The Astronaut

The Astronaut:
Cultural Mythology and Idealised Masculinity

By

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Walking on the Moon

To many people who grew up in the 1970s – and especially, I suppose, people who were boys back then – the space race loomed large in our collective imagination. And while the rockets and the landing craft may have symbolized space to us in some ways – not least because we could buy and build models of them – the central symbol, the icon, was of course the astronaut himself. Heroic men, real men, men of science and danger. Space men. In this outstanding book, Dario Llinares sheds new light on this enduring icon of masculinity, revealing him to be a curious figure, doing a curious job in curious times. And doing it, moreover, in a curious place.

As we also know, the astronaut belongs to a time before space travel became banal. His life, his mission, was all about enchantment. He made space sexy. His life was also about welding together ideas about men and what they do, science and what it's for, and nations (mainly two, of course) who traded mutually assured destruction with conquering the final frontier.

And those last words are not accidental. For we had other space men to gaze at, too. Notably, nobly, man above space men, was Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise, an equally curious yet heroic icon of postwar technoscientific masculinity. Kirk, like Armstrong or Aldrin, embodied the American model of this icon: a frontiersman in the American mould. Space cowboys.

On the other side of the ideological world, there were the cosmonauts, but we were discouraged from heroizing them by the enduring chills of the Cold War. But Gagarin was a name we all knew, too. A different man, a different kind of masculinity – Soviet, collectivized, communist. While Star Trek might have modelled itself on a kind of United Nations in space, with its mix of race, cultures and nationalities, it nevertheless reminded us that freedom was the American way, the Enterprise a perfect melting pot

and a container of those increasingly universalizing values. Suddenly the stars next to those stripes spoke about a different union.

As Llinares shows us in this book, the icons of Armstrong or Aldrin were (and still are) no less constructed, no less rehearsed and performed than those of Kirk (or Spock, but let's set aside Klingons for now). NASA very quickly became, as Constance Penley (1997) has written, a PR organization that also happened to be doing space work. And the astronauts were central to this mission: to the business of making NASA and the USA – and then men who made them both – seem like the promise of a utopian future. For the future being presented to us at that time was undeniably utopian, MAD notwithstanding. It was a profoundly technoscientific utopia, to be sure. And a profoundly male one.

So NASA manicured and buffed its men into the right stuff, building legends around them, personalizing them through family photoshoots and official biographies, ensuring their names had a place in history (and in the future). But, as Llinares reveals, this manicuring was also a papering over of the contradictions of the space man. For the astronaut was more like a desk jockey, a technocrat, spam-in-a-can, than a heroic scientist-explorer. So his image had to be shored up; and this shoring took place in popular culture, too. Back to Kirk, therefore.

Articulations of masculinity, of course, depend on lots of disavowals, lots of hiding away of complications and contradictions. But this hiding is always imperfect; the cracks don't stay seamlessly papered over for long. These men who fell to Earth, their manhood was under question from the get-go. And their post-space lives have continued to throw new light on how going into space both makes you a man, and unmakes you. Andrew Smith's *Moon Dust* (2006) picks up that story, but it is one thread that runs through Llinares's excellent tale, too: the afterlife of the astronaut. And that afterlife is lived on in popular culture, too, with endless retellings and reassessments. We use the popular to toy with the astronaut – Buzz Aldrin becomes Buzz Lightyear.

These space men fascinated us. They continue to fascinate us. They lived in the most extraordinary circumstances. Those circumstances provide ample opportunity for reflection, as these men know well, and as this book also highlights. The astronaut stood in the harsh light of the moon, and that light irradiated him, in both senses of the words. It helped us see him, but also see through him. Like conspiracy theorists poring over photos of shadows, footprints and flags, we have pored over the astronaut, looking for clues. Messages from space.

And still we pore. The space man is now an object of nostalgia, emblem of a bygone age when remarkable things were achieved, where

boundless optimism met bullish rivalry, where men could be men and be loved for it. The dream has now faded, replaced by more earthly concerns. But the astronaut remains, still bathed in star light. Unmasking, undressing and unpacking the astronaut is, of course, not an exercise in nostalgia or myth-busting. Dario Llinares isn't in the business of pedestal building or knocking down. His task is to ask us to look even more closely at the space man; to think about what he embodies, to think about the work he does in our world – and off it. To think about what happens when 'space' meets 'man'.

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INTRODUCTION

THE ASTRONAUT: ICON OF HISTORY, MODERNITY AND MASCULINITY

And I think it's gonna be a long long time
Till touch down brings me round again to find
I'm not the man they think I am at home
Oh no no no, I'm a rocket man
Rocket man, burning out his fuse up here alone

—Elton John

For most of this project the astronaut remained at a safe critical distance. A product of magazine articles, history books, news stories, literature, documentaries and feature films, I had treated him as a conceptual text of masculinity. However, on March 30th 2008, I found myself driving east along the M62 from my home city of Leeds to the small, provincial market town of Pontefract on my way to, "An Audience with Buzz Aldrin". When I told colleagues and friends that I was going to a talk given by the second man on the moon they were uniformly impressed. The fact that the event was being held in Pontefract however, was always a source of some amusement. Seemingly, the thought of such an iconic historical figure visiting a working-class, northern English town was a humorously incongruous proposition. The consensus of opinion was that the astronaut had undeniably crashed back down to Earth. This reaction however, strengthened my own sense that the astronaut still retained a revered position in the cultural imagination. Astronauts are still thought of as an heroic elite, trained to perform incredible tasks of mental complexity and physical danger. They have come to represent an idealised conception of what humanity can and should aspire to be. This symbolic significance is fostered by the media representations that I analyse in this book. By concentrating on the astronaut as text, a sense of critical distance was maintained, which I always felt was an advantage in my analysis. Now, for the first time, this critical distance would be broached and I would be in

the presence of one of only twelve men in history who has actually walked on another world.

Carleton Community High School, with its rather impersonal, modernist architecture, was a common British comprehensive. The lecture was to take place in the assembly hall and as I arrived, half an hour early, the popularity of the event was immediately apparent. The first few rows of seats had "reserved" signs on them and the seating area behind was already nearly full. I decided to sit up in the first row of the balcony in order to get a clear view. Projected onto a big screen at the back of the raised stage was a selection of familiar images of the moon landing. With half an hour to go before the 6pm start there was a definite sense of anticipation expressed through the excited level of chatter.

As I looked around, the audience (approximately 500 people) was mixed in both generational and gender terms but almost exclusively white. Sat next to me were a man and woman probably in their fifties. I decided to ask why they had attended the event. The man told me he was doing an Open University degree in astronomy and planet science and had always been interested in space exploration. He talked knowledgably about various historical aspects of the Space Program. I asked how he felt about actually seeing an astronaut to which he replied: "it gives me goose bumps thinking about it". At this statement the man's wife rolled her eyes in embarrassment. Why had she come along, I enquired, to which she said nothing and merely pointed, almost disdainfully, at her husband. This moment, for me, encapsulated the implicit gendering that underpinned the perception of space history and specifically the social construction of astronauts themselves. Space exploration was a story by and about men to which women were only peripherally connected.

Shortly after 6pm the introductions began. Various "dignitaries" (including the Mayor and Mayoress of Pontefract) were mentioned and thanked. Then we were presented with the high command of the school, governors and sponsors, a particularly excited headmaster, and the organiser of the event, Ken Willoughby. It struck me that these personae were all momentarily basking in what Tom Wolfe called the "reflected glow" of the astronaut; hoping to claim a little of the aura of stardust for themselves.

Then, finally, Dr. Buzz Aldrin was introduced. I don't know why but it took me by surprise when everyone rose to their feet and began to applaud. This wasn't just a cursory acknowledgement of someone vaguely familiar. It was the vociferous reaction of an audience that really meant it, that firmly believed that the man before them was extraordinary, embodying something beyond the shallow contingencies of contemporary

celebrity culture. After a full two to three minutes of this ovation, Aldrin beckoned everyone to sit. Despite his seventy years he was still a powerful looking man. Standing tall, he gave off an air of impregnability, as if you could hurl anything his way and it would just bounce off harmlessly. Yet there was no escaping the fact that he was old. I looked around and wondered what the children made of this strange character, at whom their fathers were staring with dewy-eyed emotion. I envisaged a series of parallel conversations in which fathers were trying to explain the significance of this man, and their children were only half getting it.

Aldrin led us through the familiar history of the U.S. Space Program slanted towards his own position within it. He addressed various questions. Someone asked was Neil Armstrong's famous "one small step" statement his own or written for him. Aldrin credited the phrase solely to Armstrong whom he praised generously. He also detailed his post-astronaut life as an adventurer and technological visionary, outlining several, rather outlandish, environmental projects with which he was connected. Interestingly, Aldrin also mentioned battles with alcoholism and depression, but this only served to contextualise his later "successes" within a romanticised, redemptive narrative.

It occurred to me that this was a commercial, popular culture event rather than a scientific or educational one. The product being sold was the astronaut and the astronomical price of £50 for an autograph, £100 for a signed book or photo, (Buzz brought with him a formidable selection of merchandise) was indicative of his commercial potential even thirty-one years after the moon landing. The event also invoked a deeper ideology that tapped into a shared recognition of social history and cultural identity. It played upon nostalgia, recycling discourses of intrepid exploration, technological ingenuity and social destiny defined through an enduring image of heroic, strong and unswerving masculinity. What the event confirmed for me was the cultural power that the astronaut still held.

In this book I explore how the astronaut's iconic status is formulated in a liminal space between history and culture. Space exploration is typically defined in terms of "man's" insatiable curiosity to explore and to progress. The history of the human venture into space is therefore created through the tangible achievements of men, which are, in turn, deemed to emerge from natural, innate elements of masculine identity. The central proposition of this book, however, contends that space history, with the astronaut as its central protagonist, is discursively moulded through cultural representation. Within the mass media, what I term a "symbolic repertoire" is constructed. This is the matrix of meanings, which occur and intersect across visual and textual representations, defining the astronaut's

importance in the social milieu. The aim of this book is the interrogation of how the "symbolic repertoire" defines the astronaut as a cultural ideal and a theorisation of such processes as generative of, what R.W. Connell describes as, hegemonic masculinity. I thus explore the ideological undercurrents of an immediately recognisable and largely uncontested icon suggesting how the astronaut enters the cultural sphere and reinforces the maintenance of hegemonic gender regimes.

In order to map out the parameters of the "symbolic repertoire" I deploy a close textual analysis of four media forms: the picture magazine, mainstream print journalism, literary "new" journalism and film. These media, in their cultural production, reflect complex social, economic and political dynamics indicative of the late twentieth century. At a conceptual level I frame these transitions by combining elements of theoretical method deployed primarily by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Positioned at the apex of modern/postmodern critical theory, their work, specifically concerning discourse and mythology, informs my method of reading, though media texts, the destabilisation of categories such as "history", "identity" and "masculinity". In this regard I interrogate the complex representative dynamics, which both fix the astronaut as an ideal of "modern" masculinity in the cultural imaginary, yet increasingly reveal a "postmodern" fracturing of coherence in the construction of identity. It is this critical framework that I now outline in more detail.

Questioning the Sovereignty of "History" and the "Subject"

It is only relatively recently that masculinity has emerged as a focus of theoretical critique. There are, of course, an untold number of histories of men achieving, fighting, inventing and debating. The assumption of male centrality in these narratives however, is so pervasive that it renders masculinity invisible. As Michael Kimmel points out, if a work of history, "doesn't have the word *women* in the title, it's a good bet the book is largely about men" (Kimmel 2006, 1). This book proceeds from the assertion that within the context of Western modernity there is a correlation between history, as a unified conceptual category and epistemological guarantor of knowledge concerning the "reality" of the past, and "man", as the coherent identity through which that "reality" is inevitably lived.

In this context the astronaut's iconic position in the cultural imaginary is largely defined as an inevitable result of the historical significance of space exploration. He is the central protagonist in a "history" of "factual" accounts reflecting a pivotal moment in human progress. Space exploration

is conceptualised as another milestone in the advancement of humanity, indicative of the innate need (of men) to explore and gain knowledge about the external world. Stephen J. Pyne summarises this narrative:

> Life will clamber out of its home planet much as pioneering species crawled out of the salty sea onto land. The impulse to explore is providential; the chain of discovery, unbroken; the drivers behind it, as full of evolutionary inevitability as the linkage between DNA and proteins (Pyne 2006, 8).

Common perceptions of space exploration are defined through scientific language but are also underpinned by the linear temporality to which the modern understanding of historical experience is sutured. Human evolution and civilisation are traditionally viewed as a cohesive, constantly developing structure which underpins the unified identity of "man". Space exploration is often inferred as an expression of "man's" innate drives and desires. For John L. Mason:

> Space exploration stirs man's deepest emotions. Explanations of this truism are not easy, but they are undoubtedly related to the inherent need of man to reduce the uncertainty about his environment and the implicit challenge to both the individual and society which is inherent in space exploration (1964, 174).

Such entrenched conceptualisations reflect a historical vernacular that is rarely self-critical, or reflexive of the fragmentary nature of the knowledge it provides. It acts as a narrative tool providing the form through which access to the past is structured but rarely questioned. Space histories in particular tend not to convey multiple or contradictory subject positions. This is exemplified by the overt focus on the unified category of "man" at the centre of an unquestioned scientific, rational (post-enlightenment) understanding of human experience. In most evocations of space history "man" stands in for a supposedly genderless expression of humanity's innate subjectivity. Think of Neil Armstrong's now legendary phrase: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind", or *Star Trek*'s mantra, "to boldly go where no man has gone before". These phrases have become a naturalised parlance and defining rhetoric of space exploration. Far from being neutral semantics however, they are part of an underlying discourse within space history in which "man" implicitly means men.

The institutional and cultural gendering of the astronaut has rarely been acknowledged much less interrogated. Early space histories, such as John M. Mansfield's *Man on the Moon,* only briefly touch upon the subject:

> NASA narrowed the field by assembling an astronaut identikit. "He"- and it is interesting that NASA, unlike the Russians, do not seem to have seriously considered the possibility of female astronauts-would be an "all American boy", in the peak of condition, in his mid-thirties (the ages of the final 7 finally selected ranged between 32 and 38), exceptionally intelligent, cool, and determined (Mansfield 1969, 81).

In Mansfield's 256-page account, this is the only mention of women with regard to the Space Program.[1] There has, in recent years, been an increasing body of theoretical and sociological analysis of space history (Kevles 2003; Weitekamp 2004; Dick and Launius 2006; Bell and Parker, 2009). However, there is no specific work that assesses the astronaut as a reflection of gendered discourse in cultural history. Space histories-whether textual, photographic, televisual or cinematic-serve to naturalise the astronaut as a heroic masculine figure at the centre of modern Western culture. Furthermore, "history" itself is generally affirmed as an unquestioned, rational framework that both authenticates knowledge as epistemologically objective, and defines "man", as the cohesive subject around whom historical "truth" is built.

This interconnection between "history" and "man", as unified categories productive of a continuity of the past, is the starting point for my analysis. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault interrogates the empiricist tools by which the historical field produces a causal, linear "reality" of the past. He suggests that the rational, modernist conception of history is a hegemonic structure of "uninterrupted continuities" is based on the veracity of the "document":

> History is the work expended on material documentation (book, texts, accounts, registers, acts, buildings, institutions, laws, techniques, objects, customs, etc.) that exists, in every time and place, in every society, either in a spontaneous or in a consciously organized form (Foucault 1972, 7).

[1] In Walter A. McDougall's highly detailed *Political History of the Space Race* (1985) there is no mention of gender while T.A Heppenheimer's (1973) *Countdown: A History of Space* briefly mentions Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space. But this is only to suggest that she was used for propaganda purposes.

Traditional historical method involves a search for causal relationships in the chronologies of historical texts. The grouping together of "material documentation" defines recognisable continuities of the past and the constitution of multiple series, which are placed in relation to one another. For Foucault this methodology defines the "archaeology of history":

> History, in its traditional form, undertook to "memorize" the *monuments* of the past, transform them into documents, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments* (Foucault, 1972: 7)

The transformation of *documents* into *monuments* suggests that the very process of reading the past through documentation produces an archaeological record that acts as a totalising discourse. Monuments stand for something that was once indefatigably "there". History is thus conceived not as a "trace of echoes" from the past, but as a quantifiable "truth" which can be reached through a systematic taxonomy of reading. The accepted formation of "uninterrupted continuities" therefore establishes a homogenous system by marking the contours of knowledge concerning the past.

For Foucault, the production of history as a series of "uninterrupted continuities" centralises the subject in providing stability onto which perceptions of identity can be attached:

> Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject-in the form of historical consciousness-will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find them in what might be called his abode (Foucault 1972, 12).

The continuity of history and the coherent subject are intertwined in the epistemology of modern thought. Foucault suggests that, "making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making the human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought" (1972, 12). The assertion here is that difference, contradiction, rupture and disunity are the enemies of traditional historical method, because they undermine its totalising form.

The history of space exploration is largely predicated on just such a sense of continuity: a product of the linear progression of modern rationality, expressive of the will of modern Western "man". The astronaut, in turn, symbolises the self-governing subject at the centre of the story of human progression. "His" experience is the experience of our "idealised" selves, the expression and symbol of humanity's rational civilisation, with "his" history as the underlying structure sanctioning "knowledge" and "truth". In relaying the "history" of space exploration media texts are the primary documents. These texts reinforce historical continuity by defining the astronaut through familiar markers-patriotism, family, democracy, capitalism, technology and religion. The interconnected, intertextual dynamics of such markers create what I define as a "symbolic repertoire", a blueprint which naturalises the parameters of the astronaut's social construction. This book, however, critically interrogates the *discursivity* of the "symbolic repertoire" by locating and drawing out its underlying discontinuities.

Foucault highlights how methods of critical analysis have begun to "read" history through transformations, ruptures, breaks, or what he defines as discontinuities. Discontinuities stem from both the ambiguous and often multilayered content of historical documents but also, crucially, from the very processes by which documentation is procured. Foucault suggests that the focus on discontinuities derives from the development of history as a philosophy of thought, which has crossed over from the theoretical fields of Marxism, psychoanalysis and literary criticism. However, he also conceives that all theoretical approaches to history could have a totalising and reductionist potential. He instead argues for an "epistemological mutation of history" which seeks to rupture history's "inalienable rights". In this regard, any claim to a singular historical worldview should be immediately contested because of the potential reassertion of hierarchies of power and subordination.

Foucault's epistemological approach to history is indicative of postmodern theoretical arguments that challenge totalising formations of history and the subject, thus revealing the play of discourse. Jane Flax (1991) for example characterises this mode of thought in terms of the symbolic death of "Man", "History" and "Metaphysics". She outlines how critical theory has begun to decentre transcendental, pre-discursive categories of thought as they privilege and presuppose, "the value of unity, homogeneity, totality, closure, and identity" (Flax 1991, 33). Postmodern theory exposes how rational logic erases the contradictions of history and, in turn, foregrounds the search for discontinuity.

This postmodern rejection of absolute systems of objective truth informs my reading of the media construction of space history and, specifically, the masculine subject as its defining centre. Jean-Francois Lyotard sees postmodern theory as characterised by an, "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard 1986, xxiv), a theoretical scepticism towards totalising social and political structures. Postmodern theory however, also exemplifies an increasingly fragmentary social experience indicative of the late twentieth century. The theoretical ideas that I have summarised above have to be read through various epochal shifts which some have recognised as a distinct break between modernity and postmodernity.

Fredric Jameson pinpoint's the late 1960s as a definitive moment. Social conditions engendered a rejection of canonical, authoritarian or structural traditions across culture, society and politics. He suggests:

> The emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic-what is often euphemistically called modernisation, post-industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism" (1988, 193).

A new cultural zeitgeist reflects the late stage of capitalism exemplified by multinational corporations, global markets and mass consumption. This has coincided with the emergence of new technologies in information exchange and media communications causing a compression of the experience of time and space. Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously labelled such effects in terms the 'global village' but perhaps this underestimates the acutely ephemeral experience that defines the postmodern age.

For Jean Baudrillard (1988) the proliferation of mass communication technologies such as television, cinema, and more recently digital communications, has produced an overwhelming bombardment of representations. Within this overlapping haze of signification, postmodern society increasingly becomes a realm of total mediation without communication, collapsing the distinction between image and reality. The mass media within postmodernity also spawns a particular kind of cultural aesthetic-often distinguished separately as "postmodernism"-characterised by modes of representation such as pastiche, kitsch, irony, intertextuality and self-reflexivity. For Jameson (1991) such styles epitomise the depthlessness of postmodern culture in which the distinctions between high-brow and low-brow are dissolved by perpetual reproduction and commodification. In this context the "condition" of experience is incoherent and fractured because of the increasingly fragile nature of the "real".

The interconnection between the postmodern theory, postmodernity (as an epochal shift away from modernity) and postmodernism (as an aesthetic style) is impossible, and somewhat futile, to map out coherently. Because of this it may seem erroneous to adopt "the postmodern" as a conceptual framework through which to read the cultural construction of the astronaut. Yet despite its inevitable inadequacies, I suggest that it offers a way of understanding the interconnecting elements at play in the construction of the astronaut. Using "the postmodern" allows an interrogation of "history" as an ideological narrative based on media "documents", and it provides a theoretical means of connecting the space race with the socio-cultural shifts of the late twentieth century. Postmodern theory, when intersected with feminism, gender studies and queer theory, offers an incisive tool for analysing the astronaut as a discourse of masculine idealisation.

The Discourse of "Idealised" Masculinity

Feminist developments of postmodern theory seek to trouble the often-unquestioned correlation between biological sex and socially defined gender. Identity is thus understood as being structured through the language of symbolic systems. It is the discourses of gender, (along with other elements such as race, class, sexuality etc.) which are produced through forms of representation that define masculinity (or femininity) in a given context. Masculinity as a symbolic construction, as Saco suggests, "assumes that film, television, and other media help constitute gender difference, rather than simply reflect or represent that difference" (1992, 25). This marks an approach to gender which rejects the notion that direct analysis of representations of "real" gender differences is possible, instead seeing the very notion of gender difference as always already situated within representative frameworks.

Conceptualisations of identity as discursive often derive, once again, from the work of Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* he examines how knowledge and ways of speaking about sex and sexuality in the nineteenth century were not repressed, as is commonly thought, but produced through social, political and economic mechanisms:

> Sex was driven out of hiding and constrained to lead a discursive existence. From the singular imperialism that compels everyone to transform their sexuality into a perpetual discourse, to the manifold mechanisms which, in the areas of economy, pedagogy, medicine, and justice, incite, extract, distribute, and institutionalise the sexual discourse,

> an immense verbosity is what our civilization has required and organised (Foucault 1998 [1976], 33).

"Immense verbosity" characterises the complex formations of institutional and symbolic power that govern the parameters of sex and sexuality. Discourses of sex are produced through science, politics, technology and other social practices of modernity, and were projected on to a citizenry as part of the disciplining controls modern, "civilised" society. The powerful practices of individuals (doctors, judges, priests) and groups (government, church, hospitals, police) affirm a naturalisation of discourses of sex and sexuality within the social fabric.

Many feminist scholars have adapted the work of Foucault to examine, in specific contexts, differential effects of gendered discourses on men and women (De Lauretis 1982; Lois McNay 1992; Bordo 1993). Twentieth century media culture is often examined as a central conduit through which hierarchies of gender difference are produced and legitimised. Liesbet Van Zoonan argues that, "all media are central sites where discursive negotiation over gender takes place". However, she suggests that negotiations of meaning are highly complex. The media does not "reflect" reality in a "closed ideological system" but is "inherently polysemic" (1994, 41).

There is a problematic contradiction here in understanding how the discourses of gender can be contingent, multifaceted and polysemic, but also able to produce a coherent masculinity as the object of feminist critique. One of feminism's central motivations is to challenge the naturally assumed tenets of masculine (patriarchal) power whether they are institutional or cultural in form. Many writers have suggested that masculine power, throughout the modern period, has been predicated on the formation of social and cultural coherence. For George Mosse:

> Masculinity was regarded as of one piece from its very beginning: body and soul, outward appearance and inward virtue were supposed to form one harmonious whole, a perfect construct where every part was in its place...Such a picture must be coherent in order to be effective, and, in turn, the internalised visual image, the mental picture, relies upon the perception of outward appearance in order to judge a person's worth (Mosse 1996, 5).

In this context the modern discourses of science, medicine, technology and aesthetics underpinned a construction of masculinity in which physical beauty and strength went hand in hand with inner moral value (Forth 2008). This notion of stability and constancy as the basis of idealisation

undoubtedly translates to the media representations of the astronaut that I examine.

The intersection of feminist and postmodern critiques seeks to expose the underlying contingency of supposedly coherent masculine discourses by highlighting the conflicts in their formulation. For David Gutterman:

> [t]hese conflicts in turn create an arena where the governing conceptions of a particular discourse suffer a sort of slippage wherein predominant roles and values lose their claims to absolute authority and subsequently can be altered (1994, 220).

One of the problems with this focus on revealing masculinity as a contradictory social construction, whose gendered ascendance is manufactured rather than innate, is that a clear understanding of identity becomes obfuscated. If postmodern masculinity is multifaceted, ambiguous and shifting, singular enactments or proscriptive enforcements of what constitutes masculinity will always be diffuse and difficult to define.

In many ways this dilemma is acknowledged but left rather unresolved in studies of "heroic" masculinity (Kipnis 1994; Benwell 2003), "dominant" masculinity (Katz 2002; Consalvo 2003), "rugged" masculinity (Brook 2003) and "normative" masculinity (Phillips 2005). The problem with these concepts, I suggest, is that they seek to define a coherent masculinity as the source of gendered power while simultaneously revealing discursive incongruities. Furthermore, such terms, both directly and indirectly, are often used as a form of shorthand, standing in for a concept that has become standard parlance in masculinity studies literature: hegemonic masculinity.

Originating from the sociological research of R.W. Connell (1982, 1995), hegemonic masculinity is used as part of a model which conceptualises the hierarchical structuring of masculine relationships:

> Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell 1995, 77).

Connell conceptualises masculinity as emerging from a matrix of power that not only affects mens' relations with women but also the relations between men. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity that is socially or culturally accepted in a given context. In line with the

feminist postmodernist intersection, hegemonic masculinity is "not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations" (Connell 1995, 76). The term therefore attempts to overcome how multiple masculinities exist within shifting patterns of identity and power.

Drawn from Antonio Gramsci, the concept of hegemony defines the processes of power and control configured through the social ideologies of a dominant class. Rather than the control of the state being maintained solely through coercive means (laws, police, judiciary), a range of cultural formations (mass media, education) are employed to persuade subordinated classes to spontaneously consent to the values and rules of the political and intellectual elite. For Gramsci:

> This consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (Gramsci 1971, 12).

The value systems of the dominant class are ideologically diffused through all its organisational structures, defining and naturalising a construction of the world that maintains the status quo. This negates the possibility or even the need for dissent, because the organisational apparatus enforces the inevitability of lived experience. Any instances of dissent are represented as pathological and summarily punished by the more coercive apparatus of state power. However, the power of hegemony is so pervasively ingrained into culture it is accepted on the whole by the masses as a naturalised part of the civilising, didactic role of the state.

Connell's development of hegemonic masculinity relates specifically to the structuring and practices of gender relations that legitimise the dominant status of men as a social class. Hegemonic masculinity is used to conceptualise both the institutionalisation of hierarchical power (Barrett 1996; Elias 2007) and the cultural sanctioning of masculine archetypes and fantasy figures (Savran, 1992; Davis, 1997). Key to hegemonic masculinity is the "correspondence between a cultural ideal and institutional power", which is collectively held, even if it is not individually deployed (Connell 1995, 77). In this context the mechanics of the astronaut's idealisation through the media can be read as a process that affirms what I call his hegemonic "potential". Representations of the astronaut fortify a symbolic link between cultural idealisation and institutional power thus establishing coherence of meaning.

Yet masculinity as a form of gendered power cannot be thought of as a simple, top-down, hierarchical formation. Hegemonic masculinity does

not only relate to patriarchal oppression, but is part of a "configuration of practice" which structures relationships between men. Connell characterises how hegemonic masculinity only attains a dominant status through its opposition to *Subordinate*, *Complicit* and *Marginalised* masculinities (Connell 1995, 77-81). Throughout this book I highlight representations of the astronaut in relationship to oppositional masculinities, such as the engineer, scientist and administrator, in order to read the complex dynamics of gendered power at work.

Postmodern/feminist critiques of masculinity have anchoring points in specific political and social contexts. The rise of women's liberation and other civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s was the starting point for a new cultural pluralism. The empowerment of women through legislation relating to equal pay, birth control, anti-discrimination and abortion, developed out of changing social attitudes to the prescribed roles of housewife and mother. Postmodernity defines an era when masculine control of social, political, economic power begins to be directly exposed as the structuring force behind hegemonic oppression.

Such transitions are often linked to the notion of masculine "crisis". The male experience within postmodern culture is often defined by a sense of loss, anxiety, nostalgia and general malaise, or as Tim Edwards characterises, "a perceived shift in men's *experiences* of their position *as* men, their maleness, and what it means" (2006, 8). The theme of "crisis" therefore represents the insecurities brought about by the external challenges to masculine power and issues of self-reflexivity in which men are increasingly required to define their own identity as men (Horrocks 1994; MacInnes 1998).

This book places the astronaut at the crossover between poststructuralist and feminist theories in order to reveal how processes of media representation confer two levels of signification: an idealisation of the astronaut as an exemplar of modern masculinity, and a subsequent postmodern fracturing of the processes of representation through which that idealisation is produced. But the question then emerges, what is the end point of this exposure of discursive contingency? Does the astronaut's masculinity become entirely undermined by the transition from modernity to postmodernity? In revealing the dynamics of hegemony does the astronaut cease to be hegemonic? In the final section of this introduction, I outline my use of the concept of mythology as a methodological tool to hypothesize a recycling of idealisation and, in turn, the reassertion of astronaut's hegemonic potential.

Myth as Methodology

Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* is a collection of short, poetic and idiosyncratic essays, which critiques the "naturalisation" of ideology in a range of cultural phenomena. Drawing upon a selection[2] of "myths" in French daily life, Barthes outlines how:

> The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the "naturalness" with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there (Barthes 2000[1957], 11).

One of these beautifully crafted vignettes is the myth of the *Jet-man*. This new form of icon, "belongs to a new race in aviation, nearer to the robot than to the hero" (2000, 71). The *Jet-man* is infused with contradictory significations (motion versus motionlessness; control versus passivity; nature versus culture), yet the process of mythologisation creates a context through which he maintains a "sacred role" (2000, 73). Barthes' description of the *Jet-man* is unerringly prophetic of the dichotomies that define the astronaut.

In *Mythologies* Barthes outlines the theoretical and methodological mechanics of myth suggesting that they evolve out of discourse and function to naturalise "truths" in a given historical context:

> One can conceive of very ancient myths but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history, which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the nature of things (Barthes 2000[1957], 110).

Myths provide a conceptual map; they are a metalanguage, which sanction forms of meaning by naturalising their ideological assertions. My analysis appropriates myth to expose the ways in which masculinity retains an idealised status, and in turn hegemonic power, despite the myriad subversions, which are evocated through representation.

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[2] Barthes states how the selection of subjects in *Mythologies* is guided by 'current' events (1954-1956) and his own interests at the time (2000, 11)

Myth, Barthes argues, "is constituted by the loss of historical quality of things: in it, things lose memory that they were once made" (2000, 142). Reading Barthes' in the light of Foucault's notion of historical discourse, I suggest that myth can be used to understand the process through which the discontinuities of history are traversed. It smoothes over ruptures and mends breaks by naturalising historical discourse as "reality". Crucially, it is the capability of myth to manipulate or rearticulate forms that, I suggest, makes it salient for analysing how idealised masculinity is reproduced across cultural contexts.

Myth therefore creates a meaning or a perception of a thing, which holds true no matter how it becomes subverted, rejected or exposed as inconsistent. In this regard it provides epistemological reassurance that signification *is* connected to reality. Barthes surmises:

> In passing from history into nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organises a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves (Barthes 2000 [1957], 143).

The mythologising of the astronaut negates the contradictions that emerge in his representation through a fusion of new and diverse interpretations of masculinities and the traditional markers of the "symbolic repertoire". This constitutes a recycling of the elements of idealised masculinity, but with subtle negotiations in his construction that transcend the break from modernity to postmodernity and reaffirm gendered cultural hegemony.

Myth is also germane here as it is a key paradigm in debates surrounding the study of masculinity. For Stephen Whitehead:

> In developing the sociology of masculinity, critical gender theorists have been forced, then, to confront many powerful myths. These include the notion that gender is destiny; the belief that men are natural knowledge holders; the understanding that women are marginal to "his"tory; and the idea that a traditional gender dichotomy is a natural state and contributes to a "healthy" society. Such ideology and myths are rarely absent from any society or any culture, and at any one time individuals and institutions will be reproducing such myths, often without being fully aware of doing so (Whitehead 2002, 11).

Myth is a central concept for "men's" studies writers such as Robert Bly (1991) and Allan Guggenbühl (1997), whose essentialist work arguably

emerges from a backlash against feminism and a perceived loss of male cultural dominance. Paradoxically, however, mythology is also a tool for liberal pro-feminist writers, like Connell, who asserts that "the winning of hegemony often involves the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures" (Connell 1987, 184).

My deployment of myth in this book is largely as a methodological tool to examine how the astronaut is formulated as a masculine icon by the media for cultural consumption. Barthes suggests that the "myth consumer" reads the intention and outcome of the myth as purely natural. It is my intention to act as a "myth decipherer" who exposes the motivation, ideology and hegemonic potential of the representations by attempting to assume a critical distance and an oppositional reading position. But this opens up the possibility that my analysis simply constructs a counter hegemony in itself in need of critique. I cannot leave behind my identity (white, Western, heterosexual male) which could be deemed as complicit with the gendered power regimes I interrogate. Does the very process of "deciphering" position me as just another author of a masculinist history, which I am attempting to decry? Although these issues can never be fully resolved, I proceed with an acknowledgement that they must have a bearing of the kind of analysis I write.

The book is split into four chapters, each dealing with a different sphere of media representation. Chapter one examines *Life* magazine's central role in the production of discursive markers-the "symbolic repertoire"-which sets the historical parameters by which the astronaut is culturally defined. *Life* is crucial because of the contract between *Time Inc* (*Life's* parent company) and NASA, giving the magazine exclusive rights to astronauts' personal stories. Interrogating both the form and content of articles from 1959 to 1970, I argue that an unwaveringly idealised imaginary of national identity was created reflecting the magazines ideological conception of American culture. I analyse how this emerged from a highly discursive picture magazine format which sought to capture an authentic history yet constructed highly gendered, raced and classed cultural representations.

Chapter two discusses the overt gendering of women astronauts in the agenda setting print media (*The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*). Throughout the history of the American Space Program the media sought to characterise women astronauts as "women" rather than "astronauts" by stressing sexual difference, thus effectively supporting the actual institution marginalisation they suffered but also undermining the possibility of symbolic idealisation. Even though NASA finally accepted women in the 1980s, the publicity around their selection

was informed by traditional conceptions of women's identity and proscribed roles. Analysing news coverage of four "women" astronauts-Jerrie Cobb, Valentina Tereshkova, Sally Ride and Christa McAuliffe-I explore the subtle and not so subtle processes of gendering that informs journalistic discourse thus reinforcing the perception that being an astronaut was fundamentally masculine.

Chapter three focuses on literary accounts of the space race by two of America's most influential writers. Norman Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970) and Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* (1979) are both examples of the wave of "new" journalism which attempted to dissolve the barriers between subjectivity and objectivity in the formation of historical documentation. Through a range of stylistic methods each texts engages in a form of literary mythologising in which contradictions and critiques of the astronaut are highlighted but almost immediately negotiated in order that the idealisation of masculinity is reaffirmed. Both texts integrate an institutional, bureaucratic conception of the astronaut with a mythic interpretation of the pioneering hero thus idealising masculinity as ahistorical, essential and transcendent.

Using an analysis of three films (*Apollo 13*, *Armageddon* and *The Astronaut's Wife)*, chapter four argues that cinematic representations of idealised masculinity become more unstable, fluid and ambiguous in form. The medium of cinema, I suggest, exposes the markers of the "symbolic repertoire" as ideological and contradictory thus rendering the astronaut susceptible readings of anxiety and crisis which characterise postmodern masculinity. However, the astronaut's hegemonic potential, is not undermined by this transparency. Postmodern culture, in fact, provides a representative framework by which he retains centrality within the cultural imaginary. Through intertextual re-articulation, using aesthetic modes such as nostalgia and parody, idealised masculinity is recycled so as to adapt to the shifting socio/cultural contours. The astronaut is therefore conceived as a cipher, reflecting the complexities and contradictions of masculinity, but also definitive of processes of reaffirmation through which the cultural significance and gendered power of this ubiquitous icon is unquestionably maintained.