

UNDER LUNAR INFLUENCE

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for millennia
a distant mysterious unattainable orb
the Moon has alternately been a heavenly body
the resting place of the gods
or a divine being itself
an omen of disaster
ruler of an individual's inner life and emotions
able to reveal the dark
ugly
even monstrous side of human nature
exerting a gravitational pull
not just on the tides
but some might say
on my uterus' monthly shedding

Both Aristotle and Pliny the Elder believed that madness and epilepsy were caused by the Moon. No wonder that the word lunacy derives from the Latin *lunaticus*, meaning “moonstruck”. In Russian, the language of my childhood, *лунатик* [lʊˈnatʲɪk] is the name for a somnambulist, a sleepwalker, a being ruled over by the celestial body in the depth of night, unconscious to its whims and orders.¹ However, the word in its most literal sense means “a moonman”, an inhabitant of the lunar orb, and to my untrained ears and vivid imagination, it sketched out a strikingly precise image of the rocky, craterous sphere, home to an altogether different but similar species of human.



An apotropaion, from the Greek *αποτρέπειν* {to divert or to avoid}, is a talismanic object or magic charm used to ward off evil. Traditional Cimaruta amulets are made of silver, but here they exchange the shine of solid metal for a pearlescent white with a lunar glow. Magnified, spectral constellations encouraged by a light dusting of lacquered silver leaf.

A metaphorical “sprig of rue”, a sprig of regret, of sorrow, of repentance, dipped into holy water, glistening drops that fall on to ecstatic worshippers. Repentance turned into grace. God's grace translated as a witch's charm, the “herb of grace” adorned with flowers, keys, hands, daggers, and a crescent Moon. Worn either as a necklace or hung above an infant's bed, in a semi-domestic space, the evil eye cannot be left to wander free.

¹ While *lunatik* and *lunatic* would seem to offer the same meaning, *lunatik* doesn't actually bear any correlation to madness or folly.

“The thing about whiteness is that it’s hard to paint precisely because it’s everywhere and in everything, and I mean this in terms of any kind of whiteness. It’s the image of the world. And yet no one can see it for itself because there’s no such thing as an ipseity of white ... There was first lead white, which we used for millennia, but it was poison.”²

Long before Kate Bush sung out longingly to Heathcliff, clad in flowing red, moving emotively through the fields of Salisbury Plain, her gaze, uninterrupted, piercing through the camera lens, it was Merle Oberon (1911 – 1979) who first slipped into the skin of Emily Brönte’s heroine³. Born in Bombay while it was still a colony of the British Empire, she left for France in 1928, her mother – who had naturally darker skin than her mixed-race progeny, fathered by a British mechanical engineer employed by Indian Railways – would accompany her daughter on the trip in the guise of a lady’s maid. A Hollywood star of the Silver Screen, the prevailing era of pre-Technicolor abetted Merle’s lifelong masquerade of whiteness. Forever tainted by the harsh bleaching treatments that she used on her skin, eroding and eating away at the non-white origins that constantly threatened to disrupt her carefully plotted disguise, to upset the polite humdrum and dazzling glamour of *proper* society, Merle remained a guardian of her secret past and parentage for the entirety of her life.

“I was trying to reach into my own whiteness, where it started and ended, if it was surface or infrastructure, skin or spine. Whitewashed or leaden.”⁴

To be in a state of fugue is to suffer a loss of awareness of one’s identity, often coupled with flight from one’s usual environment. Merle readily adopted the public persona of a white Australian colonist before finally settling in later years in Acapulco, where she used her acquired wealth to build a modern Orientalist estate, taking inspiration from the “British Colonial” aesthetic of her youth. The colonial racialised subject finally become master of her own plantation.



Filmed secretly in Paris in 1950, in a studio belonging to Jean-Pierre Melville, Kenneth Anger’s *Rabbit’s Moon* is an Expressionist tragicomic romance, with tones of Commedia dell’Arte, Buñuelian cruelty and hallucinatory effects worth of Méliès.⁵ Centred on a lovestruck – although *moonstruck* might be more apt – Pierrot trying to capture the evanescent Moon, the experimental short film “in blue” is a whimsical fantasy, a “lunar dream” about the unattainable and the artificiality of cinema, set in a night forest made out of hand-painted leaves and trees.

Cold, cold, warm, warmer, warmer, hot! The artificial heat of flickering lights only provides warmth in the eyes of the beholder. Melted plastic resolidifies into an altogether novel, warped and twisted landscape of crevices, peaks and troughs. A sensorial pastiche, the Blood Moon’s fiery red momentarily transforms cold rock into an orb of fury and passion.

² Johanna Hedva, *Your Love Is Not Good*, (And Other Stories, 2023), p. 74

³ Oberon starred with Laurence Olivier in *Wuthering Heights* (1939), the first film adaptation of Brönte’s novel of 1847, which earned eight Academy Awards.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ While the film was shot in 1950, it was not completed, and didn’t see release, until 1972.