

The Helmeted Beholder

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines a figure for the spectatorship of catastrophe in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1870): Captain Nemo viewing the lost Atlantis 300 meters beneath the Atlantic. It shows how Verne transforms romantic images of beholding ruins as picturesque or sublime in this scene by putting a helmet on the beholder. This helmet, required by divers for survival underwater, masks the countenance of the beholder, a mask that Verne extends to the posture of Nemo, who is petrified as he contemplates Atlantis by the glowing light of lava that is, bizarrely, still erupting. The essay makes sense of the scene by drawing on Maurice Blanchot's poetics of disaster, arguing that the helmeted beholder creates a new image of spectatorship in tandem with a new temporality of ruins, collapsing past, present, and future into catastrophic paralysis. The essay then traces the legacy of this figure in science fiction films of outer space, from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014). The image of the helmeted beholder occurs in scenes in these films that, as in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, show a cataclysmic moment when the astronaut's empowered agency is suspended, revealing the mind-blowing power of a cosmos he or she is powerless to affect.

FROM THE BEGINNINGS of the modern ambition to expand beyond the atmosphere of air, outer space and the ocean depths have been two great domains of investigation. The ability of humans to navigate such environments depends in both cases on technologies that overcome their irrespirable atmospheres. I take this term from *Breathing in Irrespirable Atmospheres: And, in Some Cases, Also under Water* (1947), written by Sir Robert Davis, an important inventor and at one point chief executive of the Siebe Gorman Company based in Britain.

Siebe Gorman vastly improved the technology of the closed-helmet diving suit in the 1830s, responding to needs at the time for both marine salvage operations and waterside engineering important for constructions of the Industrial Revolution. Across the next century and a quarter, the company designed equipment for “firemen, miners, aviators and chemical workers,” as well as British expeditions in the Himalayas.¹ In the post–World War II era, such inventions were studied and modified by breathing supports essayed for test pilots in the stratosphere and then for astronauts in outer space.²

Even as the ocean depths and space have been a challenge and opportunity for engineering, science, and empire, they have also stimulated the imagination. In this essay I will describe a figure of spectatorship emerging in portrayals of undersea exploration that went on to exert a powerful hold over cinema’s science fiction portrayals of outer space. That figure is the image of what I call *the helmeted beholder*: able to breathe in irrespirable atmosphere thanks to a helmet that partially or completely masks his or her countenance while witnessing a cosmic spectacle at a scale beyond human agency that he or she is powerless to affect. The creator of this figure is Jules Verne, the author who pioneered iconic imaginative figures of environmental frontiers.

Verne developed the figure of the helmeted beholder in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1870). This novel was the first fiction to portray the undersea realm as a holistic planetary environment, and across its narrative, Verne proved a remarkably prescient inventor of modern undersea icons, inspired by the innovations of his age. The ability to plumb the depths took off in the middle decades of the nineteenth century with a host of inventions, from the closed-helmet diving suit to the ability to chart the contours of the ocean floor, given an impetus by the process of laying the first transatlantic oceanic cable in the 1850s–1860s. Indeed, Verne wrote *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* on the steamship that had just accomplished the successful laying of this cable, “with a copy of [Matthew Fontaine] Maury’s *Physical Geography of the Sea* [generally regarded as the first work of modern oceanography] beside him.”³ Undersea access was also promoted on land by the exhibition format of the modern public aquarium, an exhibition form that premiered to the public in London in 1853. Verne was a visitor, notably, to the spectacular public aquariums featured at the Paris World’s Fair of 1867.⁴ In a popular account of undersea exploration penned in 1956 and revised in 1965, James Dugan declared that rather than science fiction, Verne’s novel was a “dramatization of existing techniques.”⁵ While Dugan overstates, it is to make a point: Verne’s brilliant imagination takes recent technological innovation of his era and envisages their future, as well as their philosophical and aesthetic import. The novel’s many undersea icons were taken up both in fancy and in fact. The US military named its first nuclear submarine the *Nautilus*, launched in 1956, after Nemo’s submarine, entirely powered by electricity, in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*—although it is not clear whether this echo was

¹ James Dugan, *Man under the Sea* (new rev. ed., 1965; New York: Collier Books, 1966), 29. Siebe Gorman designed a watertight attachment between helmet and suit.

² For images showing the history of US space suits, see “History of U.S. Space Suits,” accessed June 2018, <http://web.mit.edu/16.00/www/aec/spacesuit.html>.

³ Helen Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 26–27.

⁴ For a description of these aquariums, see Natascha Adamowsky, *The Mysterious Science of the Sea, 1775–1943* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 79.

⁵ Dugan, *Man under the Sea*, 170.

inspired by the novel or, rather, by the popular film version directed by Richard Fleischer, which was released by the Walt Disney Studios in 1954.

Verne invented the icon of the helmeted beholder by imagining the transformative impact if one were to put a dive helmet on the spectator in romantic tropes of spectatorship. Romantic tropes of landscape spectatorship relevant to Verne's new icon include the spectator of sublime and picturesque scenes. The spectator of picturesque scenes finds pleasure and relaxation in letting her eye wander over variations in environment, people, and architecture. The spectator in the paradigm of the sublime gains a heightened appreciation of the cosmos when witnessing scenes of astonishing power. Along with giving the romantic spectator a dive helmet, Verne's scenes of beholding set in the sea's depths depend upon a revision of existing dive practices, in his fantasy of self-contained breathing apparatus. Verne imagined that divers could walk around beneath the sea untethered from air supplies at the surface to explore a vast variety of underwater environments. In fact, scuba would emerge as a usable form only in the early 1940s, most famously with the compressed-air cylinders achieved by Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Emile Gagnan. Freed from air hoses, Verne's divers, like scuba divers a century later, adventure in unknown realms, discovering unimaginable conditions and creatures, as well as encountering unprecedented dangers.

An episode illustrating how Verne's divers adventure beneath the waves is the visit to an underwater grotto where Nemo is cultivating a pearl of fabulous value. In the grotto, Nemo and his captives save an Indian pearl diver from a shark, requiring a ferocious battle, which Verne's narrator describes in gory detail. Along with their strength, and courage, the divers have the requisite air supply for combat with the shark, in contrast to the free-diving pearl diver. Nemo is holding on to the shark's fin "striking blow after blow at its stomach with the dagger," while the shark is beating "the water with fury," about to devour the "brave captain," until harpooner Ned Land, "quick as thought," drives his "terrible weapon" into the shark's side.⁶ The captain then frees the diver from the stone weighting him down, brings him to the surface "with a vigorous kick," and the team revives him. When the diver comes to, he is, in Professor Aronnax's account, surprised to see "four great copper heads leaning over him," wondering, Aronnax surmises, to what "superhuman being" he owes his life. The accent in the meaning of "superhuman" in Verne's usage falls on consummate human agency, although the looming figures could be read as having a posthuman appearance, making the diver the precursor of some new type of cyborg, emerging from human survival in irrespirable atmosphere. However, in this episode, as throughout *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, the new dive technologies of the novel enhance the "craft" of the protagonist, employed in the problem solving that structures sea adventure fiction.⁷

The novel's incorporation of new dive technologies in the service of underwater craft renders particularly noteworthy a single episode in the novel where Nemo does not exert agency, and where the "superhuman" aspect conferred by the helmet starts to dehumanize its wearer. This episode is also the only dive that occurs at night, when Captain Nemo invites Professor Aronnax, and Aronnax alone, on a mysterious promenade. The walk occurs "at a depth of 300 metres on the floor of the Atlantic."⁸ It takes the divers along a gradually rising plain, smooth at first and then

⁶ Quotations in this paragraph are taken from Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, trans. William Butcher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 204–5.

⁷ On craft and adventure poetics, including Verne's, see Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁸ Quotations in this paragraph are from Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, 255, 259–60.

becoming rockier and steeper, toward a glowing point two miles away, where they begin a climb. As they ascend what proves to be a mountain, the terrain rising up with increasing steepness, they enter a frightening territory of “huge crustaceans lurking in their dens” and other creatures, holding “the secret of their brutish life.” Past this threshold, they arrive at a plateau where “picturesque ruins stood up, bearing the mark of man’s hand.” At the top of the mountain, finally, they look out over a vast plain toward an undersea volcano (although such seamounts would not be observed by oceanographers for another hundred years) “vomiting forth torrents of lava” “but not flames.”

In Verne’s signature mixture of science and fantasy, Aronnax gives a physical explanation for this peculiar form of illumination: “Flames need oxygen from the air, and cannot be produced underwater; but flows of lava, which already contain their own incandescence, can be heated to white-hot, acting successfully against the liquid element and vaporizing it on contact.”⁹ By such eerie light, Aronnax perceives “a city destroyed, its roofs fallen, its temples flattened, its arches broken, its columns lying on the ground; in short, a whole Pompeii sunk beneath the waters. . . . Where was I? Where? I wanted to know at any cost.” So powerful is Aronnax’s curiosity that he forgets he is in irrespirable atmosphere. “I wanted to tear off the copper sphere imprisoning my head,” but Nemo stops him from this suicidal gesture, and “picking up a chalky piece of stone, he went up to a rock of black basalt and wrote a single word: ATLANTIS.”¹⁰



FIGURE 1 Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Tintern Abbey: The Crossing and Chancel, Looking towards the East Window*, 1794, graphite and watercolor on paper, 359 × 250 mm.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

With this scene, Verne revitalizes *Ruinenlust*, to use a German term “resurrected” by Rose Macaulay.¹¹ The desire and love of ruins became a favorite subject in preromantic and romantic depictions of landscape in both literature and the arts. When Aronnax first comes upon the traces of the lost Atlantis, he uses the word “picturesque” in its aesthetic sense. The picturesque was an important aspect of the romantic cult of ruins. Thus, William Gilpin, writing of ruined Tintern Abbey, expressed the charm of architecture that “Nature has now made her own,” softened by what Gilpin calls “the ornaments of time.”¹² As Brian Dillon notes, Joseph Mallory William Turner’s picturesque views of the medieval Tintern Abbey epitomize picturesque ruins, as in *Tintern Abbey: The Crossing and Chancel Looking towards the East Window* (1794; fig. 1). This view includes spectators who enjoy the irregular masses of stone fringed with garlands of ivy, strolling at their leisure amid the abbey’s ruined yet still-spacious vaults.

As the full scale of the lost Atlantis is revealed to Aronnax, its aesthetic register shifts from the picturesque to the sublime, another expression of *Ruinenlust*. The sublime as it was revitalized in the eighteenth century by philosophers such as Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke designated the pleasure taken in displays of overwhelming power. One notable source of sublimity in romantic images of ruins is the vista of apocalyptic destruction as it is occurring, in contrast to spectators’ leisurely contemplation of what is left afterward, as at Tintern Abbey. A good example of such destruction relevant to the scene of Aronnax and Nemo viewing the lost Atlantis is the British painter John Martin’s *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1822, restored 2011; fig. 2). In this painting, the swirling forms, the fiery color, and the immense scale of natural catastrophe contribute to its vertiginous sense of apocalypse. Amid the crowds of



FIGURE 2 John Martin, *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum*, c. 1821, restored 2011, oil on canvas, 253 cm × 161.6 cm.

¹¹ See Rose Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953; London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), invoked by Brian Dillon in *Ruin Lust* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 5–6.

¹² Gilpin, cited in Dillon, *Ruin Lust*, 10.

stunned refugees and possibly potential victims in the foreground, a few soldiers hold up shields in a gesture of protection, and one also gazes directly at the eruption, with the light from its fires glinting off his helmet and shield.

Yet another, weirder romantic example is the painting *Destruction* (1836), from Thomas Cole's series *The Course of Empire* (fig. 3). In this allegory, unmoored from a specific historical event, the end of an empire is rendered both as war and as unchained, violent natural forces, including fires and a storm at sea. Curiously, the figure dominating the scene in the foreground of the picture is a bone-white statue, with a shield, yet more curiously, in metal, which reflects gleams, presumable from some light source that is part of the violence, whether human or natural, without offering any protection against it. Oddly as well, the statue is missing its head, its countenance shattered by catastrophe, which has also knocked off its hands.

Cole's series *The Course of Empire* renders a civilization's progress and destruction in a sequential, ordered fashion. Chronology is similarly controlled in the images of Turner and Martin. Both are firmly anchored in a present imagining destruction: the romantic picturesque through evidence of the work of time; the romantic sublime mapped onto the imagination of past catastrophe. In the scene where Aronnax and Nemo behold Atlantis, in contrast, the order of chronology starts to come undone as the violence of the scene sinks in. Aronnax's first response on realizing he is beholding Atlantis is to anchor this destruction in received narratives, as he runs through both mythical and historical evidence of its existence. And yet, he is viewing at once the destroyed civilization and the volcano that destroyed it, whose eruption, bizarrely, is still occurring. This implosion of the past cause of the catastrophe and its continued existence in the present is perturbing. The commanding presence of the volcano is all the more inescapable as it introduces the light enabling spectatorship, which, yet stranger, in this underwater atmosphere,



FIGURE 3 Thomas Cole, *Destruction*, from the series *The Course of Empire*, 1836, oil on canvas, 100.3 cm × 161.2 cm.

comes from lava that glows in the absence of fire. The active volcano reminds Aronnax of another scale of temporality, planetary “deep time,” augmenting *Ruinenlust* with the latest, geological knowledge. The strange temporality, the might of the scene, and Aronnax’s awareness of geological scale plunge him into a “dream,” as he muses on the cataclysmic history of the planet and how “all this ground as far as the equator, is still worked by plutonic forces.”¹³

While Aronnax is surveying and trying to make sense of this fantastic spectacle, what is the reaction of his companion?¹⁴ Nemo provides no clue as to which, if any, of Aronnax’s responses he shares. In Aronnax’s words, “Captain Nemo, leaning on a mossy stele, remained motionless as if turned to stone in a silent ecstasy. Was he dreaming of the lost generations, was he asking them the secret of human destiny? Was it here that this strange being came to commune with history, to relive ancient life—he who wanted nothing to do with modern times? What I would have given then to know his thoughts, to share them, to understand them!”¹⁵

Of course, authoritative silence is a familiar attitude for the submarine’s mysterious commander. But it is also a necessity given the physical limitation of irrespirable atmosphere, which allows no verbal communication. Nor can Aronnax extrapolate from Nemo’s countenance, hidden beneath the visor of his helmet. Yet at the same time, the inventive Verne might have imagined that one day there would be a way to communicate from helmet to helmet and speak underwater—or that glass might have revealed some clues as to expression. What if Verne fails to provide clues to what Nemo is experiencing because what Aronnax sees—or fails to see, rather—is in fact a new figure for beholding ruins created by encasing the head of the romantic lover of ruins in a technology for breathing in irrespirable atmosphere? This figure connects to the sublime and yet has a quality that evades it as well, since romantic responsiveness is lost.

In *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980, trans. 1995), French philosopher Maurice Blanchot has given us concepts to understand the aesthetic register of the impassive beholder—if the term “aesthetic” can be applied to the nonexpressiveness of disaster in Nemo’s poses. Nemo appears mute and petrified, in the sense of “turned to stone,” in Aronnax’s words. Such lack of responsiveness intimates Blanchot’s reflections on what might be called the *disabling effect of disaster*—*disabling* in the sense of a technology put out of service. In Blanchot’s words, disaster is “an experience that is not a lived event, and does not engage the present of presence . . . it impoverishes all experience.”¹⁶ As if inventing a situation that could give positive form to such radical negation, Verne imagines submarine ruins locked away from viewing for all of humanity at the time he is writing—ruins that he pointedly likens to Pompeii, for example, only to underscore the difference between Pompeii’s prominence on the circuit of historical and artistic tourism and Atlantis’s unavailability. Or rather, Atlantis yields its secrets to one man alone—Nemo, the mysterious protagonist of Verne’s novel who has renounced terrestrial existence.

¹³ Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, 262.

¹⁴ For a romantic and postromantic lineage, in Brian Dillon’s pithy distillation, ruins may be “a reminder of the universal reality of collapse and rot; a warning from the past about the destiny of our own or any other civilization; an ideal of beauty that is alluring exactly because of its flaws and failures; the symbol of a certain melancholic or maundering state of mind; an image of equilibrium between nature and culture; a memorial to the fall of an ancient or recent war; the very picture of economic hubris or industrial decline; a desolate playground in whose cracked and weed-infested precincts we have space and time to imagine a future” (*Ruin Lust*, 5).

¹⁵ Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, 262.

¹⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 50–51.

The details of Nemo's beholding of Atlantis resonate uncannily with Blanchot's fragments musing on the experience of disaster—if disaster can be called experience since Blanchot presents its qualities through a language of negation. As framed by Blanchot, the experience of disaster is nonexperience, or experience under erasure, to use the Derridean term. For Blanchot, the word “disaster,” *désastre*—constructed to indicate the negation of a star—is expressive of disaster's incomprehensibility, which can be signified only through statements that cancel or undo themselves as they are made. Our star is the sun, and Blanchot writes of disaster that “it keeps its vigil only when night watches without watching over anything.” The promenade to view Atlantis fittingly occurs at night. It is visible only by the strangest type of lighting: the perturbed light of the glowing but nonfiery lava. Such lava fits the kind of illumination Blanchot associates with disaster, which is what might be called *nonsidereal*, emanating from a light other than our sun, or any other star—*dés-astre*. “Desire, still a relation to the star—the great sidereal desire, religious and nostalgic, panicky or cosmic,” writes Blanchot. The vigil of disaster “does not occur under the sidereal sky.”¹⁷

The bizarre temporality of Atlantis in the scene from Verne's novel—mixing past catastrophe with the volcanic eruption that was its cause and that is continuing into the present—also resonates with Blanchot's figures for this response. Blanchot writes, “*Always returning upon the paths of time, we are neither ahead nor behind, late is early, near far,*” since disaster renders time jammed and inoperable.¹⁸ Disaster freezes time in a stasis Blanchot represents as time's spatialization. The experience of Atlantis under erasure for Nemo partakes of such stasis. The ruins of Atlantis are a location that he can revisit and view at his leisure—or, at least, until his air supply runs out, which, perhaps thankfully for him, reinjects him into the present and the flow of time.

While Aronnax is given a unique glimpse of the spectacle, its habitual beholder is a hero defined by his nonidentity. Nemo, translated as “no-man,” is of course Verne's allusion to the alias Odysseus chose when he expressed his identity to the Cyclops (*outis*, in Greek). With his hero's name evoking Odysseus, Verne orients Nemo toward an empowered lineage of action heroes—Odysseus is a paradigm of craft. This empowerment is important in Verne's depiction of Nemo, still and inscrutable beholding Atlantis. Nemo's passivity is not from a lack of capacity. Rather, in Blanchot's formulations, there is a distinctive passivity inhering in disaster: “Passivity is measureless: for it exceeds being; it is being when being is worn down past the nub. . . . It is the disaster defined—hinted at—not as an event of the past, but as the immemorial past which returns, dispersing by its return the present.”¹⁹

With the scene of Nemo beholding ruined Atlantis, impassible and mute in his helmet, Verne has invented a poetic expression of the human attitude toward a large-scale catastrophe that exceeds, or leaches out, human agency; an attitude that, as Verne figures it, becomes petrified and impenetrable in a fashion defying expression. The destruction of Atlantis is that of a civilization, and in *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, the cause is violent geological forces that destroy human history and reveal our presence as a short moment in a massive, in this case, planetary scale of time. In *The Mysterious Island* (1874), the sequel to *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, Verne provides social context that explains Nemo's attraction to the spectacle of catastrophe. Readers discover that Nemo is the alias of the Indian prince Dakkar, which Dakkar assumed after fighting

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

in the failed rebellion against the British of 1857. In this combat, the British destroyed his family, homeland, and friends, dispossessing him of attachment to the earth, which is the prelude to his adopting an exclusively marine existence.

The figure of the helmeted beholder, however, does not recur in subsequent dive literature and film in the first half of the twentieth century, at least to my knowledge. Rather, dive spectatorship conjures two other kinds of beholding of the depths in Verne's novel more in keeping with his Enlightenment optimism. These scenes include fascination with the enchanting mysteries of this alien world, which observers both marvel at and seek to describe; and adventure problem-solving of its mighty challenges and dangers. The helmeted beholder, will, however, be rediscovered with humans' expansion into outer space in the post-World War II era. In science fiction films questioning the project of modernity, the figure of the helmeted beholder reappears.

Perhaps the first and certainly most famous instance of its reappearance is in the meltdown of human control over technology in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). For the astronauts in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, the helmet is a prosthesis needed for survival in irrespirable atmosphere. The helmet makes astronauts in this film, as beneath the sea, in the words of Verne, superhuman beings. And indeed, throughout popular imagery of astronauts, their helmets signify their empowered agency. The helmeted astronauts start out represented in this fashion in *2001*, in keeping with the Odyssean overtones of the film's subtitle. In the sequence where astronaut Dave Bowman, played by Keir Dullea, triumphs over the vindictive AI HAL, his determined visage is framed by the helmet's visor, which reflects HAL's information storage segments (fig. 4).

Bowman loses the heroic agency of the astronaut, however, in the famous penultimate psychedelic sequence when he is swept through the Star Gate, entitled "Jupiter and beyond the Infinite." In keeping with the cosmic force field sweeping Bowman past the Star Gate, in this sequence, action adventure ebbs. In the midst of this cataclysm, Kubrick includes images of Bowman as a passive, helmeted beholder subject to astral turbulence. All we see are his eyes open in amazement



FIGURE 4 Screenshot, Stanley Kubrick, dir. *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Film. Los Angeles, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer presents A Stanley Kubrick Production, 1968.

as he travels through the Star Gate, and indeed, Kubrick shifts from the helmet to a surrealistic close-up of an overexposed, blinking eye, filtered with psychedelic colors to emphasize beholding—although there is no clue in the close-up as to what is being seen, in contrast to the imagery that we saw reflected on the helmet visor, which serves as what Spencer Golub calls “a televisual screen.”²⁰

When Bowman then arrives into an uncanny room, at once old-fashioned and strangely lit, after passing through the Star Gate, he adopts the classic pose of the helmeted beholder contemplating disaster, as in figure 5. As Golub writes, the room is strange: Golub points to its “brilliance,” which makes it appear “over-radiated and unreal.”²¹ Further puzzling are the multicolored gleams on Bowman’s helmet visor, shown in figure 5, which do not correspond to anything the spectator sees—nor to the light of the sun. These gleams are a version of Blanchot’s nonsideral light. If we seek to give them a source within the narrative, they might come from the obscure higher intelligences, who manifest themselves otherwise in the black monolith; or perhaps they are explicitly the lighting system outside the fiction we are watching, as Kubrick breaks the illusionist frame. In any case, these images of impassive, illegible beholding in *2001*, as in *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, portend epochal shifts in human existence on the earth.²²

In *2001*, both the ambiguous higher intelligence and the malevolent AI defy an Enlightenment narrative of humanity attaining perfection through reason, utilizing technology as its willing servant. Technology runs awry, too, in recent films set in outer space that feature scenes of helmeted beholding, such as Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* (2013) and Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* (2014). In Cuarón’s *Gravity*, the disaster ensues from the unintended consequences of space exploration. The Russians destroy an inoperative satellite, leaving orbiting debris that wreaks havoc with the spacecraft and spacewalk technologies used by scientist Ryan Stone, played by Sandra Bullock,

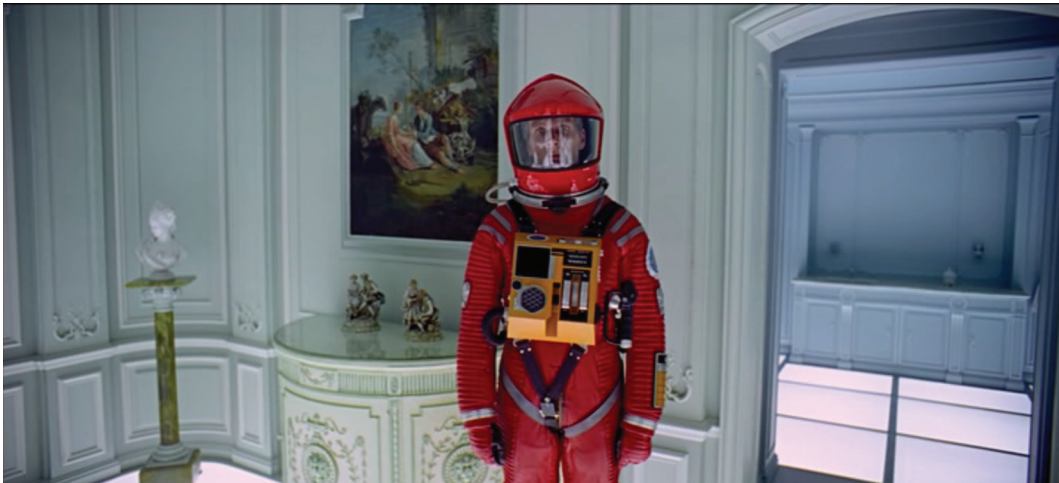


FIGURE 5 Screengrab, Stanley Kubrick, dir. *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Film. Los Angeles, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer presents A Stanley Kubrick Production, 1968.

²⁰ Spencer Golub, *Infinity (Stage)* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 118.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² In James Cameron’s homage to *2001*, *The Abyss* (1989), Cameron projects this helmeted beholding of a higher intelligence back into the depths. He, however, combats disaster, materializing the object of helmeted beholding as benevolent aliens: “a dance of light... the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” in the words of Dr. Lindsay Brigman, played by Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio (trailer at ca. 1:31).

and veteran astronaut Matt Kowalski, played by George Clooney. Throughout most of their presence on-screen, these two protagonists behave as adventure heroes. Stone problem-solves a way back to earth after Kowalski saves her from the impact of the debris and then instructs her how she should achieve her reentry, before he sacrifices himself unflinchingly. However, in one notable sequence just before Kowalski spins off to his death in space, such heroism is suspended. In this sequence, Stone and Kowalski tumble vertiginously, tethered to each other, as Kowalski guides them to a Russian craft they hope will provide their ticket home. With nothing to do, they kill the time in conversation, while glimpses of earth and cosmic light reflect off the visors of their helmets, framing their amazed countenances.

As Kowalski and Stone rotate vertiginously, the scene draws together threads of disaster from the past and future. Dr. Stone recounts the death of her four-year-old daughter, which numbs her to anything other than work. Figure 6 (at ca. 27:11) shows the light on her visor as she tells this story. For Kowalski, who has “a bad feeling about this mission,” the disaster is imminent, which he intimates during the sequence, speaking of whether he will break the real astronaut’s Anatoly Solovyev’s record for time spent on spacewalks.²³ Kowalski reacts calmly in the face of likely doom, with the understated optimism essential to the demeanor of the astronaut (e.g., the West Virginia drawl of test pilots in Thomas Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*). However, when viewed from the perspective of disaster, such muted affect turns from strategic demeanor to passive petrification. Once Kowalski does float off, his last words, defused against the background of rock and roll, are at once a poignant and inscrutable acceptance of fate: “Oh my god, wow . . . Hey Ryan, you should see the sun on the Ganges; it’s amazing” (at ca. 36:18). “[D]isaster means being separated from the star,” Blanchot writes.²⁴ In *Gravity*, Kowalski’s death is separation from the earth, our home, and from the life support connecting us to it.



FIGURE 6 Screengrab, Alfonso Cuarón, *Gravity*. Film. Burbank CA: Warner Brothers; with Sherman Oaks, CA: Esperanto Filmoj; and London, UK: Heyday Films, 2013.

²³ The record is 82 hours and 22 minutes, according to Robert Z. Pearlman, “‘Gravity’ Hidden History: Five Space ‘Easter Eggs’ in Astronaut Movie Out Now,” October 4, 2013, accessed June 2018, <https://www.space.com/23087-gravity-movie-space-history-secrets.html>.

²⁴ Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, 2.

The reflections on the astronauts' visors represent cosmic light, which would thus put the helmeted beholder in touch with some form of warmth and illumination. However, such warmth is muted, since the reflections are simulations created through complex CGI. CGI and special-effects simulation are the modern equivalent to the eerie illumination of Verne's lava and recall Blanchot's nonsidereal light: "the wake does not occur under the sidereal sky."²⁵ The interest of such light quality can be gauged by the trouble taken by Cuarón and his cinematographer, Emmanuel Lubezki, to simulate the variations that would be perceived as an astronaut orbited the earth. Lubezki invented a "Light Box," "made of 196 panels, each containing 4096 LEDs. Actors and set pieces could be placed inside. Panels could move to accommodate cameras and props. Visual effects technicians piloting software could instantaneously change any individual LED." The actors were placed inside this rig, which was "more than 20 feet (6 meters) tall and over 10 feet (3 m) wide . . . hanging on an intricate 12-wire rig, inside a small house made of flat-screen TV's. . . . Specific areas of the Earth, parts of the International Space Station, your co-stars' space-suit helmet, lights in proper perspective; any object making, reflecting or refracting light—or the absence of light—can be painted on the Light Box."²⁶ Pointedly, to reinforce the association of CGI with the cold light of disaster, in the rest of the film, when Stone is effecting her rescue and is piloting from inside the craft, her countenance is exposed without her helmet (fig. 7).

The reference point for Stone and Kowalski in the sequence where they tumble through space is earth—a scene of past tragedy for Stone and forever out of reach for Kowalski. In *Gravity*'s views of the earth from space, this home for the human species is intact and resplendent. However, the film gestures toward the dangers of human manufacture and environmental intervention in the space debris carelessly created by the Russians. The noxious effects of both are amplified to epic scale in Christopher Nolan's cli fi thriller *Interstellar* (2014), whose premise is the search for a new planet for the human species, as the habitability of the earth is inexorably



FIGURE 7 Screenshot, Alfonso Cuarón, *Gravity*. Film. Burbank CA: Warner Brothers; with Sherman Oaks, CA: Esperanto Filmoj; and London, UK: Heyday Films, 2013.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁶ Dave Brody, "Making 'Gravity': How Filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón Created 'Weightlessness' without Space Flight," accessed June 2018, <https://www.space.com/23073-gravity-movie-weightlessness-alfonso-cuaron.html>.

degrading because of climate change. One memorable riff on helmeted beholding in this film occurs after the astronaut hero Joseph Cooper, played by Matt McConaughey, fails in his mission to find an alternative planet. Instead, he is launched into tortuous paths of space-time, sucked into a black hole, and then shown trapped in a fifth dimension, both connected and cut off from his daughter when she was a little girl, with whom he is trying to communicate. As Cooper hurtles helplessly through the black hole into a tesseract in the fifth dimension, gleams of light play on his face, which is visible through his helmet (fig. 8). His demeanor is not impassive but rather desperate in the fifth dimension, imaged as the luminous abstraction of a library. Nonetheless, there is a disastrous quality to this scene, as he is caught in a future that has no contact with the past and hence in a time zone where the present is negated. Further, the plot gives this entrapment an identification: individuals' inability to avert a massive catastrophe annihilating human history—the Anthropocene destruction of the planet.

Tellingly, the high point of the episode in which Nemo and Aronnax behold the lost continent of Atlantis is not a heroic gesture but rather the enigma of an elusive cosmic gleam. The source of this gleam is the moon, which “appeared through the mass of waters and threw her pale rays on the buried continent. It was but a gleam, but what an indescribable effect!” Gleams are associated with the celestial light of birth and rebirth in a lineage epitomized by poet William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” where Wordsworth writes of the “visionary gleam.” Wordsworth’s ode is an invitation to imagine a new type of heavenly life cycle, with its own strange temporality: “*The child is father of the man*”; “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.”²⁷ But the gleam of the moon on Atlantis has a strangely cold and muting effect and depends, in any case, on the nonsidereal illumination of glowing lava. The gleam on the visor



FIGURE 8 Screenshot, Christopher Nolan, *Interstellar*. Film. Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures; in association with Burbank, CA: Legendary Entertainment; Burbank, CA: Syncopy; Culver City, CA: Lynda Obst Productions; and with the assistance of the Alberta Media Fund, Government of Alberta, and the support of Atvinnuvega-og nýsköpunarráðuneytið. 2014.

²⁷ Quotations are from William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” (completed 1804), accessed September 2018, <https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/ode-intimations-immortality-recollections-early-childhood>.

of the helmeted astronaut also cannot be perceived by him or her and thus is an elusive form of illumination at best. At the end of *2001*, Kubrick shows the Star Baby beholding the earth from outer space—not the heavens—with its unnaturally widened eyes, its entire body encased in a bubble that resembles an astronaut’s helmet. The image is enigmatic and disturbing. Does the Star Baby intimate the projection of humanity into a new—perhaps superhuman, perhaps post-human—existence, or does it express the paralysis of disaster imagined as so pervasive that it becomes a biological feature of humanity? While helmeted beholding retains a rhetoric of vision as illumination that maps onto the Enlightenment, it fails to deliver either solar clarity or mystical revelation. A