

An extract from *The Future Revisited: Jules Verne on Screen in 1950s America* by Françoise Schiltz

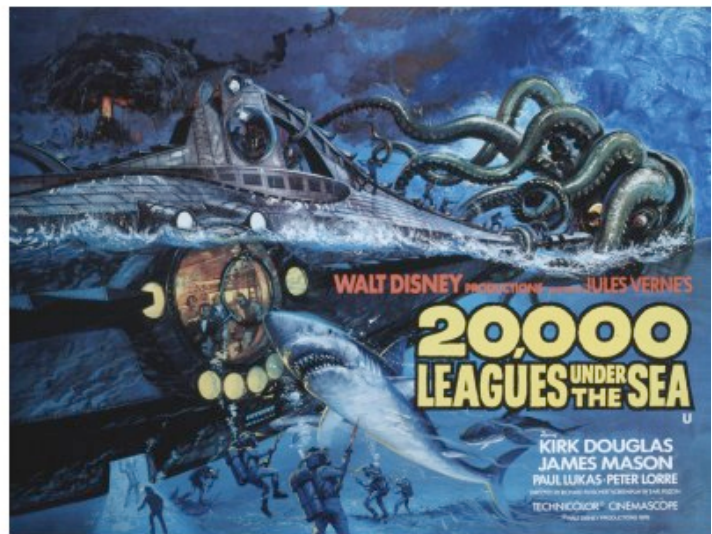
When Professor Pierre Aronnax, a French marine biologist (Paul Lukas), and Conseil, his apprentice (Peter Lorre), are thrown overboard the frigate *Abraham Lincoln* and encounter the *Nautilus* lying motionless in the sea, they are stunned to discover that what they took for a giant sea-creature is in fact a submarine: they refer to it as ‘incredible’, a ‘miracle’. Although it is an ‘engine of destruction’ that has been attacking and sinking ships for months - and nearly caused their own death by ramming the *Lincoln* - they are immediately seduced by its strange outward appearance and want to find out more about it. As the camera follows them inside the boat into the chartroom, it becomes clear that the submersible, though seemingly deserted, has recently been used as a dwelling place, featuring a perfectly clean environment, a working desk and a selection of maps.

Staying with Aronnax, whom the genius of Nemo’s conception has rendered speechless, the camera continues its exploration of the ship, taking him and us into the salon, which reveals a richly decorated, Technicolored space, complete with dining table, water fountain, red velvet settees and drapes, landscape paintings, books, a collection of bottles and flasks, and a pipe organ.

This colourful and warm setting stands in sharp contrast to the rough iron exterior and menacing ‘eyes’ of the boat and turns the *Nautilus* from an ‘avenging monster’ into an object of beauty, from a threatening device into a lavish nineteenth century bourgeois interior. Its homely quality is further

emphasised when Ned Land (Kirk Douglas), a harpooner who sailed with the Professor and Conseil on the *Lincoln*, intrudes into the sub’s galley, which presents us with an assortment of vivid-coloured food, pans and spoons, and a couple of smoking pots on a cooking stove. Nemo’s ship is not merely a technological innovation and a weapon of destruction but a ‘house’ that is ‘lived-in’.

While boasting luxurious furniture and seemingly featuring all the resources and knowledge of the nineteenth century, it also acts as a shelter away from rapid urbanisation, poverty and crime, providing a clean, private and quiet environment. Privacy is an important quality of his underground home: when Ned and Conseil are pursued by cannibals later in the film, the captain empathises with the cannibals’ wrath for, as he tells his two ‘guests’, ‘since you invaded their privacy, they have every right to invade ours’. Not surprisingly, he considers Aronnax, Ned and Conseil to be unwelcome intruders onboard his ship and decides to tolerate their presence only as long as they do not try to escape or interfere with his affairs. After he nearly drowns them in an attempt to test the Professor’s loyalty, he warns the feisty harpooner that ‘I tolerate no guests and



you already know the fate of prisoners'. With the exception of his crew, Nemo has lost all faith in humankind and turned his back on society: 'I am not what is called a civilised man. I have done with society for reasons that seem good to me. Therefore, I do not obey its laws.' Later, he tells Aronnax:

Think of it. On the surface, there is hunger and fear. Men still exercise unjust laws. They fight, tear one another to pieces. A mere few feet beneath the waves their reign ceases, their evil drowns. Here on the ocean floor is the only independence. Here I am free!

Like Nemo's submarine boat, the suburban home in postwar America provided familiar comforts and securities in new and adventurous surroundings and acted like 'a kind of fall-out shelter from the anxieties and uncertainties of public life'. Federal Housing Administration construction loans and the GI Bill encouraged the building of mass-produced housing communities like Park Forest and Levittown, New York, and enabled a large number of white, middle-class married couples to own their own house. Life in suburbia came to demonstrate autonomy and success, and promised a secure future, convenience and coherence. The aesthetic experience of a safe and largely unexplored space, and the fantasy of escape to a more 'natural' setting, also presented a welcome break away from the changing social character of large cities whose centres were now being transfigured by urban redevelopers. Architect and city-planner José Luis Sert lamented in 1944,

The natural frame of man has been destroyed in the big cities. Elements hostile to human nature have replaced the natural ones that once constituted man's surroundings. We are obliged to walk on hard pavements, to breathe and see through polluted air, our eyes are constantly disturbed by rapidly changing lights (...) But besides having substituted the natural surroundings of man for hostile and artificial ones, cities have fallen short of their main objective, that of fomenting and facilitating human contacts so as to raise the cultural level of their populations. To accomplish this social function cities should be organic social structures.

Rather than celebrated as a return to wild nature, the suburb, like the *Nautilus*, occupied 'the mythical space between two untamed rugged frontiers: the wilderness and the chaotic, dangerous inner city' and combined a sense of exploration with a domestic lifestyle. Although the move to these new neighbourhoods required different modes of behaviour and perception from those of the city-dweller, it represented a refuge from urban clutter and detachment and promised 'a radically new vision of family life' and social relationships. No longer forced to live with their relatives in an overcrowded flat and helped by the consumer boom, 'young couples saw themselves as pioneers in the suburban frontiers of planned communities'. They faced 'the task of trying to keep a world [they] never knew and never dreamed steady until [they] can rear a generation at home in it'. In a way then, Americans helped establish and maintain a new worldview that would liberate them from the past and provide a secure future for their offspring. Although contemporary and retrospective notions of 1950s suburban life are frequently riddled with clichés, the newly built housing developments changed existing personal and public conceptions and brought new significance to the idea of privacy. However, rather than using their new identities as private homeowners to avoid their neighbours or hide in their houses, group participation and bonding became an important part of suburban life: whether 'at an impromptu cookout, the neighborhood bridge game, or the morning kaffeeklatsch, people spent their time *with each other*'.

While promoting togetherness and co-operation, the suburbs were also seen as ‘isolated enclaves’ that ‘weakened extended family ties, promoted homogeneity in neighborhoods, intensified racial segregation, encouraged conformity, and fostered a style of life based on traditional gender roles in the home’. Indeed, whereas the government helped to finance the suburbs to encourage a return to traditional family values that would strengthen the American ideal and contain the threat of communism and social unrest, ‘building loans were predicated on “red-lining” (or zoning) practices that effectively kept all “undesirables” out of the lily-white neighborhoods’. Just as the peaceful image of the submarine is disturbed by the reality of wilful destruction and a lack of social interaction, the ideology of privacy and private spending associated with the suburbs not only connoted well-being and safety, but also xenophobia and isolation.

In the sociological study *The Organization Man* (1956), William H. Whyte compares suburban existence to the fate of white-collar workers (‘the organization man’) whose affiliation with large corporations after the war alienated them from their labour force and turned them, according to his view, into nameless and powerless conformists. ‘To get along, one had to go along’ and ‘if a family wished to secure acceptance, it must do no more and no less than everyone else’. In these accounts, the suburbs are portrayed as a trap that, while luring its inhabitants into a romantic vision of the American dream, compel them to act in socially prescribed roles and divests them of their individuality and free will.

In contrast to the bland and stifling atmosphere in suburbia, Nemo lives a life outside society and enjoys an independent existence under the sea. Rather than having his individualism crushed by the demands of large corporations or neighbourhood groups, he pursues his own goals regardless of the law and other people’s opinions. Whereas the suburban community of the 1950s originated from ‘understandable ideals, a “utopia” that proved to be, up to a point, a realizable one’, the *Nautilus* managed to give reality to the idealistic vision of the suburbs and provides complete freedom in harmonious surroundings. Yet while Nemo is a visionary and a rebel who wants to eradicate warfare and slavery to better humankind, the rest of the crew are a homogeneous group who fail to exude a personality: devoted to their captain and his mission, they seem to have relinquished their individual identities. Indeed, with the exception of Nemo and his first mate (played by Robert J. Wilke), the crewmembers are silent and passive and, wearing the same uniform, the same beard and of (apparently) the same ethnic origin, blend into an unidentifiable whole. Nemo tells Aronnax that they are all, like him, former slaves and ‘dedicated men with a plan for living but also a plan for dying’ but despite their common ordeal and beliefs, they do not seem to share an emotional bond and hardly interact with each other. In the midst of change and rebellion there is thus conformity and sameness.

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