

Csaba Prónai: Has a Man Ever Been on the Moon or Not? (1993)

Motto: 'It's a wonderful world!'
(Louis Armstrong)

There is a story which comes from Luiz Boglár the famous Hungarian anthropologist born in Brazil. Once upon a time, somewhere in South America he mentioned to an Indian man that white man had been on the moon. What is so interesting about this story, the Indian asked, our shaman goes there almost every night.

And indeed, from a cultural anthropological point of view we can not say that the statement of this Indian man has less truth in it than „the story of the white man”. In this paper I will try to talk about this event, which allegedly belongs to „the history of mankind” (as it is usually said).

However my question doesn't contend to be an epistemological one. That is, I'm not interested in the question „Has a man ever really been on the moon or not?”. Instead, I wish to address the following set of questions:

1. Why do we think that we have ever been there?
2. What kind of evidence have we got concerning what really took place in 1969?
3. I want to show that the above mentioned evidence can be 'less true' than 'the truth'.
4. And finally: what *is* the moon landing anyway?

Let see the first point: Why do we know what we don't know?

Everybody 'knows' – in 'white man's culture' – that Man has been on the moon. But you can find fewer people who can explain where exactly this knowledge derives from. In our everyday life this story is not a historical question. That is it is not a scientific problem and not a theological one either. The 'fact' that Neil Armstrong was on the Moon on 21 July, 1969 belongs 'naturally' to our identity. We don't actually know it – we believe in it.

The question is what kind of communication process can build up this particular knowledge in our mind. This is my second point: what kind of things prove that this is what happened.

First of all there are the memoirs, chronicles and chronologies, the handbooks and encyclopedias, and we must not forget about the schoolbooks which have also taken us in... And there are also the papers.

Besides, in our culture we have to mention three other types of media which play a major role in constructing the world in our mind: radio, film and television. Photographs or films are considered 'the Truth', as in the case of identity cards. Radio and television can connect you straight to the event and you. You can be 'there' where 'history is being made', without you actually having to be present.

Is this then 'our wonderful top technology'?

What is the problem with all of these media is what I wish to discuss under my third point.

Neither writers nor reporters were on the moon with Neil Armstrong. Only the memoir writer can be considered proper eyewitnesses. In our case that means that there are only two people in the whole wide world who can really know what happened on the Moon at 03:57 CET on 21 July 1969: Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin (Michael Collins never actually set foot on the Moon!). So we can safely say it is a real secret.

And what about films?

You can see photographs of Nessie the Loch Ness Monster¹ or of the Yeti's footprint² – similarly to Armstrong's footprints³ –, but can these be considered 'evidence', that is can they prove what is 'true' and what is not?

In one of Margaret Mead's books there is a photo from Houston, Texas of a simulated Moon landing taken by Ken Heyman⁴. Also, there is a simulated Mars landing in the film 'Capricorn One'⁵.

As we know from Antonioni's 'Blow Up', shot in 1966, a story depends on the material which carries it. As Foucault⁶ puts it, 'everything vibrates in front of our eyes in uncertain light'. The worry of our age is that the real world has been superseded and replaced by a world of images, as Susan Sontag⁷ wrote.

On 30 October 1938 thousands of Americans panicked when they heard the introducing sentences of Orson Welles's radio adaptation of 'Invasion from Mars' by H. G. Wells. (For more on this topic see Hadley Cantril's famous panic study⁸.) Similarly, there was a panic reaction on 20 February 1959 in London, after the radio announcer spoke about a hostile spaceship approaching Earth to introduce the TV play 'Sunset'⁹.

What the two stories have in common is that they both exemplify how modern media have opened up unlimited simulation spaces for stories and pictures, as Baudrillard puts it¹⁰.

What actually happened on the moon on the 21st of July in 1969 may have been just anything, only one thing is sure: we believed it. Sometimes television – that Eliot Aronson¹¹ calls 'the instrument with big power' in his *Social Animal* and McLuhan¹² calls 'timid giant' in his 'Understanding Media' – is not interested in what happens in 'reality'. As Adorno¹³ says, television is interested in the positive and negative messages.

What could we see in Armstrong's moon landing that we could actually see 'with our own eyes' on the TV screen? This already takes us to my last point: What is the moon landing, in actual fact? It was, of course, a show, which was played with the intention to confirm our human identity and to celebrate 'our wonderful history' with 'our wonderful technology'. A show created from Neil Armstrong's sentence, 'That's one small step for a man... but a giant leap for mankind'¹⁴. It is quite incredible that a man in such a strange situation should be able to speak so naturally, eloquently and wisely. Thus it was achieved that the new medium could even form an audiovisual contact between the people on the Earth and the 'luna incognita'. All this means that the story of the moon landing could operate simply as the breaking the news of a new discovery, just like that of Sir Edmund Hillary – but it could also operate as something

that is capable of changing people's attitude by this living contact, as P. H. Tannenbaum says¹⁵.

Believing this story implied, in the first place, believing that 'mankind ranks highest in the great chain of being' and, secondly, according to Riva Castelman¹⁶, believing in television as such. Therefore the story of Armstrong's moon landing can be considered 'the truth', but after Roland Barthes¹⁷, we can also call it a myth that was performed in reality. It is no coincidence this story has made it into Andy Warhol's pantheon (under the title 'Moonwalk'), to join the images of Albert Einstein, Jane Fonda, Mao Zedong, Lenin, Mickey Mouse as well as Marilyn Monroe. All of these can be called a 'myth' or the 'truth'. The myth of the moon landing of 1969 is a well-functioning one, made in/by the USA.

P.S.: At first I wrote Louis Armstrong rather than Neil Armstrong by mistake. Or it seemed a mistake anyway. Now I see it was not one. It is possible that Louis Armstrong has been on the moon, or Salvador Dalí has been on the moon, as he has stated it himself. It depends on your 'communication', on your 'culture', on the 'communication process of your culture', etc. And you can easily believe that Louis is walking up there when you are listening to his music on a warm summer night when it's full moon...

¹ Witchell, Nicholas: *The Loch Ness Story*. Corgi Books. 1989.

² Parker, Derek – Julia Derek: *Atlas of the Supernatural*. Mitchell Beazley. 1990.

³ First Explorers on the Moon. *The Incredible Story of Apollo 11*. National Geography. 1969/12: 736.

⁴ Mead, Margaret: *World Enough. Rethinking of Future*. Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown and Company. 1975: 185.

⁵ Directed by Peter Hyams, in 1977.

⁶ Foucault, Michel: *La folie, l'absence d'œuvre*. Gallimard. 1972.

⁷ Sontag, Susan: *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1973.

⁸ Cantril, Hadley: *The Invasion from Mars. A Study in the Psychology of Panic*. Princeton University Press. 1940.

⁹ Film, Színház, Muzsika. 1969. július 26: 26.

¹⁰ Lecture from Jean Baudrillard. Freie Universität, Berlin. 1984.

¹¹ Aronson, Elliot: *The Social Animal*. New York/Oxford: W. H. Freeman and Company. 1984.

¹² McLuhan, Marshall: *Understanding Media*. New York/Toronto/London. 1976.

¹³ Adorno, Theodor-Wisengrund: *Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture*. In: *Mass Communication*. Ed. By Wilbur Schramm. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1960: 610.

¹⁴ Ryan, Peter: *The Invasion of the Moon (1957-70)*. Revised and enlarged edition. Penguin Books. 1971: 120.

¹⁵ Tannenbaum, Percy H.: *Research Related to Television Production: A Report on Three Projects*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation. 1980.

¹⁶ Castelman, Riva: *Andy Warhol sokszorosított grafikái*. In *Andy Warhol Nyomatok*. Budapest: Műcsarnok. 1991. február 13-március 24.: 28.

¹⁷ Barthes, Roland: *Mythologies*. Éditions du Seuil. 1957.