



David Fenimore*

SINGING COWBOYS ON THE MOON: SCIENCE FICTION RE-OPENS THE WESTERN FRONTIER

When I was six, my great-grandmother, a devout and practical woman who had nurtured three generations of engineers, gave me *The Big Book of Space*. I was so utterly absorbed by this colorful encyclopedia of “space ships, space station, rockets, equipment” and “star maps” (Hurst) that she followed up by giving me another illustrated children’s book, *You Will Go To the Moon*. Published in 1959 in the immediate wake of the International Geophysical Year and the launch of Sputnik I, this simply written and earnestly didactic story promoted the friendliness, familiarity, and safety of space travel to impressionable and daydreamy Anglo-American boys such as myself. In it, a little brown-haired, blue-eyed boy – dead ringer for six-year-old me – gazes through a telescope at a full moon over the rolling fields of Midwestern farm country. On the next page, his well-dressed parents are escorting our young hero to the launch facility, which spreads out across a laser-flat plain between dry rocky desert ridges. Arriving on the moon, he encounters a similar landscape, described as “different from earth – no water, no lakes, no trees (...) just deep gray dust” (Freeman 50). He climbs a hill in his space suit and looks out over the moon colony, a cluster of shiny metallic pods and domes spreading across the lunar plain under an outer-space sky. Inside, the off-duty “rocket men” are shown relaxing by watching a Western film, the scene on the screen – a frame within a frame – being a mounted cowboy galloping past a desert mesa, his six-guns blazing (52). A cowboy! Spaceships! The moon! I was hooked.

My life over the next few decades followed much the same trajectory, from the humid east to the arid west, from suburban farmland to intermountain desert, as I sought escape from the gravitational pull of my Pennsylvania family and its conventional career expectations, and landed at last on the western edge of the Great Basin, in the shadow of the Sierra Nevada. What I realize now, is that my early fascination with science fiction propelled me on this flight from home into the unknown. I wanted something new, something shiny, mysterious, and unbounded – the promise of a clean and streamlined New World that would fire my imagination and free me from the low, limited horizons of my conventional suburban upbringing. “Earth” was well-watered and vegetated, like the early images in *You Will Go To the Moon*, like my hometown in Pennsylvania. So the western deserts, my young self reasoned, must be different, somehow unearthly.

Fifteen years after great-grandmother’s gifts, when I saw my first Nevada mining towns out on the playa, they looked to me like that city on the moon: a tight cluster of tanks, machines and low-profile mass-produced shelters perched on the edge of a vast and alien unknown. These were the wide open spaces, the home on the range, the iconic backdrop of the American Western, and yet, thanks to my sci-fi fantasies, my focus was not so much on the cowboys or cattle ranches, for real buckaroos still worked in Nevada then – no, my eyes were drawn to the ragged settlements framed by jagged peaks and uninhabited valleys so like, I thought, those on the moon and Mars.

A few years after reading *You Will Go To the Moon*, I had joined a science-fiction book club and spent many late nights reading the mass-market masters, especially those who included healthy doses of science with their speculation: Robert Heinlein, Poul Anderson, Clifford Simak, and Isaac Asimov. On Saturday mornings, rather than watch TV westerns like *The Lone Ranger* and *Hopalong Cassidy*, I preferred B-grade science-fiction serials, adventurous clunkers like *Captain Midnight*, *Commander Cody: Sky Marshall of the Universe*, and *Tom Corbett: Space Cadet*. One of my all-time favorites was a twelve-part cliffhanger called *The Phantom Empire*, a strange blend of six-guns, disintegrator rays, masked riders, and lumbering robots,

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starring the singing cowboy Gene Autry.¹ Originally filmed as a full-length feature in 1935, *The Phantom Empire* was billed as “the first musical western” despite its futuristic setting and implausible plot, said to have been dreamed up by co-writer Wallace MacDonald in a dentist’s chair under the influence of nitrous oxide. His original title was *Men with Steel Faces* (VCI).

The Phantom Empire is both conventional and surrealistic in its adherence to the western formula. The dialogue is silly, the acting is uninspired (if often enthusiastic), the special effects low budget, the production standards minimal and often laughable. Throw in a few doses of corny country music and an occasional tendency for characters to break frame and directly address the viewer,² and the end product is irresistible. The story centers on a subterranean “Scientific City of Murania” located twenty thousand feet beneath the dusty corrals of “Radio Ranch,” from where Autry, playing himself, broadcasts a fictitious radio program. Murania is ruled by Queen Tika who is threatened on two fronts: from the above, by mad scientists in pith helmets searching for radium deposits; and from within, by Muranian rebels in tall feathered headdresses and metal armbands. In her throne room full of humming and sparking machinery, Queen Tika delivers scornful soliloquies condemning the frantic pace of the “surface people” as she views the crowded streets of New York City and Chicago on a big-screen TV monitor. Periodically, for reasons unclear, she sends the “Thunder Riders” up to the surface. These are cloaked and helmeted Muranian troopers mounted on horses, whose activities are spied upon by Autry’s adolescent sidekicks Frankie – a Tom Swift-type boy inventor with a secret laboratory in the ranch’s hayloft – and championship rodeo rider Betsy. In imitation of the Thunder Riders, Frankie and Betsy form a club whose members wear blankets over their shoulders and galvanized zinc pails on their heads. Eventually Gene Autry ends up a prisoner down in Murania, where he bravely and resourcefully overcomes them all – Thunder Riders, robots, Muranian rebels, and evil scientists – and with the help of Frankie and Betsy and their Thunder Riders club, returns to the surface barely in time to grab his guitar and join the band for their weekly broadcast.

Very weird, this hybrid of western action and science-fiction opera – but it somehow all made sense to my six-year-old self. The surface setting was the same as that of the more conventional cowboy westerns I had seen, like *The Lone Ranger* and *Hopalong Cassidy*: sandstone, mesquite, cacti, and towering cumulus clouds. When this western landscape peeled away to reveal a futuristic city set evidently on loan from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, I don’t remember thinking anything was particularly out of place. Just as astounding to my sheltered East-Coast were the dramatic canyons, cliffs, and mesas of the Great American Desert, so it was no surprise when a secret doorway in an eroded hillside opened on metal hinges and the Thunder Riders kidnapped Gene Autry out of his cowboy musical into the German Impressionistic underworld of Murania, where, in full cowboy regalia, he slides unconscious down a chute, past walls of machinery, into the bowels of the mysterious metropolis.³

A few years after *The Phantom Empire* was released, the film industry had turned away from science-fiction to different forms of escapism: screwball comedy, noir thrillers, and of course the good old B-western. Fortunately for me, the genre had come back in a big way at the dawn of the Atomic Age (Ellison 5-6). Filmed in southern California studios, in close proximity to the inland deserts, directors of this new wave of low-budget science-fiction films once again took advantage of the wild western scenery at their doorstep, every bit as exotic as the American Southwest to Eastern city audiences, as a stand-in for otherworldly landscapes. Countless popular films of the time, typified by *Red Planet Mars* and *Forbidden Planet*, and network TV serials like the aforementioned *Commander Cody: Sky Marshall of the Universe*, *Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits*, and *Star Trek*, used the nearby Mojave Desert as a backdrop representing the moon or other extraterrestrial locations. And somehow it worked. The arid West, where fertility has been stripped away by relentless sun and wind to reveal bare geological bones, seemed a proper setting for these visions

¹ This was Autry’s first starring role, following his scene-stealing guest appearance in David Howard’s *Old Santa Fe* (1934) starring Ken Maynard.

² At one point Autry turns to the camera and invites the “children” in the audience to write to the studio for a free pattern, so their mothers can sew them a “Thunder Riders outfit.”

³ The design of this recurring scene is very similar to the one a year later in Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936), in which the Little Tramp takes a trip through the stylized gears of a giant machine.



of a transhuman machine culture, the perfect dwelling place for *homo cyborg*. Where else would a "man with a steel face" not look out of place, but instead, almost "natural"?

Given my innate shyness in those days, and tendency toward compensatory daydreams of the Walter Mitty type, these movies and TV shows were potent fuel for puerile fantasies of piloting spacecraft and rescuing androgynous spacewomen in tight-fitting lycra uniforms. But even more than the melodramatic plots, it was the technological props that powered my boyish reveries: disintegrator rays, flashing banks of control panels, electric sparks, rocket ships, and shiny flying saucers. Beginning with *You Will Go to the Moon* and *The Phantom Empire*, I had already learned to associate images of futuristic machinery with desert landscapes. In fact, I have a letter to Santa Claus written by my six-year-old self asking for both a "space helmet" and a cowboy hat. My kindergarten teacher Mrs. Lippincott, both acknowledging and disapproving of this precocious technophilia, wrote in my report card as follows:

Dave's interest in outer space sometimes is not on the elementary level of the other boys which often hinders successful play. But in recent weeks he has joined the cowboy brigade and left Captain Cody [*sic*] behind.

Not for long, though. I was hot on his trail soon enough.

In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama points out that the original Dutch word at the root of "landscape" denotes a framing of the land, a limitation imposed by art on the unbounded natural world which creates a "highly selective and value-laden presentation of a particular kind of native habitat," embodying what he calls "pride of place" (71). These values are often nationalistic as well as aesthetic, encoding mythic narratives of nation-building and mastery over nature. Bryan Jay Wolf has written on the way that nineteenth-century American painter Thomas Cole's wilderness landscapes, especially *Gelyna*⁴ and several versions of *Last of the Mohicans*,⁵ became a topographical shorthand for James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels: "The vertiginous quality of the chasms and rock outcroppings is translated into a narrative of death, sacrifice, and suspense" (229-30). In the following century, after Zane Grey's novels forged similar connections between his melodramatic plots and vivid descriptions of the Southwest, John Ford reintroduced an explicitly visual element by filming his star actor John Wayne on location in the Southwest, most notably in Monument Valley, Arizona.⁶ The later re-framing of these same landforms by science-fiction films and TV serials reinforced their emblematic function, lending them the power of a new myth: mastery over nature through machinery. Manifest Destiny rides again, but this time in a rocket ship.

A few critics have mentioned the numerous parallels between westerns and the more subliterate forms of science fiction, between "horse opera" and "space opera," but seldom do they address the issue of landscape. Kingsley Amis notes that "in a space opera, Mars takes the place of Arizona with a few physical alterations" (60). David Lee Mogen compares science fiction and frontier fiction along the lines of "the metaphoric overtones geography often has in American fiction"; he goes on to argue that "[t]he identification of the West with advanced technology reverses traditional associations, which identify the West with savage freedom" (153).

It was this savage freedom that I came West to experience: freedom from family pressures, from the

⁴ Also known as *View from Ticonderoga Pass* (1828)

⁵ In 1826-1827 Cole produced four large-format exhibition paintings based on Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757* (1826). Tiny human figures representing scenes from the novel are dwarfed by monumental mountainous landscapes, looking more like the West than upstate New York where Cooper set his story.

⁶ Ford shot 10 films in spectacular Monument Valley, including *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956). The location was also used by Stanley Kubrick in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to represent an extraterrestrial landscape.



stratified social classes of the Eastern Seaboard, from my sheltered naiveté, perhaps from the burden of history itself. A nineteenth-century frontier folksong asks what the western emigrant might be running from:

What was your name in the States?
Was it Johnson or Thompson or Bates?
Did you murder your wife and fly for your life?
Oh, what was your name in the States? (Sandburg 106)

The flight from domesticity served as a common motivation for young single men like me to pick up and pack out for the West, but as Clint Mohs observes, one of the narrative themes of the Western since *The Virginian* has been the domestication of the West by technology, and one of the ironic realities of increased Western tourism has been the erosion of those very wilderness qualities the tourist, whether literary or automotive, has been seeking (242, 244). For me, and I believe for generations of Americans, mapping science fiction on the iconic landscapes of the West restored that sublimity which settlement and development had eroded, infusing it with a new mystery, new romantic associations, and a sense of unexpected possibilities – in a sense, reversing Frederick Turner's thesis and re-opening a frontier, this time a frontier of the imagination, to disillusioned Easterners like myself.⁷ For me, it was a flight from, but also a flight to something – something almost libidinal in the force of its attraction and its ability to contain my restlessness and longing within the broadest limits I could imagine.

Science fiction and arid western landscapes have thus come into a kind of reciprocal relationship; just as Monument Valley was transmogrified into the mythical Wild West, so has the desert come to represent the posthuman, sometimes inhuman vision of science fiction. Embodied in particular landforms, these two narratives, one evoking America's imaginary past and the other its equally imaginary future, both represent escape from conventional civilization and morality into a stylized romantic frontier that we just can't wait to transform into another suburb. For us agrarian Anglos, the wilderness is often set off from civilization in both hydrological terms, contrasting the undomesticated lack of water in the West with the nurturing green civilization east of the hundredth meridian, and also in spatial terms; as Turner puts it, the pioneers, "challenging the spaces of the West" found that "the meadow lot of the small intervale had become the prairie, stretching farther than their gaze could reach" (XIII). Given the overwhelming masculine orientation of the western's hegemonic narrative, it is no wonder many of Zane Grey's novels conclude with gunslingers like Bern Venters, Buck Duane and Pecos Smith, their work done and their women won, moving from the wide-open western lands back to the narrower confines of well-watered Ohio farms or Louisiana plantations.⁸ Even Wister's *Virginian*, the archetype of them all, ends up as a mining baron in a well-tailored suit, sitting in an Eastern drawing room (501-502). Gunbelts hung up for good, the closure of the frontier writes finis to the traditional western narrative of penetration and conquest, and opens a new chapter of domestication. I wandered lonely as a cloud, but now I'm a homeowner with a lawn and a mortgage, and a fulltime job at a university.

But the land itself, a living thing, constantly begs a reconception and rebirth in new narrative terms. The intermountain West was the last North American region to be explored and settled, and despite the subdivisions, a sense of otherness still shrouds its more remote corners. Sun-blasted, given to temperature extremes, and more hospitable to insects and lizards than mammals, the desert has traditionally been identified with a much older myth. In ancient visionary tradition, it serves as a place of ascetic withdrawal, where one might transcend and ultimately reject the city, the family, and the physical world in general. Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Mohammed all are said to have retreated to the desert to purify themselves of worldly connections and come into contact with their deity. In the modern science-fiction

⁷ I am thinking not so much of Turner's economic or political analysis, but rather the occasional references he makes to the salutary psychic effects of the frontier, where, for example he writes of "the energy which the mountain breeze and western habits impart" (I).

⁸ In the novels *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), *Lone Star Ranger* (1915), and *West of the Pecos* (1937), respectively.



retelling, then, the desert is where humans meet the extraterrestrial Other, where the human and inhuman merge as one.

In the 1940s that most inhuman and godlike of technologies, the atomic bomb, was born in the desert Southwest. In the following decade, as I was reading and watching science fiction, Americans were promised that the “atomic genie” would make the desert bloom.⁹ Commercial artists at the time were fond of portraying in advertisements and the covers of popular magazines – even on children’s school lunch boxes¹⁰ – a rationalist vision that Eric Schlosser describes as “a blind faith in science: a Disneyesque vision of society transformed through chemistry and families living happily in plastic homes and travelling in sleek, nuclear-powered cars” (398). And nowhere more than the desert does human habitation depend so much on humans appropriating the power of a god, by employing what Freud calls the “artificial limbs” and “accessory organs” of technology (53). First it was guns and dynamite, the heliograph, the telegraph, and the railroad – later the automobile, airplane, radio, refrigeration, solar panels, hydroelectricity, nuclear power, and mobile devices, and the Internet. These have made life safer and more comfortable, if more resource-intensive. The tattered landscapes, depleted and polluted aquifers, and pathological societies thus enabled are familiar scenarios to us now, and until at least the 1960s were considered a fair trade for prosperity. Today we know that the technologies of power generation, resource extraction, and irrigation, in the absence of a densely packed and regulated society, have had a proportionately greater impact on fragile western environments than elsewhere, by giving that imported population the godlike power to manipulate nature. In this way the savage freedom of the inhuman West is colonized by technology; in less-populated, less-vegetated regions the destructive, unsocialized, and ultimately oppressive power of machines is more immediately evident than in more densely settled regions. “Earth First,” reads a popular pro-development bumper sticker in Nevada that ironically transforms the name of a radical environmentalist organization; “We’ll Mine the Other Planets Later.”

The vanguard of technological colonization in the nineteenth century used guns and steel to clear the land of its indigenes. Today, with the map scrubbed clean of ancient associations, the military-industrial complex has cordoned off vast uninhabited sections of what is widely presumed by city dwellers to be a “wasteland.” There, safe from any discouraging words, under skies that are seldom cloudy all day, are developed the weapons systems of tomorrow. Occasionally they serve as tourist attractions. Civilian travelers on Highway 50 across Nevada, officially designated “The Loneliest Road in America,” are greeted after hours of seeming nothingness by signs marking a turnoff to the “US Navy Centroid Facility”¹¹ and can pull off the road to watch low-flying fighter jets attack the mountainsides with air-to-ground missiles and U-235 slugs. As Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. observed, looking back at the twentieth century from a million years in the future, “high explosives were now a branch of the entertainment industry” (208).

Yet even the military’s domination of its vast tracts has not dimmed the imaginative appeal of the desert, where thousand-year-old petroglyphs share the neighborhood with ten-mile runways, experimental lasers, and camouflaged radar installations. On a hilltop above remote Hancock Summit, adjacent to the Nevada Atomic Test Site, stands a masonry monument commemorating an angelic visitation to Dr. M. L. Glendenning, founder of a Mormon splinter group called “the Aaronic Order.” Below, in the surreal immensity stretching to the curved horizon that borders so-called Area 51,¹² busloads of tourists from Las Vegas scan

⁹ The curiously orientalist image of the atomic genie originated in a Walt Disney animated film commissioned by the US Government, called *Our Friend the Atom* (1957), and hosted by nuclear physicist Heinz Haber. It also took the form of a children’s Golden Book published the same year, in the same series as *You Will Go To the Moon*. In them, the settings for both the atomic mushroom cloud and the legend of the fisherman and the genie are nearly identical desert-like landscapes. Details at <http://www.awn.com/mag/issue3.1/3.1pages/3.1langerdisney.html>.

¹⁰ Yes, I owned several of these.

¹¹ This refers to the Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center (NASW) Electronic Warfare Range, also known as “Top Gun,” in Dixie Valley. Over 37 real and simulated radar systems populate this desolate and unpopulated basin.

¹² The common name for an outlying restricted section of Edwards Air Force Base, secluded behind a ridge of high hills and off-limits to the public, where new types of aircraft and weapons are tested, and which plays



the skies for UFOs and climb ridges to spy on the airbase where alien spacecraft are widely rumored to be stored. Further north, at the cluster of trailers that makes up the town of Rachel, even-lonelier State Route 375 was dedicated in April 1996 as "Nevada's Extraterrestrial Highway" by Governor Bob Miller, appearing alongside actors from *Independence Day*, a film released that year about an alien invasion, which had been shot in the vicinity ("ET"). On my last pass through there, a self-proclaimed local extraterrestrial named Merlin II drank coffee with me at the only restaurant for many miles in any direction, Rachel's Little A'le'Inn, and told me tales of flying saucer wreckage and alien cadavers held in secret government warehouses.

My home on the Nevada range has been so thickly overlaid with these new frontier narratives that, gazing across the most mountainous state in the US, to this day I can't help but see in my still active imagination the glint of sun on curved titanium alloy, the flare of rocket exhaust, or at night the mysterious colored lights of a flying saucer against the starry, outer-space sky. I am relieved that so scrupulous and scientific an observer as journalist John McPhee can report such a nighttime encounter above Paradise Valley, north of Winnemucca: a ball of bright white light that disgorged a ringed satellite, maneuvered for a few minutes, then faded (165-66). McPhee doesn't sound surprised, maybe because a few pages earlier he was in the mood to compare roadside magpies to "scale-model 747s" (149). And he has already noted that "neon looks good in Nevada" because "[t]he tawdriness is refined out of it in so much wide black space" (54). Machines are at home out here, far from the unfair competition of the garden. Like neon, metal shows to its best advantage against a bleak and distant backdrop. The artificial symmetry and ascetic sheen of machines complement rather than compete with the desert, and unglamorous contraptions like oil derricks, tanks, and radio antennas, so out of place next to a grove of trees, here take on a reassuringly streamlined appearance in contrast to the eroded and sun-baked rock that surrounds them.

Literary critic T.K. Whipple suggests a psychological association of the desert with science-fiction hardware. Writing about the visceral appeal of Western novels, he says that "[o]ur forebears had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed, we live; and what they lived, we dream" (65). We are dreaming technology. We depend as much on digital circuits, controlled climates, and electronic fuel injection as Euro-American settlers depended on their guns, telegraph, and steam engines, and as much as any space traveler on even more complex systems of life support. Hence we cherish our collective fictions of plastic homes and nuclear cars, or whatever updated form that 1950s Modernist dream may take today. What is science fiction, if not an acknowledgement that we are all cyborgs, wired into a grid of public utilities, transportation networks, and information superhighways? We're not in Arcadia anymore, and we won't be living off the land anytime soon.

Technologies permeate Western recreation as well. East Coast visitors who imagine they are visiting the wilderness to find adventure – tourists, skiers, hikers, and river runners – experience considerably less risk and discomfort since the invention of microporous water filters, SPF 30, Kevlar canoes, and polypropylene underwear. I still remember the sense of self-sufficiency and power over nature granted by my first backpacking stove, the marvelously engineered Svea, with its accompanying spun-aluminum fuel bottle, and a set of lightweight titanium cooking dishes. Solar-powered mobile phones and GPS now serve as basic necessities for both casual and professional backcountry travelers: to send E-mail from the summit, or summon a rescue helicopter, or just snap a selfie and post it to the Internet.

Do the convenience and protection offered by these devices enhance or diminish these tourists' experience of nature? Do the inhabitants of isolated desert communities see themselves as part of their natural environment, or like most inhabitants of Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Reno do they cling to, and identify with, the mechanisms that insulate them from that environment? Both, I believe. In describing science-fiction novelist Robert Heinlein's space frontier, David Lee Mogen notices that in one story the artificial environment of a pressurized lunar module is considered natural – "the artifacts of technology [are identified] with humanity" – while "it is the Lunar vacuum that is 'unnatural'" (66). Beyond the familiar suburbs, with their well-engineered roads and friendly lawns – all products of our ingenuity – yawns the nonhuman wilderness made both accessible and more mysterious by the machines from which we are now inseparable.

a prominent role in UFO folklore.



A few years after I landed out west, I joined a volunteer search and rescue team, and one winter night found myself standing on a Sierra Nevada summit during a blizzard, wearing something not too different from a spacesuit: a hooded GoreTex parka over a silk face mask and synthetic fleece, with insulated gauntlets, electrically heated goggles, a radio transceiver, and an avalanche beacon beeping comfortably against my chest. Around me rose the higher peaks, and below me mysterious corniced drop-offs led to hidden canyons and further adventures far from any highway or town. It was a landscape as different from the safe, green, and well-settled East as I could ever have imagined. As I leaned on my carbon-fiber ski poles and watched fellow searchers disembark like a conga line of Commander Codys from our team's lunar lander-like snow tractor, its floodlights glaring through swirling icy diamonds, I distinctly remember thinking, "This is as close to the moon as I'll ever get."

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