



Man on the Moon: Edwin Aldrin photographed by Neil Armstrong (reflected in his visor).

of humanity and to its dangers. When the new oceans were discovered, they were opened to colonization, to the abuse of power and to the enslavement of the indigenous peoples who were taken to Spain in chains. Whole communities on some Caribbean islands were wiped out. The conquest of the moon, in turn, may give way to a meaningless "war of the galaxies".

Columbus believed he had found the gateway to Paradise -Paradise regained- when he contemplated the beauty of the new continent and the mouth of the powerful river flowing into the Gulf of Paria. But the ravages of egoism and the black-white dichotomy of colonialism soon put an end to this paradise. When the time was ripe, the colonized countries sought their independence under the banner of liberty and justice, their guarantee of freedom and peaceful coexistence.

In the meantime, the Old World was busy destroying itself in armed conflicts, which came to be known as "world wars" in this century but were more like "European civil wars". On account of scientific and technological advances, the moon was still open to the human race. However, space was also open to destruction, to thermo-nuclear war and to the possibility of a "nuclear winter" for everybody, since there can no longer be any victors.

**HERE MEN FROM THE PLANET EARTH
FIRST SET FOOT UPON THE MOON
JULY 1969, A.D.**

**NEIL A. ARMSTRONG
ASTRONAUT**

**MICHAEL COLLINS
ASTRONAUT**

**EDWIN E. ALDRIN
ASTRONAUT**

**RICHARD NIXON
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

On October 12, 1492, the walls of the "non plus ultra" came tumbling down. Ever since that time, the human race has lived within the cloisters of this planet. In July, 1969, the walls of "the nothing beyond" collapsed again as the human race began its conquest of open space, if we can survive the ever-present threat of a thermo-nuclear holocaust.

Serendipity versus science

While each step of the astronauts' voyage to the moon was calculated with precision, Columbus' journey was fraught with uncertainties. The former was monitored with technological rigor; the latter was an act of pure imagination since the so-called scientific speculations were proved wrong.

The first ships headed into mysterious waters, into the unknown. Nobody knew anything about the prevailing winds and currents. The rudimentary nautical instruments consisted of an astrolabe, a cross staff and a quadrant. The compass had deviated during the voyage; it was only strength of conviction, inspired by the subtleties of the old poems, that enabled Columbus to maintain command and impose his will in the face of adversity.



Salvador Dalí, Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.



Columbus finally convinces Queen Isabella of Spain to support his Indies project.

There were two counts of the leagues covered: the accurate one for himself and the official one for the crews. Despite his precaution, the crews mutinied over the course they were set on during the later stages of the voyage. On the edge of human resistance, the inspired visionary won his battle. The Admiral of the High Seas was a good cosmographer, an experienced sailor, a dreamer, a courageous man and an excellent "starwatcher".

For the success of their mission the astronauts relied on the support of researchers, technicians and modern machinery. The glory went to the group who planned the voyage, the moon landing and the return to earth with exact timing. Columbus, however, was a lonely dreamer. Apart from maps, charts and erroneous speculations, he could rely on no one. It was serendipity and poetic intuition that opened the seas to the human race.

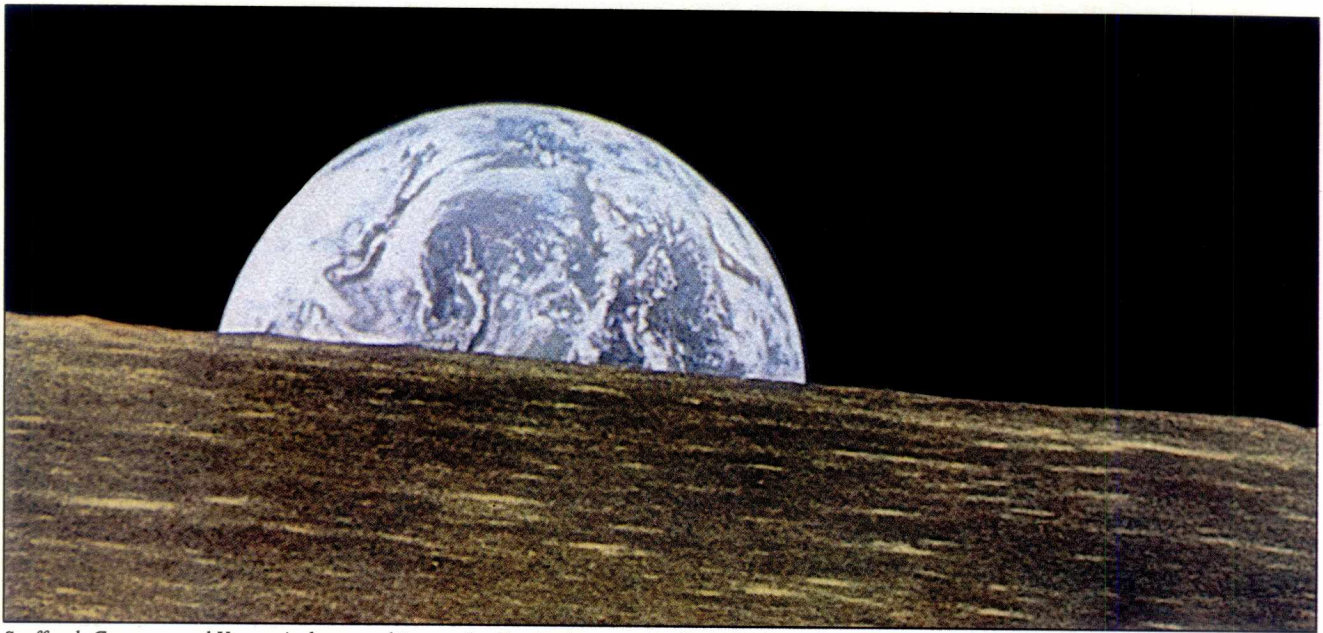
Toscanelli believed that India could be reached by sailing westward. The discoverer was a little wary of Toscanelli's chart and his entire voyage was guesswork. One of Columbus' most heroic gestures was his silent suffering when he discovered

a mistaken calculation on his voyage towards what he so desperately sought.

He was really saved by the New World, which no cartographer had even envisaged; only the poets had dreamed of it. The daring sailors entered the waters of the "Mare Tenebrosus", the unknown sea, as yet unopened to the predominant ideology. Columbus opened it to the human race. The moon on the other hand, was known to be airless, uninhabited, hostile, more dangerous in its airlessness than the heart of dark waters.

The astronauts never lost touch with the earth-bound scientists during their voyage to the moon. Television screens brought to the whole world the instant, at the instant, when man stepped on the moon for the first time. The astronauts' voices could be heard throughout the voyage, while the general consensus was that Columbus and his courageous seamen had perished.

Columbus dispelled the mystery and phantoms which darkened the horizon of other lands and civilizations; the myth of the precipice at the end of the oceans; the receding Island of Saint Balandrán and the non-existent St. Elmo's fire.



Stafford, Cernam and Young in lunar orbit, see the Earth rise over the lunar horizon from Apollo 10.

This voyage also destroyed many myths of monsters of the deep, which, as a product of Europe's confinement for so many centuries, had been created by fear of the unknown. Culture, a captive of the old European house, broke its chains: the western world experienced the euphoria of the liberated Prometheus.

The modern age and the space age

The discovery of the Americas ushered in the modern age; the conquest of the moon ushered in the space age.

Armstrong and Aldrin spent more than two hours collecting stones, rocks and dust particles from the surface of the uninviting satellite in the absolute silence of lifelessness and nothingness: nothingness, an absolute void, the bleak silence of a dead planet. They carried their collection to the lunar module. They left the flag by the launch module and a plaque on it, which read:

Here men from the Planet Earth first set foot upon the moon. July 19th, 1969 A.D. We come in peace for all mankind.

Upon their return to earth, the astronauts were put in quarantine for three weeks, in order to make sure they had not come into contact with any

harmful and unknown organism, and then they were set free. They had completed a mission which would have incalculable repercussions in the future.

Washington Irving, one of Columbus' biographers, examined the logbook of that immortal voyage in great detail. During the ill-fated days of dissatisfaction caused by the seamen's fear of the unknown, land birds were spotted flying southward. This omen made Columbus set course for the southwest.

The flight path of some birds determined the future destiny of the continent: if Columbus had remained on course, he would have discovered the Americas at the latitude of the present Carolinas. However, the birds' flight led the expedition to San Salvador Island (now known as Watling Island) and from there on to the Caribbean in search of gold, where the ships came across of numerous islands belonging to the new continent. It was not "Cipango" or "Catay" as the dreamer persisting in believing.

There are people who have reflected on how a trivial act may, in certain circumstances, become of vital importance in determining destiny and the course of history. The birds' flight

transformed the future of the Americas; those delicate birds were decisive to the future distribution of the new lands among the European cultures.

Rodó picks up this episode and speculates what would have happened if Columbus had not changed course: the whole framework of conquest and colonization was modified by the flight of a few birds. The world would be quite different if nobody had noticed these birds. And Rodó asks himself: what happens to each one of us when an event more important than a trivial one presents itself in our lives?

We should all ask ourselves what effect a decisive event will have on the future of the human race. We are now talking not about the flight path of birds but of the conquest of the moon and the opening up of outer space. This gave us a different conception of the world; it was the first step into our own galaxy. The cosmos awaits us.

Human progress was the most significant historical consequence of Columbus' voyage; the paths into outer space remain open and we hope they will work towards the common good, as Kantian milenarianism hoped, the only thing that justifies the immortality of the human race **M**