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# Vehicular Utopias of Jules Verne

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An important new paradigm in the history of utopian speculation was born in nineteenth-century Europe during that period of dramatic social change which we now call the Industrial Revolution. This new utopian paradigm was the notion of *unlimited mobility*. In France, as railways continued to multiply across the countryside and steamships churned the seas to ever more distant ports of call, the utopian focus of the French bourgeoisie of the Second Empire and Troisième République quickly began to shift with the times. The traditional utopian "nowhere" was soon replaced by a potential "anywhere"; the pastoral setting by the industrial; personal ethics by competitive expansionism; and, perhaps just as importantly, utopian *ends* by utopian *means*. Improved modes of transportation became an *a priori* corollary for all real "Progress." The ultimate dream? Vehicles that could maximize speed (thereby maximizing commerce, profit, and leisure) while minimizing time wasted in transit; vehicles that could enhance personal comfort while eliminating *ennui*; vehicles that could exude power, efficiency, and practicality yet remain tasteful to the eye and soothing to the senses; vehicles that could "go where no one has gone before" while providing a homey antidote to the continual *dépaysement* of foreign milieus. And, above all, vehicles that could be the exclusive private property of their owners who, alone, decided their ultimate use and destination. Such was the new ideal: facility of movement in a moving world — "*Mobilis in mobili*" as Captain Nemo of the Nautilus would say.

These idealized, hyperbolic vehicles found their expression in the many dream machines of Jules Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires* — machines that might be called "vehicular utopias" to the extent that they satisfied such nineteenth-century visions of transportational perfection. In fact, to my mind, they might even be viewed as Verne's most fully realized utopias, in contrast to those most frequently cited by Vernian scholars: that is, the static, antiseptic village of Franceville portrayed in *Les Cinq cents millions de la Bégum* [*500 Millions of the Begum*][1] or Cyrus Smith's doomed castaway colony of *L'Ile mystérieuse* [*Mysterious Island*].[2] Verne's real utopias are vehicular: those memorable hot-air balloons, moon capsules, helicopter airships, submarines, trains, gypsy wagons, steam-powered RV's, and even propeller-driven mobile islands — all of which play such a central role in the *Voyages Extraordinaires*, transporting the heroes to the far ends of the earth, to the bottom of the oceans, into the skies and beyond. Only *they* accurately embody the new utopian values (and, as we shall see, the ideological undertones) of the nineteenth-century Industrial Age imagination.

Most often, Verne's vehicular utopias are fully enclosed and solidly protected from the alien — and sometimes menacing — environment through which they travel. Witness, for example, the iron-clad Nautilus of *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* [*Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*], or the aluminum space-bullet of *De la Terre à la Lune* and *Autour de la Lune* [*From the Earth to the Moon, Around the Moon*], or Robur's unique flying vessel called *Albatros* in *Robur-le-Conquérant* [*Robur the Conqueror*] whose hull and fittings are described as follows:

> Du papier sans colle, dont les feuilles sont imprégnées de dextrine et d'amidon, puis serrées à la presse hydraulique, forme une matière dure comme l'acier. On en fait des poulies, des rails, des roues de wagon, plus solides que les roues de métal et, en même temps, plus légères. Or c'était cette solidité, cette légèrté que Robur avait voulu utiliser pour la construction de sa locomotive aérienne.[3]
>
> [Unsized paper, whose sheets are impregnated with dextrin and starch and then squeezed in hydraulic presses, forms a material as hard as steel. The pulleys, rails, and wagon-wheels are made of it — much more solid than metal wheels, and far lighter. It was this lightness and solidity that Robur had sought in the construction of his aerial locomotive.]

Snugly insulated from the outside, such vehicles are also sumptuously equipped on the inside: plush Victorian furniture, artworks, dining-room, a well-stocked library, not to mention such *de rigueur* items as devoted servants and a nearly inexhaustible supply of provisions to provide the utmost in physical, emotional, and intellectual *bien être*. The lavish interior of Nemo's Nautilus is an obvious example, as are the more compact but equally comfortable living quarters aboard Barbicane's moon probe, or "wagon-projectile" as the author chose to call it. But let us also recognize another lesser-known vehicular utopia of this sort described in Verne's *La Maison à vapeur* [*The Steam House*]: the huge, mechanical elephant simulacrum called the *Géant d'Acier* [Steel Giant] – an all-terrain pachyderm-locomotive, pulling two train cars featuring all the accoutrements of the famed Orient Express, and then some:

> Le premier char avait une longueur de quinze mètres. A l'avant, son élégante véranda, portée sur de légers pilastres, abritait un large balcon, sur lequel une dizaine de personnes pouvaient se tenir à l'aise. Deux fenêtres et une porte s'ouvraient sur le salon, éclairé en outre par deux fenêtres latérales. Ce salon, meublé d'une table et d'une bibliothèque, garni de divans moelleux dans toute sa largeur, était artistement décoré et tendu de riches étoffes. Un épais tapis de Smyrne en cachait le parquet. Des «tattis,» sorte d'écrans de vétiver, disposés devant les fenêtres, et sans cesse arrosés d'eau parfumée, entretenaient une agréable fraîcheur, aussi bien dans le salon que dans les cabines qui servaient de chambres. Au plafond pendait une «punka» qu'une courroie de transmission agitait automatiquement pendant la marche du train, ou que le bras d'un serviteur mettait en mouvement pendant les haltes...
>
> A l'arrière du salon, une seconde porte, en bois précieux, faisant face à la porte de la véranda, s'ouvrait sur la salle à manger, éclairée non seulement par les fenêtres latérales mais aussi par un plafond en verre dépoli. Autour de la table qui en occupait le milieu, huit convives pouvaient prendre place. Nous n'étions que quatre: c'est assez dire que nous serions à l'aise. Buffets et crédences, chargés de tout ce luxe d'argenterie, de verreries et de porcelaines qu'exige le confort anglais, meublaient cette salle à manger.[4]

> [The first car was 15 meters long. In the front, its elegant pilaster-supported veranda covered a wide balcony on which ten persons could fit easily. Two windows and a door opened into the living room that was lighted additionally by two lateral windows. The living room, furnished with a table, a library, and soft couches all around, was artfully decorated and walled with rich cloth. A thick rug from Smyrne covered the floor. «Tattis,» a kind of wicker blind, hung over the windows and they were constantly sprayed with perfumed water which maintained a pleasant freshness in the living room and sleeping quarters. From the ceiling hung a belt-driven «punka» which waved back and forth automatically with the movement of the train and which, during halts, was kept in motion manually by the servant...
>
> In the rear of the living room, a second door of precious wood, facing that of the veranda, opened into the dining room, lighted not only by the lateral windows but also by a ceiling of frosted glass. Around the table in the middle, eight guests could be seated. Since we were only four, we were more than comfortable. This dining room was furnished with buffets and credenzas filled with all the sterling silver dinnerware, crystal glassware, and porcelain that true English comfort requires.]

It is important to note that each of these transportational utopias invariably contains some sort of *window*, in order to allow the heroes — "from the comfort of their own home," as it were — to take in the movie-like spectacle of the outside world. Quite often, these windows (like those in the Nautilus or in Barbicane's space-capsule) function not only to safeguard the travellers from the dangers of the exterior environment, but also to provide an excellent *milieu transparent* for its first-hand study.[5] Such windows serve to designate the boundary between the "us" and the "them," between the secure familiarity of the known and the implicit menace of the "Other" — whether it be the elements, hostile natives, or dangerous flora and fauna. And they serve also as the tangible point of contact between the reassuringly insular world of owned and filled space and that exterior, empty space yet to be possessed by humanity. Such windows often resemble a kind of magic looking glass, eliciting a sense of wonder in the travellers who peer into them, as the natural marvels of the universe — hidden to all but the most privileged — are progressively unveiled. Witness, for example, the

reactions of Prof. Aronnax, Conseil, and Ned in this regard when looking through the underwater portholes of the Nautilus:

> De chaque côté, j'avais une fenêtre ouvertes sur ces abîmes inexplorés. L'obscurité du salon faisait valoir la clarté extérieure, et nous regardions comme si ce pur cristal eût été la vitre d'un immense aquarium...
>
> Emerveillés, nous étions accoudés devant ces vitrines, et nul de nous n'avait encore rompu ce silence de stupéfaction, quand Conseil dit: "Vous vouliez voir, ami Ned, eh bien, vous voyez!" [6]

> [On each side, I had a window opening onto these unexplored abysses. The darkness of the room enhanced the brightness outside, and we looked through it as if this pure crystal were the glass wall of an immense aquarium...
>
> Awestruck, we were down on our elbows in front of these large windows, and none of us had yet broken this stupefied silence when Conseil said: "You wanted to see, my friend Ned. Well now, you see!"]

More importantly, these mobile mansions epitomize the ultimate bourgeois dream of taking along *all* of one's possessions when travelling — a revealing example of technological wish-fulfillment for bourgeois materialism, making these fictional conveyances a kind of moving microcosm of an entire way of life. In the words of Jacques Noiray in his study titled *Le Romancier et la Machine*:

> Ce rêve de "voyager avec tout son chez soi," illustré quarante ans plus tard par la fameuse roulotte automobile de Raymond Roussel, tous les héros de Jules Verne l'ont caressé, tous ses ingénieurs l'ont réalisé, et l'on ne saurait comprendre les fonctions profondes de la machine dans les *Voyages Extraordinaires* sans voir qu'elle est est d'abord une maison — électrique ou à vapeur certes — mais possédant tous les caractères et tout le confort de la maison bourgeoise à la fin du XIXeme siècle.[7]

> [This dream of "travelling with all of one's home," illustrated forty years later by the famous automobile caravan of Raymond Roussel, all the heroes of Jules Verne were tantalized by

> it, all his engineers materialized it, and one would be at a loss to understand the subliminal functions of the machine in the *Voyages Extraordinaires* if one did not see that the machine is first and foremost a house – electric or steam, of course – but possessing all the characteristics and all the comfort of the bourgeois home at the end of the nineteenth century.]

These imaginary vehicles exemplify (or, even better, encapsulate) two of the most fundamental properties of the traditional utopia: namely, *autonomy* and *comfort*. But one might also view them as a richly symbolic expression of an even more ubiquitous Vernian obsession: the impulse toward *(en)closure*. Roland Barthes was the first to call attention to this seemingly omnipresent characteristic of Verne's fictional world, saying:

> Verne a construit une sorte de cosmogonie fermée sur elle-même qui a ses catégories propres, son temps, son espace, sa plénitude, et même son principe existentiel.
>
> Ce principe me paraît être... l'enfermement. L'imagination du voyage correspond chez Verne à une exploration de la clôture...
>
> Verne a été un maniaque de la plénitude: il ne cessait de finir le monde et de le meubler, de le faire plein à la façon d'un oeuf... Verne ne cherchait nullement à élargir le monde... il cherchait sans cesse à le rétracter, à le peupler, à le réduire à un espace connu et clos, que l'homme pourrait ensuite habiter confortablement.[8]

> [Verne put together a kind of self-referential cosmogony which has its own categories, its own time and space, its own richness, and even its own existential principle.
>
> This principle seems to me to be the continual gesture of enclosure. In Verne's works, the imagination of travel corresponds to the exploration of enclosed space...
>
> Verne was a fanatic of plenitude. He never stopped completing the world and furnishing it, making it full like an egg... Verne never tried to expand the world... He always tried to constrict it, to people it, to reduce it to an enclosed and familiar space in which Man could then comfortably inhabit.]

But Verne's fixation with structures of *(en)*closure and comfort is much more than just one writer's personal bourgeois fantasy, however typical it might be of this particular nineteenth-century social class. More importantly, such a preoccupation goes to the heart of the educational project of the *Voyages Extraordinaires* themselves as a fictional series. This collection of novels was conceived by Verne's publisher Hetzel to be an encyclopedic compendium of the world's scientific knowledge, books which would educate the scientifically-illiterate French public via easy-reading and entertaining adventure stories:

> Son but est, en effet, de résumer toutes les connaissances géographiques, géologiques, physiques, astronomiques amassées par la science moderne, et de refaire, sous une forme attrayante pittoresque... l'histoire de l'univers.[9]
>
> [Its goal is, in fact, to outline all the geographical, geological, physical, and astronomical knowledge amassed by modern science, and to recount, in an entertaining and picturesque format... the history of the universe.]

Hence, the explicit (if over-ambitious) social goal of the *Voyages Extraordinaires* themselves — that is, to be a "user-friendly" instrument for transmitting the (supposedly) circumscribed totality of human knowledge — inherently implies these same utopian presuppositions: thematic (en)closure, generic autonomy, reader comfort, etc. This, of course, in addition to their ideological role as a highly popular vehicle for proselytizing the doctrines of Positivism — which, it might be argued, is *itself* a kind of utopian philosophy.

But if the social goal of this series of novels was the transmission of a fixed body of knowledge, the didactic means to this end was the fictional *voyage*. And it is here, as mentioned, that we find Verne's real innovation, adding an entirely new dimension to the traditional utopian elements of (en)closure, autonomy, and comfort: Verne's vehicular utopias are not only self-contained and homey, they are also supremely *mobile* — rapidly transporting their passengers to ever-changing locales and continually providing them with new, exotic vistas to contemplate and to learn from. Moreover, they also most often serve as ambulatory *cabinets de travail* — fulfilling the needs not only of the body and the spirit, but the intellect as well — by providing the Vernian scientists an unparalleled platform for their ongoing work of mapping the universe and uncovering Nature's deepest secrets.

Finally, in addition to their utopian characteristics of *(en)*closure and comfort, their autonomy, their mobility, their role as purveyor of new knowledge, and their being (as one protagonist of *La Maison à vapeur* described it) "le dernier mot du Progrès en matière de voyage!" ["Progress's last word in matters of travel!"], Verne's extraordinary vehicles are also portrayed as technological objets d'art.[10] They act as fictional stepping-stones for the reader's imagination to venture out not only into new dimensions of physical space, but also into new patterns of aesthetic appreciation. The mechanical device itself is viewed as a thing of Beauty, carrying with it its own criteria of form and function: sleekness of design, precision of movement, strength of material, straightness of line, amplitude of effect, etc. The poetic function of these vehicles is further underscored by the fact that they are never portrayed as economic entities (as in Zola's work, for instance): they neither create jobs nor replace them; they produce no "surplus value" in the Marxist sense; they do not manufacture commodities; they are not bought and sold. They serve only to make the impossible possible, the fantastic real, and the unlikely believable. Their primary raison d'être is to create for the reader an imaginary inner space from which to explore, alongside Verne's fictional heroes, the outermost boundaries of the real.

But what of the ideological implications of Verne's many dream machines? In many ways, they constitute a utopia *turned inside out.* For example, although they are self-contained and self-sufficient, these Vernian vehicles do not exist for themselves. They are not examples of *L'Art pour l'art.* On the contrary, they are meant to be *used*: not only for the aesthetic pursuits of tourism, but also — and more fundamentally — for the conquest and subjugation of a natural order which must be inventoried for the material profit of humankind. In the words of one of the heroes of *La Maison à vapeur*:

> "L'homme, simple habitant de la terre... s'il est rivé à son écorce, il peut en pénétrer tous ses secrets.
>
> — Il le peut, il le doit! reprit Banks. Tout ce qui est dans la limite du possible doit être et sera accompli. Puis, lorsque l'homme n'aura plus rien à connaître du globe qu'il habite...
>
> — Il disparaîtra avec le sphéroide qui n'aura plus de mystères pour lui. répondit le capitaine Hod.
>
> — Non pas! reprit Banks. Il en jouira en maître, alors, et il en tirera un meilleur parti."[11]

["Man, simple inhabitant of the Earth... even nailed to its crust, he can discover all of its innermost secrets."

"He can, and he must!" replied Banks. "All that's within the limits of the possible must and will be accomplished. Then, when Man has nothing more to learn of the globe that he inhabits... "

"He will disappear along with the sphere that has no more mysteries for him," answered Captain Hod.

"Not so!" replied Banks. "He will then reign as master over it, and bring out its very best."]

Viewed from this vantage-point, Verne's vehicular utopias reveal a new and different identity. They are the imaginative by-products of a factory-driven, positivistic notion of unlimited Progress — scientific, industrial, and material. And, as such, they constitute an effective fictional tool for the expression and popularization of the latter's ultimate goals: global hegemony and domination. In other words, these memorable technological extrapolations in the *Voyages Extraordinaires* function both as the representation and the social instrument of a kind of utopian imperialism.

Further, the narratological structure of these texts tends to *reverse* the traditional dialectic between utopian and non-utopian protagonists. The narrative viewpoint associated with Verne's extraordinary vehicles, for instance, always moves from the utopian (and reader-shared) *interior* — identified as "us" — *outward* toward the "real" (and reader-distanced) exterior — identified as "them." Although the Vernian machine itself serves to bring the two into contact (which is, after all, its primary role within the narrative), the psychological and social barriers separating the "us" from the "them" — albeit now reversed — are nevertheless scrupulously maintained. There can be no contamination from the outside: organic or atmospheric, ideological or cultural. The ideal utopian interior — not only the *luxe, calme, et volupté*, but also the bourgeois value system, the positivist agenda, the pedagogical imperative — must be always kept pure and undiluted.

If the inside integrity of Verne's vehicular utopia is somehow compromised, immediate death to the machine (and to the utopian setting) will almost always ensue. The disappearance of the Nautilus into the Maëlstrom which concludes *Vingt mille lieues sous les Mers* is the direct result of Ned Land's ill-fated presence aboard; the *Géant d'Acier* ultimately explodes when abandoned by its makers and overrun by bandits; the floating paradise of *Ile à hélice* [*Propeller Island*] is torn apart by rival political factions from within; in *Maître du Monde* [*Master of the World*], the growing insanity of the once-

heroic Robur dooms both himself and his unique airship in a lightning storm; and the list goes on... To survive, the Vernian vehicular utopia must remain hermetically sealed and inviolate – from "them" on the outside, from ideological contamination, and (ironically) from its own author's need to destroy it at the conclusion of the narrative in order to conform to the dictates of realist verisimilitude.

In summary, then, Jules Verne's many "vehicular utopias" throughout the *Voyages Extraordinaires* give new meaning to Marshall McLuhan's well-known phrase "the medium is the message." And the message therein is one that is very mixed, both in its scope and in its implications.[12]

## NOTES

1. V. Nicolas Wagner, "Le Soliloque utopiste des *500 millions de la Bégum*" *Europe* 595-96 (1978): 117-26.

2. V. Simone Vierne, *L'Ile mystérieuse.* Paris: Hachette, 1973.

3. Jules Verne, *Robur-le-Conquérant* (Lausanne: Rencontre, 1966): 70.

4. Jules Verne, *La Maison à vapeur* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1967): 79-80.

5. Philippe Hamon, "Qu'est-ce qu'une description?" *Poétique* 12 (1972): 472.

6. Jules Verne, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers.* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1966): 134.

7. Jacques Noiray, *Le Romancier et la machine* (Paris: José Corti, 1982): 119.

8. Roland Barthes, "Nautilus et Bateau Ivre," *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), pp. 80-81.

9. P.-J. Hetzel, "Avertissement de l'Editeur," *Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras.* (Paris: Hachette, 1978): 8.

10. Jules Verne, *La Maison à vapeur*, p. 28.

11. Jules Verne, *La Maison à vapeur*, p. 274.

12. For additional analysis of the man/machine interface in Verne's novels, see my *Jules Verne Rediscovered* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), from which portions of this essay were adapted.