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Anyone and everyone who enjoys science fiction will have heard of Jules Verne (1828–1905) – a pioneer of the genre who described things that no one really else could. He travelled around the world in 80 days, journeyed to the centre of the Earth, and flew to the moon. In purely literary terms, Verne set foot on the moon in 1865, a good century before US astronaut Neil Armstrong.

From afar, the Earth looked like a “cloudy light” and a “dark spot, drowned in the solar rays” according to Verne. This is incorrect – we live on a blue planet. Blue because we now know what the Earth actually looks like from space. Space science has transformed our understanding of things.

Take the first moon landing 50 years ago, for example. Thanks to the University of Berne's solar sail (or Solar Wind Collector), Apollo 11 was also a major Swiss event. Astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin made sure that this experimental device was in place even before they thrust the American flag into the lunar soil.

As you will learn in Berne-based journalist Dölf Barben's lead article, the reputation of Swiss space science has gone from strength to strength ever since. Metaphorically, Berne's physicists have travelled from the moon to the stars. Their research continues to help change our view of the universe – from taking high-resolution images of Mars, to searching for planets outside our solar system.

Former astronaut Claude Nicollier from Vaud notwithstanding, Switzerland has remained a nation of space researchers to this day rather than becoming a space travelling nation. Science is first and foremost a story of delving into the vast unknown. It is about the beauty of knowing, learning, understanding and comprehending. This ethos is more important than ever as a counterpoint to the growing clamour among those who view near-Earth objects as a potential source of raw materials. Especially, it is also an antidote to the global superpowers hell-bent on militarising space – talks in Geneva to prevent an outer-space arms race ended in spectacular failure at the beginning of April.

The lesson from Berne is that we should maybe attend to some of the much more pressing and urgent problems on our own planet first. And that we should probably let science fiction writers worry about manned missions to the red planet. In the words of one of the Berne physicists who worked on the solar sail 50 years ago: “The red planet is so far away. Most people don't even know where it is in the night sky.” So why fly there? MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cover image: Astronaut Buzz Aldrin deploys the University of Berne's solar sail on the moon, 20 July 1969
Photo: Nasa/Keystone

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