

MYTHOLOGIES OF OUTER SPACE

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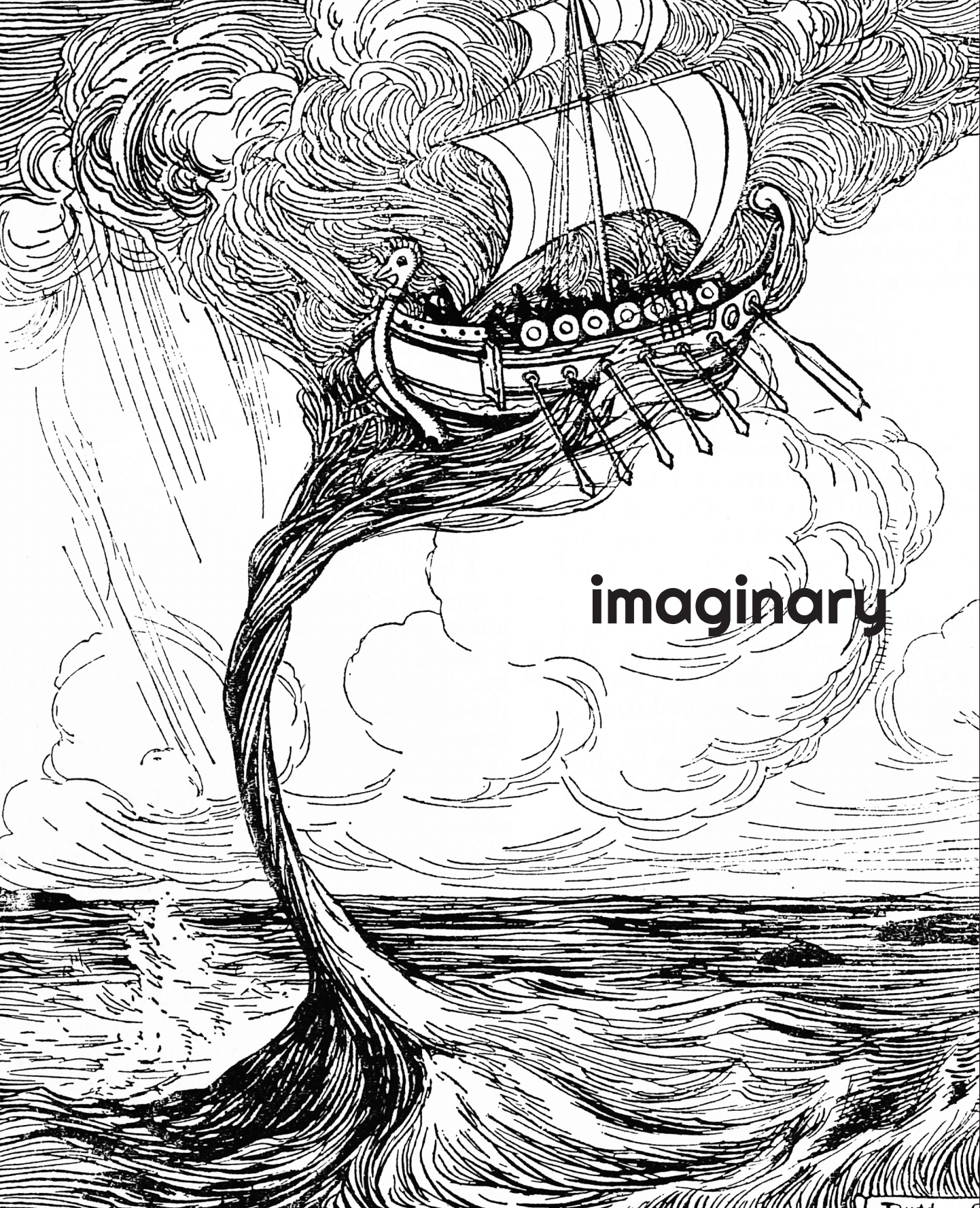
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imaginary

noreen humble

voyages to the moon:

lucian & his legacy

In her contribution to this volume, Alice Gorman, with stark clarity, outlines the widespread perception of the Moon as dead, a near wasteland ripe for capitalistic exploitation. While this image does not solely belong to the period following the lunar landing of 1969, it was certainly reinforced by that event within the parameters of the colonialist mindset of the dominant players in the space race.

Just as from our earthly perspective we appear unable to grasp the time scale of natural forces at play on our Moon and how our presence, in exploitative form or not, alters these, so, too, from our anthropocentric viewpoint, have we forgotten that for much of the past, and still for many non-Western non-colonial cultures in the present, the Moon, and indeed the other planets, are living entities, often deities. In the ancient Greek tradition, which is effectively behind all Western narratives and mythologizing, the Moon is a goddess, Selene, and part of her mythology is that she falls in love with a mortal but endlessly sleeping youth, Endymion, who in some versions of the myth is the discoverer of the course of the Moon, and in others becomes the king of the Moon.

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But while our imagination fails us in these ways, at no time has any amount of hard science, whether attained through the naked eye, increasingly powerful telescopes, satellite imagery, or moonwalks, constrained imaginary speculation about journeying to the Moon or colonizing it. Though imaginary voyages are by no means centred on the Moon alone, the Moon is the closest planetary body, and it is to the Moon that the first imaginary space journeys in the Western tradition go. The earliest of these journeys are found in two works of the ancient Greek author Lucian of Samosata (ca. 125–180 CE): *Icaromenippus* and *True Histories*. These works are striking not least for their imaginative power, their engagement with contemporary scientific knowledge, and their satirical force, but also for the depth and longevity of their influence on virtually all imaginary lunar voyages until at least the early twentieth century. Their reception history is rich and complex so what follows are just a few representative highlights of the long influence of these early imaginings.

ancient greece: setting the scene

Lucian's *Icaromenippus* and *True Histories* date to the second half of the second century CE.¹ They do not appear in a vacuum. Two Greek works that predate them were undoubtedly important sources. The first is a novel by Antonius Diogenes entitled *The Incredible Things beyond Thule*. Though it is now lost, we have a summary of it preserved in a ninth-century encyclopedic work, the *Bibliotheca* of Photius (ca. 810–893), and so know that embedded in it was an imaginary trip to the Moon.² The second is the still extant dialogue *On the Face of the Moon* by the ancient Greek biographer and philosopher Plutarch (a work composed likely in the early second century CE).³ There is no imagined voyage to the Moon in Plutarch's work, but in the course of the lengthy dialogue all contemporary scientific knowledge (astronomical, cosmological, geographical, and catoptrical) about the Moon is discussed. The topics range across the nature of its topography (e.g., it is argued that it is full of mountains and valleys), its substance, velocity, phases, eclipses, etc., filtered through a variety of different philosophical outlooks as represented by the different interlocutors. The dialogue ends with a lengthy myth explaining that the purpose of the Moon is as a halfway house during the life cycle of souls. Part of the discussion also turns to speculation about whether or not the Moon is inhabited, during which expression is given to the hypothesis that if there are inhabitants, from their point of view, "they would be much more astonished that the Earth—looking at it as the dregs and dirt of the cosmos, glimpsing through moisture, steam and clouds as an unlit, low and immobile place—might generate and nourish living beings that take part in motion, breathing and warmth."⁴

Since 1969 it is no longer possible for us to un-know what it is like to see the Earth from the Moon,⁵ but this conjuring of the lunar perspective of Earth has been a feature of speculations about and imaginary voyages to the Moon from the start, and Plutarch no less than Lucian remains an important touchstone for all the works discussed below.

Lucian's two lunar voyages are different in every possible way. The shorter of the two, the *Icaromenippus*, is a dialogue between one Menippus and an anonymous friend.⁶ It, like many of Lucian's works, is a satire, here poking fun at philosophers and the wild excesses of scientific speculation of the day concerning the Moon. Tired with the trivialities of life on Earth, Menippus assembles a pair of wings from an eagle and a vulture so that he can find the answer to such questions as what the Sun was, why the Moon changed shape, etc. Upon reaching the Moon he turns his gaze upon the Earth, but it is so small that he despairs about being able to see it properly, until the philosopher Empedocles appears (all burned up, having thrown himself into Mount Aetna) and reveals to him that if he flaps his eagle's wing he will soon find he has the sight of an eagle. He is then able to see human hypocrisy in all its forms, relating all manner of behaviours, mostly unsavoury, and noting how overwhelming it is to take in the spectacle of the world all at once. This lengthy reflection on what is happening on Earth recalls but greatly expands upon Plutarch's brief lunar perspective on our world.⁷ As Menippus is about to leave to fly farther to the realm of Zeus, the Moon speaks to him about the slanderous ways the philosophers talk about her, and asks him to get Zeus to do something about this. Menippus flies off, then, to the realm of Zeus, reports his and the Moon's complaints, and the assembly of gods agree to annihilate all the philosophers—*after* the festival season, so that they get the benefit of all the sacrificial offerings first.

While in the *Icaromenippus* the focus is on viewing the Earth from the Moon, the opposite is the case in the *True Histories*, where a much more elaborate journey to a richly inhabited Moon is imagined as part of a series of fantastical adventures that the protagonists undergo (for a complete translation of the journey, see Keith Sidwell's contribution to this volume). This, too, is a deeply satirical work. Travel narratives are certainly the main focus of the satire, but few poets, historians, philosophers, and scientists are exempt from attack. The broader narrative begins with the narrator and fifty companions setting off on a sea journey toward the Pillars of Hercules (the promontories that flank the entrance to the Strait of Gibraltar). Blown off course, they begin their fantastical journey. They first encounter rivers of wine, and when investigating the source come across the first of a number of hybrid creatures: vine-women. Those of the companions who succumbed to their charms were held fast by their genitals and grafted to them,

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becoming, likewise, grape-bearing vine-creatures. Departing from this place they are swept up by a whirlwind and soon they find themselves on the Moon, where they are at first captured by gigantic Vulture-Riders and brought to Endymion, the king of the Moon (the feminine Moon has no voice in this work; in fact the feminine is eschewed completely here, even for reproductive purposes). They are not treated badly and discover that Endymion is at war with Phaethon, the king of the Sun, over who gets to colonize the Morning Star—a critique of colonization thus finding a place already in this earliest of imaginary voyages.⁸ The war is related. Phaethon is the victor and his postwar building of a cloud wall in the air causes an eclipse, until it is removed and peace established by a treaty. Not only do the armies of the two sides consist of monstrous hybrid creatures, but the inhabitants of the Moon are fantastical creatures who defy gender and sexual norms: the lunar inhabitants are all men, who gestate their children in their calves, and a race of tree-men live side by side with them, also androgynous with wildly imaginative reproductive means. No practices bear any resemblance at all to those on Earth. While the narrative is focused on the strangeness of life on the Moon itself, there is a brief description of how things on Earth can be seen and heard, here via a mirror positioned over a well. Though Endymion entreats the travellers to stay, laden with gifts they set out on their way again in their ship, finally setting down in the sea again after four days, where they are swallowed by a whale. Their fantastical adventures continue from there, the voyage to the Moon being only one portion of the whole work.

Together Lucian's journeys set the parameters for later imaginary voyages with the key elements being an elaborate framing story starting in the real world, the obligatory imagining of how the Earth looks from the Moon, gigantism, and the hybridity of creatures who live on the Moon. The strong critique of colonialism in the *True Histories* will manifest as a theme again in later journeys, though paradoxically not so much in those written during the wave of colonization in the early modern period.

16th century europe & the scientific revolution

There is a renewed interest in imagining voyages to the Moon in the wake of the Scientific Revolution, particularly after the publication in 1543 of Nicolaus Copernicus's (1473–1543) *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*). What these voyages might have looked like had the works of Plutarch and Lucian not also been, by this time, widely available in print, not just in Latin but increasingly in the major vernacular languages in Europe, is hard to say. Lucian was popular

both in schools and more generally. His satirical bent appealed greatly, so that a work like the *True Histories* was not just a model for wacky off-world journeying, but also for its mode of attack.⁹ The fact that Erasmus's Latin translation of the *Icaromenippus*, first published in 1514, was reprinted fifteen times by the middle of the century played no small role in the dissemination of that work too. But even before the text or its translation was in print, the circulation of manuscripts of both in the fifteenth century ensured their influence was already being felt. The *Icaromenippus*, for example, is undoubtedly in Ludovico Ariosto's (1474–1533) mind when he composes a brief journey to the Moon in his *Orlando Furioso* (34.68–86), first published in 1516 (Mac Carthy 2009).

The most important of Lucian's direct successors in terms of combining science with a fantastical lunar voyage was Johannes Kepler (1571–1630). His *Somnium*, begun in 1593, was published posthumously in 1634.¹⁰ The treatise proper is fairly short but accompanied by copious lengthy notes. Its purpose, Kepler says in the fourth note, "is to use the example of the Moon to build up an argument in favor of the motion of the Earth."¹¹ It starts by him falling asleep and dreaming of reading a book, composed by a fictional Icelandic astronomer, Duracotus, who relates a portion of his life story, starting with some adventures, which include learning about sidereal matters from the contemporary Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. Upon his return home, Duracotus's mother tells him she has the ability to commune with the daemons of the Moon, here named Levania (based on the Hebrew, *Levana*, which Kepler says he favoured over the Greek for its more occult flavour). A daemon then takes over as the narrator and first describes how a human could be carried to the Moon (showing Kepler's theorizing about the effects of gravity on the human body). There follows a description of the physical nature of the Moon, its climate, movements, etc., and how its inhabitants—who are of gigantic size but short-lived—would view the Earth and its movements. The narrative ends abruptly with Kepler awaking from his dream.

The extraordinary meshing of the supernatural framework with scientific knowledge in this work has long been noted. There is no doubt but that the gigantism of Lucian's Moon dwellers is a direct inspiration (Lambert 2002, 11), as is the elaborate set-up in the outer story. Indeed, in the second note on the text Kepler recounts how he chanced upon Lucian's *True Histories*, which he used to help him to learn Greek, and which were his "first steps in the trip to the Moon." He also notes the following: "at Prague, in the year 1604, I quoted extensively from Plutarch in my *Optical Part of Astronomy*." He is referring here to Plutarch's *On the Face of the Moon*, a work he himself translated into Latin.¹²

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Kepler's work is not, however, like Lucian's, satirical, nor does it tap into the contemporary anxieties about colonization, and in these points it differs from the rest of the works discussed here. Its purpose is serious, even if the literary and fantastical framework of the lunar voyage owes much to Lucian. Further, the work did not circulate tremendously widely; the first German translation did not appear until 1898 and the first English translation came only in 1965.

The contrast with the translation history of Lucian's works couldn't be starker, or indeed with the translation history of the first English translunar voyage that appeared only four years after Kepler's *Somnium*: Bishop Francis Godwin's (1562-1633) *The Man in the Moone, or a Discourse of a Voyage Thither by Domingo Gonsales the Speedy Messenger* in 1638.¹³ Godwin's composition was far less scientific than Kepler's *Somnium*, though it is fully conversant with contemporary scientific theories, but it was also far more successful as a literary work. Between 1638 and 1768 it was published twenty-five times across four languages (Parrett 2004, 50).

There is again an elaborate framing story involving the adventures of one Domingo Gonsales. After some years of exile, while on his way home to Spain, he finds himself on the island of St. Helena, where he discovers a type of wild swan that can carry heavy weights. When his journey resumes, he is attacked and escapes by taking to the air with his wild swans, who simply keep flying higher until he reaches the Moon after twelve days. His first observation is how huge the Earth looks from the Moon compared to the Moon from the Earth, his second how huge the trees are. He discovers a plant of surpassing deliciousness just before he is surrounded by people, first described as twice the height of Earth people, though the longer they live the huger they become. Unlike most other encounters with imaginary Moon inhabitants, this one is peaceful, though the trope of bringing the interloper to their leader is followed.

Godwin's vision of life on the Moon starts out looking like it might be utopian, but that image is soon problematized, not least by the description of another group of inhabitants termed "changelings." They are of ordinary height, thoroughly despised, and serve as slaves to the "genuine" gigantic lunar people. Any child of poor temperament is sent down to Earth in exchange for one of better temperament. This is a peculiar invention by any standard, but it is made all the more astonishing by the way Godwin casually links this practice to contemporary discourse about Indigenous peoples in the "new world":

And their ordinary vent for them [the children they send away] is a certaine high hill in the North of *America*, whose people I can easily beleeeve to be wholly descended of them, partly in regard of their colour, partly also in regard of the continuall use of Tobacco which the *Lunars* use exceedingly much, as living in a place abounding wonderfully with moisture, as also for the pleasure they take in it.

Here Godwin effectively doubly dehumanizes the Indigenous peoples of North America: not only are they inferior, they are not even human but defective, slavish lunar beings.¹⁴

Gonsales is eventually prompted to depart by constant recall of his family back in Spain and by the fact that his swans, his only means of transportation, start to die. He leaves, with gifts of magical stones, and lands in China nine days later, where some further adventures await him (just as Lucian had left the Moon with gifts from Endymion and embarked on further adventures).

Godwin was highly educated, and as has been well shown, his work draws on many different contemporary sources. In one of these, Richard Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (first published in 1621), is the exhortation "with a *Galelies* glasse, or *Icaromenippus* wings in *Lucian*, command the Spheares and Heavens, & see what is done amongst them."¹⁵ Godwin does the latter both literally—Menippus uses the wing of an eagle and the wing of a vulture to ascend to the moon, Gonsales uses wild swans, one of whose feet has talons like an eagle—and figuratively, with the elaborate framing story that starts in reality and slowly becomes more fantastical and with his continuing to people the Moon with gigantic creatures and plants. Godwin, like Burton, had read his Lucian.

19th & 20th century colonial perspectives from france & england

The next notable Moon voyages I want to look at that have links to Lucian belong to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lucian was still readily available in print in all major vernacular languages and was a staple on school curricula throughout Europe and its colonies, and all the literary creators in this section were educated in Latin, and the first also in Greek.

In the mid-nineteenth century the bestselling French novelist Jules Verne (1828–1905) published *De la terre à la lune* (1865), followed five years later by its sequel, *Autour de la lune* (1870). Mankind does not actually land on the Moon in these works and their de-

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tail focuses on contemporary technological capacity, specifically with regard to rocketry, so there is not so obvious a link to the Lucianic works here other than in the general sense that they both concern a fantastic voyage to the Moon and are satirical, critiquing both capitalism and colonialism. There are two reasons, though, for mentioning them: first, they were wildly popular and certainly influenced the two slightly later journeys I am going to discuss; secondly, they are sprinkled with references to the past—not to Lucian, but certainly to Plutarch, among other classical writers. For example, when one of the characters is asked whether he thought the Moon inhabited, he answers, “men of great intelligence, such as Plutarch, Swedenborg, Bernardin de St Pierre, and others have, if I mistake not, pronounced in the affirmative” (Verne [1874] 2019, 95). Verne, like his predecessors, acknowledges the tradition he considers himself to be writing within.

Nearly half a century later, in 1901, came the publication of *The First Men in the Moon* by H. G. Wells (1866–1946). Wells, like Verne, satirizes the colonial impulses of his day, but he does so in a far more allegorical and fantastical way. That fact alone puts him more firmly in Lucian’s camp, but he also acknowledges the debt openly in two places. When later writing about the literary predecessors for what he termed his “scientific romances,” he lists Lucian’s *True Histories* (Wells 1933, vii), and, tellingly, the opening epigraph to his *The First Men in the Moon* is a quotation from the opening of Lucian’s *Icaromenippus*.¹⁶

As is customary, Wells creates an elaborate outer story, which in this case leads a Mr. Bedford, an unscrupulous businessman, into the company of an earnest scientist, Professor Cavor, working on a substance, cavorite, that reflects gravity (in one of their early conversations Bedford mentions Verne’s *A Trip to the Moon*; see Wells [1901] 2005, 28). Once this is perfected, they successfully voyage to the Moon. They find the environment harsh and challenging upon first stepping out of their capsule, but when day appears plants start growing at an extraordinary rate. That these plants turn out to be intoxicating is a nod to Godwin, as is the fact that the protagonists discover they can leap huge distances with little effort. They soon learn they are not alone: monstrous animals called mooncalves are being herded around by giant, five-feet-tall, ant-like creatures called Selenites.¹⁷ Upon gorging themselves on the plants the voyagers fall into a drugged state, and the next thing they know they are underground, the captives of the Selenites. Bedford urges fighting, Cavor urges restraint. Bedford has his way and they eventually make it back to the surface, having ascertained that the mooncalves mine gold for the ant creatures. In the end Bedford gets back to the capsule and makes his way back to Earth with some of the gold, intent on making a profit out of all this, which, happily, he fails to do.

The last example of imaginary lunar voyaging showing direct Lucianic influence is the 1902 film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* by Georges Méliès (1861–1938). While the immediate and general inspiration for Méliès's film is agreed to be Verne's and Wells's novels,¹⁸ there are strong Lucianic elements to be found too. And like all his models, Méliès's uses his chosen medium to critique colonial practices.¹⁹

The film opens in the midst of a meeting, during which a group of scientists decide to build a rocket and fly to the Moon. The rest of the film depicts them carrying out this plan: building and launching the rocket, the Moon landing and events thereon, and the triumphant return to Earth.

Méliès's own iconic visual wizardry, with the rocket crashing into the Moon's right eye, is followed by the classic shift in perspective that has been part of the vocabulary of such voyages since Lucian's *Icaromenippus*: the explorers gaze back upon the Earth from their new vantage point on the Moon. The Selenites once more are fantastical hybrid creatures: now a cross between humanoids and crustaceans. Initial contact, as in many instances (recall the Vulture-Riders in Lucian and the giant ant-like Selenites in Wells) results in the explorers being captured and brought to the leader, though in the film the crustaceans' hold is only brief, and the explorers manage to return to their capsule and fall back to Earth bringing with them a crustacean hanging on the back, which, in time-honoured colonial fashion, they display in chains. While the two sides are fighting on the Moon there is something that strikes the reader of Lucian forcibly. Whenever the explorers hit a crustacean, the lunar creature goes up in a puff of smoke. In Lucian's *True Histories*, the Moon people do not die but "dissolve into the air like smoke." It may of course be that in the film dissolving in a puff of smoke—skilfully done by means of a substitution splice—is purely a dramatic magic effect, as Méliès was well-known for his fascination and skill with magic tricks and had deployed smoke effects in other ways previously, but it is not possible to rule out that he, too, had first-hand knowledge of Lucian's widely read story and that this detail in particular caught and pleased his magician's eye.²⁰

diminishing influence

The influence of Lucian's imaginary journey is diminishing as the literature of the ancient Greeks slips, with good reason, from the pole position in the Western literary canon, a position it had held since the fifteenth century. It is not that Lucian's account is not still readily available in translation in at least all the major European languages, but more that knowledge of Lucian himself has diminished to the point where intertextual and

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cross-media allusions, if they exist, are sure to go unrecognized by all but a very few, and even when they occur they are likely now to have been filtered through one or more intermediary accounts.²¹

Further, imaginary journeys to the Moon now have a different starting point. We know today how to get to the Moon, and we know, too, that the atmosphere and topography will not support human life without significant technological intervention currently beyond our means. But the moonwalk of 1969 did not diminish the Moon as a site for our fantastical imaginings, it just altered things, so that it is no longer a question of imagining how one might get to the Moon and what sort of creatures one might find upon arrival, but rather how one might make the Moon habitable for humans.²²

But the pull of Méliès's particular imaginary—and indirectly, therefore, Lucian's—still has the power to inspire, with musicians continuing to take up the challenge in the twenty-first century. Most recently, when Conor Mitchell, the artist-in-residence at the Wexford Opera Festival, was asked to compose a piece for the seventy-first iteration of the festival in 2022, the theme of which was “Magic & Music,” he chose as his inspiration Méliès's film. His creation, *Les Selenites*, a half-hour chamber opera, is a fantasy as equally compelling as that of Méliès. The story is described thus:

A young research student is watching a film from the last century. She is joined by three characters, each lost in time. A man and his friend—both acrobats from the Folies Bergère in Paris—are joined by a young actress with dreams of leaving France and going to New York. The characters inhabit the same space, though time is split between the present and 1902.²³

Scenes from Méliès's film fill a screen behind the characters as they each muse or interact with it in different ways, including visually via their clothing, as the young actress wears a costume resembling the skimpy sailor's suits of those “eroticized and trivialized caricatures of explorers” who send off the rocket in the film (Ezra 2000, 123), while one of the Folies Bergère acrobats (a nod to the fact that Méliès employed Folies Bergère actors to play the Moon dwellers in his film) puts on a crustacean suit as the two of them discuss the film and its meaning.

Regardless, then, of how knowledgeable we are now about the Moon and the impossibility of its harbouring life, the lure of the imagination and conversations with the imaginary voyages of the past prove hard to set aside.

notes

- 1 For an introduction to Lucian, see Sidwell 2004. For a case for the *True Histories* to qualify as science fiction, see Georgiadou and Larmour 1998, 44–8.
2. Photius, *Bibliotheca*, 166. For an edition, including Greek text and English translation, of Photius's summary and other evidence of this lost novel, see Stephens and Winkler 1995, 101–72. On what we can discern about the lunar voyage within Diogenes's story, see ní Mheallaigh 2020, 212–22.
3. For a translation of the full text, see Gárriga 2021, 32–111.
4. Plutarch, *On the Face of the Moon*, 940E; trans. Gárriga 2021, 95.
5. Though the first photo of Earth from space, taken from sixty-five miles away, dates to 1946; see "On This Day in Space History, the First Photo Is Taken from Space," Space Center Houston, October 24, 2019, <https://www.spacecenter.org/first-photo-taken-from-space/#:~:text=On%20Oct.,accepted%20beginning%20of%20outer%20space.>
6. For an easily accessible translation of the full text, see Costa 2005, 45–60.
7. See ní Mheallaigh 2020, 174–5 and 261–90, for more on this ancient tradition of *selenoskopia* (literally "view from the Moon").
8. Smith 2009 discusses this aspect of the tale.
9. Robinson 1979, 129–38, discusses its influence on such works as Thomas More's *Utopia*, François Rabelais's *Pantagruel*, Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique des états et empires de la lune et du soleil*, and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.
10. Rosen 1967 is still the most recent commentary and English translation. In his introduction (xvii–xxiii) he discusses the complicated gestation of the work.
11. See Rosen 1967, 36, for the translation and further details.
12. Rosen 1967, 33–4, for the translations quoted from the second note. Rosen also (209–11) interestingly traces, through various correspondence, the challenges Kepler had in translating Plutarch's work into Latin. Chen-Morris 2005 and Swinford 2015 explore the Lucianic and Plutarchan connections.

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13. See Poole 2009 for a recent edition. Cressy 2006 is good for wider contextualisation.
14. Poole 2009, 113; also Adams 1995, 72–3.
15. See Poole 2009, 19, for this quotation from Burton.
16. He took the translation (and modified it every so slightly) from Tooke's 1820 English edition of Lucian's works.
17. "Selenite" is a direct translation of Lucian's Greek term for Moon dwellers and was so used by Tooke in his 1820 translation.
18. See Christie 2015 for other contemporary influences on Méliès.
19. Sandner 1998 and Crivelli 2023 both investigate the connections between Verne, Wells, and Méliès with an emphasis on their critique of imperialism. See also Lefebvre 2011.
20. Lefebvre 2011, 59, notes two prior films of Méliès in which a similar effect is achieved, but neither are quite the same: in the 1900 film *Nouvelles luttes extravagantes* (known in English as *Fat and Lean Wrestling Match*) one wrestler jumps onto the stomach of another and there is an explosion with smoke, but the body does not disappear, it just breaks apart; in the 1901 film *L'homme à la tête en caoutchouc* (*The Man with the Rubber Head*) a head is inflated with air until it explodes. In all three films substitution splices are used but for different effects and different reasons.
21. It is worth pointing out, however, that Antonius Diogenes (if not his lunar voyage) is one of the ancient Greek sources that recently inspired Doerr's 2021 novel *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (New York: Scribner).
22. See, for example, Pak 2016 for a deep exploration of terraforming in science fiction, as well as his essay for this volume.
23. The description is taken from the 2022 *Wexford Festival Opera Programme*, 120.

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