

CHAPTER FIVE

CONTESTING THE ASTRONAUT
AS A MASCULINE IDEAL: NARRATIVES
OF MYTH IN TOM WOLFE'S *THE RIGHT STUFF*

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Introduction

In one of the most intriguing articles in his seminal *Mythologies* (1957, trans 1972) Roland Barthes theorises the jet-man, a jet-pilot who, as an icon, epitomises the changing experience of humanity in an increasingly technological age. In this sense the jet-man is defined as a "proof of modernity", yet despite his contextualisation within the "modern" he also occupies a sacred role through which he attains something approaching spiritual transcendence:

As for endurance, we are definitely told that, as is the case in all initiations, it is not physical in nature: triumph in preliminary ordeals is, truth to tell, the fruit of a spiritual gift, one is gifted for jet-flying as others are called to God. (Barthes, 1957: 72)

The mythology of the jet-man is created in between a discursive dichotomy which is informed on the one side by rationality and scientific reason and on the other by a narrative of spiritual vocation. The combination of these two polemic elements, rather than producing an ambiguity of meaning, underpins and forges a coherence and unity of signification through which mythology is authenticated. Barthes conceptualises the process of mythologizing in terms of a naturalisation:

The naturalisation of the concept, which I have just identified as the essential function of myth, is here exemplary. In a first (exclusively linguistic) system, causality would be, literally natural [...] In the second (mythical) system, causality is artificial, false; but it creeps, so to speak,

through the back door of Nature. This is why myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden – if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious – but because they are naturalised. (Barthes, 1957: 131)

The tension between oppositional parameters is the basis for the second order signification that mythology implies. The mythology of the jet-man emerges as naturalised *despite and because of* its basis in between conflicting discursive influences.

Using mythology as a theoretical method offers the potential to contest historically fixed or bounded subject positions. From a gender perspective, understandings of masculine hegemony have often been conceptualised around the notion of a coherent and historically continuous subject position which is sustained "by its capacity to remain beyond question, its contradictions out of sight" (Rutherford, 1988: 23). Masculinity often becomes constructed around specific elements which are deemed intrinsically male. Notions such as strength, heroism, control and rationality become frequently cited as fundamental characteristics underpinning representations of masculinity, which then take the form of mythical icons or fantasy figures. Horrocks (1995: 17), for example, argues that "Within mythical narratives, 'icons' are fashioned, that is, key figures or exemplars, who have somehow lost their everyday reality and have become legendary figures." These figures provide a symbolic framework which underpins the notion of masculinity as overtly 'idealised', that is, they create the parameters by which masculinity is often judged and aspired to. Yet the imaginary of idealised masculinity often hides a myriad of inherent contradictions within the discursive contexts that inform them.

The astronaut is one of the most enduring cultural symbols that has emerged in the 20th century and has become an obvious exemplar of masculine idealisation. This understanding has gradually been refined not only through the historical significance of their exploits but also because of the countless representational examples in literature, television and film that has imprinted astronaut iconography upon the cultural imaginary. These texts have provided an aesthetic and narrative foundation through which the astronaut has become defined particularly in Western culture. However I want to suggest that the astronaut, and the masculinity his image is predicated on, derives from a contradictory mythology in a similar vein to that of Barthes' jet-man (1957: 72).

In order to develop this argument I will draw upon Tom Wolfe's 1979 novel *The Right Stuff* which charts the selection, training and early missions of the first American astronauts, the Mercury Seven. The

narrative of *The Right Stuff* is homage to traditional, white, Western masculinity yet quite paradoxically it also reveals, at times indirectly, many ambiguities inherent in what is an often fixed and uncontested identity position. Masculinity is idealised through the figure of the test pilot whose "manly courage" is described as, "ancient, primordial, irresistible" (Wolfe 1979, 33). Through the novel the figure of the pilot reflects a coherent subjectivity overtly masculine discourses particularly concerning the control of technology and the male body. Yet as the chosen seven pilots become astronauts, and the processes and experiences of training and embarking on space flight become apparent, these elements which may be considered markers of idealised masculinity become contested, if not completely negated. The astronauts discover that control is given over to passivity and the male body, far from being a guarantor of masculine power, becomes a site of redundant disembodiment. Yet despite these contestations, which problematise the connection between fixed notions of masculinity and ways in which they inform representative icons like the astronaut, this chapter will argue that any potential subversions are hidden behind a naturalisation of mythology that reinforces and reproduces the astronaut's 'idealised' status.

Analysing the representation of the astronaut in *The Right Stuff* I contend that idealisations of masculinity should be thought of in mythological terms and that mythology has the effect of perpetuating hegemony across historical or contextual shifts. The coherence of its gendered meaning is mythically naturalised despite inherent contradictions in its informative discourses. Myth, in these terms, has undoubtedly ideological implications in terms of its naturalisation of certain meanings and therefore as Culler suggests is represents a "delusion to be exposed" (Culler, 1983: 33). In the following I set out to highlight the instability of elements, such as technological control and the male body, as essential masculine qualities in order to reveal the fragility of fixed identity formulations. Before I engage directly with Wolfe's text I will first contextualise this chapter by outlining some of the ways in which masculinity has been rendered as historically coherent and bounded through the production mythologies concerning 'idealised' masculinity.

Masculinity as History and Myth

The foundation of much theoretical debate concerning masculinity suggests a historically coherent and uncontested identity position from which a dominance of social and cultural arenas is manifest. A more in-depth and critical examination of how masculine identity is constructed is

a fairly recent phenomenon. In his history of American manhood E. Anthony Rotundo begins his enquiry by asking "Who is a 'real man'? What is 'naturally' male? How does a 'manly man' act?" (Rotundo, 1993: 1). Apart from the obvious difficulty in answering these questions they presuppose the implication that a "real" man or a "natural" male actually exists. The rhetoric around these and other questions, which attempt to define masculinity, often implies that behind all the cultural and social "baggage" there exists a "core" identity. Masculinity, as the object of analysis, then becomes a process of unpacking its constituent elements with the aim of revealing an underlying truth.

These elements, whether constitutive of the institutions of patriarchy or intrinsic to dominant behaviours of masculinity have had the effect of producing a specific focal point through which the subordinate position of "others", primarily woman but also subordinate forms of masculinity, can be revealed. While the diversity of "masculinities" is increasingly being recognised within gender theory, its dominating and hegemonic underpinning provides the basis to many feminist perspectives. Millet, for example, suggests that "while patriarchy as an institution is a social constant so entrenched as to run through all other political, social, or economic forms, whether caste or class, feudality or bureaucracy, just as it pervades all major religions, it also exhibits variety in history and locale" (Millet, 1977: 25). While Millet acknowledges contextual differences in the dominance of the patriarchy she also deploys an understanding of the ubiquitous influence of a taken-for-granted masculinity.

Masculinity, from this perspective, is constructed as a history of "uninterrupted continuities", a coherent and well defined subjectivity which is central to social, cultural and institutional hegemony. Foucault has stated that an unquestioned reliance upon history has become "the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject" (Foucault, 1972: 12). He critiques an epistemology of history and the ways in which historical analysis collectivises discourse as a "totalization". The implication here is that clear and well established notions of history and knowledge provide security and authentication of our perceptions of the world and yet hide oppositional or dissident possibilities. This line of enquiry provided by Foucault has given feminists a useful tool to theorise alternative gender histories (McNay, 1992).

However, I suggest that in analysing elements that inform a history of masculinity, one also has to acknowledge the central part that mythology has played in reproducing supposedly innate notions of masculinity across different contexts. Many of our interpretations of gender and identity derive from historical assumptions that in turn have produced common-

sense realities. Because men have overtly dominated the ways and means by which knowledge is produced there has traditionally been limited self-referential critique of the ways in which mythologies facilitate the dominance of masculinity. This is a situation that is only recently begun to change:

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' story; 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 here is characterised as ideologically constructed and pervasive as a force for the reproduction of hierarchies of gender through which masculinity is naturalised as ascendant in a myriad of ways. However, one also has to recognise the complexity with which mythology transcends different historical contexts and acknowledge how myth, as a producer of 'naturalised realities', is increasingly rooted in subjective literary and media texts.

A correlative to defining masculine subjectivity as mythological has become increasingly popular with both academic pro-feminist theorists and the opposing wing of men's studies which has derived from a backlash against feminism (Edwards, 2006). The latter group are typified by Robert Bly's (1991) book *Iron John: a Book about men* which is a reinterpretation of folklores and myths that encourages men to seek out an essential core, that is hidden by the perceived crisis of masculinity in modern life. Its mixture of diverse fantasy narrative and Jungian psychoanalysis has spawned a whole canon of texts aimed at uncovering lost 'truths' concerning male experience. Allan Guggenbühl (1997) for example, asserts that the prevalence of inner explanations of subjective identity, characterised by the centrality of psychotherapy in the contemporary world, is much more relevant for, and geared towards women. Guggenbühl contends that expressions and understandings of masculine identity, which are better explained through outside factors such as mythology, have lost their importance. The overt problem with this discourse, however, is the rigid binary separation between the "legitimate" ways in which male and female identity should be understood. Mythology has also become a central component for the liberal pro-feminist aspects of masculinity studies particularly concerning

conceptualisations of what constitutes idealised masculinity. Myth occupies a central part of Connell's seminal term "hegemonic masculinity" in that "the winning of hegemony often involves the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures" (Connell, 1987: 184). Within today's contemporary media structure the mythologisation of "real" figures which represent an unattainable yet idealised concept of how masculinity should be embodied is also prevalent. The astronaut as a cultural exemplar can undoubtedly be read in this way; few men can attain the actual hegemonic power of an astronaut but most men consent to the mythology that produces and sustains such power. The mythology of the astronaut is perpetually reinforced across all spheres of the media, for example actor Tom Hanks when asked why he took the role in *Apollo 13* (Ron Howard, 1995), stated: "It's every American boy's dream: to play a cowboy, a baseball player, and an astronaut" (Rymning 1995, 34). Constant reassertions of such a discourse only serves to validate the ideal of the astronaut as an archetype of masculine identity.

Yet I also suggest that using mythology offers a methodological way of exploring the ambiguity of masculinity that is inherent in such iconic representations. Barthes' work on myth suggests that events signify more than their literal interpretation but more than that, 'myths are based on a concealment of some meanings and interested in the promotion of others' (Rylance 1994, 47), the outcome which has implications when analysing from a perspective of gender. In the following I employ a discursive analysis of Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* in order to highlight how the text constructs and undermines the astronaut as a masculine ideal. It is the process of myth which perpetuates the power of the astronaut's masculinity despite these inherent contradictions.

Active Controller to Passive Subject

The aura of idealisation which underpins the perception of the astronaut is signified across various cultural spheres. Through the Mercury and Apollo missions of the 1950s and 1960s the astronaut has become a revered, almost deified, figure. At the same time he was something tangible whose identity and moral framework were somehow in tune with ordinary people. *The Right Stuff* is one of the first literary texts to analyse the identity of the astronaut yet also help shape his iconography. It is the story of the Mercury Seven, America's first manned space program which was initiated by President Eisenhower as a response to the Soviet Launch of Sputnik in 1957. Right from the outset the novel employs a dichotomy

between its basis in historical documentation and its heavy reliance on mythology. This is apparent in various narrative devices such as equating flying with ascension, collapsing science into the realm of spirituality and linking characters with historical figures of the past (Konas 1994, 179). Phyllis Frus (1994) highlights how the blurring of mythology and history in *The Right Stuff* is a mechanism that ostensibly impedes a self-reflexive, critical reading:

The Right Stuff is particularly difficult to read reflexively, for narratives are most seductive when they trace the contours of cultural myth that have come to stand for historical truth. Not only does Wolfe trace a strain of myth particularly resistant to criticism because of its quintessential "Americanness" – besides the space program it has a Western setting, horses, and laconic heroes exploring a new frontier – but it is also inescapably a male myth. (Frus, 1994: 208)

Unpacking the parameters of masculine mythology offers the possibility of a gendered reading of the text and this undoubtedly has to require a dissection of the phrase "The Right Stuff".¹ Wolfe uses this phrase metaphorically to describe the complex set of interconnecting factors which discursively frame a pilot's subjectivity. "The Right Stuff" is expressed as a mythical discourse, "an ineffable quality" which is never specifically knowable, particularly because part of the code was not to talk about it. Wolfe outlines here how he sees its key elements:

As to just what this ineffable quality was... well, it obviously involved bravery. But it was not bravery in the simple sense of being willing to risk your life. The idea seemed to be that any fool could do that, if that was all that was required, just as any fool could throw away his life in the process. No, the idea here (in the all-encompassing fraternity) seemed to be that a man should have the ability to go up in a hurtling piece of machinery and put his hide on the line and then have the moxie, the reflexes, the experience, the coolness, to pull it back in the last yawning moment – and then to go up again the next day, and the next day, and every next day, even if the series should prove infinite – and, ultimately, in its best expression do so in a cause that means something to thousands, to a people, a nation, to humanity, to God. (Wolfe, 1973: 29)

This passage engenders various elements that discursively construct "the right stuff" as an idealised form of masculinity. Perhaps the most

¹ Throughout the text a differentiation is made between *The Right Stuff* referring to Wolfe's novel as text and "The Right Stuff" as a discursive model used to define the masculine subjectivity of pilots/astronauts.

fundamental concern is the notion of control which is contextualised through two particular paradigms: the control of the aircraft which both literally and symbolically facilitates the pilot's ascendancy, and control of the male body which becomes defined as the core or rudiment of masculine subjectivity.

First of all, the control that underpins an understanding of masculinity here relies most obviously on the mastery of technology. A narrative theme which is prevalent throughout:

To take off in an F-100 at dawn and cut in the afterburner and hurtle twenty-five thousand feet up into the sky so suddenly that you felt not like a bird but like a trajectory, yet with full control, full control of five tons of thrust, all of which flowed from your will and through your fingertips, with the huge engine right beneath you, so close that it was as if you were riding it bareback, until you levelled out and went supersonic, an event registered on earth by a tremendous cracking boom that shook windows, but up here by the fact that you felt utterly free of the earth – to describe it, even to a wife, child, near ones and dear ones, seemed impossible. (Wolfe, 1979: 40-1)

The notion of control here imbues the pilot with a heightened power which seemingly, in the end, comes from him just as much as the machine. The aircraft facilitates a transformation or an augmentation of masculinity through which his control and his power can be truly recognised. The machine is merely facilitating the primacy of the pilot's "will" which sets him apart and symbolically above those who do not possess the ability to ascend. In this sense the pilot's control spans the dichotomy between the sphere of the rational and that of the spiritual, liminally placing masculine subjectivity at the interconnection between the two. Yet this action also has to be constantly proved and repeated, "To go up again the next day, and the next day, and every next day" (*ibid.*: 29), as if masculine control is a relentless performance that continuously has to be reaffirmed. The idealised masculinity of "the right stuff" is never guaranteed or a fixed part of male identity. It is reliant on a perpetual confirmation of the ability to control.

This link between technological control and the masculine power that it imparts reflects an established critical discourse within feminist thought. Judy Wajcman (1991) suggests that:

Gender is not just about difference but about power: this technical expertise is a source of men's actual power or potential power over women... technical competence is central to the dominant cultural ideal of

masculinity, and its absence is a key feature of stereotyped femininity. (Wajcman, 1991: 159)

Here Wajcman highlights the underlying inference of power which serves as a defining mechanism; the control of technology can be seen as discursive as it produces power relationships based upon gender. Wajcman among others perhaps draws on the earlier work of Simone De Beauvoir who, in her seminal text *The Second Sex* (1949), also highlights this profound cultural connection:

In our attempt to discover woman we shall not reject certain contributions of biology, of psychoanalysis, and of historical materialism; but we shall hold that the body, the sexual life and the resources of technology exist concretely for man only in so far as he grasps them in the total perspective of his existence (De Beauvoir, 1953: 91).

Here de Beauvoir places control of technology alongside sexuality and body as primary sources of masculine power. She does not dismiss out of hand the centrality of certain histories but recognises their innate hierarchical nature in defining the basis of the power relations between genders. Undoubtedly the pilots control over his aircraft is used as a device to assert his masculine power in *The Right Stuff*. Furthermore, the control that the pilot possesses also characterises a quality to be aspired to for those 'others' who cannot hope to understand or achieve it and in that sense it is idealised.

The reliance on control as a definition of masculine subjectivity becomes more complex and uncertain as Wolfe describes the experience of the pilots as they begin to train as astronauts. This transformation (from pilot to astronaut) has a fundamental effect on the element of control as "An astronaut on a Project Mercury flight would do none of the things that comprised *flying* a ship: he would not take it aloft, control its flight, or land it. In short, he would be a passenger" (Wolfe, 1979: 75). Many of the top test pilots including Chuck Yeager (the pilot who most profoundly symbolised the masculinity of "The Right Stuff"), refused to volunteer for Project Mercury² and criticised the very nature of flight without human (that is male) control. "Span in a Can" was Yeager's euphemism for the astronauts who he considered simply experimental test subjects. The astronauts themselves sought to change the parameters of the mission so

² Chuck Yeager and another pilot Scott Crossfield, who were considered the top test pilots in America at the time, did not volunteer for the Mercury Project. However they were not considered for selection anyway because they did not have the prerequisite college degree.

that control would be reinstated but this would merely consist of peripheral changes such as altering the name capsule to spacecraft or insisting on the installation of a window (there was to be none in the original capsule design).

This reaction at having this symbol of their male power removed can readily be conceptualised through theories of gender socialisation which associates masculinity with "sexual energy, initiative, drive and aggression, what Freud sometimes refers to as 'activity' as opposed to 'passivity'" (MacInnes, 1998: 86). Throughout the novel, the subjectivity of the astronaut is constructed as oppositional to the pilot through this active/passive dichotomy. The astronaut's lack of control is further underlined through the narrative which posits the real power in the space program with the engineers and scientists at the suitably named mission control. As Wolfe outlines:

The astronaut would have little to do in a Mercury flight except stand the strain, and the engineers had devised what psychologists referred to as a 'graded set of exposures' to take care of that. No, the difficult, the challenging, the dramatic, the pioneering part of space flight, as the engineers saw it, was the technology. (Wolfe, 1979: 154)

Certainly the engineers had their own ego's concerning who was in control of the flight which in once sense reflects one of the fundamental tenets of masculine hegemony; that does not reside within "a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same" (Connell 1995, 76), and is instead "a historically mobile reaction. It's ebb and flow is a key element of the picture" (1995, 77). Indeed within Wolfe's narrative a rather contradictory understanding of idealised masculine iconography takes place; one that reproduces the traditional elements of control as central for the pilot yet is questioned and ultimately subverted as a paradigm of identity for the astronaut.

The Male Body and Disembodiment

Control, or lack of it, which facilitates the astronaut's ascent is only part of the discourse through which masculinity is represented in *The Right Stuff*. It is also vital to recognise how the body itself is a focal point for Wolfe in describing the subjectivity of astronaut. However, this is once again underscored by various contradictions. The body as a site for understanding how masculinity is formed relies on foundations of essentialism characterised by Connell's assertion that "true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a

male body or to express something about a male body" (Connell, 1995: 45). Within sociological thought overt notions of embodiment have more readily been applied to femininity. This may be due to the fact that women have been the greater focus of critical gender studies or may reflect the "well known ideological equation between women/men and nature/culture" (Morgan, 1993: 69). Yet male embodiment is central throughout *The Right Stuff* and perhaps relates to what Thomas suggests is a "constitutively masculine anxiety about the male body as a site for the production of language and representation" (Thomas 1996, 13), in that it portrays fears and contradictions about how masculinity is constructed around particularly fragile and vulnerable notions of the body.

The subjectivity of the pilot is made corporeal in the first instance through graphic descriptions of how a crash left the remains of a pilot "burned beyond recognition." For Wolfe this was an:

artful euphemism to describe a human body that now looked like an enormous fowl that burned up in the stove, burned a blackish brown all over, greasy and blistered, fried, in a word, with not only the entire face and all the hair and the ears burned off, not to mention the all the clothing, but also the hands and feet (Wolfe, 1973: 14)

On the one hand, the body is shown as fragile and mortal here. A fact which seemingly underscores and augments the notions of bravery and heroism that are central to idealised identity. The pilot was fully aware of his body's mortality yet he still chose to take the risk of flight, to go up in a hurtling piece of machinery day after day. This acknowledgement of bodily mortality, accepting the rationality of death, makes the willingness to perform the role of pilot all the more idealised and heroic. This theme mirrors suggestions in ancient mythology that "death is proof that something indestructible lives in the human breast" (Lash, 1995: 84).

In another sense the body of the astronaut in Wolfe's account evokes what might be understood as essential associations between youthful physical masculinity and the perception of strength and power that it endows:

Fighter jocks, as a breed, put physical exercise very low on the list of things that made up the right stuff. They enjoyed the rude animal health of youth. They put their bodies through dreadful abuses, often in the form of drinking bouts followed by lack of sleep and mortal hangovers, and they still performed like champions. (I don't advise it, you understand, but it can be done – provided you have the right stuff). (Wolfe, 1973: 116-7)

Wolfe highlights here the fact that exercise was not high on the list of priorities for the test pilot, or as an element that constitutes "The Right Stuff". For the pilot the body provides the site from which conceptions of idealised masculinity emerge; the ability to perform like a champion in the face of (self inflicted) physical abuses, demonstrates how the material body is the rudiment of their subjective experience. The masculine body as root of male power is a key mythological discourse which is reiterated across many iconic representations

In many instances the male body come signify a corporeal authentication of power which underscores his dominance across many social and cultural spheres. Flannigan-Saint-Aubin (1994: 240) suggests that "patriarchy homologizes human existence with man's corporeality and man's experience of his bodily nature as male." The male body signifies the normalisation of masculine experience (all men can identify with having a male body) and a symbolic source of masculine power (the body can be mythologised as transcending its very corporeality) through which the idealisation of masculinity becomes realised.

Yet once again a closer textual analysis invites a subversive reading which undermines the simplicity of an idealised embodied masculinity. Wolfe's account of the extensive tests undergone by the astronauts would expose any pretension that the male body possessed some unique core of masculine strength which transcends its mortal boundaries:

The problings of the bowels seemed to be endless, full proctosigmoidoscope examinations, the works. These things were never pleasant; in fact, they were a bit humiliating, involving, as they did, various things being shoved up your tail. The Lovelace Clinic speciality seemed to be the exacting of maximum indignity from each procedure. The pilots had never run into anything like this before. Not only that before each ream-out you have to report to the clinic at seven o'clock in the morning and give yourself an enema. *Up Yours!* (Wolfe, 1973: 84)

The manner in which Wolfe describes these tests is arguably written in such a way as to reinforce certain boundaries which hold traditional understandings of masculinity in place. What is particularly interesting here is the rhetoric of homophobia that underpins the description of these invasive procedures. Certainly *The Right Stuff* in general is predicated on the assumption of the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality and sexual difference as fundamental to the ideal masculinity that is being portrayed.

Yet one can also conceptualise these descriptions as another example of how the transition to astronaut subverts the notion of idealised masculinity. In complete contrast to the pilot whose body was the central element of control, these tests were designed to de-condition and

desensitize the astronaut, essentially to "adapt out"³ bodily responses. The very embodied-ness of the pilot, the corporeal underpinning to his masculinity, is, in effect, removed from the subjectivity of the astronaut. This is epitomised by the fact that "considerable attention had been given to a plan to anesthetize or tranquilise the astronauts, not to keep them from panicking, but just to make sure they would lie there peacefully with their sensors on and not do something that would ruin the flight" (Wolfe, 1979: 156). The male body in these terms is not the site of power but a passive biomedical test subject whose masculinity is in fact an obstacle to mission success.

In fact the processes and actions of space flight itself seemingly erode the embodiment of masculinity even further. The wearing of the space suit is a case in point. Once the astronaut puts on the suit he essentially hands over his bodily functions to a computer, everything including breathing, talking and urinating becomes computer controlled. This physical transformation is mirrored in Barthes' jet-man mythology "His racial apartness can be read in his morphology: the anti-G suit of inflatable nylon, the shiny helmet, introduce the jet-man into a novel type of skin in which 'even his mother would not know him'" (Barthes, 1957: 72). This transformation can be culturally defined as a symbolic act that provides the visual focal point of astronaut iconography. The suit *is* the astronaut and is just as central to his mythology as control.

Yet it also reinforces the very limitations of the body and contradicts its significance as the fixed 'root' to masculine power. I argue here that if the pilot has his masculinity enhanced by the aircraft and the body is the central point of control then by contrast the astronaut has his masculinity undermined through various processes of *disembodiment*. The final ascent into zero gravity means that notions of weight and strength become irrelevant and feelings of sickness, fear or anxiety have already been 'adapted out' of the astronauts through their training. The whole discourse of space flight, from the training to the journey itself, effectively removes the notion of the body as a reference point for masculine experience.

Mythology and the Perpetuation of Idealised Masculinity

The Right Stuff represents a coherent, idealised understanding of masculinity around elements such as control and embodiment yet

³ Wolfe highlights many tests, designed by the engineers to train the astronauts to do nothing, that is, to become more passive (see Wolfe 1979, chapter 8). The normal response of the test pilot would be to react to any given situation. The tests were designed to curtail or "adapt-out" these responses in the astronaut.

throughout the text these become contested and ultimately revealed as illusory as the transition from pilot to astronaut takes place. But if, as I suggest, the astronaut as a construct of idealised masculinity is disrupted, or at the very least problematised, why does his identity still seemingly retain coherence? Certainly within Wolfe's novel, despite all the discontinuities that appear to surface through his prose, he still produces an iconic, idealised definition of masculine iconography in the form of the astronaut. This paradox is exemplified by Wolfe in the meeting between Gus Grissom, one of the Mercury Astronauts, and Joe Walker, a test pilot from Edwards air force base. Joe proceeds to "rag" Grissom about the fact the astronauts did not "fly" the spacecraft, but that they were actually passengers. Grissom does not take the bait and just smiles at Walker because he knows that the astronaut, not the pilot, has effectively transcended the various discontinuities which could have undermined his status. Wolfe writes:

And so much for Joe Walker and the True Brothers! It was all right there in that scene, the *new* simple truth. Grissom didn't even feel angry. There was nothing that Joe Walker could say or do – and nothing that even Chuck Yeager himself could say or do – that would change the new order. The astronaut was now at the apex of the pyramid. The rocket pilots were already...the old guys, the eternal remember-whens...Oh, it didn't even have to be said! It was in the air, and everyone new it. (Wolfe, 1979: 235-236)

Despite relinquishing the tenets of control and embodiment which underscore the perception of "The Right Stuff", the astronaut has transcended these factors and superseded the pilot an idealised masculine icon. Masculinity here overrides any simple connotation with supposed masculine traits and I suggest should be understood as a mythological signifying practice which produces knowledge beyond the level of simple or obvious representation.

Barthes has conceptualised how myth is informed by discourse in the sense that its meaning goes beyond any simple language of representation. The astronaut therefore can be explained in terms of discursive elements that inform it *but its meaning transcends this*. Myth is also contextual as it reflects a historical foundation but is not essentially produced or reflective of a coherent reality or truth. Barthes suggests that, "Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication. It is because the materials of myth (whether written or pictorial) presuppose a signifying consciousness that one can reason about while discounting their substance" (Barthes 1957, 110). The astronaut as masculine mythology is conceptualised through discursive

elements engendered in written accounts such as Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* and through various visual representations in film and television. In using discursive analyses of such cultural icons, which perpetuate the idealisation of a certain type of masculinity, one may be able to subvert or undermine their coherence, authenticity or marginalising effects but this does not seemingly deny the way they are ultimately validated through the lexicon of myth. Mythology facilitates the construction of a coherent whole that transcends discursive or contextual shifts:

In terms of the myth masculinity wants to present itself as an essence – fixed, self-consistent, pure. In fact it has no essence and no central core. Gender is marked in three areas or levels of human experience – that of the body and the biological; that of social roles; and that at which gender is defined internally in the unconscious. The myth aims to bring together all three levels in a perfect unity, the completely masculine individual. (Eashope, 1990: 166)

The notion of myth disavows or masks the possible discontinuities that are inherent in historical discourse. Indeed the hierarchies of power that may inform meaning, are rendered immobile or without consequence when myth enters in cultural language. The form of the astronaut may be visible through cultural representation and 'his' ideologically constructed nature may be acknowledged. The idealisation of control over technology may be defined as illusory and the power of the masculine body may be made redundant by the astronaut's subjective experience yet it is through the production of myth that masculine dominance transcends these discursive contradictions to remain culturally and representationally dominant.

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CHAPTER SIX

AMBIGUOUS BODIES, AMBIGUOUS READINGS:

REFLECTIONS ON JAMES M. MURPHY'S

'CHRISTINE ON THE CROSS'

SUSANNAH CORNWALL

The body of the crucified Christ as a soteriological site – a site of salvation – for human bodies has been a central symbol for Christianity. Despite what might charitably be described as ambivalence toward bodies and fleshiness in the Christian tradition, it has been important for theologians to continually give weight to bodies, particularly in light of the doctrine of Jesus' incarnation in a human body, and the assertion that the resurrection of humans after death will occur in physical bodies. Feminist theologians in the 1970s and 1980s emphasized the value of different kinds of embodiment, and of individual experience. Despite a move toward embracing different bodies, however, the body of the central figure of Christianity as portrayed in a series of pieces called *Christas* – where the crucified body is female rather than male – have aroused controversy. In this piece I explore why non-male portrayals of Christ cause such hostility; why *Christas* are important theologically; and how the ambiguities attached to such portrayals echo other ambiguities in bodies, particularly in terms of projections of sexuality. I consider the problems attached to violent figurings of bodies, key to discourses of bodily control, and how these might exist in quasi-empowering representations of female sexuality, as in the photographs sent in by women to men's magazines such as *Zoo* and *Nuts*. One particular *Christa* piece, *Christine on the Cross*, provides a catalyst for exploring such figures as loci for considering other bodily ambiguities.