

Chapter 2. Space Invaders: Cousteau the Coloniser

'The peculiar contradictions of France in that period (1954-1962) can be seized only if they are seen as those of an exploiter / exploited country, dominator / dominated, exploiting colonial populations at the same time that it is dominated by, or more precisely, entering more and more into collaboration or fusion with, American capitalism'.

Kristin Ross: *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1995, 7)

In this chapter I will focus exclusively on the second Cousteau feature film, *Le Monde Sans Soleil* (*World without Sun*, dir. Jacques Cousteau, 1964). 'L'homme vivra-t-il sous la mer?' asks the publicity ('Will man live under the sea?'). This film is an account of the 1963 'Conshelf' experiment, a month-long attempt to live underwater on the Shab Rouni reef, on the continental shelf off Sudan, in which a group of divers set up a prototype underwater house on the sea-bed. (See Fig.1)

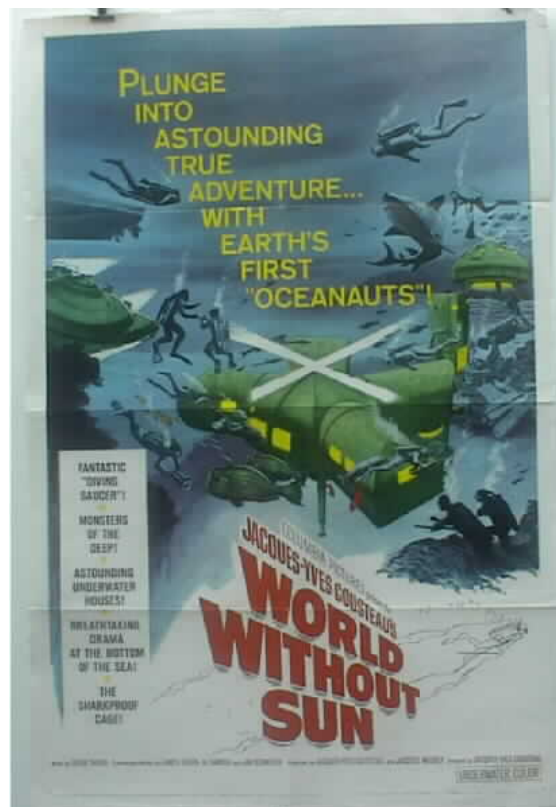


Fig. 1

Cousteau's two feature films roughly bookend the same period (that is to say 1954-1962) examined by Kristin Ross in *'Fast Cars, Clean Bodies'*, a particularly important text to this chapter. This chapter follows the logic of Ross's argument as quoted above, which is to say that France can only be understood in the context of being both colonizer and colonized, and that the two roles are in constant tension. The first part of the chapter therefore examines the pressures on 'space' in France and suggests that, both in conception and implementation, Cousteau's endeavour can be seen as an imaginary or surrogate empire that discursively outlives France's actual empire. The second looks at what Lefebvre

and the Situationists, in the early 1960s called ‘the colonization of everyday life’ by consumer capitalism (e.g. Lefebvre 1992), and demonstrates how this film reflects the period of dynamic domestic modernization described by Ross.

Space Invaders: The Oceanauts and Colonisation of the Sea

‘Each yard of depth we claimed in the sea would open to mankind three hundred thousand cubic kilometres of living space’.

Jacques Cousteau, *The Silent World* (1953, 18)

Most European nations underwent some form of modernization after the Second World War, but Ross describes the modernization of France as being unusually swift: ‘headlong, dramatic and breathless’ (1995, 4). She charts above all the speed with which France is transformed from a rural, empire-oriented country into a fully urban, industrialized, decolonized nation. ‘In the space of just ten years a rural woman might live the acquisition of electricity, running water, a stove, a refrigerator, a washing machine...a car, a television’ (1995 5).

In my explorations of the newspaper archive of the time, I found ample evidence that space was being reorganized, almost overnight, by speed. In the period in question, newspapers (which, to the contemporary eye, seem otherwise remarkably free of advertising) carry almost daily full-page adverts for jet travel. In a two-week period in 1956, we learn that Air France has bought new planes (*Le Monde*, 26 Jan). An advert (*Le Monde*, 1 Feb) announces the new fleet of Lockheed Super Constellations, which ‘franchissent tous les oceans, reliant tous les continents’ (cross the oceans, and join the continents). Sabena (*Le Monde*, 3 Feb) take a whole page to announce that the time from Brussels to New York has been cut from fourteen hours to six and a half. On 16 Feb, train advertising announces simply ‘Avec le train vous gagnez du temps’ (with the train, you save time’). This phenomenon is new and specific to the period, as demonstrated by the schematic in Fig. 2 from Harvey (1990, 241). Harvey deploys this to illustrate the idea of time-space compression, and connects the speeding-up of the pace of life with the history of capitalism. ‘The experience of time-space compression is challenging, exciting, stressful, and sometimes deeply troubling, capable of sparking, therefore, a diversity of social, cultural and political responses’. (1990, 240).

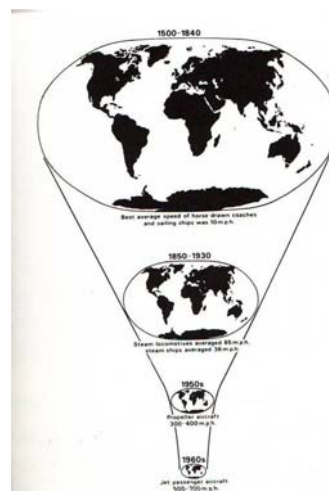


Fig.2.

As the world gets smaller, the population booms. Ross, again, details the 'relentless dismantling of earlier spatial arrangements' in relation to Paris. In *Le Monde* (4/5 Jan 1953) a graphic report ascribes the death of three young children, burned to death (*Trois enfants meurent carbonisés*) directly, if a little unfairly, to the 'crise du logement' (housing crisis). The paper concludes (*Le Monde* 5 Feb) that 'Il faut donner de nouvelles ressources ... pour accélérer la construction... dans les régions en expansion'. (More resources must be found to accelerate construction in the expanding regions). And as early as the 18 Feb, the race is being won: 250,000 logements terminés (250,000 houses 'finished'). This urban development is unprecedented in France's history, and is taking place with the speed and zeal of the later (outer) space race and arms race.

In February 1956 the whole of northern Europe looks on in horror as the sea, literally, invades. On 4 Feb, 275000 hectares of Zeelande in Holland, and other parts of the North Sea region, are invaded by the sea. On the 6 Feb there are columns of 'refugees' from Zeelande. On the 7 Feb begins 'La lutte contre les eaux' (the struggle against the waters), culminating on 10 Feb in 'La bataille des brèches', (the battle of the breaches). It is a clear reminder of the war that has just ended, and expressed in the same terms. If national borders were redefined by war, external borders are now given new meaning, and a new permeability, by the sea.

Little wonder, then, that the collective national psyche, experiencing unprecedented time-space compression, jumps at the fantastic promise of a whole new world under the sea. 'Obviously' (sic) says Cousteau 'man has to enter the sea', (1953, 223). The human population is increasing so rapidly, he reasons, that at some point we must take our sustenance from the 'great cornucopia'. The 'great cornucopia' is a fantastic promise of limitless resource, available to all, like a self-replenishing refrigerator. Unlike Paris, home to 2 million cars by 1965 (Ross: 1995, 53), there is an abundance of virgin space.

Clearly, the biggest spatial reorganization of them all is the retreat from empire. The first Cousteau movie, *Le Monde Du Silence* (Dir: Cousteau, 1964) comes out shortly after Dien Bien Phu (spring 1954) and the first major Algerian uprisings a few months later; *Le Monde Sans Soleil* appears shortly after the Evian accords which give Algeria its independence in 1962.

The object of *Le Monde Sans Soleil* is set out early on as the 'conquest of the continental shelf', which we are told is an area 'bigger than Africa'. There is only one mention of the fact that the location of the experiment is off the coast of the Sudan, and no explanation of why this particular location was chosen, as opposed to, for example, the Atlantic, or perhaps the French Mediterranean. I suggest that the reason this project takes place off the coast of Africa is that it represents in many senses a surrogate Algeria, something which will emerge strongly from my analysis. The choice of location is one of a number of assumptions encoded into the gaze of the colonizer, and is therefore not mentioned.

What happens to the New Diver in this time? Well, a whole series of new roles and signifiers come into play, and the characterization of the New Diver changes. First and foremost, he is less individual, and more collective – part of a wider venture. Cousteau himself steps back into the team – even his great nose, as distinctive as De Gaulle's, makes a semiotic retreat. And as the following demonstrates, his team are now defined by their roles, as opposed to by their names or unique personae. 'Ces hommes, professeur de faculté, cuisinier, moniteur d'éducation physique, douanier, dessinateur industriel, sont les pionniers d'une fabuleuse conquête, celle du plateau continental'. (These men, faculty professor, cook, monitor of physical education, customs official, industrial designer, are pioneers of a fabulous conquest, that of the continental shelf). This is modern, rational organization at work; a team of professionals brought together to achieve a goal, something that industry is fond of calling a 'virtual team' these days.

‘S’ils réussissent, l’exploitation de la mer sera possible’. (‘If they succeed, the exploitation of the sea will be possible...’) says Cousteau. As well as the language used (conquest, exploitation) the composition of the team sets up an immediate problematic: each of these individuals is a white, male, middle-class man. We are left to ask questions such as who *built* this underwater city? Where are the labourers and the workers? The film is instructive as much for what is stated as for what is not stated. The men have an explicit ‘mission’ – rather like a ‘civilising mission’. Each represents something that France holds dear, from the cook to the newly-ennobled Engineer (see Ch1). They are as close as possible to the model of the ‘jeune cadre’ (young executive) who, according to Ross, is a phenomenon both of the metropolis and the colonies, and has a ‘steadfast faith in a technologically perfected future’ (1995, 166).

Second, the diving in *Le Monde Sans Soleil* becomes *industrial* – characterized by mechanization, specialization, compartmentalization, and the organized ‘farming’ of samples. The men now swim rarely – mostly they are on board their ‘soucoupe plongeante’ or ‘diving saucer’, (see Fig 3) or dragged around by propellorised vehicles. *Food* is industrialized: in the book of *Le Monde Du Silence* Cousteau waxes lyrical about the indescribable complexities and nuances of flavour experienced when the entirety of a fish, including brains and entrails, is cooked. He relates stories of dropping down into underwater grottos and plucking lobsters from the wall for lunch while, onland, France goes hungry. In *Le Monde Sans Soleil* one of the men looks out of the window at the multitudes of fish swimming in front of him in the ‘cornucopia’ and, rather redundantly, opens a tin of sardines. He eats from a tin, whilst himself enclosed inside a tin. At mealtimes, food comes down from the boat on the surface, which we never see. Food becomes a technological miracle, something which appears naturally and effortlessly from above. In summary, in the period during which France has moved from artisanal to industrial, rural to urban, it is as if Cousteau has first established the *craft* of the engineer – and then industrialized it.



Fig. 3

Technology takes on a different significance. Instead of enabling, it controls. There is a big security theme. In the underwater base, letters are delivered from the surface and distributed among the men, in a scene which has distinctive military overtones. The alternative name for the Oceanauts is the 'Masques Noirs' (black masks). The Black Masks form themselves into squadrons and patrol the area with powerful spotlights. A series of outposts are set up, like mini-fortresses, as refuges against sharks. The reef sharks (which aren't dangerous) are set up as a predatory and opportunistic 'other' and literally 'barred'. There is surveillance of the boundaries of the site, using remote cameras, which enable the central pod to see at any time what is happening on the surface, in the garage etc. The pod is 'gated', with metal grilles that prefigure Mike Davis's accounts of entire gated communities in Los Angeles (1990, 223-260), a similar phenomenon to the reorganisation of social space and the removal of immigrant workers to the suburbs that Ross describes taking place in Paris during this period.

Quoting Memmi, Fanon and Cesaire, Ross talks at length of the 'animalisation' of the colonized, the refusal of the colonizer to acknowledge the colonized as a whole man, and the tendency towards slavery, and turning the oppressed into 'merchandise'. (1995, 164). Clearly, the oppressed are already animals, so what happens is that the animals are displaced one step further down the commodity chain, that is to say they become objects of 'exploitation' – more like mineral deposits. The shark is portrayed as primitive, opportunistic, and living off the efforts of the colonizers, implicitly a threat to 'our interests'. Other fish less able to stand up for themselves are literally turned into commodities – caught and stored in plastic bags.

The theme of security is matched by the theme of hygiene. Ross compares the reorganization of Paris with the same exercise in the nineteenth century, when the reasons for vacating central Paris of immigrants were, as now, hygiene and security. (1995, 151). In the first film, the divers, out of water, were portrayed as 'men in trunks', or 'men in shorts' – dishevelled, indistinguishable from fishermen on deck. In the second film they are literally and figuratively 'groomed'. They become collectively known as Oceanauts, and the Oceanauts are represented as a new race of fit, strong men, as designated by the fact that they walk about 'torse nu' (bare-chested) - without tops on. They spend time combing their short-cropped hair, and they shave each other.

The cadre, says Ross, is 'well-shaven' (1995, 166). And the New Diver has been cleansed in the cadre's image: he is white and above all clean. Why must the men be clean? Although also a function of the temperature inside the underwater house, the naked torso of the Oceanauts perform a function that Barthes (1957, 23) calls 'rhetorical amplification' that is to say their bodies seem to act as a kind of basic sign, or like a corporate identity. In this case it seems like an original, pure state, or a wished-for image of racial purity, a stripped-back French-ness. The white chests of the men have become devoid of singularity – they are wearing a uniform, and they are reproducible and interchangeable. This is above all a sign of social organization, not some kind of new Aryanism with a French twist – and as with the jeune cadre, it is a consequence of the logic of production entering social relations.

Like the bare chests of the men, the Gitaine – a metonymic shorthand for all that is spontaneous or cool about the French working class, is replaced by the pipe. All that is missing in this tableau of contentment is a pair of slippers and a roaring fire. If we saw something akin to a racial conversion on a technical level in the first chapter, then this second chapter is exposing a contained, idealized, strong, technologically enabled, white French male utopia. This can be seen as a form of social mapping, defined by Denis Cosgrove as 'a mode of harmonizing citizen, community, and place in the visionary construction of a modern society' (1999, 15). As such, it is important that every encounter in the sea is 'virgin', that is to say that there is no evidence of anyone ever having been there before. As the day's adventures are played out, divers come back as if from an 'other' world, with its caves, moonscapes, and

deserts. They emerge through the 'air door' and breathe again, uniforms are shed, and the day's activity is washed away. The return home plays itself out like the decolonising of empire, with the base / starfish remaining solid and steadfast, like the hexagon of France.

The Fantasy and the Reality

So, forty years on, why are we not all living on the bottom of the sea? Astoundingly, since Conshelf, more than sixty habitats of this type have been built on the seabed, from Australia to the Arctic (Ecott, 1995, 253). But the dream of living in an underwater city has never come to fruition.

The film contains answers to this question. As we have seen, although the 'cornucopia' is on the doorstep, the men make up sardine sandwiches from cans. They become progressively dehumanized – they stop talking, and they stop listening to the radio. Without the sun the men start to lose track of time – they cannot sleep, and wake up in the night. 'Sun and shade have disappeared', observes Cousteau, and the men 'detach themselves from the terrestrial world'. Ten minutes under a UV lamp is necessary every day to compensate for the lack of daylight. The purpose of capturing of fish and their storage in bags is quickly defeated when the trapped fish prove irresistible to the larger predators, who eventually rip the bags and feast on them. The promise that man will live under the sea turns into nervous disintegration, and the promised bounty of nature turns into processed, industrialized food. One of the oddest scenes is that of the team's pet parrot looking out of the window of the base at a parrotfish, symptomatic of the fact that although the men are underwater, they are still alien to this environment. The wished-for 'man-fish' has failed to synthesise.

The film opens with a fantastic, long descent following the diving saucer down into the sea. The scene ends in bathos as this amazing craft 'parks' in the garage. The dramatic counterpart to the opening sequence of the film is a long descent in the submersible at the end, and again it ends in a less than satisfactory way. As the 'diving saucer' is taken deeper and deeper (as far as 300m below), the sea is revealed to have less and less life. Oysters are fossilized, and 'notre nouvel espace' ('our new space') is revealed as a barren 'desert vertical' (vertical desert). Initially we had been presented with a fantasy about limitless 'space' – but most of it turns out to be barren and unusable. Consequently, in direct contrast to the way we left *Le Monde Du Silence* full of excitement, we come away from this film feeling empty and unfulfilled. The title of the first film - *World of Silence* - could be interpreted as perceiving silence as a virtue. A World Without (life-giving) Sun, however, cannot be thought of as positive, and throughout, with its colonial overtones and a pervasive sense of oppression, there is a darkness at the heart of the film. Stephen Kern observes that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is 'one of the greatest stories about empire', equating Marlow's journey with the return of the species into the past, into nothing (1983, 167). The end of *Le Monde Sans Soleil* is similar: it is disquieting, even if it was not intended to be so. Like Marlow, or Verne's heroes, who always seem to arrive in places to find them already occupied by indigenous populations, he ends up painting an imperialist void – all that is missing from the final scene is the pronouncement 'l'horreur, l'horreur' (the horror, the horror)¹.

The Colonization of Interior Space

'The Commodity, the market, money, with their implacable logic, seize everyday life. The extension of capitalism goes all the way to the slightest details of everyday life'.

Henri Lefebvre: Towards a Leftist Cultural Politics (1988)

What awaits the colonizer under the sea? What does this new home look like? Well, remarkably like the one he left behind. As the divers enter the underwater house, we find that it is fitted out with the latest domestic technology, stainless steel, plastic, formica, bathtubs, showers etc. Within, Cousteau, newly arrived, sits in his wetsuit as those around him smoke (pausing to note that tobacco burns twice as quickly at this depth). This is the first sign of a constant effort of 'naturalisation' – everything happens down below as above – smoking, eating, putting the cleaner round, sipping wine, water and tea, making up the beds, answering the phone, playing the stereo, taking a shower, having a haircut. A typewriter and an anglepoise lamp, it appears, are the latest models.

The amount of focus on the banal is perplexing, forty years after the event. This requires an understanding of the contexts, and the pressures in France to modernize, focussed around the political economy of the household. 'A well-run, harmonious home is a national asset' says Ross (1995, 78) and it is characterized by 'A qualitatively new, French, lived relationship to cleanliness' (1995, 73). Nearly a century after Verne, the divers have all the comforts of the Nautilus. The undersea house is a veritable showhome, paralleling the retreat of the new middle classes to domestic interiors and electric kitchens, and enclosed automobiles. The submersible takes on the role of the family car, and performs 'spins' round the underwater countryside, like the 'randonnée en campagne' (Sunday drive).

The architects of this new domestic France are, however, women. A problematic emerges here. On the surface, there is a rigid gender division. Ross observes that as France modernizes, there are clear gender roles: 'double-lined curtains and nylon veil for women, technology and beyond for men'. (1995, 59). Women's magazines are complicit in selling 'the daily narrative of female existence, involving shopping, housekeeping, fashion: daily life is full and complete, and the reader finds a ready-made model of accomplishment, fulfilment and satisfaction'. (1995, 81).

Watching Cousteau and his crew put the Hoover round gives one the distinct impression that the viewer is 'at home with the Cousteaus' (even if Mrs Cousteau is not present). Cousteau and his men must be *both the male and female* of the 'new unit of middle-class consumption' – the couple. (1995, 11) 'Orientalism', writes Said, 'was an exclusively male province' (1978, 56). But this is not about feminisation of the men, nor is it making a statement about it being increasingly masculine to do domestic work. The colonizing imperative is in tension with the need to set up a home, and the men on Conshelf have to live out both: each of the aquanauts has his own duties, and they perform them in unison. Colonization, with all its dangers, must at this time still be an exclusively male activity.

At some point, the aquanauts have to 'go to work'. This takes the form of the apparently serious business of plucking fish and dropping them into clear plastic bags. In fact this activity has less a feel of farming or retrieving vegetables from the garden than it does the antiseptic qualities of wandering round the supermarket. Getting the fish in is more like a parody of the weekly shop in the supermarket. There are a number of moments when the syntax and tone of advertisements are used, indeed there is a sense in which an entire lifestyle is being 'sold'. The descriptions of how the pod is supplied with air and food sound like the miracle of the refrigerator (Ross, 100/101). The focus on domestic appliances is so great that it seems to be less concerned with cleaning and more with 'demonstrating' the technology. Indeed, the communications technologies on board seem interchangeable with the domestic ones.

Watching the men 'making house', forty years on, is hilarious. It is unlikely this was intended. The undersea kingdom is not so much colonized as 'settled' as a domestic salon, the utopian society on the bottom of the sea characterized less by (masculine) technology than by its delight in new gadgets for the home.

Ross observes that American capitalism exported a fantasy of timeless and limitless development, the past having been eradicated, where no-one goes without. (1995, 10). The main significance of the settling of the seabed is that it sets up a controlled, rationally administered environment that is not only 'outside of time' in Ross's terms, but also 'outside of space'. Falco, one of the members of the Conshelf experiment apparently said 'Under the sea, everything is moral' a statement which Ecott finds 'enigmatic'. (2002, 252). I think this statement is perfectly understandable in its historical context, which is to say it summarises the generalized desire of the day to wipe the slate clean and reconstruct the world along utopian lines. Conshelf might as well have been on the moon. As noted above, it just comes into being: we don't see it's conception, nor its construction. Its past is as bare as the chests of the men.

Conclusion

This analysis should reinforce Ross's point that contrary to prevailing memory, Empire did not neatly 'end' in 1962 (1995, 9). Just as she demonstrates that its practices and discourses continued through the racist cleansing of central Paris, we see Cousteau project onto his diving experiment all the trappings of Empire. The ahistoricity of his enterprise is betrayed by its discursive continuities. He presents a purified idea about 'home' with its return from adventure to a domestic white, middle-class male world, characterized by domestic bliss, and brought about by technology, with invisible immigrant communities: Paris in microcosm. If, as Ross says, France made use of the colonies 'one last time' to resurrect its own superiority over them (1995, 9), Cousteau has enacted a fantasy in which white males build this utopia on virgin African territory, creating a surrogate, imaginary Empire which acts as an antidote to the housing crisis. Against a backdrop of time-space compression, he creates, on a site that is-and-is-not Africa, a safe haven. It is a flight from history, a construction of an alternative history in which 'Africa' as 'other' has been obliterated. The underwater house is like the hexagon of France, where boundaries are permeable to the Oceanaut, but not to the scavenger. However, as above, those boundaries have also proved permeable to the Marshall Plan². He enacts an idea about Empire, but at the same time Empire has changed its terms of engagement. So, ironically, Cousteau is as much colonizer as colonized.

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Notes

¹ Kurtz's famous utterance at the end of 'Heart of Darkness'

² A major effort to export US consumer durables, named after United States Secretary of State, George C. Marshall and initiated at Harvard University on 5 June 1947.