"American Moon: Picturing Imperialism in Outer Space in the Nineteenth Century"

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The moon was colonized in the American imaginary long before an estimated 500 million people tuned in to witness American astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin plant the American flag on the surface of the Moon on the 20th of July, 1969. It was at London’s Great Exhibition of 1851 that American astronomers John Adams Whipple and William Cranch Bond presented one of the first images of the Moon, a daguerreotype produced at the Harvard observatory between 1847–1851. The image was celebrated for its clarity and consequently it took first prize for technical excellence in photography. Accolades and awards aside, the Whipple and Bond Moon captured the hearts and imaginations of fairgoers.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, World’s Fairs were presented as showcases for the best and newest technology, art, science, and industry, while representing a utopian vision of the world modeled after Enlightenment ideals. As such, World’s Fairs celebrated a narrative that bestowed the power of innovation, history, and sovereignty to the West while reinforcing a vision of non-western cultures as primitive and outside of time and space. By exhibiting their daguerreotype at the Great Exhibition, Whipple and Bond, perhaps unknowingly, presented the Moon as an American space, where the telescope and camera became tools for the colonisation of the popular imaginary. The World’s Fair format provided a microcosm of the world for enjoyment and pleasure of the fairgoer: one could tour the world on foot in a day, observe the entire world in a single glance atop a central tower, and buy a postcard of that view to take home. By laying claim to the Moon, the United States positioned themselves above the Earth, in a position to see the world in a single glance, which they would do in 1968, when American astronaut William Anders would take the first photographs of the Earth from the Moon.

In claiming the Moon as an American innovation, space — that is, outer space, the infinite — is pacified, mobilized into the narrative of American Imperialism. The camera is complicit in this process of aestheticizing space. It is necessary as a technology of capture. The danger of this aestheticization of space is that it cultivates a powerful relationship between the camera and American imperial prowess. If the Moon becomes an object of American innovation, rendered finite, passive, and impotent, then who or what is “othered,” marked outside of time and space? Recent scholarship in New Materialisms, particularly the work of Quentin Meillassoux, has informed my thinking on this relationship, which I hope to develop in my paper. My paper will contribute to a larger discussion about the colonization and aestheticization of space, sparked largely by Mars and the Mars rover, by examining an important precedent that highlights the relationship between outer space, photography, and American imperialism.