

Topographies of imagination: exploring light, body, and meaning in the myth of Endymion and Selene

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Abstract

This contribution explores the representation of the myth of Endymion and Selene in specific artworks from the Global North (especially by Pier Francesco Mola and Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson), focusing on the interplay between light, body, and meaning. The study uncovers the complexity and evolution of Endymion's character, influenced by changing cultural and artistic contexts. It delves into the spatial dimensions of imagination, symbolic associations, semiotics of light, and evolving ideals of masculinity, emphasizing the importance of interpreting the myth through a topographic perspective. Furthermore, it examines how cultural norms and spatial constructs challenge established conventions, introducing disruptive elements within familiar narratives. Endymion's portrayal as a passive figure bathed in Selene's light serves as a focal point for exploring themes of desire, castration symbolism, and the objectification of the male body that reflects broader shifts in artistic sensibilities and cultural norms.

Keywords

Heterotopies, Utopias, Topographies, Spatiality, Semantics of lights, Modern art, Art of the global North, Classical reception

Topographies of Imagination: Exploring Light, Body, and Meaning in the Myth of Endymion and Selene

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This study examines the intricate relationship between light, body, and meaning as portrayed in the myth of Endymion and Selene within some aspects of Global North art. By analyzing a range of visual works, this research investigates the evolving representations of the goddess and the shepherd, and examines the significance attributed to the myth through two theoretical lenses: that of the “Topographies of Imagination”, and that of “Semiotics of Light”.

Within this spatial and semiotic system, the myth of Endymion and Selene provides a captivating framework for analyzing the mechanisms of objectification present in the various transformations of the myth, particularly when the Moon goddess, Luna, is depicted as pure light shining upon the shepherd’s body. Light constructs a topographical space that, by playing with a well-established iconography, re-signifies the connection between Endymion’s body and Selene’s desire, while redefining the spectator’s role in watching the scene.

The contribution traces the historical trajectory of Endymion’s depiction and its transformations within different cultural and artistic movements, focusing especially on the centuries between the 17th and the 19th. Notable works by artists such as Pier Francesco Mola and Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson exemplify the exploration of Selene’s role as light and the captivating allure of Endymion’s pose.

Topographies of imagination

The notion of “Topography of imagination” that I intend to propose arises within a broader theoretical strand in contemporary criticism, the spatial turn, which aims to underline the importance of spatial conditions

in the analysis of cultural processes, even within the field of humanities¹. The term “topography” is indeed borrowed from scientific language and refers to the discipline that analyses the Earth’s surface through conventional signs. Furthermore, the starting points for this concept are Foucault’s interventions on heterotopias and José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of utopia as explained in *Cruising Utopia* (2009).

Heterotopias² are those real places, found in every culture of every time, structured as defined spaces, but different from all other social spaces, that are at the same time represented, contested, and overturned. The function of these special spaces, in relation to all other spaces, is to compensate, neutralize or purify themselves. Examples are the prison, the garden, the cemetery, the museum, the asylum, the cinema, the ship, etc. In opposition to utopias that offer consolation through their imaginative landscapes, even though they lack physical existence, heterotopias unsettle because they challenge language, making it difficult to articulate their nature, by disrupting conventional naming and syntax, and hindering communication³.

Building upon these definitions by Foucault, I began to reflect on the possibility of finding some other spaces within literature and the arts that did not possess the purifying, aphasic, or utopian properties proposed by Foucault, but rather were expressive spaces subject to failed attempts at normalization while simultaneously being utopian sites of present and future political action and uncanny desires.

The cultural endeavor towards normalization is achieved by enforcing a sense of separation, which paradoxically renders the designated space more alluring than its surrounding environment. This space does not conform to the conventional notion of beauty or sterility; rather, it engages in a dialectical interplay with the uncanny. Such spaces can be considered topographic, as they are shaped by familiar scripts, as in the case of the *locus amoenus*. Nonetheless, they constitute zones where certain disruptive elements are expressed with a de-/co-constructive intent (one may say a queer one). Throughout this process, the nonconforming object or concept

¹ Cfr. Calbérac - Ludot-Vlasak 2018: 8.

² The term heterotopia appears for the first time in the preface of “The Order of Things” (2001, 1st French edition 1966), but it is actually through the two radio conferences, *Les utopies réelles ou “lieux et autres lieux”* (1966) and the Parisian conference of 1967, published under the title *Des espaces autres* (Foucault 1984), that the concept is better defined.

³ Cf. Foucault 2001: xix.

(such as the reification of a male body) is not neutralized but rather persists and showcases its complete expressive potential, evoking a sensation that is neither utopian nor fantastical, nor a rejection in the heterotopic sense. The yearning for repulsion, triggered by specific abject elements as described by Julia Kristeva (1980), can only be equated, through narrative techniques, with a desire for possession.

In modern literature and art, this has led to different outcomes compared to the past since they have consciously adopted these mechanisms, seeking to exploit the tools of constructing antagonistic space and giving them an increasingly prominent voice.

Semantics and semiotics of light

A second critical tool of utmost importance for this contribution is that of semiotics of light⁴. At the core of this notion lies the assumption that changes in lighting conditions correspondingly influence the semiotic interpretation of observed and represented objects. This interplay is intertwined with the symbolic associations of specific colors and lights, which evoke distinct sensations and occasionally vary in their meanings. This phenomenon can be observed not only in cinema but also in a wide range of art forms and literary works across the Global North. The manipulation of lighting and its impact on semiotics play a significant role in shaping the overall aesthetic experience and the nuanced meanings attributed to the visual and textual representations.

The concept of the semiotics of light, primarily developed within the realm of cinema by Jacques Fontanille (1995), serves as a theoretical framework – although I will not take into account the various technical-

⁴ The foundation of this notion draws upon various aspects. Firstly, it incorporates Walter Benjamin's seminal studies on the "modes of illumination" (2011), which shed light on the transformative effects of different lighting conditions and their impact on perception and interpretation. Additionally, observations made by Jean Baudrillard on the new modularity of urban artificiality, particularly exemplified in his analysis of Las Vegas (1986), further contribute to understanding the relationship between lighting and semiotics. Lastly, Luca Venzi's study on the role of color in cinema (2018) provides valuable insights into how the specific use of colors can evoke particular sensations and convey nuanced meanings within visual storytelling. These interdisciplinary perspectives collectively inform the understanding of how lighting, color, and semiotics intertwine in various artistic and cultural contexts.

ities proposed in his methodology. However, it is crucial to emphasize that this framework should not be interpreted rigidly but rather should accommodate the polysemy inherent in the objects under consideration and the overall imaginative context. Consequently, this perspective should be regarded as a heuristic tool, facilitating analysis, rather than a fixed and inflexible structure. In this context, the white light of the moon can signify a form of symbolic castration, bodily objectification, passivation, and eroticization in the case of Endymion's body.

A second set of considerations is more strictly semiotic. The semiotics of light is intended to emphasize the extent to which certain types of lighting refer to a system in which the relationship of signification sets in motion a communicative process whereby the reading given of a particular light is contextual to the meaning that that light has in symbolic terms in a determined epoch. Cold white light in this case is, beyond Endymion, spectral, eroticizing, castrating according to the periods of reference. Since certain changes in lighting, both the reference system to which Endymion's light refers and the context with which it is associated have changed.

When referring to the semiotics of light, I do not imply an inherent meaning within the physical phenomenon of light itself. Instead, I refer to the different signification that arises from fundamental technical alterations in lighting. Particularly within artistic imagination, lights and colors assume crucial roles in the interpretation of meaning. They are integral components of the synthetic syntax that composes an image. Light holds significance not solely for its realistic or imitative qualities but primarily due to its impact on the viewer's experience. As a signifier of light, Luna embodies the essence of light within the visual economy of the observed image.

Expounding on the semiotics of perception is beyond the scope of this discussion, for which I refer to Fontanille's (1995) exploration, which draws upon Merleau-Ponty's ideas and proposes a visual semiotics wherein light assumes a central position. This approach is neither overtly physical-objective nor exclusively subjective-phenomenological. According to Fontanille, the semiotic configuration of light is not derived from the perception of a potential observer, nor from the characteristics of the physical world, instead, it is portrayed as a somewhat objective construct of constituent categories⁵. These categories should make it possible to describe the effects of meaning born of the interactions (deictic, modal, passionate, etc.) between

⁵ Cf. Fontanille 1995: 27-28.

the perceptive-enunciative activity of a subject and the energy gradient⁶.

The properties of light (generally referred to as (*éclat, ton, saturation*)), are for the scholar effects of enunciation that 'semioticize' light in the very act of its creation. Fontanille considers the effects of light on space as processes, predicated by the subject of enunciation (collective or individual), which organizes the visible world as a discourse⁷. Just like a discourse, it therefore creates meaning and at the same time relies on signifying elements.

The insights provided are indeed highly valuable for comprehending the mechanisms of objectification at play in the context of Endymion's body when Luna transforms into pure light upon his body.

Selene from divinity to erotic light and Endymion's body reification

The most popular version of the myth tells the story of Endymion, a shepherd or hunter, who captured the profound love of Selene, goddess of the moon. Selene's affection for Endymion was so intense that she beseeched Zeus to grant him the gift of eternal slumber, allowing her to visit and kiss him every night. The myth had a widespread fortune and reception from late antiquity onwards easily approaching modern contemporary culture and passing through different and subsequent metamorphoses⁸.

In the visual arts, Selene has traditionally been depicted for centuries descending from her chariot, engaged in the *velificatio* (unveiling, symbolically associated with epiphany), as she approaches the sleeping body of Endymion⁹. However, as early as the 17th century, in certain representations of Endymion peacefully sleeping alone, the moon (Luna) assumes a mere astronomical role.

During the 17th century, the initial observations of the moon sparked a shift in the portrayal of Selene, leading to her gradual assumption of a

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See especially Agapiou 2005 for the various tradition and version of the myth from Antiquity up until the 17th century, Wang 2019 for the ones concerning the Moon, the *Der Neue Pauly* (Cancik - Schneider *et al.* 2003) s.v. "Endymion", and the invoice "Endymion" of supplement 5, *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, of the same Encyclopedia, edited by Marc Föcking.

⁹ See LIMC III, 1 and III, 2 s.v. "Endymion", ed. by Hanns Gabelmann and Sichtermann 1961.

central role as a celestial entity¹⁰. Consequently, Selene's tradition diverges into two distinct manifestations, reflecting the evolving cultural and artistic interpretations of her celestial significance.

Firstly, she assumes a primarily decorative role, particularly within a certain type of burgeoning bourgeois sensibility during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Secondly, Selene takes on a more ephemeral form, gradually dematerializing and transforming into pure light.

When Selene appears as a light, often depicted as white, upon the male body, it serves a dual purpose: it illuminates and accentuates the contours of the objectified male body, symbolically suggesting a castration motif, and it functions as a proleptic light, foretelling of impending death on the body she is illuminating.

The underlying assumption, that I suggested in the previous section, posits that a modification in illumination aligns with a corresponding shift in the interpretation of the observed and represented objects. This assumption is intertwined with the symbolic associations of certain colours and lights with distinct sensations and at times different meanings found in the arts and literature of the Global North. In this semiotic and representational system, spectators interpret a specific meaning conveyed through encounters or clashes rich in additional connotations beyond the medium itself. It is important to acknowledge that the interaction with the object seen or examined is influenced by a polysemic mechanism, where multiple interpretations can arise. However, certain elements have the propensity to guide the spectators' gaze while remaining active contributors to the construction of meaning.

A white light shining upon a passive body can undergo various interpretations. This mechanism of "apperception" allows for transcultural analysis in the context of the myth of Endymion and Selene. Indeed, the narrative of the story provides a compelling framework to investigate the interplay of light, body, and meaning across diverse cultural contexts. The interpretation of a particular element is embedded within a system that guides and shapes the process of meaning-making, actively constructing both meaning and space.

¹⁰ One of the first pictorial representations showing the Moon in her "imperfection" is by Adam Elsheimer, in the *The Flight into Egypt* (1609, Alte Pinakothek in Munich), a painter who was an academic of the Lincei and who had much to do with the Galilean research of the time, also a Lincean, see on this the intervention by Corrado Bologna (2015).

The significance of a specific light can also possess a proleptic quality, anticipating subsequent events that directly result from the interplay between activity and passivity. In exploring these dynamics, the concepts of intra- and extra-diegetic light, commonly employed in cinema, prove to be useful analytical tools. These concepts also align well with the visual representations of Endymion and Selene as a whole.

Selene, as the divine representative of moonlight, naturally assumes the role of an intra-diegetic light building and sectorializing the space within the images she is present. As the divine figure becomes decentralized and Selene assumes the role of a mere satellite, the equation of Selene with light directs the erotic focus of the spectator towards Endymion's body.

A notable example of this can be found in the late seventeenth-century neo-Venetian paintings, particularly the works of Pier Francesco Mola (1612-1666). Mola and his circle produced numerous depictions of Endymion, with the most renowned piece being the one housed in the Capitoline Museums in Rome (fig. 1). This artwork was commissioned by Bonaventura Argenti, a prominent figure in the Roman milieu during the second half of the 17th century¹¹. In addition to the aforementioned artwork, another depiction of Endymion by the same artist that is particularly intriguing can be here mentioned. It draws inspiration from two sources: Cima da Conegliano's portrayal of Endymion¹², evoking its positioning and setting, and Guercino's representation of Endymion in terms of colour palette and the proportion of the young man's figure. However, Mola undertakes a distinct artistic approach with these influences. While Cima's portrayal largely omits the figure of Selene, and Guercino's work leans towards conceptualizing the Moon as a star in relation to the young astronomer Endymion depicted with a telescope, Mola's depiction showcases a more intricate composition.

In both of Mola's paintings, the nocturnal landscape frames the distant contemplation of Selene as she gazes upon Endymion. This suggests a

¹¹ He was a cantor in the papal chapel but also a competent expert in painting and a collector, linked to the Pio family and the painter Giovanni Bonati. Confirmation of the identification of the Capitoline painting with the one executed for the musician was confirmed by the publication in 1987 of the inventory of his inheritance where it appears «a painting, of an Endymion, gilded frame, by Francesco Mola bequeathed to Luigi Pio», Cf. <http://capitolini.info/pc149/> and see Petrucci 2005: 354-5 for a complete bibliography.

¹² Cf. Agapiou 2008 for a description of the motives in Cima da Conegliano's painting.

multi-layered representation where Selene's role as a divine figure and her connection to the moon intertwine with the contemplative aspect of Endymion. The relationship between the two figures and their surroundings is imbued with a sense of depth and complexity that enriches the artistic portrayal. The pose of Endymion is also reminiscent of figures such as Giovanni Battista Langetti's *Ixion*¹³, or Salvator Rosa's *Prometheus* (1646-8)¹⁴ in an interesting long-distance association between the tortured and eroticized body and Endymion's reified body.

Mola, as Petrucci emphasizes, shows a modern painting technique that seems almost from the nineteenth century¹⁵. This very "classical" and at the same time erotic body, as well as in his allegories of the five senses¹⁶, anticipates Romanticism in part, recalling in many ways the experiments of Delacroix¹⁷.



Figure 1. Pier Francesco Mola, *Diana e Endimione*, 1660, Roma, Musei Capitolini, Inv. Pc 149. Cr. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

¹³ Preserved at the Museo de Arte de Ponce. The Luis A. Ferré Foundation, Inc.

¹⁴ Preserved in the Corsini Gallery in Rome.

¹⁵ Cf. Petrucci 2005, 52

¹⁶ In particular, Bacchus, Narcissus and Hyacinth manifest this marked eroticism cf. Petrucci 2005: 118-23.

¹⁷ It is of note that the Delacroix instructed his pupils to study Mola, among others as suggested by Martinelli 1966: 716-717.



Figure 2. Pier Francesco Mola, *Diana ed Endimione*, 1630, Private Collection.

The depiction of Endymion by Mola can be considered a precursor to one of the most renowned portrayals of the myth, namely that by Anne Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson (fig. 3). In Mola's first painting in the series dedicated to the subject, Endymion's body is positioned at the boundary between life and death, as well as between sleep and eros.

Endymion assumes a sensual and sculptural pose as he turns his body towards the Moon goddess, who envelops and illuminates him with her radiant light. This pose mirrors that of the Barberini faun, a replica of an original sculpture dating back to 220 BC, which was discovered in the moats of Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome in 1624 and gained immediate fame. The Barberini faun as well, in many ways, played a transformative role within the tradition of Endymion depictions.

The decision to position the goddess within the Moon carries multiple connotations. Firstly, it accentuates the notion of epiphany, lending a spectral quality to Selene's presence. Simultaneously, Selene is fully integrated into her celestial realm, signifying her equivalence with her physical and natural form. Additionally, the role of Selene as the illuminating light upon Endymion's body is underscored in both paintings. Endymion's erotic pose highlights the sensual aspect of the myth and prefigures the exploration of desire and beauty that later artists would delve into more prominently in their interpretations of the subject.

Mola, a dissident against the system¹⁸ – at least on a formal level –¹⁹, expresses here a bizarre 17th-century, neither naturalist, nor baroque, nor classicist, but devoted to approximating the corresponding expressive form of elusive and indeterminate states of mind²⁰.

A topographic construction in this artwork can be perceived since it utilizes familiar schemes such as the Barberini Faun or Roman iconography of the myth itself. However, through a deliberate manipulation of lighting, various elements of the myth are endowed with distinct significance. The construction of a different space also through lights using well-known scripts can add a different layer of meaning to Endymion and Selene's relationship. The male body is here objectified, symbolically castrated through the interplay of light, while the decentralization of Luna allows the viewers to actively (and erotically) engage with the body of the sleeping youth.

In the seventeenth century, the figure of Endymion gained widespread popularity in Arcadian-inspired literature and melodrama. A notable example is Pietro Metastasio's work *Endimione*, which dates back to 1727. This marked the start of a series of portrayals of the shepherd in which he is often portrayed as awake and enjoying the company of his lovers alongside Diana in idyllic pastoral settings²¹. Moreover, contemporary at the time emblematics also demonstrated a growing tendency to portray Endymion's body as eroticized, as in the case of the emblem by Gerard de Lairasse²² or in *Diana and Endymion* (1705-1710) by Francesco Solimena

¹⁸ This is how Luigi Salerno defines a group of seventeenth-century painters in Rome and Naples who, through a conscious intellectual choice of dissent, made a detachment from the official Catholic art of the time that followed the two Bernini and Cortonesque trends, including Mola in Salerno 1970.

¹⁹ As underlined by Petrucci 2014: 31-2.

²⁰ Cf. De Melis 2013: 8.

²¹ Among the various performances of Endymion, the earlier *La Calisto* by Giovanni Faustini (1651), which can be paired with the two dramas (the second sung) by Luigi Groto (1586) and Almerico Passarelli (1651), in which, however, Endymion does not appear as a character should be also mentioned cf. Badolato 2007: 16ff. For an overview of Endymion in Arcadia, see in particular Forment 2008. Note here that Endymion was widespread as a symbolic figure, as is clear from its use by Alessandro Guidi in his *Endymion* and from the commentary made by Gian Vincenzo Gravina *Discorso sopra l'Endimione di Alessandro Guidi* that formally starts the Accademia dell'Arcadia, see in particular Guidi 2011 while for Gravina's text see the edition by Valentina Gallo, Gravina 2012 and see also Smith 2019.

²² Cf. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-P-OB-46.784>.

(1657-1747)²³. In these later portrayals, Endymion undergoes a significant feminization. This transformation is evident in his physical posture and features, departing from certain Baroque elements initially depicted by artists like Luca Giordano²⁴, which served as his defining characteristics

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a notable shift in the portrayal of Endymion as the central character in the love duo, while Diana's role underwent a transformation, assuming a different, yet not necessarily marginal, position within the dynamics of the love affair. This development was particularly evident in well-known works such as John Keats' *Endymion* (1818) where he is the protagonist of the story.

From an iconographic standpoint, Mola's representations of Endymion were largely embraced by the neoclassical and romantic painting trends that gained prominence in the academies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This shift in artistic sensibility can be seen as a reflection of evolving perspectives, as exemplified in the studies of scholars like Lessing and Winckelmann. The latter noted that the eternal and immortal nature of the gods necessitated an idealized representation of their bodies, one that eschewed muscularity, veins, and tendons with strong masculine connotations, as they were considered to belong to human imperfections²⁵.

The rise of neo-classicism, as in the case of Jacques Louis David, brought about a shift in the portrayal of the male nude. It became the focal point, exuding heroic, and virile characteristics through its statuesque classicism. However, this period also saw the emergence of a different approach to the masculine body, characterized by ephebic and a less muscular physique. Artists such as Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson (1767-1824) explored this alternative representation, utilizing the nude, often with an ephebic quality, for distinct artistic purposes. In the academies, the male nude was far more common than the female one²⁶, and experiments such as Girodet's were initially considered eccentric by his contemporaries²⁷.

²³ Liverpool, National Museum, Inv. N. WAG 6366.

²⁴ See Luca Giordano (1632-1705), *Diana ed Endimione*, 1675-1680, in Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona.

²⁵ Cfr Kocziszky 2019: 131n27.

²⁶ Until 1863, the year of the reform of the fine arts schools in France, only the male nude was allowed cf. Cogeval *et al.* 2013: 49 written by Ophélie Ferlier and Cogeval *et al.* 2013: 89 by Philippe Comar.

²⁷ One could open a separate discussion here on Endymion and his erotic *Pathosformel* within homosexual representations or for a homosexual audience, which however are not studied since they exclude the figure of Selene. However, I refer

The discourse surrounding the growing prominence of ephebic masculinity in Western cultures is properly addressed by Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1997), whose analysis highlights a continual crisis and counter-crisis of masculinity that perpetually oscillates between these two extremes²⁸. In this context, it is noteworthy that Girodet's depiction of an ephebic and erotic Endymion starkly contrasts with the neoclassical representation of the heroic man. The youthful body, the undefined muscles, and even the subject himself stand in stark contrast to Jacques Louis David's portrayals of figures such as Achilles or Paris.

In Girodet (fig. 3), the position of Endymion has his face turned towards the light of the moon, which sectorially casts its light on the young man's totally hairless chest, while the part of his lower abdomen, in penumbra, in a symbolic castration, is turned towards the viewers. In Girodet's painting, an intriguing interplay occurs where the moon both spectralizes and castrates the body of Endymion while simultaneously evoking a sense of eroticization for the viewer. The spectator takes the place of the divinity in terms of gaze on the shepherd's body, enacting a further objectification of the young man. This allows for the arousing of an erotic desire that had never been directly experienced by the spectators before. In the slow disintegration of the lunar epiphany, which already in Mola's painting gave space to a statuesque, distant moon, enclosed in its lumen, yields to pure light and relinquishes itself to the spectators and to its lust.

to a recent contribution on the subject that analyses its iconographic reception in gay literature and art, Martin and García 2022, to which one can add two exhibition catalogues on masculinities, also very recent, in which it is possible to trace many explicitly or not Endymionic images Cogeval *et al.* 2013 and Pardo 2020.

²⁸ This article does not focus on exploring the notion of hegemonic masculinities and their associated challenges and responses. However, Solomon Godeau is referenced here for her thorough analysis of Girodet's Endymion. Nonetheless, it is worth noting Raewyn Connell's key insights on the concept of hegemonic masculinity (2005 [1993]), as well as works by Silverman 1992 and Mosse 1996, but numerous other scholars have also contributed to this discourse.



Figure 3. Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, *Endymion. Effet de lune, dit aussi Le Sommeil d'Endymion*, 1791, Paris, Musée du Louvre, cr.1994 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / René-Gabriel Ojéda.

The pose already presented in the sarcophagi depicting the myth semanticized the castration of Endymion's body and his feminization. The interpretations of the painting are among the most varied and are of partial interest here because the painting has been the subject of much circulation and debate²⁹. The problem posed by scholars is that of the absence of the lunar figure (which, however, given the discussion so far, will not seem so eccentric to the reader). Barbara Stafford emphasizes that this representation is to be attributed not so much to an allegory of death as to a suspension of the ego in order to allow the divine, now scientifically transformed into nature, to work its positive influences³⁰.

The concepts of divine ecstasy and the representation of a lifeless body have been enduring themes in the culture of the Global North, particularly when depicted in static forms such as paintings or photographs. In the case of Endymion, the portrayal evokes a sense of ecstatic bliss that encompasses his entire being, reminiscent of the melancholic yet contemplative-

²⁹ See especially Stafford 1982, Smalls 1996, Fend 1997, and Solomon-Godeau 2005.

³⁰ Cf. Stafford 1982: 197.

ly beautiful Renaissance depiction influenced by Neoplatonic ideals. This positioning of the spectator in a state of simultaneous appreciation and distance is achieved through the viewer's gaze, which, taking the place of Luna, focuses on the objectified form of Endymion. Scholars have highlighted historical factors, specifically the impact of the French Revolution, in shaping the composition of this artwork³¹: while battlefields celebrated heroic bodies and the construction of masculinity was often based on the equivalence of a soldier and a man, the heterotopic space of the academy was dedicated to an art form that celebrated sensual and Grecian-inspired bodies³².

This passivizing light, which replaces the female gaze and with centripetal force pushes the spectator's gaze into the active passivizing position, is key in the representations of the reified male body of this century. In addition, when examining the cultural transition during that period, it becomes evident that discoveries like electricity played a pivotal role in radically transforming representations of bodies. Stephanie 'O Rourke (2018) writes that this kind of galvanizing illumination, typical of Girodet's painting, is to be ascribed to the light demonstrations (phantasmagorias) that were taking place everywhere in Europe at the end of the 18th century³³.

The notion of "electrical beatification" of the bodies through phantasmagorias that can be derived from 'O Rourke aligns with the concept I previously mentioned regarding the topography of the imagination crafted through manipulation of lights. This notion encompasses not only artistic interpretations but also draws inspiration from scientific discoveries. As the lighting conditions change, what is illuminated also transforms, along with the accompanying conceptualizations and perspectives. This dynamic interplay between light, perception, and interpretation influences the evolving nature of artistic representations and the shifting gazes of the viewers. In Girodet's case, this shows how much the symbolic equivalence light = moon is also likely to be the vehicle of a secondary meaning due to the (re)semanticization of space, but above all of the body, through light.

³¹ See especially Lippert 2017.

³² The case of Pierre-Narcisse Guérin is also worth mentioning here. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the artist devoted himself to subjects such as *Morpheus and Irises* (1811), *Aurora and Cephalus* (1812) in which the soft, dreamy and feminized male nudity contrasted with the paintings produced during the Restoration period, during which female sensuality dominated and masculinity was certainly not ephebic, as in the case of the depiction of *Dido and Aeneas* (1815).

³³ See also the pivotal essay on Phantasmagoria by Terry Castle (1989).

These kinds of illuminations spectralize the body, making it an object between life and death. The case of Robertson's coeval *Phantasmagoria* in which the ghosts are illuminated in relation to an audience of bystanders in semi-darkness can be compared with the sensibility that is already *in nuce* in Girodet. The angelic woman, who leaves the light around her, yields to a different, spectralizing and reifying light that anticipates death and is at the same time its obvious signifier – the artificial illumination that Girodet³⁴ uses also partially foreshadows well-known literary and artistic experiments, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Domination over Endymion through this expedient is, and not paradoxically, total³⁵. This spectralization paves the way for an interesting combination of the use of artificial light as a substitute, at least partially, for Luna, the eroticization of the passive male body, and the anticipation and/or representation of the fate of the mortal (his actual death in the impossibility to wake up again).

Furthermore, the artificial light creates a distinct topography in which Endymion's marginality, particularly his eccentricity in relation to the context of the French Revolution and a particular form of hegemonic masculinity, not only enables spectators to embrace the margins but also encourages them to join Selene-light in the eroticization and objectification of the shepherd's body.

Conclusion

The exploration of spaces and the topography of the imagination unveils the intricate interplay between light, body, and meaning found within the figures of Endymion and Selene. This analysis delved into the complexity and metamorphoses of their representation in some specific works of art from the Global North. Throughout the course of this brief study, one could have witnessed the shifting cultural and artistic paradigms that

³⁴ O'Rourke 2018 also with regard to the spread of electrical experiments during the eighteenth century.

³⁵ Cf. Stafford 1982: 94, but above all O'Rourke 2018: 885 «[p]erhaps this was what Girodet first began to explore in his *Sleep of Endymion*, in which the linear contours of the heroic male nude are softened and dissolved, an effect that coincides with the subject's psychic suspension and physical vulnerability. Selene does not merely touch Endymion's body - she both breaches and illuminates it. Endymion's body is thus defined by its receptivity to a luminous substance, an immaterial force capable of passing through objects».

have influenced the portrayal of Endymion and his relationship with Selene. The analysis of diverse visual representations has provided insights into the spatiality of imagination, symbolic associations, semiotics of light, and the changing ideals of masculinity, proving the importance of reading this specific myth through a topographic lens.

The examination of cultural norms and the construction of spaces has shed light as well on the allure and expressive power of objects that challenge established norms. These objects are expressed and presented in topographies of imagination that, within familiar scripts, invite embrace and accept the disruptive elements while they retain their expressive potency. Here, the topography is formed through a distinctive iconographic scheme and the commanding presence of light.

Endymion's portrayal as a passive body adorned with the luminous presence of Selene has served as a focal point for exploring the dynamics of desire, castration symbolism, and objectification of the male body. The integration of Selene into the moon, her spectral and epiphanic presence, and her role as a signifier of light have added depth and complexity to Endymion's traditional representation.

Furthermore, the study has highlighted the emergence of ephobic masculinity and its contrast with traditional heroic ideals in the modern era. The transition from muscular, statuesque figures to more delicate and androgynous male nudes has reflected broader shifts in artistic sensibility and cultural norms.

Finally, this contribution aimed at opening avenues for further exploration of the spaces of imagination created by the clash between mythology and different meanings constructed by diverse lights. The convergence of these mechanisms of signification, extending beyond textual discourse, utilizes various approaches to explore the re-semanticization of the myth and of its tradition. Certainly, light serves to expand visual realms within defined topographies of the imagination, aiding in the expression of concepts that diverge from coeval norms, by inspiring different relationships with the work of art. These specific connections in relation to myths' reception still await a thorough conceptualization.

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