

# science on television

## One giant bore

by John Gribbin

ON JULY 20, just five years to the day since Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin stepped on to the Moon, the BBC broadcast, with much huffing and puffing from its publicity machine, "Moonwalk One"; "... a NASA-commissioned documentary which records the moon landing adventure in minute and breathtaking detail", to quote from the *Radio Times*.

Minute the detail may have been, but the programme was hardly breathtaking, except insofar as the encouragement of yawning could be said to constitute a breathtaking spectacle. This was an opportunity missed on the grand scale; a film which should be preserved as a guide to producers in how not to present exciting science on television.

Shots of Saturn rockets taking off are now something of a cliché, but still sufficiently spectacular to justify inclusion in such a supposedly definitive feature. But there was little further material with a comparable visual impact, in spite of the existence of miles of such film in the NASA archives. The reason for this seems to have been a desire on the part of the makers to use only genuine Apollo 11 material, in line with the programme's title.

That would be laudable enough if the material was any good, but it simply is

not. To me, the most dramatic thing about the first Moon landing was that it was covered live on TV around the world. As far as I know, this was just about the only aspect of the mission not predicted by the science fiction writers.

But in retrospect those first pictures were not at all good. Since Apollo 11, we have become even more blasé about the TV coverage of Apollo, and used to pictures which are not just shaky grey blurs labelled "Live from the Moon", but rather in full colour and coming from a camera which is controlled from Earth so that we can watch the astronauts at work.

The answer, surely, would have been to produce a documentary not just about Apollo 11 but about the whole Moon adventure, using material from the later missions which is so ideally suited to the TV medium. As it was, whether through the paucity of good Apollo 11 material or as policy, "Moonwalk One" fell back on long, boring sections of padding. Shots of row upon row of the 'backroom boys' at Houston no doubt brought a warm glow to the hearts of their Moms and kids back home, but told us little of the excitement and importance of the mission. And views of good American citizens flocking lemming like to the beach to watch the launch will no doubt provide useful information for sociologists studying the phenomenon of how dramatically public interest in the Apollo

programme waned after the first mission. But that, surely, was not what the programme was all about.

Even the genuinely exciting parts of the programme—perhaps one sixth of its ninety-minute length—were marred by obtrusive and inappropriate background music in the sub-2001 tradition, and the few graphic aids used were not in the same league as the famous 'simulation' which filled in the gaps when the live Apollo broadcasts were being made. Some heretics, indeed, have been known to argue that the simulation was, visually, the best part of those missions; they have a point, but perhaps those of them who watched "Moonwalk One" were mollified by the segment of old Buck Rogers' film clips. These provided the dramatic highlight of the programme, which declined monotonically in interest for its final hour.

The tone of the whole proceedings is perhaps best summed up by noting that the *Radio Times* even failed to quote Armstrong's famous and carefully rehearsed *ad lib* correctly: "One small step for man, one big step for mankind", they said. None out of ten for effort; whoever wrote that should be encouraged to take a giant leap.

But faith in the American way of life and a genuinely breathtaking spectacle was provided to soothe the heated brow within an hour of the end of "Moonwalk One". "Sergeant Bilko", starring Phil Silvers—now, that *was* worth staying up late for.

## obituary

### L. C. Dunn

LESLIE C. DUNN, one of America's oldest and most influential geneticists, died unexpectedly on March 19, 1974 still active in a scientific career which spanned more than sixty years, encompassing almost all of the development of modern genetics. His early work established some of the first cases of linkage in mammals, and he was the first to demonstrate similar degrees of linkage between what seemed to be the same kinds of mutations in two distinct species, mice and rats. This

led him to recognise that Mendelian analysis could yield clues to genetic homologies and relationships among species, and thus be applicable to understanding the evolution of natural populations, and formed the basis of his life-long interest in what was to become population genetics. His chief work, however, continued to be genetic analysis, and the major efforts of his laboratory centred on the analysis, by both genetical and embryological methods, of mutations expressed in early stages of embryonic life. The greatest part of this work concerned one extensive series of mutations at a

complex region (T) in the mouse, where he and his colleagues analysed a number of mutations which identified genetic factors essential to early embryonic development. After the elements of this system had been identified in laboratory mice, his interest in natural populations led him to examine feral groups of *Mus* for the presence of these mutations. Most of such populations in North America and Europe proved to be polymorphic for variant genes, usually embryonic lethals or semilethals, belonging to the T series. In searching for explanations of how lethal genes could be main-