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Lifting Off into Apollo's Universe:  
An Exploration into NASA's Reception of Apollo

Audrey McGrail

“I have seen the earth eclipsed by the moon. I have seen the sun's true light, unfiltered by any planet's atmosphere. I have seen the ultimate black of infinity in a stillness undisturbed by any living thing.”<sup>1</sup> Michael Collins, pilot of the Apollo 11 spacecraft, recounted this view of light and dark during his solo orbit around the moon while fellow astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made the first human footprints on the lunar surface below. Apollo 11, the sixth of twelve NASA Project Apollo missions that launched from 1961 to 1975, was the first space mission to land Americans on the moon and return them safely to Earth. The mission took humans to heights never before reached outside of the mythical world. As such, the Project was aptly named for the Greek god Apollo, as will be explored in this essay.

In 1961, United States President John F. Kennedy declared that the United States would set out on an ambitious goal to land Americans on the moon - and do so before their Cold War rival, the Soviet Union. The USSR had already begun their own exploration into space in 1957 with the release of Sputnik, an intercontinental ballistic missile that was launched into Earth's orbit, becoming the first man-made invention to do so. In 1959, the USSR landed the first space probe on the moon, known as Luna 2. During the Cold War, relations between the two world superpowers grew increasingly tense, and as a result their outer space competition became more ambitious. Ultimate victory in this space race would be granted to the first country that successfully completed a lunar landing mission and returned the astronauts to Earth. Timely completion of President Kennedy's goal would effectively express American dominance in

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Goldstein, “Michael Collins, ‘Third Man’ of the Moon Landing, Dies at 90,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2021.

science and technology, while also trumpeting the United States' defiance of the USSR's communist agenda.<sup>2</sup>

An impressive network of NASA scientists and researchers worked behind the scenes on other space-related projects years before man ever landed on the moon. Five other lunar missions were launched in the Project Apollo series before Apollo 11 to ensure, to the best of NASA intelligence, that when man did eventually land on the moon the mission would be successful and safe. In 1961, overwhelming research determined that the safest way to land Americans on the moon would be by using a lunar orbit rendezvous, a highly complex and sophisticated docking system that allowed for two astronauts to land on the moon and a third astronaut to stay in the main spacecraft and orbit around the lunar planet.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this research and intelligence at NASA, public officials and partners supported the mission outside of NASA's headquarters and millions around the world watched. Such a significant and historic mission required an equally significant and historic name.

In 1962 the *New York Times* wrote a brief article entitled "Moon Project is Named for Greek God of Light." The article introduced Americans to Apollo, the god of light in Greek myth. Apollo thus became a household name in the United States, and in the greater world, because of his attachment to NASA's monumental lunar landing mission.

In Ancient Greek myth Apollo is the son of Zeus and Leto and the twin brother of Artemis, the goddess of the moon. Apollo is, among other things, the god of the sun, light, poetry, and prophecy<sup>4</sup>. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Apollo is given the epithet "far-shooting" (1.95) for his expert archery skills and visionary mind.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Space Race." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 22 Feb. 2010.

<sup>3</sup> "Project Apollo: Astronauts to Train for Moon Flight in Two-Man Gemini Craft," *The New York Times*, 1 August 1962, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Fritz Graf. "Apollo." *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

Abe Silverstein was the brainpower behind the name Apollo for NASA's Project Apollo. After the Project was completed successfully Silverstein reflected that he chose the name Apollo because of its "attractive connotations" and because of the powerful imagery of Apollo "riding his chariot across the sun," reasoning that it "was appropriate to the grand scale"<sup>5</sup> of the NASA lunar missions. In Abe Silverstein's 2001 obituary the *New York Times* wrote that in choosing the name Apollo for the space mission, Silverstein was like Apollo in that he was "an archer who hits the target."<sup>6</sup> The same rings true for the mission as a whole. Project Apollo required precision and clear vision, like the archer Apollo, so that the mission was successful and safe in landing Americans on the moon and collecting valuable scientific information of the lunar surface.

The reception of Apollo in NASA's lunar missions shows the great fascination with Greek culture in modern times. This famous moment of Classical reception invokes Greek myth and aligns the modern audience with Greek intellectual thought. The moon landing, a once unimaginable and still monumental modern human accomplishment, is placed within this legacy of Ancient Greek achievement.

Not everything aligns so perfectly, however. First, there is an obvious incongruence; Apollo is the god of the sun, and his name endows a lunar mission. Further, Apollo is a complex, and sometimes unethical character in Greek myth. The *Boston Globe* wrote in a brief 1969 article entitled "Ancient Apollo Had a Dark Side" that Apollo once "tied a hapless horseman to a tree and skinned him alive."<sup>7</sup> The *Globe's* article helps to articulate Apollo's complexity, which pertains to the Project's dismissal of the unsavory aspects of Apollo's character. Still, it is

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<sup>5</sup> "What's in a Name," NASA Glenn Research Center, accessed May 2, 2021,

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Saxton, "Abe Silverstein, 92, Engineer Who Named Apollo Program," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2001

<sup>7</sup> "Ancient Apollo Had a Dark Side," *The Boston Globe*, July 20, 1969, 54.

important to note that Apollo's "dark side" correlates with the uncertainty of the Apollo missions and how much there is still unknown and unexplored beyond Earth.

Apollo 11 pilot Collins was dubbed the "loneliest man in history" for his solo orbit around the moon aboard the command capsule, as he was the lone adventurer of the far-side, or "dark-side", of the moon.<sup>8</sup> Though the nickname was given to Collins in a somewhat affectionate manner, there is truth in the sentiment that, unlike on Earth, there is an extreme loss of connection and companionship in space. "If you look at the Earth as it is from the moon," Collins reflected in the years after the successful completion of Apollo 11, "you are startled by how tiny it is... it is almost like a small headlight... The overriding impression I got," Collins continued, "was one, oddly enough, of fragility... you want to really nurture it and protect it."

With the launch of the Apollo missions, humans took on god-like capabilities and were given a previously unseen view of Earth. Before the twentieth century ascending the skies and visiting other worlds had been reserved only to figures like Apollo in myth. This desire to 'lift off' into once mythical, but now attainable worlds beyond Earth still inspires curiosity today. Space has become increasingly accessible to humans since Collins returned to Earth in 1969. Greater research, funding, and enthusiasm has helped to trigger a curiosity for life beyond Earth. But whether this continued exploration will prompt space-goers to develop a deeper gratitude and a sincere desire to protect the Earth, as it did for Collins, is unclear. Collins' detachment from humanity aboard the Apollo 11 spacecraft begs more philosophical questions: what is the cost of this competition for outer space and the fascination with life beyond Earth? How great is the risk of losing human connection? Are we in jeopardy of losing our home on Earth?

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<sup>8</sup> Goldstein, Richard "Michael Collins, 'Third Man' of the Moon Landing, Dies at 90," *The New York Times*, 28 April 2021.

Humans may marvel at the great potential for space exploration, hoping to bask in the same glory as Apollo and be the light that guides humanity into new worlds. But, as Collins reflected, the light for humanity is already known. Earth is the home for humanity where modern and ancient connect to launch civilization into the future, as it did in this moment of the reception of Apollo.

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