankind it is merely necessary to bring about better communication: an ideology of Cook's Tours as global political ideal (with a Saint-Simonian pedigree).

Wells's horizon, on the contrary, is open to all the possibilities of the future and dangers of space. His openness involves vulnerability, it opens primarily on catastrophe: originally, he wanted to call his first SF story *The*

Anachronistic Man instead of *The Time Machine*. Transposing his personal and class feeling of history into ontology and global destinies, the human species looks to Wells increasingly as an anachronism. But the image of an anachronistic humanity has two faces. The face turned toward the author's present, a self-satisfied bourgeois empire, is a flame of critical warning and an active call for a wiser age. The face turned toward the author's future is the darkness of ceaseless suffering, and his protagonists become helpless witnesses and victims. In his flight to the Moon, the original reader's present participates of both.

In other words, Verne felt no need for any radical Novum; Wells's Novum is present but terrible, it is the Future personified as a horrifying, inhuman biological genus of Selenites, Martians, Crabs (or the dogmatic Blind in "The Valley of the Blind"). Verne did not want or need a vision of a radically different future (at least not in his main phase in the middle of the second half of the nineteenth century – later a final, different, black Jules Verne also appears). Wells could not but show the destructive future, while avoiding to delve deeper into its causal nexus. The end of his stories is therefore inconclusive and factitious: Dr. Moreau's island is left to its fate, the Martians are conveniently destroyed by bacteria, and the connection with Cavor on the Moon breaks abruptly off, leaving us to guess what finally happened to him. The future within the world of the story is disposed of, but this is so unconvincing that it remains hanging over the reader like the sword of Damocles: a sensational menace coming up from the deepest mythical fears of humanity that can at any moment fall down on his head.

Yet for all the differences between Verne's and Wells's vision, they both belong to the humanist mainstream of SF as an artistic reflection on other possibilities and lateral worlds. Their visions thus share some important, basic similarities. There is an important exception to Verne's benevolence and to the optimism of his central phase: there is one branch of human affairs toward which his stance was always critical, even satirical. Whoever has read *From the Earth to the Moon* must have been impressed by the grotesque image of the Baltimore Gun Club with its symbolically crippled members, whose only joy in life is fabrication of bigger and more destructive guns and explosives. *War* and *militarism* are Verne's deepest aversion, so that Captain Nemo uses the treasure found on the bottom of

the sea to help the liberation movement of the Greek people, as a pledge of friendship between free peoples (we need more such SF captains today). And the deepest anxieties of Wells were tied to inter "racial" violence: Morlocks against Eloi, Selenites against Cavor, Martians destroying humanity as the Whites – Wells expressly makes the parallel – destroyed the "darker" races of newly discovered and conquered regions. The knowledge that the Nazi V2 rockets and the ICBMs are the main *basis*, and the erection of orbital and Lunar stations for nationalist prestige the main *reason*, for investigating the Moon, for this wondrous and in some ways majestic enterprise which we are witnessing these days – this knowledge would fill Verne and Wells and all the other writers in the "selenographic" or Moon-describing tradition (from Lucian and Plutarch by way of Kepler and Godwin to the great Cyrano) with black horror and revulsion.

In sum, we can use Verne and Wells and the whole artistic-cum-cognitive tradition of selenography as a yardstick for the mendacity of the pseudo-scientific brainwashing to which we are in these days treated through uncounted cubic meters of printers' ink and kilowatts of radio and TV energy. This euphoria, as in a patient anesthetized with "laughing gas," is *lying* in the sense of Hegel's observation that only what is whole is true (*das Wahre ist das Ganze*), that no single empirical fact may be taken at its face value without factoring in the context in which it happens. What is the context of the Moon landing is so well known that it would be almost ridiculous to mention it again, were it not indispensable because of the strange circumstance that it has been passed under silence in all the printed and electronic emissions. The context of the Moon enterprise ranges from wars in West Asia and Biafra to "smaller" killings whose victims barely surpass some hundreds per week, such as those in Central America, in Southern Africa, and in a dozen more underground and guerrilla movements, not omitting Greece (so beloved by Captain Nemo) and Northern Ireland. It is, furthermore, the context of mass violent military repressions from Czechoslovakia to Argentina and from Malaya to Brazil. It is the context in which hundreds of thousands of people are hunted as wild animals by means of the most sophisticated technologies of killing, from infrared rays and helicopters to Flying Fortresses and chemical defoliation agents – precisely as Wells foresaw for his Martians' behavior toward people (the

Martians were, however, naively metaphorical, they only drank human blood …). In order not to prolong this list indefinitely, let me adduce only one central fact: hundreds of millions of people (to repeat: probably more than 1,000,000.000), *one billion people* hunger, and have a median life expectancy of between twenty-five and thirty years. In this context there is no doubt that both Verne and Wells would hold that the Moon landing, this great achievement of human imagination and technique, is used for very ambiguous and potentially very dangerous goals.

The propaganda machines to which we are these days so uncritically subjected like to compare the landing on the Moon to the first animal venture on dry land. If only this were so! Or even, if only we could really draw a parallel to Columbus's caravels which, when all is said and done, did discover (at least for Europe) a whole New World with all its wonders! But if history is any teacher, we have to fear that the best parallel is, at this moment and in this context, the also fantastic imaginative reach and invention of the airplane. The airplane could be a great liberator of humanity, the eraser of frontiers rendering possible for each person to live where he wished when she so wished. And yet, besides enabling businessmen and diplomats to lie to each other more quickly, the airplane has intervened into human history – at least up to now – mainly to enable quicker and much huger mass slaughtering of people. The ape sat himself down in the airplane, wrote Miroslav Krleža in the 1930s, and started to throw bombs. I acknowledge that by the way this invention has contributed to really helpful meetings of people and landscapes (I flew here from Canada). But it is dubious that the airplane has up to now decisively contributed to people's realization of their generic being, as Feuerbach and Marx would say, or to the homonization of Sapiens, as Teilhard would say. In spite of all racket from the propagandist drums and tam-tams of the modern Leviathans – States, armies, and "ethically neutral" sciences – it is imperative to see and to say that the Moon landing was not effected by people *tout court* but by the equivalent of *colonels of the imperial armies*, while its *generals* direct the venture.

As long as this is so – and it is today so without any doubt – and quite irrespective of the uniforms worn by all these generals and colonels, it is the duty of at least an intellectual to take a critical stance toward the

enterprise of Apollo 11 (and all such further Soviet or US enterprises). A critique does not mean a reactionary refusal – since Man should not unglue himself from this Earth on which God put him. I'm in principle a strong supporter of interplanetary and interstellar flights, and I've been writing about such a literature for fifteen years now. Yet the Moon is still, as the old Persian legend had it, only a mirror of Earth. At this moment, it is a hugely magnified mirror which shows us the human image more clearly than at any time since Plutarch wrote "About the Face on the Moon" (*De facie in orbe lunari*). This landing on the Moon is therefore not centrally a matter of technology: the technology enables a clearer envisioning of the human face. As I suggested at the beginning, the question about the Moon implies an answer about the humans. The question about the Moon is a question about liberation or enslavement of the species Homo. History is supposed to be a teacher: if futurology has any point, it could learn from both Verne and Wells that they didn't believe in a Moon that would magically liberate their protagonists. Verne's heroes don't reach the Moon, which is why all ends happily; Wells's reach it and find on it a caricature of technocratic capitalism, which is why all ends unhappily.

Such prefigurations in SF, which is thereby defined as a vanguard of a literature oriented toward the human future, are not without interest precisely in these days, when fantastic promises hide fantastic menaces. Thus, *selenographic fiction is not the future history of the Moon, but it is a warning against future possibilities of history on Earth.*