

Tin Can Blues
Moonage
Earthrise
Bowie

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acmi The Stardom and Celebrity
of David Bowie Symposium
Melbourne, Australia
AUSTRALIAN
CENTRE FOR
THE MOVING
IMAGE



Bowie is

a contrast
a chameleon
a vaudevillian changeling
a cypher code
running out of time

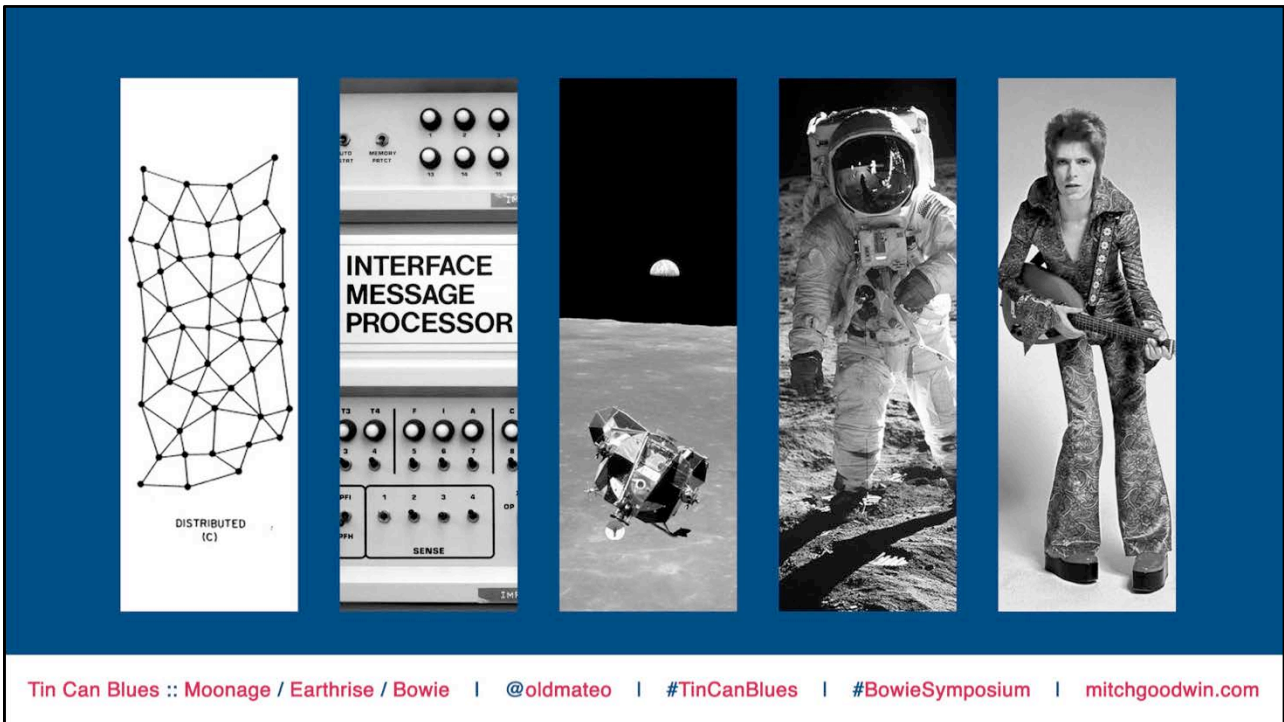
Bowie is

Dylan on *Width of a Circle*
McCartney on *Cygnets and Committes*
Lennon on *Wild Eyed Boy From Freecloud*
Reed on *Queen Bitch*



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We know that now and that's all-ok – because now, we live in the network; we remix the world by just being in it. On *Space Oddity* however, Bowie appeared to us seemingly fully formed as a moonstruck balladeer who would go on to hit the glam rock jackpot with his alien stage persona *Ziggy Stardust* – a highly original and exhilarating pastiche of the British and American music scenes. A character who captured the abrasive temperament of the moment as he straddled the jet-trails of our collective rushing towards the stars.



Indeed, this period '69-'72, represents the same period that APARNET is brought into being, that covert experimental network of military and academic main frames that would become what we now call the Internet. Major Tom, Ziggy and the Apollo Moon Shots are all products of the network. Indeed, they depend on the philosophy of network culture, of decentralisation, of fail-safe communications and of course, vast commercial opportunity.

Bowie is

the Internet's greatest assemblage
embedded in its genealogy
framed by the screen
sound & vision

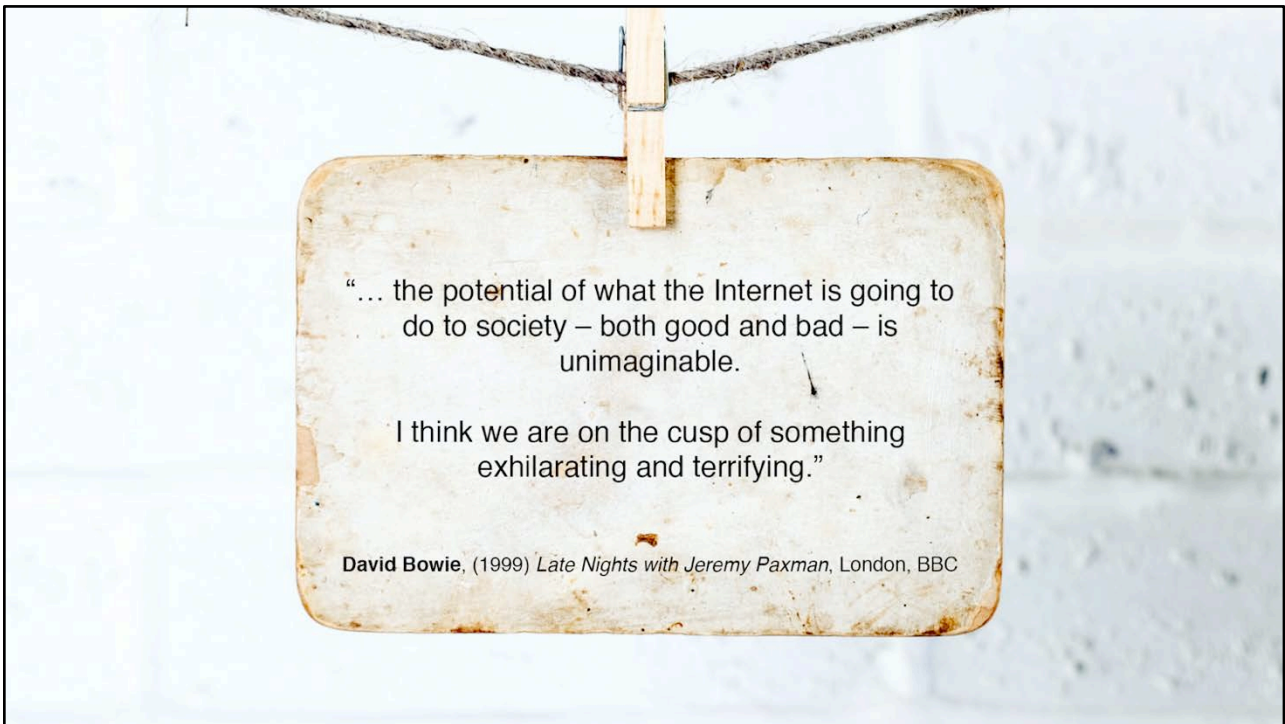
#01

BowieNet



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An early adopter of Internet technology, Bowie observed on the eve of the millennium:



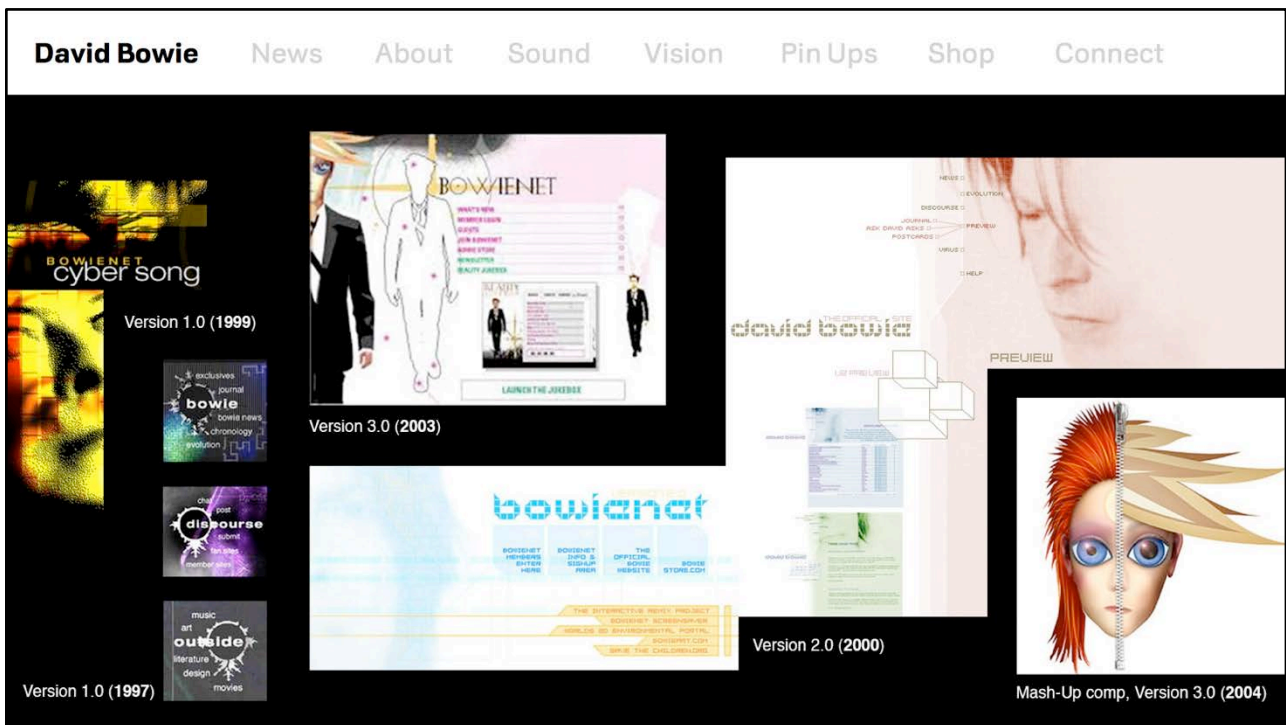
“... the potential of what the Internet is going to do to society – both good and bad – is unimaginable.

I think we are on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying.”

David Bowie, (1999) *Late Nights with Jeremy Paxman*, London, BBC

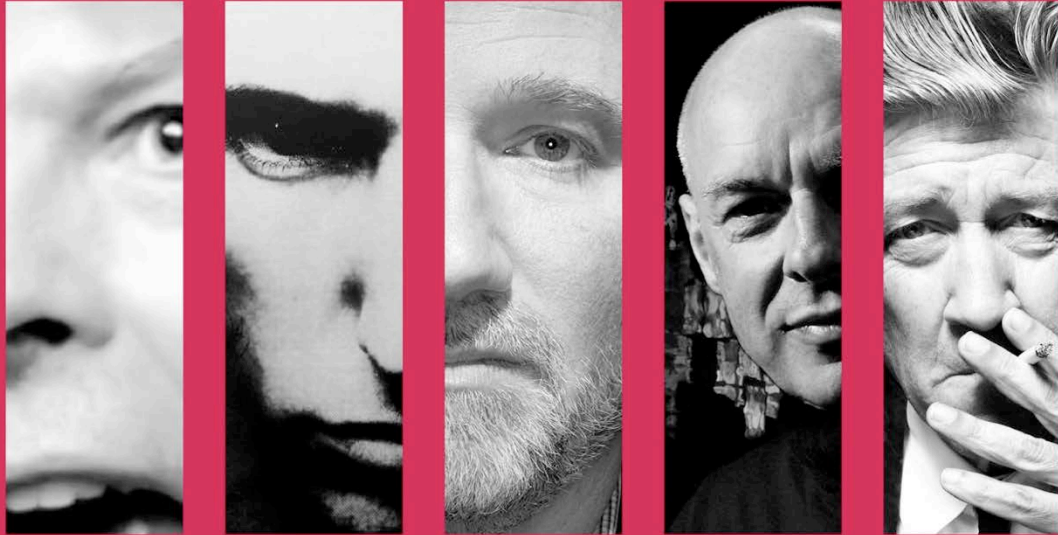
“... the potential of what the Internet is going to do to society – both good and bad – is unimaginable.

I think we are on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying.”



Over the ensuing decade-and-a-half Bowie has transformed into one of the network's most fabulous and yet elusive of creatures. Bowie literally hocked himself to the network in '97, listing himself on the stock exchange and then creating the BowieNet ISP in '99. He understood the power and fluidity of network culture. He gave his many subscribers the impression that he was present, just behind the wires, busy beneath the crackle and pop of the modem, his curatorial hand just a click away.

Bowie gave currency to the notion of artist-audience engagement in a way that not many artists could manage in the days before Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Bowie understood the dirty cyber world of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling perfectly – those tubes contained both grime and lustre.



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His most visible creative outlets during this period were interventions with the screen and had the grimy silicon fingerprints of the likes of Reznor, Fincher, Eno, Lynch and McQueen all over them. Again Bowie was out there on the edge gathering, cataloguing and repatching as the millennium fast approached.

The alien storekeeper of cyberspace, he was on the *Outside*, like Major Tom, he was looking with singular eyes on the multi-verse expanding below. And BowieNet users? They multiplied - they gathered, created, shared and distributed.

Bowie is

- a digital object
- a virtual passenger
- the perpetual avatar
- the multiplier in the archive

#02

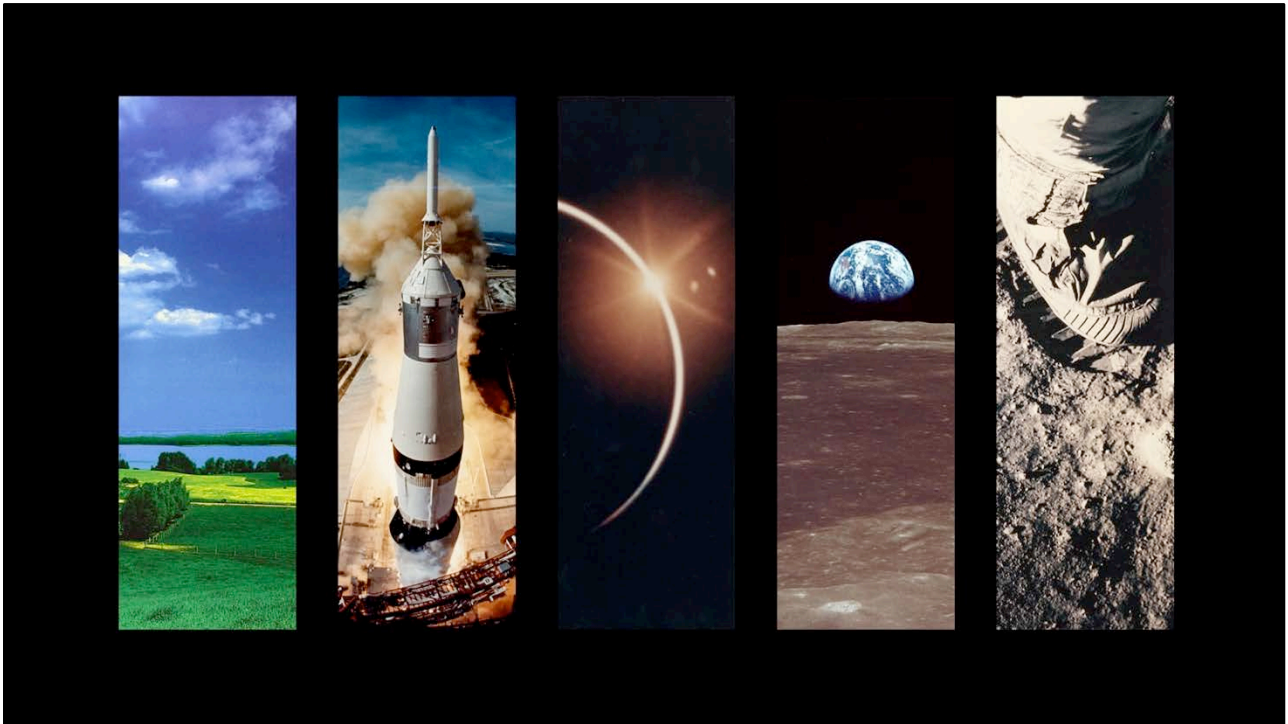
Moon Shot



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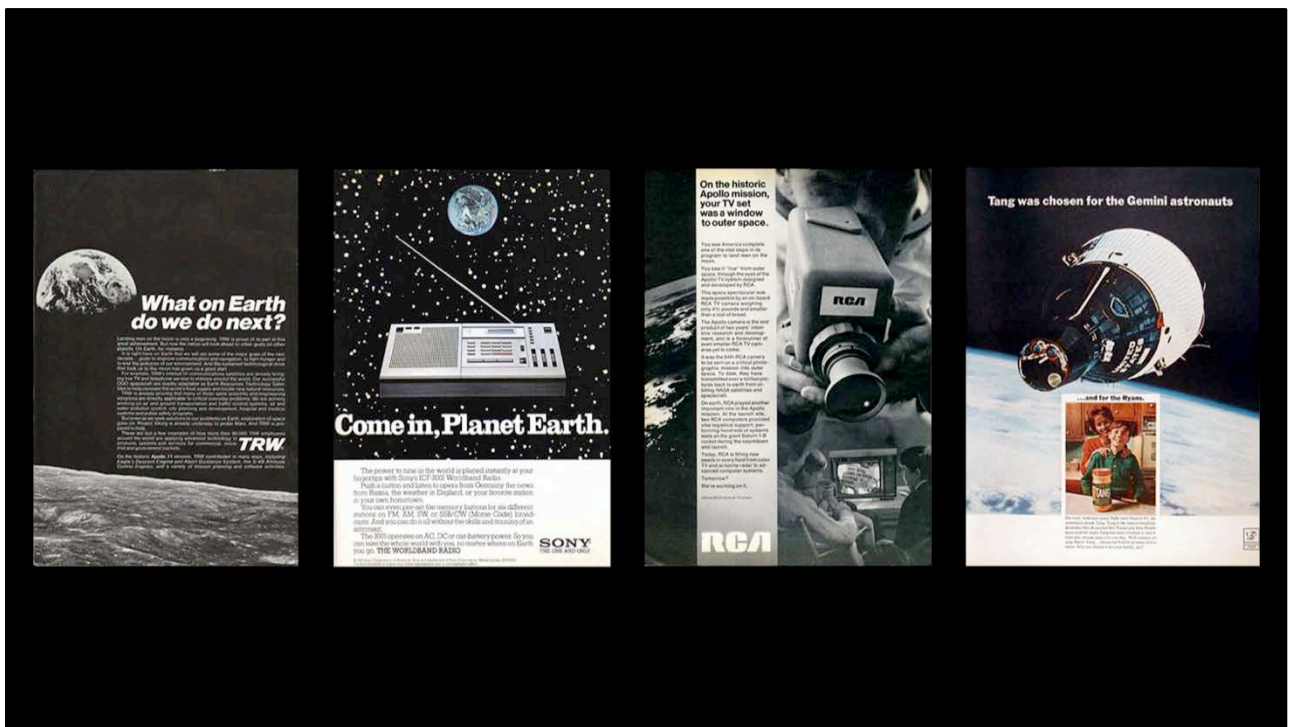
Back in '69 however we must understand that when we think of the moon we must couple this with notions of the Earth and the technological narrative that weds them together. After all, the Apollo missions were about the journey from one to the other and then back again.



What's more it was also the most literal manifestation of network culture we were yet to see played out on intergalactic terms. Like the Internet, like Silicon Valley, the moon shot was laced with propaganda, patriotism and corporate image making – and it had a theme song.



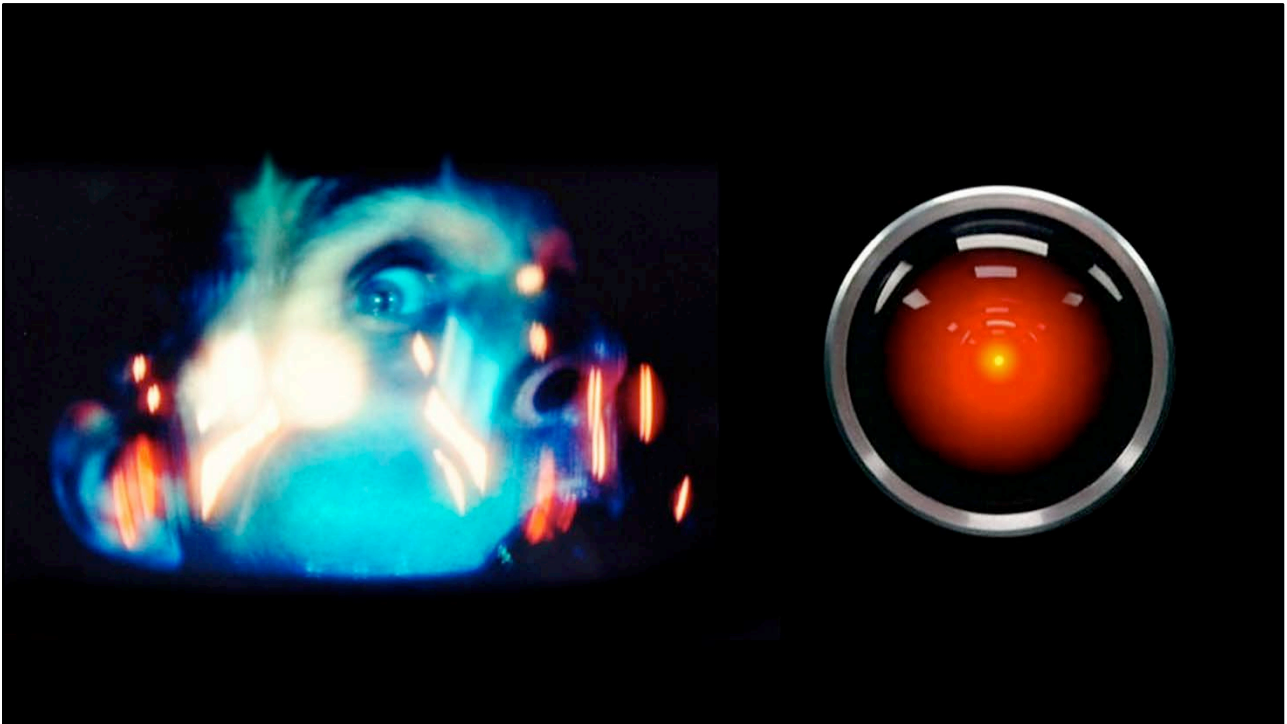
Space Oddity is that strange product of pop culture, seemingly out of nowhere but so clearly derived from everything that was happening at the time. Like Bowie we had seen Kubrick's epic cinematic construction and like Major Tom we had seen the Earth from space courtesy of the newly developed Hasselblad electric cameras aboard Apollo 8.



Space Oddity too was a blatant commercial object – the concept, the performance, the theatrical arrangement by producer Gus Dudgeon – it gave Bowie his immortality.



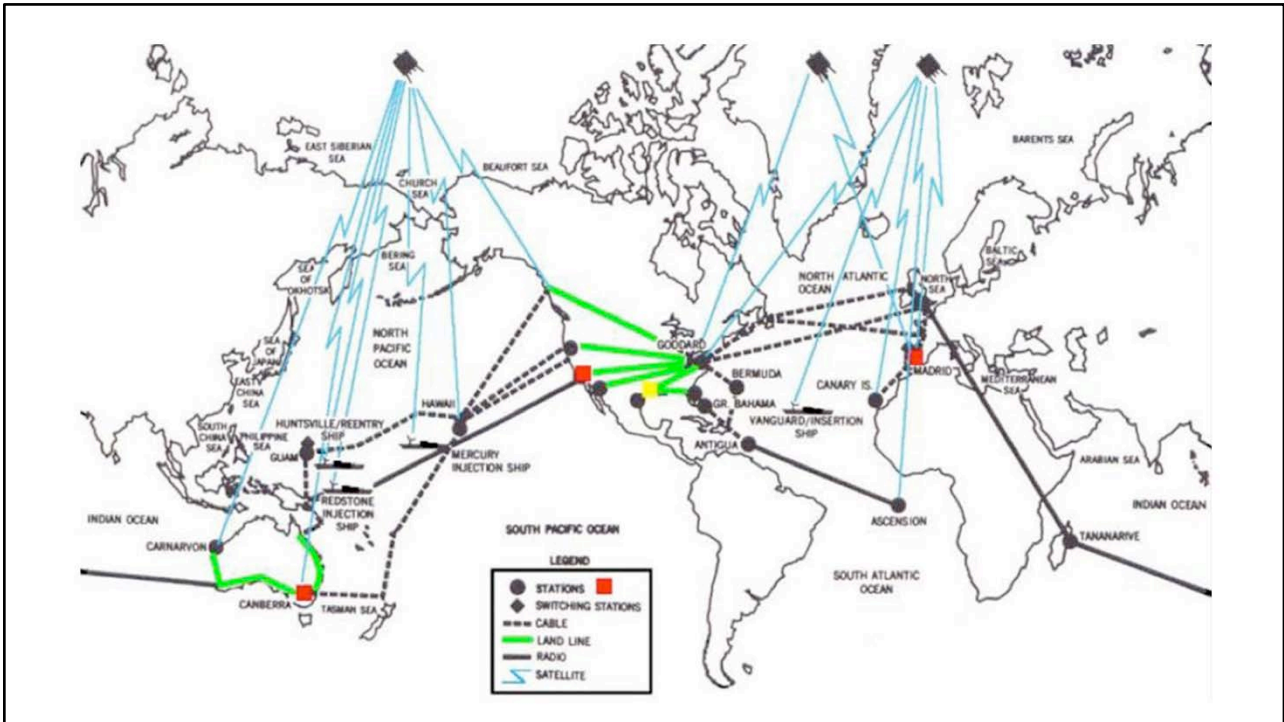
An anthem hanging in the air along with Omega watches, Coca-Cola, Sony tape recorders, Tang and Space Food Sticks.



And yet *Space Oddity* was also wedded to darkness, it is after all a song about an astronaut's ill-fated space walk, Bowie's antidote to "space fever". Space travel you see was a dangerous business, a mysterious science with foreboding cultural markers like Apollo 1 vaporising on the launch pad, HAL the recalcitrant computer and the image of Commander Poole cast adrift in that now iconic pose.



Indeed, the first public airing of the *Space Oddity* recording was at the Rolling Stone's Hyde Park gig in July '69. An event that, among other things, was a memorial for guitarist Brian Jones, who was found floating face down in his pool only two days before.

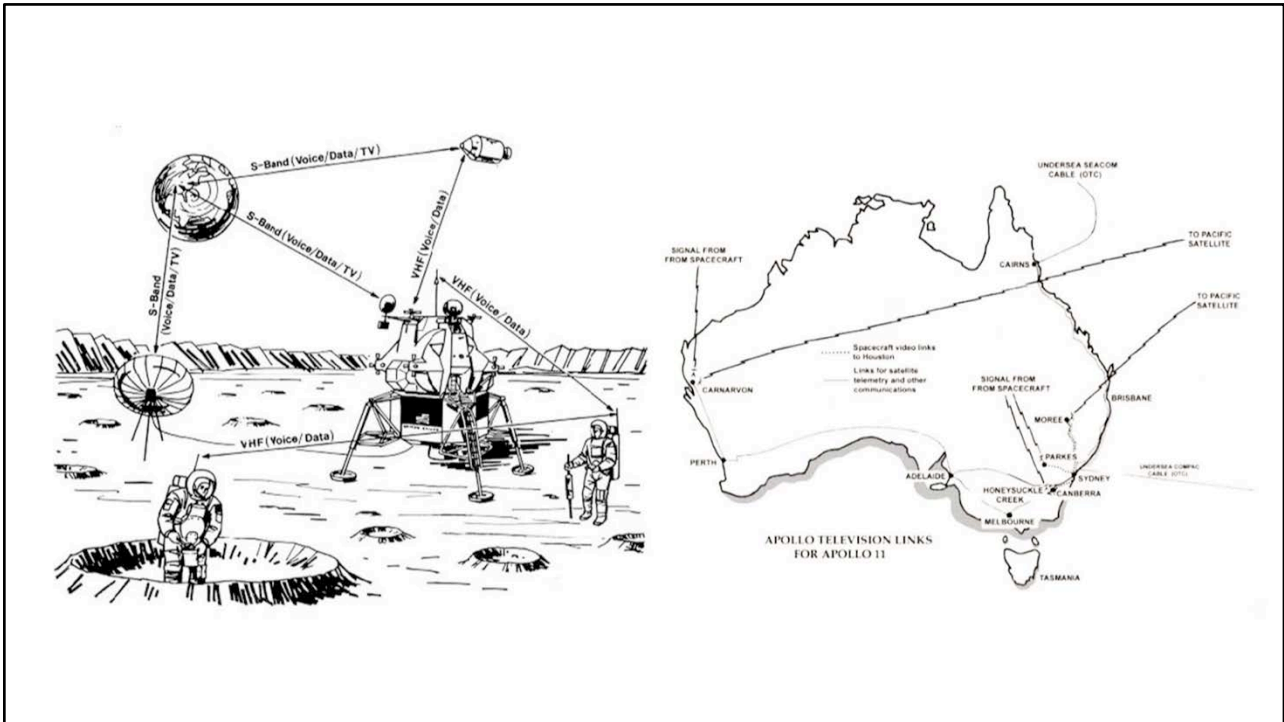


Yet the Apollo moon landing also represented the dawn of the global media event. It was the network's hitherto greatest triumph. Bringing the images back to Earth:

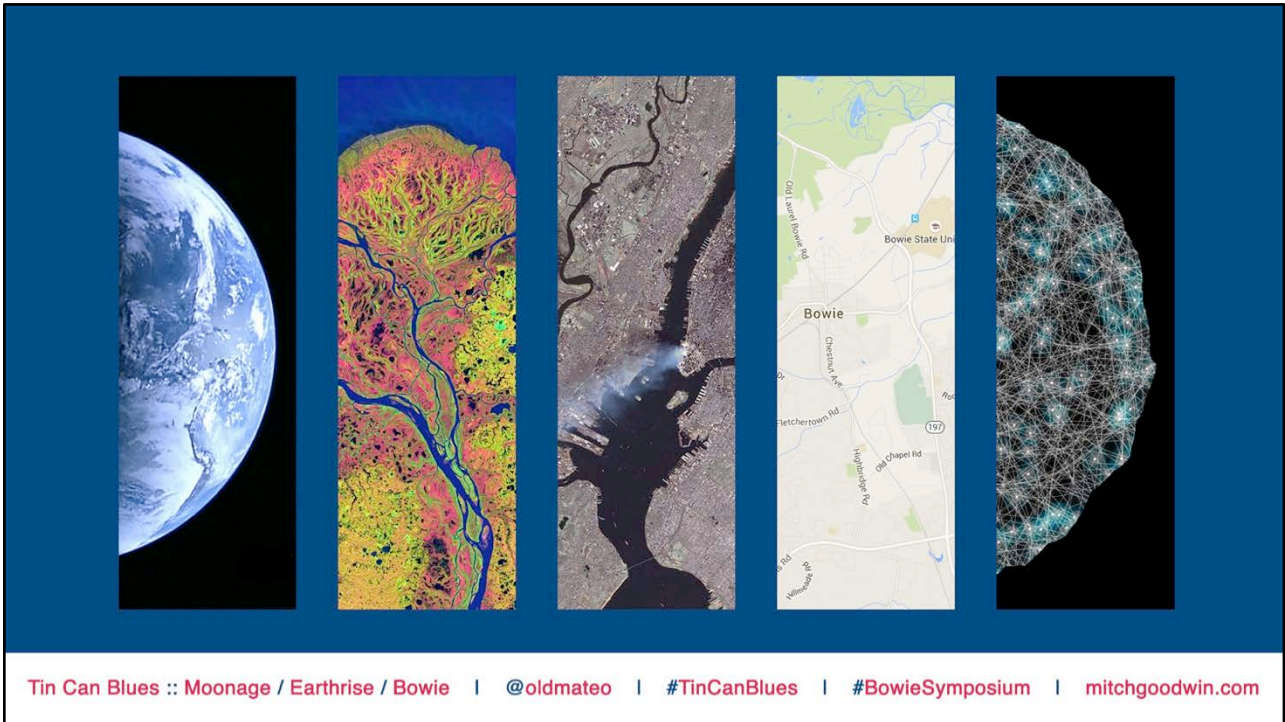
the decent to the surface / those first steps down the gantry / and those immortal words of Neil Armstrong were just as important as bringing back the crew.

After all this was a time of war, a Cold War, this was nation building stuff, this must be seen, this must be recorded and most significantly transmitted *as it happens*.

Live television would become American Life.



The communication network for the Apollo broadcast is a thing of wonder. From the lunar surface, to the Parkes Observatory in western NSW, to satellites above the Pacific to the Goddard Flight Center and then via transatlantic cable on to half-a-billion lounge rooms. The technological means by which it was conducted would have enormous influence on our emergence as a global society and the transformation of the Earth itself into a site of mass media production.



The Earth then would become an icon, like Bowie, we would see before our eyes its gradual virtualisation. It would become a metaphor, it would be examined, probed, raped, mapped, photographed and commercialised. All of this because we put a tin can in space with some pretty impressive technology on board and turned the camera back unto ourselves.



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In November '69 the first link was established over the ARPANET, the virtualisation had begun. Like Woodstock, like The Beatles, *Space Oddity* and the moon landing exist on magnetic tape now. Much of the lunar walk was astonishingly deleted, as tapes were recycled, to store more data, more history, more virtuality. The 1960s – a feverish archive spinning on shiny discs, fragmented across millions of hard drives – a residual flickering of frames from another time / another reality / another Bowie.

#03

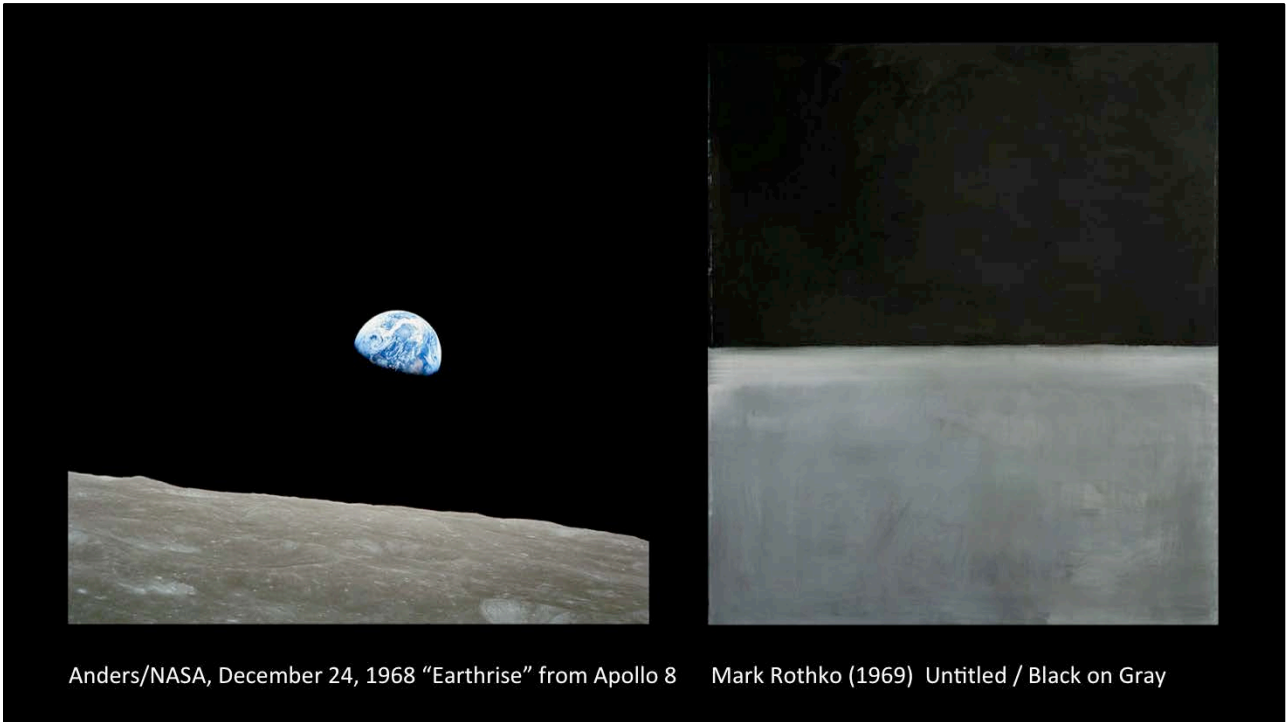
Earth As Icon



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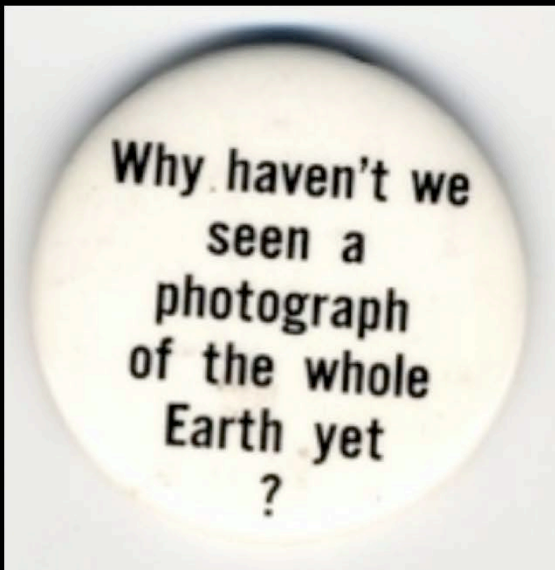


The long tail of what the image of the Earth represents as a symbolic emblem of networked computer interaction and environmental ecology has its beginnings with a single photograph taken from Apollo 8 in 1968.

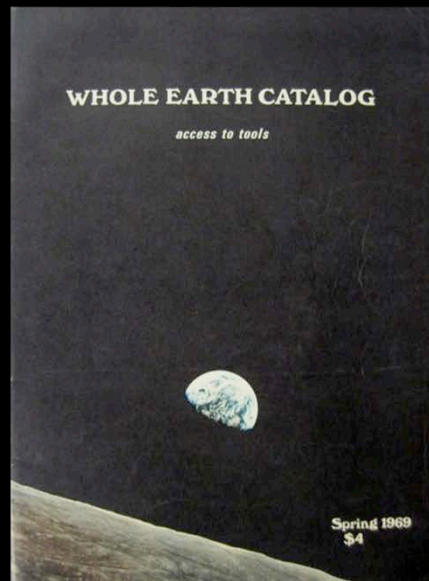


Here we see the blue planet hanging precariously in the vacuum of space and as Bowie so poignantly articulates in that often repeated line: “planet Earth is blue and there’s nothing that I can do”.

It’s helpless, it’s fragile and it’s all-alone. Like a Rothko multi-form it is an image you can fall into.

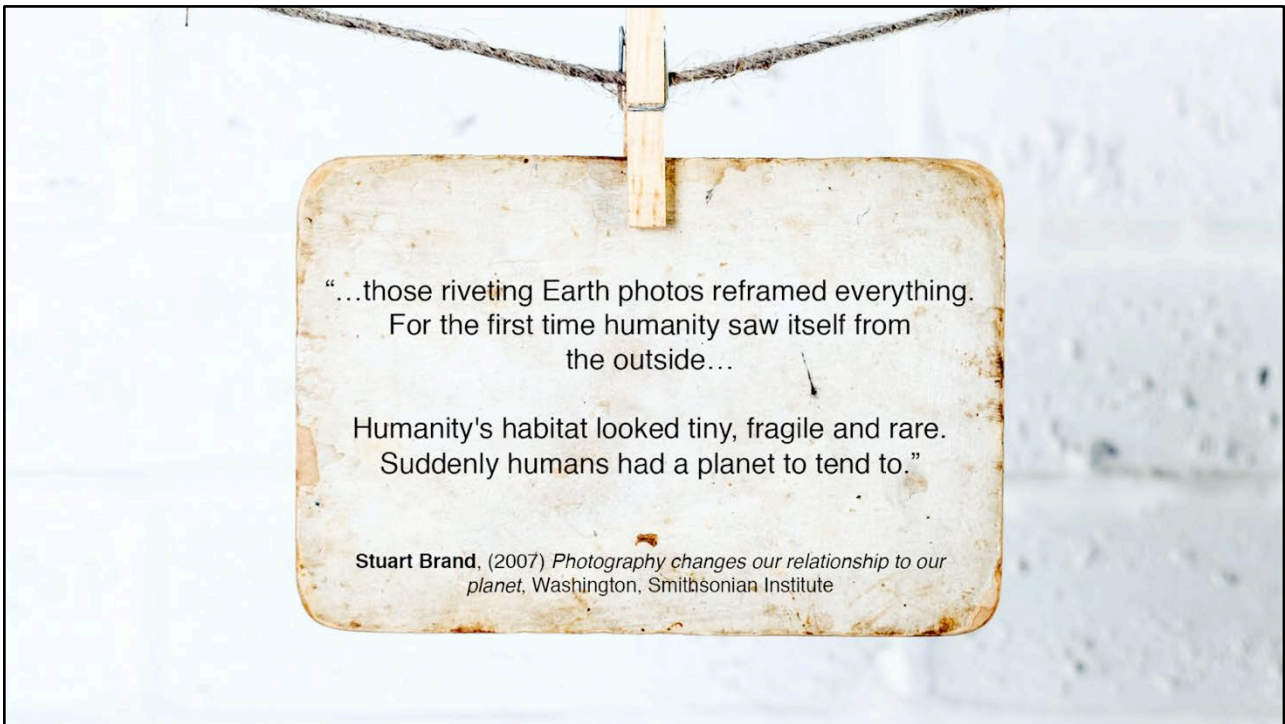


Stuart Brand (1966) Whole Earth badge



Stuart Brand (1969) The Whole Earth Catalogue

The *Earthrise* photograph was *the* galvanising image for the environmental movement and helped to spark a narrative of the blue planet not merely as an object but as a cultural icon. As Stuart Brand observed at the time:



“...those riveting Earth photos reframed everything.
For the first time humanity saw itself from
the outside...

Humanity's habitat looked tiny, fragile and rare.
Suddenly humans had a planet to tend to.”

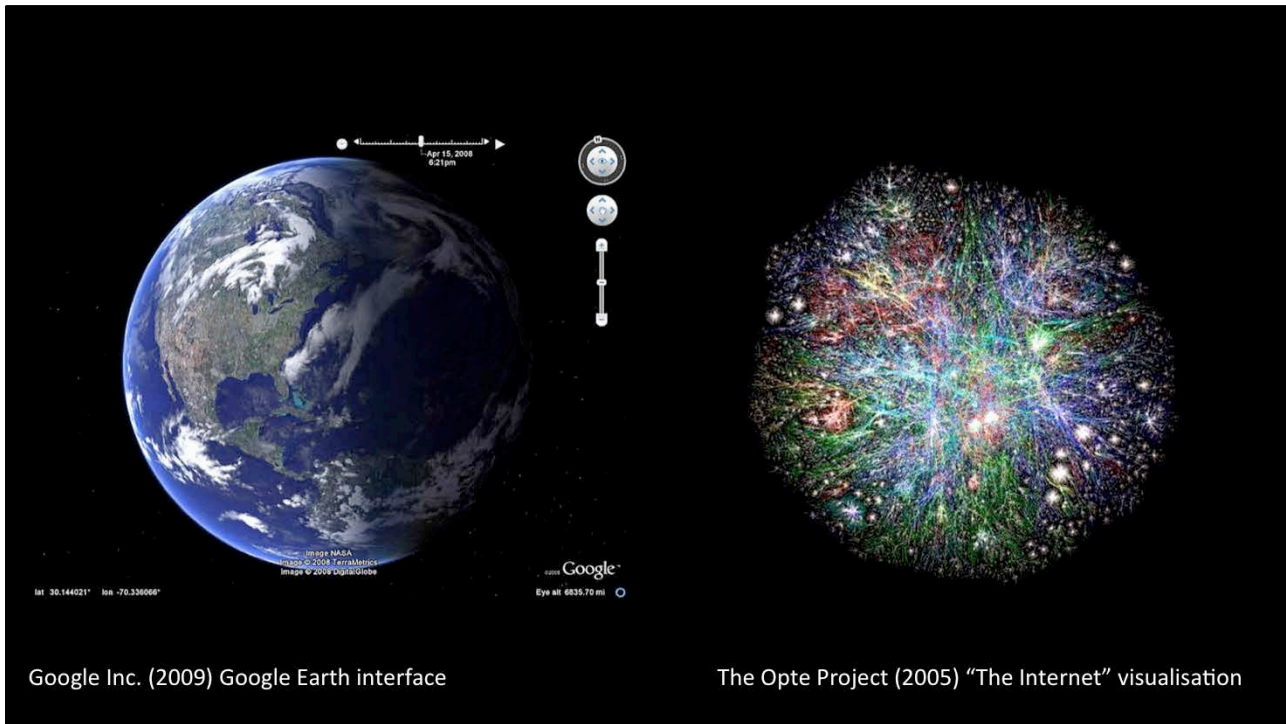
Stuart Brand, (2007) *Photography changes our relationship to our planet*, Washington, Smithsonian Institute

“...those riveting Earth photos reframed everything.

For the first time humanity saw itself from (the) outside...

Humanity's habitat looked tiny, fragile and rare.

Suddenly humans had a planet to tend to.”



While the original *Earthrise* photograph is certainly iconic – perhaps the original image of the global network – its power as a symbolic construct has waned in recent decades; its immediacy one step removed. It has been reduced – literally – through its reproduction and reconstitution as a digital object of device culture.



The ability to hold the earth in the palm of one's hand, swipe it off the screen or spin the globe with a flick of the mouse wheel has rendered the earth a mere assemblage of pixels at nothing more than a bit depth of either 1 or 0.

#04

Loving the Alien



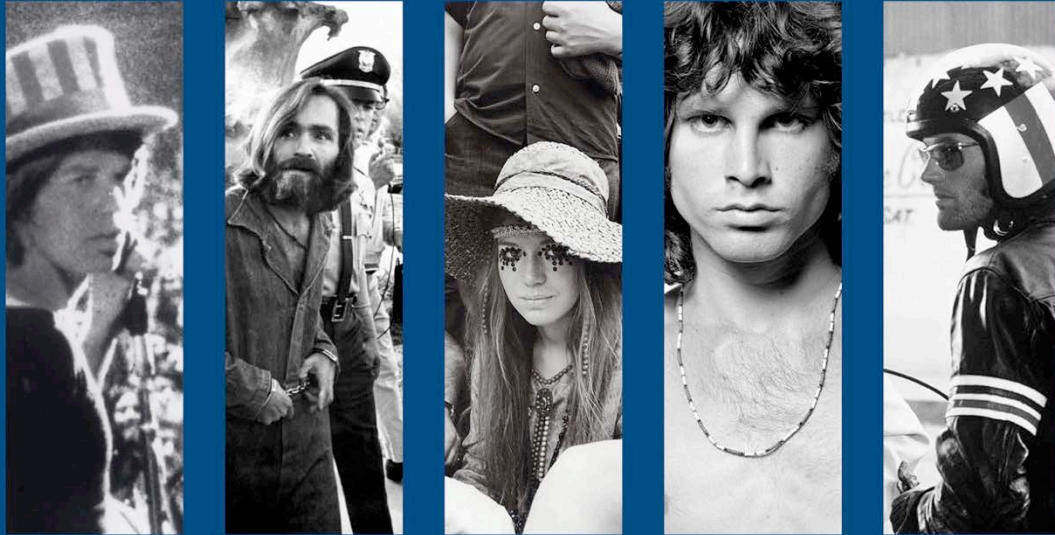
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Back here on Earth, it's now the 1970s. Bowie ejects the Tin Can Blues for a shot at the big time: Mars.



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Ziggy Stardust personified the space dreaming that the West clung to in a perilous age of what seemed like certain nuclear annihilation. Since Bowie rode the Tin Can in '69 the world had amassed more weaponry, accelerated by the space race, and started to build networks so the captains of doom might endure the nothingness beyond the fallout from the pink clouds.



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Indeed, by '72 as Ziggy and the Spiders rolled across America, the promise of the 1960s was a distant thing. The *Memory of a Free Festival* was a very dark indeed. We had suffered Altamont, the Manson rampage, the LSD had turned brown and the knives were out. We had lost Hendrix, Morrison and Joplin; meanwhile Captain America was lying in a ditch on the side of the road.



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The political winter, on both sides of the Atlantic was growing long and dark and the Cold War was taking on a chillingly fatalistic turn. America of course was slithering its way out of the quagmire of Vietnam, the oil was running out and the environment was starting to show signs of fatigue. It was a good time to be an alien.

By December '72 the Apollo Missions to the moon were over. By July '73 Bowie would retire Ziggy much to the amazement of just about everyone except the man himself. Bowie had sold the world an icon to get a foothold in the musical zeitgeist and he wasn't putting the brakes on for anyone. The serpentine dance of sexual ambiguity, genre slippages and cultural appropriation had only just begun. A career born from the stars had started its journey back to Earth.

#05

Virtualisation of Reality



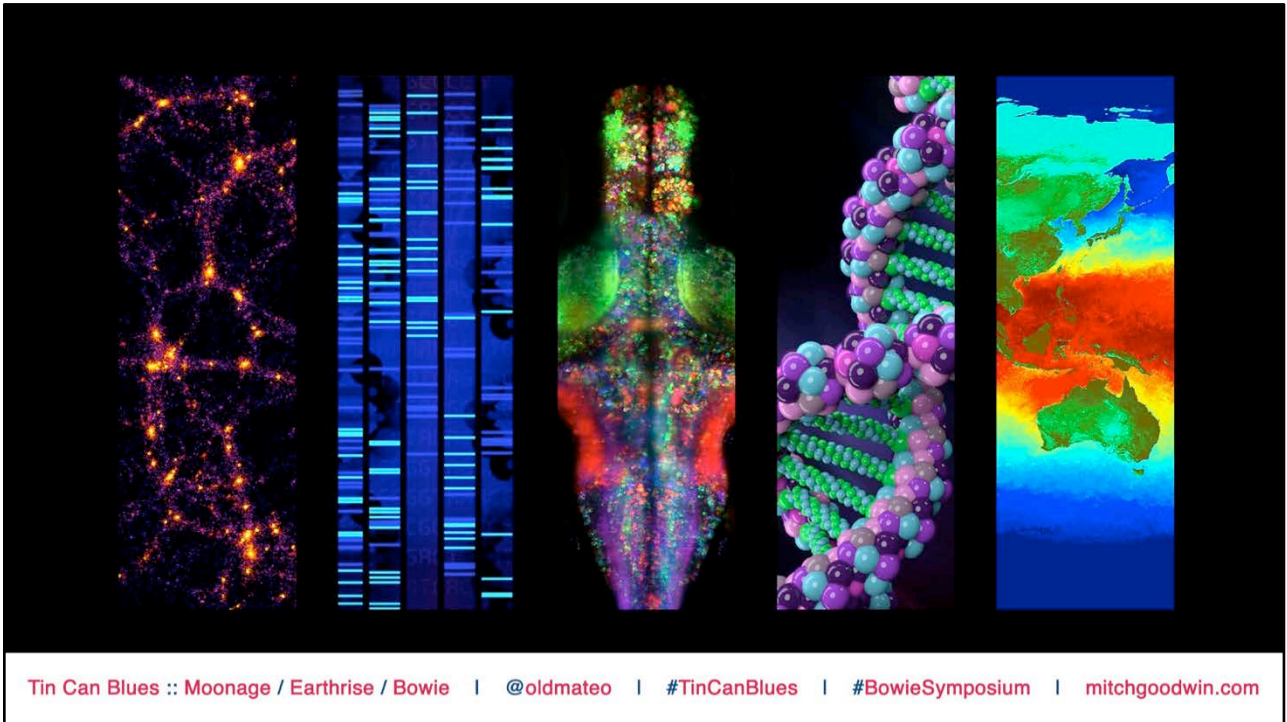
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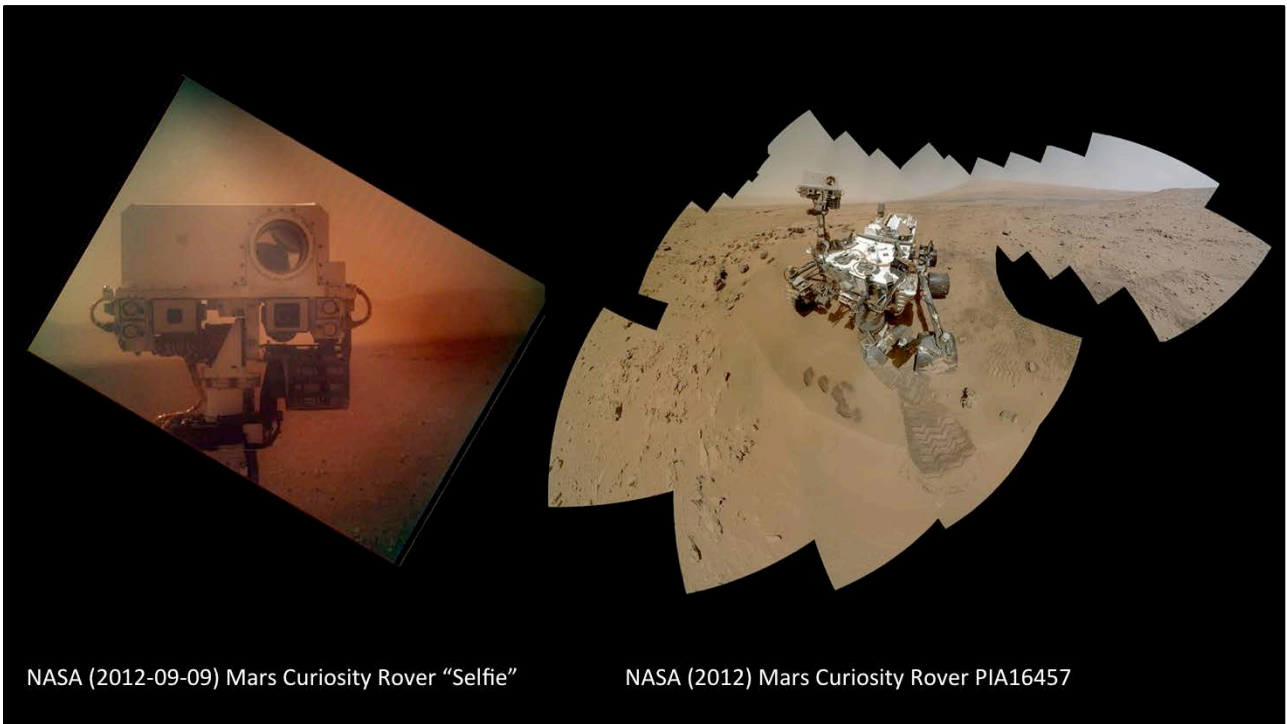
Bowie is

a bridge
a conduit
a celestial object

just out of reach



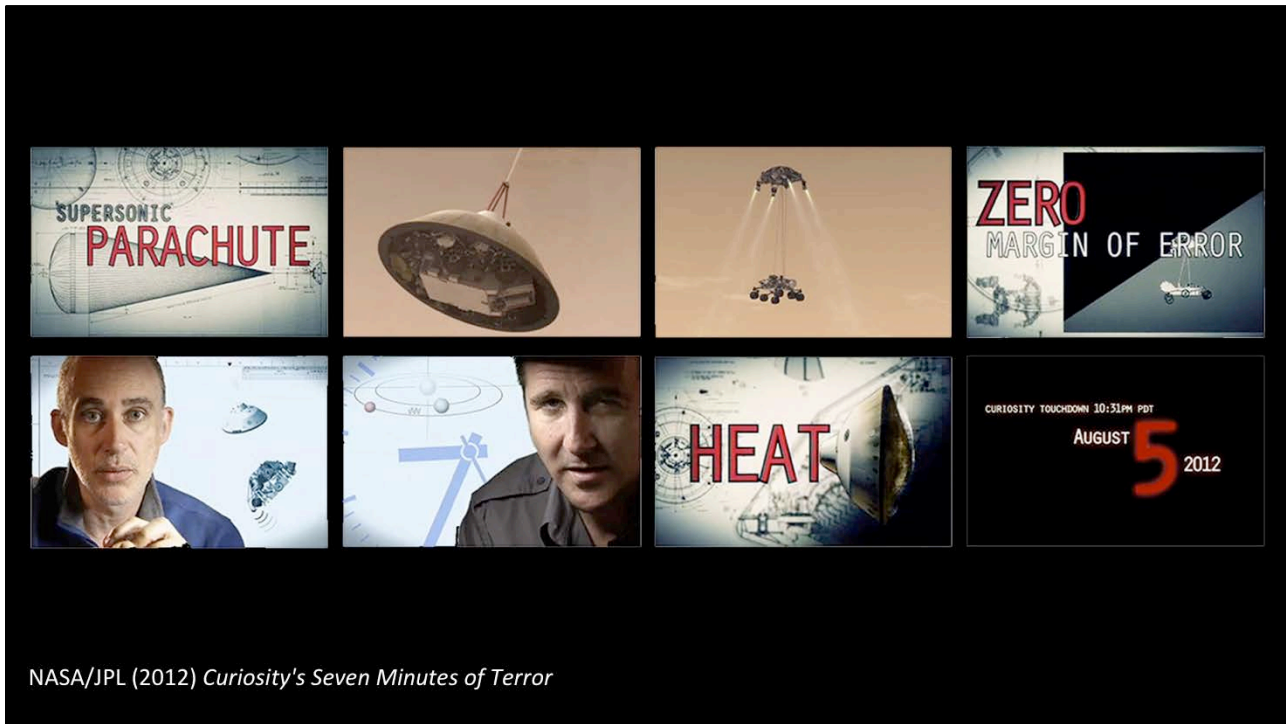
Humanity's most stunning accomplishments in aerospace engineering, in particle physics and in human biology are instances of virtuality. Too extreme to photograph, too remote to broadcast as a live telecast, and too obscure to focus the collective attention of the Instagram crowd.



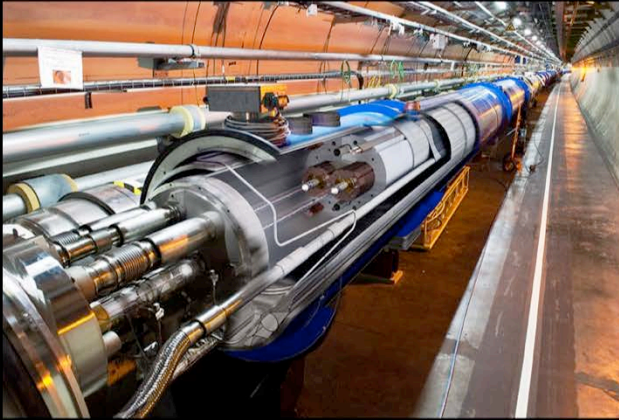
NASA (2012-09-09) Mars Curiosity Rover "Selfie"

NASA (2012) Mars Curiosity Rover PIA16457

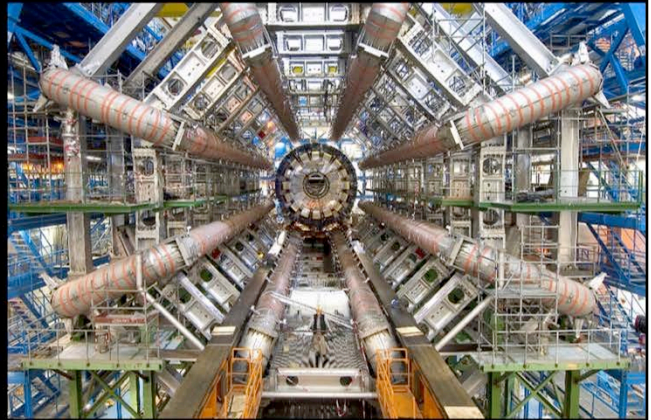
In August 2012, when the Curiosity mission entered the Martian atmosphere the communication channels went silent. For 7 minutes the scientists and engineers back on Earth knew nothing of the fate of their 2.5 billion-dollar baby.



Yet you and I had a pretty good idea of what was going on. We had already lived through Curiosity's death-defying plummet to the surface through a slick photo-realistic animation, fittingly called, *Seven Minutes of Terror*. The WETA-effect had come to NASA big time.

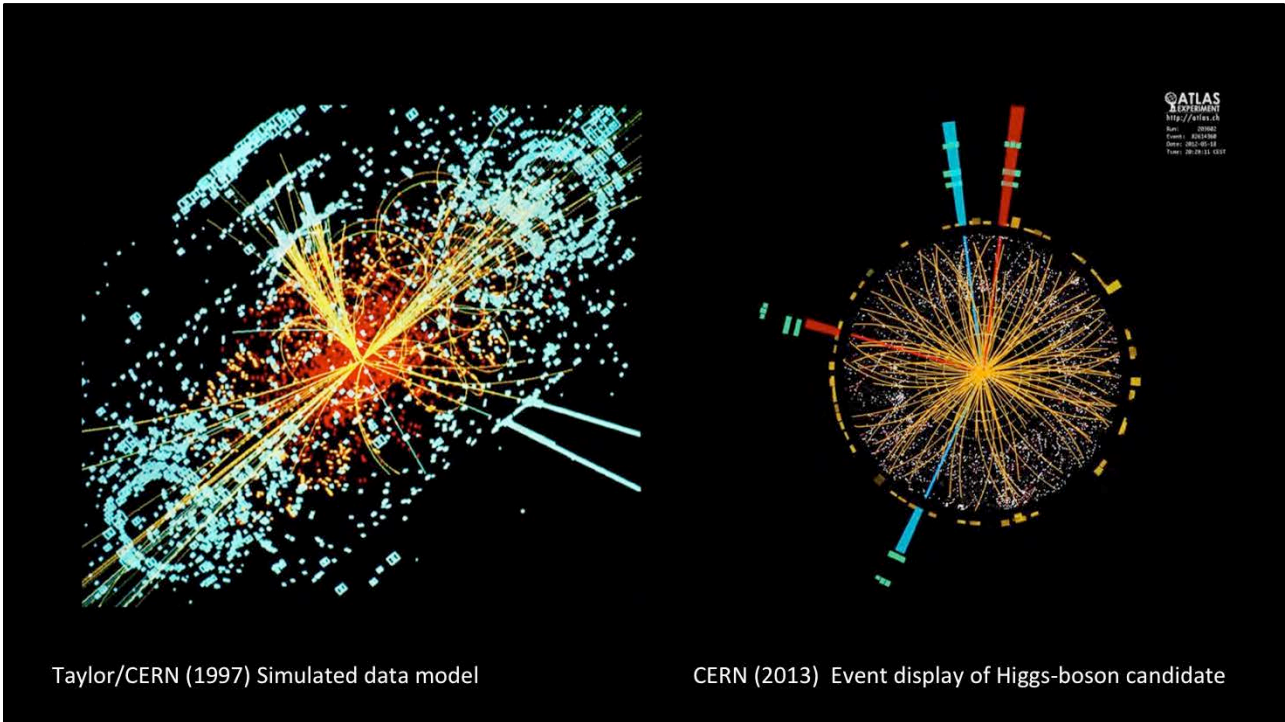


CERN (2009) Diagram of Large Hadron Collider interior



CERN (2010) The ATLAS Observer

Back in of June 2012 the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, a particle accelerator 500ft beneath the Franco-Swiss border, finally detected the much-vaunted Higgs-Boson field and thereby confirming the existence of the “God Particle”. To achieve this not only required the smashing together of sub-atomic particles at ridiculous speeds but also the observation and recording of the event at a sub-atomic level. This required the world’s biggest vision machine, a 7000 tonne 5-storey contraption called ATLAS.



To the casual observer these images would appear to tell a similar story, on the left we have the model, while the image on the right is a data visualisation of the event itself. What we are seeing here is the inner fabric of the universe and possibly one of the most important scientific images of the C21st. Yet, like Curiosity's decent onto Mars, like Bowie's withdrawal into the network, it is a simulation – the simulation that *proves* the reality. This is extreme virtuality. It's the temperament of our times. These pixels, this light on dark, these alien adventures.

#06

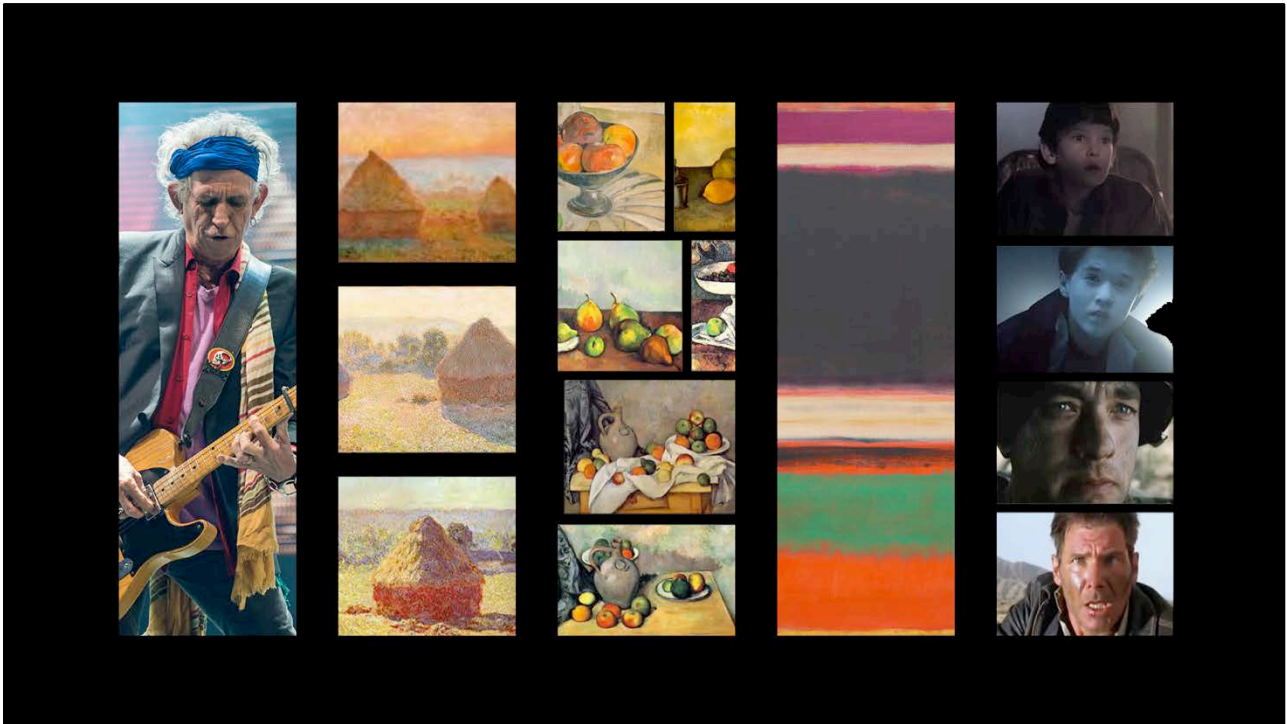
A Work in Progress



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As time has passed we have lost contact with the singer-songwriter from Bromley Tech and instead found ourselves transfixed with this notion of the artist, with a capital A. There are so few definites when it comes to artists like David Bowie - artists who recreate / manipulate / shade / colour and transform their canon with almost seasonal regularity. There is a distinct lack of permanence. Surely, like Dylan, like Picasso, like Olivier that is what we should expect.



Keith Richards has been grinding out the same riff for 50 years. Monet had his haystacks, Cézanne his bowls of fruit, Rothko his multi-forms and Spielberg the close up. All riffs on the same problem - the problem of representation. For this is the artist's lot, the struggle to present that which is finished, complete, ready. But it never is truly "ready" – the quest for the definitive statement is a tantalising one indeed.



There has never been much solid to go on and now the virtualisation of Bowie seems complete. Assembled by Google, window dressed by ACMI and published by BowieNet. He remains a *Starman*, staring back at the networked Earth amused no doubt by all this mythologizing; his virtuality perhaps his greatest asset – to be everywhere but to be nowhere.

Bowie is

a hybrid system
our cultural atomic clock
an interdisciplinary artist fit for the Millennium

Bowie is

a work in progress



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