

FULL MOON: Not Pale Fire

By Ted Byfield, **Mute** magazine, #14, Autumn 1999 London

In his afterword to **Full Moon**, "The Skin of the Moon," Michael Light mentions (of course) the "strange and murky television image" of Neil Armstrong's awkward backward leap from the lunar lander's ladder to the moon's surface; but, he adds, "more vivid for me are the eerie rhythms of radio communication between the astronauts and ground control in Houston – that inimitable beeping, followed by the most spacious silence imaginable." The elegance of that last phrase is easy to miss, and I was glad to find it. After spending hours lost in Light's image narrative of moon travel, it confirmed that his delicate sense did indeed lend brilliant form to a project which, in the hands of someone less subtle, would have crackled with the needless noise typical of publications on space travel.

And it does so by design. Except for a handful of presentation pages, Light's meticulous layout takes its cue from Armstrong's oddly backwards moment in space-time. The book's front matter – from copyright to an introduction by a certified expert – is set in reverse order and consigned to the back. More than just a nice touch, this inversion allows the book to open in silence and tell its story, through shining images set on unnumbered black pages, in a way more meditatively monumental than busily museological. One can, if one wants, pore over the well-crafted diagram of a moonshot's trajectories, or refer to the index of well-captioned thumbnail images, or read through Andrew Chaikin's forgivably pompous but informative introduction, or Light's poetically personal afterword. But one won't want, not for a long time, because the images Light chose are far too seductive.

The story **Full Moon** tells, in keeping with this monumental quality, is generalized – not of a single moon-shot but of an idealized, "composite voyage" of moon travel, culled from thirty-something thousand images from a dozen Apollo missions. As one leafs through images that seem to be arranged in the chronology of a single trip to the moon and back, one passes back and forth across the nearly six years of the Apollo missions – eight, actually, for he includes four deliriously topsy-turvy images from a Gemini spacewalk as "an antidote" to the apollonian order embedded in "that most essential NASA visual leitmotif," the hairline plus-sign grid that pervades pictures of the moon. "Antidote" seems harsh, though, for behind this trivial super-imposition lies the

marvel of a new world. The task the astronauts were saddled with was to document it – but what exactly was “it”?

The aspirations that drove the U.S. space program were famously irrational – interparty rivalry, a messy mix of latter-day manifest destiny and because-it’s-there conquest, competition with the U.S.S.R. for superpower prestige and for military prowess. Such a hodgepodge could never suffice to close the disciplinary gap between astronomy and geology (whose very name reveals the depth of its bias), let alone to articulate a positive program for defining a trip to the moon as a coherent object of study. Most of all, though, the very thought that a human could set foot on the moon was an ambitious exercise in futurism; and, as Emile Durkheim has said, the study of the future has no subject. Thus, the “it” the astronauts were to study dissolved across the broad range of possibilities opened by the trips themselves, ranging from physiology to climatology to cosmology. They were to study, in a word, experience. And that’s precisely what Light captures brilliantly with his narrative montage in **Full Moon**: the accidental, incidental, and incomprehensible travelogue of a trip beyond perspective in which every object becomes a subject and every subject an object.

As one leafs through the record of this disorientation, through intimate close-ups and harrowing landscapes, pictures taken up and down, pictures taken all around, the idea slowly dawns that the result is a sort of beatnik aesthetic: snap-happy travelers dividing their time – and, one assumes, their consciousness – between moving and doing, doing and seeing, seeing and capturing every moment and every thing. And if the portraits of luminous moon rocks and glittering alien equipment won’t stop you in your tracks, the realization that most of these pictures were taken without “looking” surely will: the cameras the astronauts used on the moon were affixed to their chests, and the pictures were framed not through optical mediation but the adoption of a physical attitude. In a way, then, the jumbled, inarticulate reminiscences rife with a near-mystical reverence for which the astronauts are legendary make sense, for these images are traces of their spiritual exercises: postures adapted in the face of unknown majesty and an undeniable experience of something very close to eternity.

In this light, the images of the astronauts themselves which Light chose are telling. He quietly sidesteps the kitschy lionization that’s tended to bury their singular experiences in the Right Stuff. Instead, the people he unearths in five images of the astronauts unmasked

would seem vulnerable if they didn't seem so modest, mundane even: Walter Schirra's stubbly face swollen with sinuses that wouldn't drain in zero gravity, a sleeping James Lovell with his folded arms drifting upward, a shaky shot of a Eugene Cernan grimy with moon dust looking like a weary coalminer, Walter Cunningham wearing hopelessly weak sunglasses in the blinding glare of the sun. These are portraits of the inadvertent artists not as cosmic heroes but as people – pictures taken not by paparazzi or PR flaks but by peers.

There are oddities in this book – for example, Light's curious tendency to relegate the trauma of lift-off to an equivocal spot (from Earth it's prior to the title page, and from the moon it closes Part II rather than opening Part III). But to dwell on these would be, I think, to miss the point. Light spent years working with NASA to digitally duplicate the original images and sift through them; the fruit of his labors is a stunning book at once intensely personal and harshly impersonal – or maybe *transpersonal*. To try to describe these images – of the Earth, of space, of the moon – would be futile, but to peruse them is divine.