



From Melies' historic *Trip to the Moon*, 1902. Turn-of-the-century audiences delighted in space fantasies.

# The First Men in the Moon

On July 20, 1969, as the world watched in awe and wonder, a man set foot on our nearest neighbor in space, the Moon . . . but he was not the first.

By HOWARD ZIMMERMAN

**D**ecades before Neil Armstrong was born, movie audiences were thrilling to astronauts' adventures on the Moon. In literally dozens of films since the turn of the 20th century, a strange assortment of travelers have found themselves standing on the Moon looking back at Earth. Some filmmakers have used a Moon voyage merely as background to tell a totally different story, while others have striven for scientific accuracy . . . with varying degrees of success.

Sixty-six years before Apollo 11, the brilliant French filmmaker Georges Melies

took his classic *Trip to the Moon*. This silent, hand-colored, 845-foot film released in 1902 was based on the Moon voyage books of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, included some stunning effects, and thoroughly entertained the turn-of-the-century audience. Melies portrayed space travel as a simple exercise in ballistics. He aimed a mile-long cannon at the Moon, filled a hollow projectile with dauntless explorers and pulled the trigger.

Although fantasy clearly dominates this early cinematic landmark, it contains one piece of startling scientific accuracy that was overlooked or disregarded by succeeding generations of SF filmmakers: the return

journey of the bullet-shaped spacecraft ends with an ocean splashdown and Naval recovery!

A somewhat more plausible lunar excursion is *First Men in the Moon*, adapted from the Wells novel. Plausible, that is, if you concede the possibility of an anti-gravity solution—such as the one created by Dr. Cavor. After coating a metal-braced sphere with the substance, Cavor is whisked off to the Moon, where he meets an intelligent race of insect-like Moonmen called Selenites. Originally made as a silent film in 1919, the story was updated by Charles Schneer and Ray Harryhausen in 1964. This version opens with an



Cavorting around the lunar terrain in diving suits are Dr. Cavor and friend—*The First Men in the Moon*.



PHOTO: 1988 ASTOR



PHOTO: 1984 COLUMBIA

Giant spider slavors over Moonwoman in *Missile to the Moon*.

Dr. Cavor has close encounter with Selenites.

authentic-looking scene of an American astronaut about to place the flag on the Moon's surface for the first time. To his surprise, he finds an old British Union Jack already planted there.

The rest of the film recounts Cavor's earlier landing and is filled with wonderful effects. The movie ends on a rather ominous note: It seems that the Selenites are no longer on the Moon because they were infected—and totally wiped out—by Cavor's Earthly germs.

One of the more serious attempts to portray an accurate Moon trip on film before the Space Age dawned is George Pal's *Destination Moon*. Made in 1950, it boasted a screenplay by Robert Heinlein, matte paintings by Chesley Bonestell and sets designed by Ernst Fetge. Filled with dozens of fine little touches, it introduced American audiences for the first time to the actual language and experiences of space travel, from celestial mechanics to zero gravity. (For a fuller, first-hand account of the difficulties in accomplishing all this, see Robert A. Heinlein's "The Making of *Destination Moon*," STARLOG #6.)

Many movies filmed before the Space Age was in full bloom are chock-full of scientific inaccuracies and downright impossibilities.

## MOON MOVIES

**B**elow is a list of films made before 1969 that deal with manned lunar landings. Sources used in compiling this list include Walt Lee's *Reference Guide to Fantastic Films* and STARLOG's *Photo Guidebooks to Spaceships, Aliens & Fantastic Worlds*.

Astronomer's Dream	1898	(French) A Georges Melies production, 195 ft.
A Trip to the Moon	1899	Lubin, silent, short
A Trip to the Moon	1902	(French) A Georges Melies production, 845 ft., silent, hand-tinted
A Trip to the Moon	1903	Pathe, silent, short
Moon Man	1905	(British) 106 ft., silent
Voyage to the Center of the Moon	1905	(Italian) silent, short
Moon in His Apron	1909	(French) silent, animated short
Moonstruck	1909	(French) Pathe, 721 ft., silent, hand-tinted
New Trip to the Moon	1909	(French) Pathe, silent, short
A Trip to the Moon	1914	Lubin, 600 ft., animated w/live action
A Trip to the Moon	1917	Toyland Films, silent, puppet animated short
First Men in the Moon	1919	(British) silent
All Aboard for the Moon	1920	Bray, 1 reel, silent, animated
First Man to the Moon	1920	Bray, silent, animated short
Adventures of Baron Munchausen	1927	Peroff, 970 ft., silent, animated
Woman in the Moon	1929	(German) UFA, 156 min., silent (directed by Fritz Lang)



PHOTO: © 1963 ASTOR

This lobby card says it all. Note the lack of helmet and air supply as Sonny Tufts descends ship to step on lunar surface.

A Trip to the Moon	1933	Univ. of Michigan, 1 reel
Shape of Things to Come	1936	(British) London Films (UA) 130 min. (Korda, Menzies)
Destination Moon	1950	Eagle Lion/George Pal Prod., 91 min., color
Rocketship X-M	1950	Lippert, 78 min., b&w w/tinted sequences
Radar Men from the Moon	1951	Republic, 12-part serial, 24 reels
Project Moonbase	1953	Lippert, 63 min., b&w
Cat Women of the Moon	1953	Astor, 3-D, 64. min.
Flight to the Moon	1953	(Russian) animated short
Destination Magoo	1954	UPA/Columbia, 7 min., color, animated
Man and the Moon	1955	Buena Vista, 20 min., color, animated w/live action
From the Earth to the Moon	1958	Waverly/RKO, 100 min., color
Missile to the Moon	1958	Astor, 78 min., color
Moonbeam Man	1958	(Japanese) Toei, 102 min.
Twelve to the Moon	1960	Columbia, 74 min.
Moon Pilot	1961	Buena Vista, (produced by Walt Disney) 98 min., color
Mouse on the Moon	1963	(British) Walter Shenson/Lopert 85 min., color
First Men in the Moon	1964	Columbia, 107 min., Technicolor
Countdown	1967	Warner Bros., 101 min., color
Those Fantastic Flying Fools	1967	(British) Jules Verne Films, Ltd., 101 min., color
To the Moon	1967	CBS, 16mm, 25 min., color
2001: A Space Odyssey	1968	MGM, 160 min., color

Even some filmed during the 60s show ignorance of the simplest details. Most often seen are gravity where and when there shouldn't be any; spacesuits without air supplies, or breathing without a suit on an alien planet; stars that twinkle when they shouldn't; moving or turning in space without thrusting. Fortunately, there have always been exceptions.

Lippert Films' *Rocketship X-M*, made in 1950, was the first SF film to cash in on the interest in "scientific" space films generated by *Destination Moon*. The X-M, however, never arrived at its destination; a meteor swarm threw the ship off course and it wound up going to Mars. There the crew found the remains of a Martian civilization which, they surmised, was destroyed in a devastating nuclear war. Oh well... *c'est la guerre*.

Another early exception to the fantasy-filled Moon movie was Lippert's *Project Moonbase*, released in 1953. In an uncanny display of future forecasting, *Moonbase* follows the story of the first manned flight to the Moon in 1970. A multi-stage vehicle blasts off from Earth and docks with an orbital space platform. From there, a non-aerodynamic craft (much like the Apollo Lunar Module) takes off on a mission to map the Moon. Only *Moonbase's* forecast of a



PHOTO: © 1968 MGM

Above: American astronauts gaze in wonder at the alien monolith unearthed on the Moon and still functioning, in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Right: Cavor is brought before Selenite leader for disposition. These Moon creatures apparently need the same air as humans.

Below: How mundane the reality is compared to the fantasies; July 20th, 1969.



PHOTO: © 1964 COLUMBIA

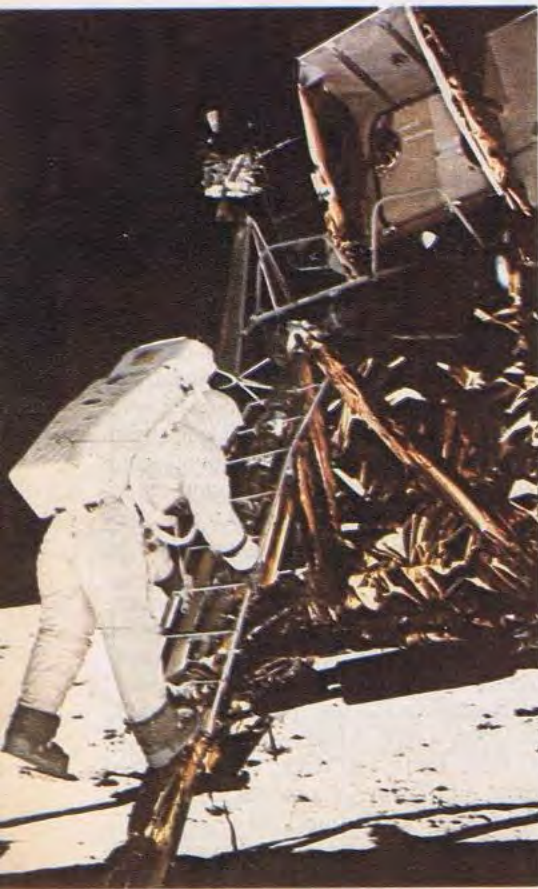


PHOTO: NASA

woman president in the White House by 1970 proved to be way off the mark.

The next film to display such casual accuracy in its approach to Moon travel was *2001: A Space Odyssey*, released in 1968. (This doesn't include the Disney educational space films or those films based on the Apollo program, such as Warner Brothers' *Countdown*, released in 1967.)

Although *2001* does not picture the first lunar landing on screen, it does show our first encounter with physical evidence of an alien race. . . the monolith is proof that men are not the first sentient beings to set foot on the Moon. Of course, people have always speculated about what we might find on the Moon—alive or otherwise. Many films portray alien forms of life on the Moon and some lifeforms that aren't so alien. Giant spiders

show up in quite a few films. In *Twelve to the Moon* (1960), astronauts found a race of humanoid Moonmen who didn't like the idea of being disturbed and threatened to annihilate the Earth. *The Cat Women of the Moon* (1953) meanwhile, were very human bathing-beauty-types who couldn't decide whether to kill the Earthly interlopers or keep them as pets.

As the Apollo 11 craft orbited the Moon and Armstrong prepared for the biggest step of his life, scientists and newsmen back on Earth waxed philosophical as they waited. What would be found on the Moon? Would they find the presence of lunar life? Might they find something, *anything*, that was out of the ordinary or unexpected. . . if not a shining monolith, perhaps a battered Union Jack? ★