

## Man on the Moon

*A short, critical analysis of Neil Armstrong's photograph from the Apollo 11 mission*

*"...a wider problematic of human- nonhuman relations, and raise the politico-ethical question of human responsibility in a world in which the agency of the majority of actants— such as wind, meteorites, rain, or earthquakes—goes beyond that of human decision or will, even if it may be influenced by human action. The question of human responsibility in the universe, in which we are quintessentially entangled on both a cellular and a cosmic level (with all of us being “made of starstuff,” as Carl Sagan remarked in his documentary TV series Cosmos), is an important one.”*  
(Zylinska, 2017, p.58)

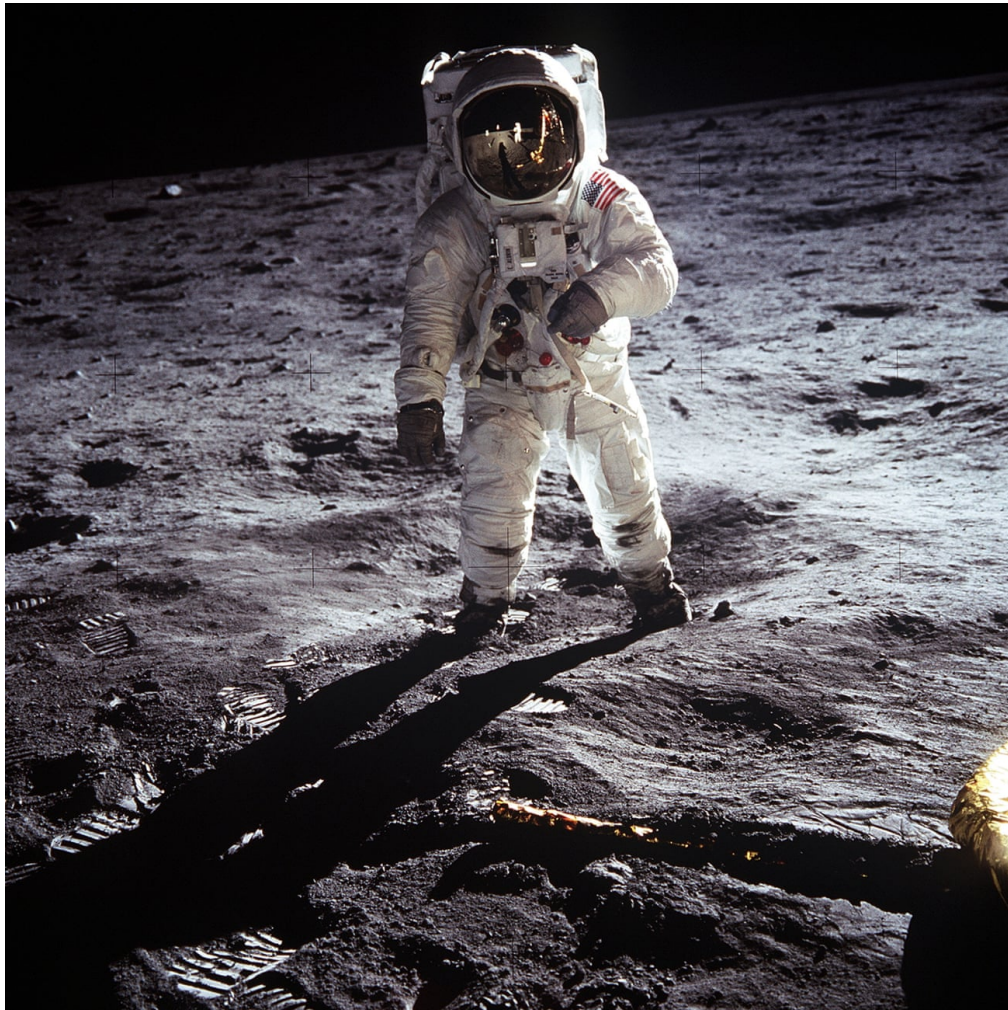


Image 1

The Moon ☽ ; our planet's only natural satellite shadowing Earth and serving as its sidekick, like the biblical Eve to Adam, is again subject of popular discourse both within and beyond astronomical research, as the first Moon landing called the Apollo 11 project by NASA is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2019. This paramount event of the history of humankind was carried out on the 20th July, 1969 by two American astronauts, Neil A. Armstrong and Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin Jr. It was a success for scientific research, space engineering, political relations, and social progress. Despite the controversies around the legitimacy of the Moon landing, that have been debated on for decades, there is a substantial amount of photographic material documenting some significant momentums of the mission. One of these, according to the journalist Jonathan Jones, can be perceived as "one of the revolutionary artistic masterpieces of the 20th century" (Jones, 2019). The photo in question is Armstrong's double-horizon portrait of his colleague, Aldrin, bearing the title: *A triumph of human consciousness in an otherwise mindless universe* (Image 1).

In his article for *The Guardian* ("The greatest photos ever? Why the moon landing shots are artistic masterpieces"), Jones argues, amongst other things, that the significance of this portrait is in its all-encompassing power. In his unisex spacesuit and faceless figure Aldrin becomes a symbol for all men and women on Earth, while the uncanny landscape surrounding him is the object of discovery, representing everything non-human, but potentially governed by our species. (Jones, 2019)

Even though he is described by Jones as being genderless and embodying each one of us, my counterargument is that the portrait is very much a symbol of hegemonic masculinity. Already indicated by the title of the photo, the "triumph" over the natural spheres, also perceived as an act of homogenous control, marks the affinity of the human species in relation to the rest of the universe. The ultimate heroic mission of bringing rational consciousness to what is deemed primal and unpredictable, might ring a familiar bell for those engaged in critical gender theory, as it is clearly derived from the same source as the disabling of femininity in our virile world. This question, however, might remain invisible to the masters of the cosmos, who can freely move around spaces, without having to encounter their own limitations of privilege.

For the following six lunar journeys where a total of twelve astronauts have set their feet on the Moon, not one of them were women or non-binary individuals. The naming of the missions is already a telling choice; Apollo in Greek mythology is the male deity of the sun, light, knowledge, order and agriculture, along many other things, but essentially the epitome of physical superiority and moral virtue. Aldrin and Armstrong, the two pivotal figures of the Apollo 11 mission, carry this legacy with them together with the weight of their cultural backgrounds. The portrait taken by Armstrong is a complex one, both visually and conceptually. It was exposed with a specially made Hasselblad camera, which, together with the photographer and the rest of the technical equipment, are all reflected on the surface of Aldrin's space helmet. The image has been composed so that the scale of the Moon in relation to the size of the portrayed person is distorted, as the central figure is still occupying most of the perceived space. The horizon behind both astronauts merge into a seamless line (supplemented by the reflection), while their non-identifiable faces appear to be looking at each other. They are aliens on a celestial body that has not encountered human life before. They launched a history (both social and photographic), that was already conceived with a specific agenda: colonizing the Moon. Our planet's only Moon. However, as oppose to previous explorers, like Christopher Columbus, the Apollo 11 crew already had an idea of what they would find on this uninhabited land.

As noted by Tanya Sheehan, photographic meaning has been produced via the masculine emphasis on "taking", in contrast to the feminine associations of "making", although the opposite analogy can be argued for as well, *taking* understood as a passive verb, while *making* as an active one. This gendered politics in the discourse of photographic history has been the foundation to the exclusion of the latter sex, while also informing the standard aesthetic taste for lens-based media (Sheehan, 2014, p.131). In this particular context photography takes the status of an epistemic medium that is both a means of technology and journalism. However, reinterpreting a fifty-year-old scientific documentation is a delicate quest, due to our current perspective accounted to the shifting socio-political climate. Nevertheless, stating that such a historically loaded photograph would be a general representation of humankind – treatment of representation as a vernacular phenomenon – fails to address its infringement of diversity and only succeeds in underpinning the same Western, white, middle-class patriarchal system that it is employed by.

Ironically enough, the next NASA Moon program including humans again has been named Artemis, another figure of Greek mythology who was not only the twin sister of Apollo, but also the goddess of the Moon and chastity. This time, NASA officials have stated their intention to send the first woman to the Moon, while also considering to execute the mission with an all-female crew. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this step does not lessen the troublesome objective of colonialization through a self-proclaimed right. Even though this notion might advance from leaving the sole role of spectatorship to women, it still does not let go of the violent practice of demarcating space, whether social, public, natural or even outer.

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Ⓜ : intentionally written with a capital 'M' throughout the whole essay to honour it with some agency

## Illustration

### Image 1:

NASA, 1969, *A triumph of human consciousness in an otherwise mindless universe*, Image, viewed on 1 December 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jul/17/greatest-photos-ever-moon-landing-shots-artistic-masterpieces>>.

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