

Preface: Trafalgar Square, 19/20 July 1969

Toward evening on Saturday, the 19th of July 1969, Trafalgar Square filled with a mostly youthful crowd. Only nine months earlier the square, historic site of both protest and celebration, had been packed with an agitated throng opposed to the Vietnam War and its technology of death, many of whom marched off to what proved to be the last of the great demonstrations at the American embassy in Grosvenor Square. This expectant, if anxious, crowd, however, had assembled to cheer the success of American technology, and to celebrate, as it were, the humanism of its modernity. A giant television screen had been erected before the National Gallery on the square's north side where, a little past 9:00 p.m. London time, live satellite images from NASA's space center in Houston would play out the drama of *Apollo XI's* Moon landing. For the millions of others who would watch crowded around the family telly—a larger audience than that for the Queen's coronation in 1953 and probably rivaling the 25 million or so who watched Churchill's funeral in 1965—the event was, as for hundreds of millions around the world, high drama unfolding in their sitting rooms, and when it was over the national grid reported a critical surge of demand as, it was said, millions of electric tea kettles were simultaneously set to boil. Each of the three television channels in Britain scheduled intensive coverage for Saturday night and Sunday morning, and substantial coverage during the following three days before the *Apollo* crew returned to Earth.

By most accounts,¹ it was the commercial channel ITV, led by six hours of London Weekend Television's David Frost all Saturday night, that scored the best, at least most entertaining, reportage. As Michael Palin, who had watched the *Apollo* blastoff on the 16th and then all night on the 19th/20th, recalled, "The extraordinary thing about the evening" was that ITV somehow contrived to fill all those hours before Armstrong stepped out onto the Moon's surface.² BBC1 disappointingly chose to continue its regular programming up to the critical descent, shifting from *The Black and White Minstrel Show* just as the landing module separated from its mother ship. Instead of a night of expert talking heads interspersed with live feed from NASA, Frost chose a variety show format of "chat

and audience participation” with performing celebrities like Cilla Black, Engelbert Humperdink, and Cliff Richards, while ITV cameras went to Trafalgar Square to interview among the crowd there. Amid commercials for dog food, soft drinks, toilet soap, corn flakes, and detergents, there was Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who chose ITV to address the nation, an enthusiastic eighty-six-year-old Dame Sybil Thorndike, telephone conversations with viewers, and an interview with a man who had in 1964 placed a £10 bet that Americans would land on the Moon by 1970 and now stood ready to win £10,000. Some thought all this trivializing, and the American science fiction writer Ray Bradbury walked out of the London Weekend Studios rather than participate in what he regarded as a vulgar irrelevance. But many apparently found Frost’s show to be innovative and successful in breaking “the long presentation of facts.” It was also the only program to raise in a sustained way the core issue of whether manned spaceflight was actually worth the expense. Around midnight a panel debated this, with the historian A. J. P. Taylor and the American black entertainer Sammy Davis, Junior, together (“a somewhat bizarre alliance” Michael Billington reasonably thought) attacking the value of lunar exploration. In the end, of course, it was what Peter Black, television reviewer for the *Daily Mail* called “those incredible flat American voices” from NASA and the Apollo mission itself, that provided the real drama, “terrific waves of anxiety and relief,” “when one lost all awareness of anything not coming out of the TV screen.”³

As it happened, those who watched amid the crowd in Trafalgar Square or from their sitting rooms had a better view than the party of American residents and tourists who were to assemble in the embassy’s theater to watch live coverage there in Grosvenor Square. As the critical time approached the embassy’s own internal power failed. Elsewhere there were myriad television parties public and private. The *Evening Standard* arranged a “Moon breakfast” at the Savoy where the expatriate painter David Hockney declared himself to be unimpressed with it all (“I fell asleep”), while its own advertisements, like ITV’s commercials, eagerly exploited the media event of the century. A full-page ad of the Moon wreathed in cigarette smoke: “Congratulations from W. D. & H. D. Wills, pacemakers in tobacco on the historic achievement of Apollo XI.”⁴

The era of satellite-relayed telecommunications that made the Moon landing an event of worldwide simultaneity had begun seven years earlier, on 11 July 1962, when the American AT&T *Telstar* satellite beamed its first live pictures to the British receiving station at Goonhilly in Cornwall. As one observer there at the receiving dish later recalled, “You felt as if you were really at the centre of something.” Among some others, however, the historic moment evoked reflections of a rather different kind. The Conservative MP for Morecambe and Lonsdale, Basil de Ferranti, was simply annoyed that “the Americans had done it all. What a pity that we could not have been the pioneers as we always used to be.”⁵

In Britain, satellite transmission itself did not mean a sudden access to American television; canned U.S. programs were already commonplace on both BBC and ITV. But it did presage less expensive and easier telephone traffic, the immediacy of live transmission, and generally a greater density of exposure to American popular culture. If the satellite revolution meant, potentially at any rate, wider and more immediate communication into as well as from the United States, the issue of how American life might be impacted by greater access to international news and sport was much less compelling than what easier access to America might mean for others. Two days after *Telstar* began its limited service (it was not in geosynchronous orbit and could relay only while in "sight"), the *Daily Telegraph* repeated concerns they claimed had been voiced in the States: "What impression of American life will be given when [both good and bad American programming] is a daily reality?"⁶

The Hughes Aircraft Company's *Syncom 2*, the first communications satellite in geosynchronous orbit (allowing round-the-clock contact), followed in July the next year. In 1965 Hughes's *Early Bird* satellite offered free television exchange for a few months, but then the international consortium imposed high charges that deterred commercial use until Atlantic-stationary *Intelsat IIIs* greatly increased capacity and lowered cost in the years after 1968. In Britain, where the G.P.O. had signed on as an original member of the *Telstar* group, receptor dishes proliferated in Cornwall (near Poldhu, where Marconi's radio mast had sent the first transatlantic message in 1901). They were given whimsical Camelot names—Arthur, Guinevere, and Merlin—and quickly became popular tourist sites.

In January 1965, all the U.S. networks were able to offer Americans intermittent, fifteen-minute live broadcasts of the Churchill funeral as *Telstar* swung into range. By 1968, when reception from the Intel system was continuous, the British could see live broadcasts of the presidential election of that year, and in the summer of 1969 early-rising American tennis fans could watch Rod Laver defeat John Newcomb live at Wimbledon. As Laver would later boast to Bud Collins, "Maybe more people watched me on this day in 1969 than ever watched all the tennis matches ever played before because Tel-Star [*sic*] was carrying it around the world."⁷ By that time the system had doubled its capacity; there were further improvements the following year, and in the seventies live broadcasting became relatively cheap and commonplace. There were also significant reductions in the cost of telephone communication, and international direct dialing between Britain and North America was introduced in 1970.⁸

The Moon landing, nearly everyone agreed, was somehow an era-defining event, but what, exactly, did it mean? On an emotional level it was simply science fiction and boys' adventure fantasy made real, as Michael Palin put down in his diary: "To bed at 5.00 with the image in my mind of men in spacesuits . . . just like the images in my mind after reading Dan Dare in the old *Eagle* comics—only

this time it's true."⁹ British dreams and American fact? Indeed, the ability to view the landing, live, in Britain, owed something perhaps to the British science fiction writer and futurologist Arthur Clarke, who had anticipated the synchronous orbit communications satellite as early as 1945.¹⁰ But Britain's own drive to modernization, most graphically represented perhaps in London by the thrusting G.P.O. tower with its microwave transmitters, had seemed to falter by the late sixties, and it was little consolation to observe, as Reginald Turnill, the BBC's man in Houston during the *Apollo XI* drama, improbably did to a Radio 4 audience in December, that the "astonishing thing about America's post-Apollo space plans is that they are being drawn up largely by Englishmen."¹¹

There was some irony, perhaps, in the fact that the same satellite technology that brought the Moon landing from Houston to London, had four years earlier sent to an expectant American audience live images of the funeral of "the greatest Englishman"—the End of Empire versus the Dawn of the Space Age. For Americans, this was a Britain of the past, heritage Britain, an anticipation perhaps, amid the media hype of "swinging London," of the coming decade's fascination not with British Pop but with transatlantic nostalgia. For the British viewing the Apollo mission, satellites brought an America of thundering Saturn rockets, of power and modernity, and if Britain could reciprocate by at least receiving those signals, as a plugged-in partner, the closest it itself could actually get to space travel was the London studio where the American director Stanley Kubrick had turned Arthur Clarke's fiction, *2001, A Space Odyssey*, into at least celluloid reality.

As image and metaphor, televisual astronauts of course floated free of narrow national readings. *Apollo VIII's* picture of a distant, fragile Earth energized a dawning transatlantic radical ecology movement, while the Anglo-American feminist Mary Ellman, in 1968, wrote of the astronaut's space-suited body—awkward and encumbered "as the body of a pregnant woman"—revealing man's physical strength to be "gratuitous."¹² For some, man's triumphal conquest of space exposed his analogous inability to conquer poverty, injustice, and social inequality at home on Earth. Sammy Davis, in the Moon-landing night debate, gave merely a faint echo of Black Power's much more radical take on warped American priorities.

In fact, the euphoric excitement of the moment produced quite quickly, in Britain, a backwash of sometimes sour reflections about what it revealed about the special relationship. In November, veteran journalist William Hardcastle, in an article in the BBC's *The Listener* entitled "Mid-Atlantic," mused whether "[in] one sense . . . this [the broadcast of Americans on the Moon] is a propaganda exercise, a commercial for America's overweening technological expertise." Hardcastle was expressing less provocatively what the technophobic countercultural press in both the United States and Britain was already saying. In the August/September issue of the underground monthly *OZ*, Bob Hughes had written that the *Apollo* landing

had been “the greatest and most expensive public relations exercise in the history of man,” one that was, he thought, saturated with religious parody and obsolete symbols of nationalism and patriotism.¹³

Readings of the Moon landing as emblematic of a future of technological progress clashed from the start with contrasting readings that dwelt on the irony of American modernity in space and American atavism in Vietnam and in its burning ghettos, the contrast of power and impotence, the contradictions between a NASA-inspired future techno-utopia and a descent into a domestic dystopia of assassination, race-war, and anarchy. The summer of the Moon landing news from the United States was full of Black Power anger, a radical Women’s Liberation movement, and the explosion of the Stonewall Riot and Gay Lib demos in New York City, while in Chicago Judge Hoffmann was preparing a media-circus show trial for the Chicago Eight. For many observers, the decade’s close suggested that the conquest of the Moon might be an end rather than a beginning, the concluding chapter of an era defined by Kennedy-optimism and the missionary project of American-style modernization. Considered thusly, the failure of the internal power at Saarinen’s modernist embassy on this night of all nights was as symbolic as that of the embattled defense of the modern high-rise embassy in Saigon during Tet.

Christopher Booker, in his 1969 diatribe against the “gigantic ‘vitality-fantasy’” of “swinging London” and countercultural revolution, *The Neophiliacs*, anticipated the exhaustion of what he called the twentieth century’s “American dream . . . the most powerful ‘vitality image’ in the world.” The novelist J. G. Ballard, in an interview six years later, echoed more sympathetically this sense of closure in his own recollections of 1969: “Armstrong landing on the moon. That was a stupendous event. I thought the psychological reverberations would be enormous . . . In fact it was almost nil . . . Clearly the Space Age is over.” The Moon landing, viewed from Trafalgar Square, is then a moment that can be unpacked in a number of different ways. Most obviously it made a graphic statement about a common humanity—but also about a shrinking Atlantic and American technological hegemony. If Anglo-American viewing was coparticipation, as in so much else it was the British receiving and the Americans giving. It was an event that celebrated, if in those flat American tones, the common language of a medium that made each accessible to the other as never before, and yet it highlighted difference. As the first lines of a British novel published shortly after the landing put it, “In the same year that Man first flew to the moon and the last American soldier left Vietnam there were still corners of England where lived men and women who had never travelled more than fifteen miles from their own homes.”¹⁴