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**DOI**

[10.25969/mediarep/3348](https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3348)

**Publication date**

2016

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

NECSUS

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Staat, W. (2016). 'The Right Stuff': From Western to melodrama and comedy. *NECSUS*, 5(1), 77-93. <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3348>

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## 'The Right Stuff': From Western to melodrama and comedy

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NECSUS 5 (1), Spring 2016: 77–93

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-right-stuff-from-western-to-melodrama-and-comedy>

**Keywords:** comedy of remarriage, film genre, melodrama, space travel, Western

*The Right Stuff* (1983) is a film about Project Mercury (1958-1963) and its protagonists, the first American astronauts.[1] It is an ensemble film, as it has an extended cast for several story lines interconnecting the lives of seven astronauts and the test pilot thought to be their predecessor in the 1940s. Philip Kaufman's film shows how an unknown phenomenon – space travel – became a familiar topic by referring first to the Hollywood Western and then to melodrama and comedy. *The Right Stuff* uses genre elements to examine how astronauts in the 1960s became public figures. The film is a case point for the idea that we do not so much let an unknown phenomenon like space travel determine our cultural outlook, but instead use cultural habits like genre conventions to transform a new phenomenon into something with which we can cope. The film showed its audience that already in the early days of space travel, starting with supersonic jet planes in the 1940s, film genres were used to prepare the general public for the space-age revolution. *The Right Stuff* addresses not only what its own audience knew about the decline of the Hollywood Western but also what audiences in the early days of space travel themselves used as their cultural reference for their understanding of a new phenomenon. To be sure, *The Right Stuff* aims to accurately portray actual events but never suggests being a documentary. Its reference, rather, is Hollywood.

Understanding the history of space travel in terms of what Hollywood has made of it requires an examination of how *The Right Stuff* has portrayed

the change of a covert military operation built on the skills of experienced test pilots into a civilian public relations project manned by rookie astronauts. The Hollywood Western was the film's point of departure for its depiction of the astronaut's immediate predecessor: the test pilot.[2] As this essay hopes to show, Kaufman went beyond the Western and proved the relevance of other genres as well. The essay argues that Stanley Cavell's 'melodrama of the unknown woman' and his 'comedy of remarriage' are best suited for our understanding of the genres superseding the Western in *The Right Stuff*. Cavell is particularly relevant for *The Right Stuff* because he presents 'the melodrama of the unknown woman' as directly related to 'the comedy of remarriage', not as separate genres. When *The Right Stuff* appears to negotiate the relevance of comedies and melodramas for space travel, Cavell would say that the film does not so much waver between genres, it rather emphasises their interrelatedness. By exploring both melodrama and comedy the film portrays the ways in which genres are negotiated as relevant for our understanding of astronauts as protagonists in familiar films. Notably, Cavell's first examples of melodramas and comedies are from the 1930s and 1940s – a familiar reference for the first astronaut audiences in the 1960s. Cavell describes his favorite comedies as expressing mutual acknowledgment, and his favorite melodramas as expressing existential loneliness when acknowledgement is withheld. When *The Right Stuff* portrays the nearness of loneliness and acknowledgement it shows how space travel became understandable in reference to familiar household heroines and not just to lonesome horseback heroes.

In the end *The Right Stuff* will have made clear that contemporary astronauts are not presented as lonesome cowboys but rather as generic family men, familiar from comedies and melodrama. Remarkably, what we know about genre helps us to understand the world around us. We do not make sense of the world and then, subsequently, use Hollywood to retrospectively entertain us about what has happened before. Instead, a film like *The Right Stuff* proves that the prospect of an ever-changing world will actually be dealt with along the lines of what already is most familiar. The world extended by space travel does not determine a subsequent film – film determines the world.

## The Hollywood genre production of *The Right Stuff*

Before Kaufman directed *The Right Stuff* he was asked to supervise the re-working of Tom Wolfe's 1979 novel of the same title into a film script. It was Kaufman who made clear that Wolfe's journalist reportage-style novel should be adapted in its entirety. Both book and film cover the first American plans to travel into space (the Mercury Program) right from its early years at Edwards Air Force Base in the Californian desert to its move to Houston, Texas, where the Mercury space crafts were launched. 'The right stuff' was an attribute of test pilots before it became a quality of astronauts. The film begins in 1947, shortly before the breaking of the sound barrier; it continues with the selection of seven Mercury astronauts, and it ends with the seventh astronaut circling Earth in 1968. The film's plot is a collection of aviation and space-flight acumen presented with an American viewpoint, interrupted briefly by news item-styled reports on the Soviet's continuing edge in space travel. Most of the film's screen time is reserved for depictions of what it means, on a day to day basis, to be a test pilot, and then a recruit involved in severe training schedules, and ultimately an astronaut getting ready for launch. All events are presented in chronological order except for the extended parallel-editing sequence towards the end of the film, which depicts a dramatic crash by the film's key test pilot in the Californian desert and a public relations event in Houston presenting the seven Mercury astronauts to their Texan audience.

Two aspects of *The Right Stuff* relate to Hollywood genres. The first aspect is the film's adherence to Western conventions. In 2010, James Scott wrote that in its time the film was understood as reminiscent of the good old days of the American West depicted by the Hollywood Western.[3] The cowboy qualities of fighter pilot Chuck Yeager (born 1923), Scott explains, were welcome not only to counter the American back log after the Soviet Sputnik satellite in 1957 but also to combat the turbulent political times and economic tides of the film's premiere in 1983. According to Scott 'the genius of *The Right Stuff* lies in its refashioning and repositioning of the nostalgic cowboy virtues of Yeager, so as to streamline them for the space race and adapt them to the more turbulent world of the 1980s'.[4] Both Tom Charity in his book on *The Right Stuff* (1997) and Annette Insdorf in *Philip Kaufman* (2012) agree with Scott on the Hollywood Western as the notable genre reference that the film makes.[5] As Insdorf writes:

*The Right Stuff* (1983) is a thrilling and quintessentially American motion picture about pilots conquering space the way cowboys once mastered Western land. Using spacecrafts instead of horses, they stake out new territory.[6]

For our understanding of the film's rendition of the astronaut's ascent, the second aspect of the way in which the film uses genre conventions becomes more important. To be sure, this second aspect has been less obvious in the reception of *The Right Stuff*. If the film is read through Cavell's work on Hollywood melodrama it becomes clear that after the Western references were made prominent in the first part of the film, Cavell's 'melodrama of the unknown woman' and his 'comedy of re-marriage' aptly describe the previously unacknowledged role of the wives of the astronauts in the film's second and most substantial part. Although the wives were largely hidden from the general public, in *The Right Stuff* they significantly contextualise the private lives of astronauts as family men.[7] The film finds a balance between the dramatic and the comedic when a predicament in the public relations of the Mercury project is presented together with a potential problem in Annie and John Glenn's private life. As Cavell would have pointed out, our ability to comprehend the generic laws of household melodrama and comedy helps us understand the astronaut's fitness for his job, which, quite different from what the physical strains of the recruitment program suggest, consists in his ability, like the regular family man of his time, to combine public and private aspects of his family life.

### ***The Right Stuff* as Western: Cowboy Yeager**

In *The Right Stuff* the forties markedly belong to Chuck Yeager. His first appearance in the film is dated by Yeager breaking the sound barrier over the desert plains of Southern California in 1947. The opening scene reveals the dangers involved. Breaking the sound barrier is a highlight in Yeager's extended career in the US Air Force, which he began as a fighter pilot during the Second World War. After the war Yeager remained active, mostly as an Air Force test pilot, until his retirement in 1975. Interestingly, Yeager's long career coincided with the success of the Hollywood Western,[8] which began to lose its large-screen appeal by the time Yeager retired.[9] In the film, Sam Shepard as Yeager is introduced on horseback galloping through the desert dressed in a pilot's jacket. Like the new recruits at Edwards Air Force Base, the cinema audience may have heard of Yeager but did not

know what he looked like, nor that he was married and that his wife also lived at Edwards. For Yeager, befitting his cowboy characterisation, there appears to be no reference in *The Right Stuff* to family life beyond Edwards Air Force Base – unlike the introduction of the first of the Mercury Seven, Gordon ‘Gordo’ Cooper (Dennis Quaid), some 20 minutes later, in a luxury car accompanied by his wife and young daughters.

Immediately after the film’s opening with a jet fighter crash in 1947, Kaufman uses the Hollywood Western as an anachronistic reference. He uses the Western while depicting the high-tech, experimental jet pilots of the 1940s. The generic desert landscape of the American Western – the actual scenery of Edwards Air Force Base – was readily available. According to Insdorf the test pilots were ‘conquering space the way cowboys once mastered Western land’.[10] Indeed, when Kaufman worked on the film script he decided to give the Yeager part fewer lines to make his role accord more with the idea of a generic silent cowboy.[11] Yet by the time of the film’s release the popularity of the Western had dwindled.[12] Like the silver-screen cowboy, Yeager was surpassed by other heroes. When *The Right Stuff* premiered in 1983, Yeager’s revered cowboy qualities had become obsolete.

In the first part of the film the Hollywood Western is the prime reference. With Yeager on horseback, the first encounter between pilot and experimental airplane takes place in the desert, not in a hangar, nor recognisably on an airstrip. The encounter is filmed as a confrontation in nature.



Fig. 1: Yeager face to face with the Bell X-1. ©Warner.

A telephoto lens brings rider and airplane close to each other; even though the plane is painted bright orange it does not appear to be isolated from the landscape; the plane's orange befits the sunset lighting. In these surroundings Yeager does not appear to oppose a man-made machine but rather a creature from the wild, in its own habitat, to be tamed by a Western hero.[13] Like a cowboy gaging a wild horse, Yeager prepares for his test flight; the next day he will break the sound barrier in the Bell X-1.

The film jumps to 1953, and 24 minutes in we see the first images of Gordo Cooper. In Pancho's saloon bar at Edwards, Cooper meets Gus Grissom (Fred Ward) and Deke Slayton (Scott Paulin), both also future astronauts. In this setting the three recruits will first become test pilots, learning from Yeager's vast experience. It is not until the 41st minute that space travel will become an issue. By then the film has shown the launch of Sputnik in 1957, which marks the beginning of the space race in *The Right Stuff*. In the 47th minute the first astronauts are recruited to Edwards. From this moment on Yeager's presence in *The Right Stuff* is less authoritative.[14] Instead, the reaction by Senator Lyndon B. Johnson (Donald Moffat) to Sputnik sets the stage for a race in which astronauts will be the protagonists. Even though catching up with the Soviets in space travel was a straightforward target, the way in which space travel had to be coaxed into a political success was far from clear. In this sense *The Right Stuff* not only covers the story of the first American astronauts but also presents how space travel became an event for public relations, how space travel came to be a part of American popular culture.

Kaufman has explained that he opted for the Western in the first part of his film because he wanted his American audience to recognise the way in which Hollywood has imagined the pioneer's spirit of the American Western.[15] Hence the anachronism of a test pilot with an advanced flying machine in a Western setting would not obstruct the viewer's identification of Yeager in the part of the Western hero. Even Cooper, Grissom, and Slayton can be understood as aspiring cowboys in the first part of the film. However, for newcomer John Glenn the Western references will be inadequate.

## Family-man Glenn

At first John Glenn (born 1921) is just one of the jet fighter pilots to be recruited for Johnson's space-travel project. However, Glenn's habitat is not

primarily Edwards. Glenn, played by Ed Harris, does not fit the Western genre conventions. For Glenn in *The Right Stuff* the marital bedroom is generically more important than the Western desert and the saloon. It becomes a prime location. Hence, for the film's presentation of the Glenns, Cavell's melodramas of the unknown woman and his comedies of remarriage are apt conventions. Yet, unlike the well-documented identifications of Yeager as a Western hero, comments on the Glenns as melodramatic and comedic protagonists are scarce or non-existent.

Stanley Cavell was trained as a philosopher and at first his work attracted attention from philosophers interested in ethics and aesthetics. It was only later in Cavell's career that film scholars became interested in his work on the Hollywood melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s. Cavell's work attracted the attention of authors who repeatedly addressed these melodramas as the locus of gender discrimination. Cavell was criticised for not paying ample attention to feminist authors.[16] Unlike these authors, Cavell referred to Bette Davis' paradigmatic role in *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942) as a strong woman, not subservient to patriarchy, transcending her lover who had 'reached the limits of his powers of comprehension'.[17] Cavell's theory of the relatedness of comedies and melodramas is particularly relevant for *The Right Stuff*. What is important about Cavell's book *Contesting Tears* is that he relates his favorite melodramas to the Comedies of Remarriage of his book *Pursuits of Happiness*. In *Contesting Tears*, Cavell writes: 'there must exist a genre of film, in particular some form of melodrama, adjacent to, or derived from, that of remarriage comedy, in which the themes and structure of the comedies are modified or negated in such a way as to reveal systematically the threats (...) that in each of the remarriage comedies dog its happiness'.[18] Here, Cavell has described how his favorite genre films can turn a marriage crisis into its opposite: a couple's celebration of their bond. Cavell then is less interested in romantic comedies about young couples and more in comedies celebrating romantic love in so far as they make that love a public affair. It is as if the wedding vows of the older couple need reiteration. This explains Cavell's qualification of his favorite comedies by the word 're-marriage'. In these comedies the intimacy of romantic love is transcended and publicly celebrated. Cavell uses the phrase 'the simultaneous establishing and transcending of intimacy' for the couple testing 'in the open, or else mutual independence is threatened, the capacity to notice one another, to remember beginning'.[19] To ignore the fragile balance between the public and private aspects of marriage would result in a

lack of acknowledgement, particularly of the wife, Cavell claims. She would become an unknown woman. Hence, both genres are about marriage crises. Cavell's comedies withstand crisis and celebrate the couple's mutual dependence; his melodramas result in a broken relationship with particularly harsh consequences for the wife.

For *The Right Stuff* marriage crisis is relevant for several of the film's couples, but most importantly for the Glenns. The interrelatedness of Cavell's comedies and melodramas particularly pertains to the marriage crises experienced by John and Annie Glenn, as the film, in its middle section, establishes the Glenns as the film's comedic *and* melodramatic protagonists. Significantly, the Glenns' marriage crisis corresponds to the introduction of a problem experienced by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. This outlandish NASA problem literally becomes a familiar problem. Crucially, in its middle section, the film enters the realm of comedy and melodrama in order to come to grips with a problem not even NASA technicians can solve. Before, NASA was uninterested in the private lives of astronauts in the early days of the space program; now, NASA has entered the bedroom.

The administration's reluctance to engage with the married life of their astronauts was understandable given its foundation in 1958 for the explicit purpose of peaceful space science. In 1959 its aim became manned space travel. Still, it was not until 1961 that NASA launched its first public relations campaign. Before 1961 NASA operated like its military predecessors – covert and without PR. Consequently, at first the Mercury project in 1959 was actively on its way to space without acknowledging that it was serving a public, political purpose. Arguably, the 1959 contract with *Life* magazine was the first PR success for NASA – but it was not carefully planned. NASA reportedly opted for *Life* in order to rid itself from public attention once and for all rather than embrace it wholeheartedly.[20] The *Life* contract features prominently in the film. To wit, the private life of astronauts was not relevant in a military context. They all were soldiers before they became astronauts, and that they were family men was relevant only in so far as married life would obstruct their performance. Appropriately then, *The Right Stuff* begins from Edwards Air Force Base. In the 1940s and 1950s popular media were kept at a distance. In the film, television as a popular medium begins to play a significant role as soon as the recruitment program for the Mercury project directs its first recruiters to Edwards. Two civil officers in plain clothing drive a car marked as a government vehicle. A tall and short re-

cruiter duo (Jeff Goldblum and Harry Shearer) clumsily try on each other's jacket. According to *The Right Stuff*, it was these two fumbling intelligence officers who presented Johnson with the news about the Soviet lead in space.[21] Now, as recruiters, they improvise their way through Edwards, eventually enjoying their TV dinner over a quiz featuring a candidate in uniform – John Glenn.



Fig. 2: John Glenn introduced on television. ©Warner.

Glenn's introduction in *The Right Stuff* is established through his answer to a TV-quiz question: a song called 'Straighten Up and Fly Right', arguably Glenn's motto for the rest of the film. In the same television show Glenn explicitly refers to his wife when he tells the audience that he married his childhood sweetheart. Glenn is the only candidate astronaut introduced via a seemingly insignificant small, black-and-white screen, apparently prescient about a public-relations project that NASA itself did not yet know it was launching. Later, Glenn indeed becomes the ideal spokesperson for the astronauts; on television his talent is already distinguished.[22] The crucial scene for Glenn as the key figure in the middle part of *The Right Stuff* is the press conference in April 1959 when the Mercury Seven were presented to the public. As the film emphasises, the press conference was largely improvised. It was the first time the Mercury Seven appeared in public. According to the film the seven astronauts were not well prepared. An apparently overwhelming crowd of journalists surprised the seven prospective astronauts with non-technical questions about their patriotism and their family's support.



Fig. 3: The public presentation of the Mercury Seven (Glenn in the middle, with bow tie).  
©Warner.

*The Right Stuff* shows how Glenn saves the day for the Mercury project because of his aptness to involve his family – reminiscent of what he did before, on the television screen. His catchphrase ‘a hundred percent’, for the first time in the 76th minute, demonstrates his ability to communicate via press conferences, as does his patriotism inspired by a well-chosen but apparently wholly-improvised reference to aviation pioneers Orville and Wilbur Wright. Stimulated by Glenn the other astronauts recognise that patriotism is an astronaut’s forte, and that going to church is just one way of showing that they are serving God and country. To be sure, flaunting his patriotism would be out of character for a mysterious cowboy like Yeager. For Glenn, however, a PR opportunity like this lets him excel. In fact, the film emphasises his success by sounding the Hallelujah Chorus from Händel’s *Messiah*. This is the film’s inauguration of a PR campaign launching all-American heroes against Soviet opponents. These heroes are not lonesome cowboys – they are patriotic family men.

## The Glenns in both melodrama and comedy

After the glorious press conference the film's next scene underlines the importance of the astronaut's family life; it is the scene covering the *Life* magazine contract.[23] This is the contract that actually has brought the astronauts closer to the American public, not only because the photographs of the astronauts were published in a mainstream magazine but also because of the way in which the astronauts were portrayed as loving husbands. From then on the astronaut wives were no longer unknown and reporters also spoke to the wives – a problem for Annie Glenn. Not unlike the American general audience in the 1960s, viewers of the film had to wait a long time before they could hear Annie Glenn speak (82nd minute). However, the film audience was to know more than the general audience in the 1960s: Annie had a serious stammer. Significantly, Annie's speech impediment is shown to the film audience within the confines of the marital bedroom, befitting the melodramas and comedies described by Cavell. In spite of the quite elaborate screen time of more than half an hour for the launching and landing of space crafts, what is crucial for our understanding of the generic transition from Western to melodrama and remarriage comedy is that, corresponding to the transition from test pilot to astronaut, we have actually left the Western desert and entered the marital bedroom.[24]



Fig. 4: In bed with the Glenns. © Warner.

What notably warrants the astronauts' solidarity is not the screened array of exploding rockets, nor the new Soviet successes in the subsequent scenes; instead, it is Annie's stammer that aligns the Mercury Seven. Indeed, *The*

*Right Stuff* opts to present the astronauts' first expression of unanimity in relation to the private life of one of them. The immediate cause for the astronauts' alarm is vice president Johnson's request to speak to Annie. As the vice president's delegation requests an interview with Mrs. Glenn, her stammering 'nn-no' after more than two hours of screening time is what unifies the astronauts. Together, they support Annie's refusal. In *The Right Stuff*, Mrs. Glenn's stammer coincides with a next phase of the Mercury project. Kaufman lets Glenn use his 'a hundred percent' phrase to both comfort his wife and reassure the press that the American astronauts are ready to travel into space for an entire day, just like the Soviets. Glenn's leadership is confirmed repeatedly by this phrase. Crucially, Kaufman makes Glenn also use the phrase in a private phone call with his wife; he displays the intimacy of marriage as he becomes the central character of *The Right Stuff*.

As Cavell has clarified, the privacy of the bedroom relates to the public image of the protagonists. In *The Right Stuff* Glenn understands how the press needs his catch phrases, and he remarkably uses the same formula to express his love for his wife. 'A hundred percent' lets him be the loving husband in times of stuttering crisis *and* the undisputed leader of the Mercury astronauts. These roles are not incompatible. The astronauts led by John Glenn have become a self-assured group as a result of the resolution in the Glenns' marriage.[25] The adventurers close ranks when the Glenns are at stake. If John Glenn would have succumbed to the vice president's requests and had encouraged his wife to speak to Johnson he would have risked his marriage. For Cavell such a scenario would have been the melodramatic counterpoint to what the film actually has shown; it would have shown Annie as an unknown, unacknowledged woman. In the world of public relations John Glenn would have done well; however, in his marriage he would have failed, and his failure would have devastated Annie. In as much as the reciprocity of marriage would have been denied to Annie, the film would have become a Cavellian melodrama of the unknown woman. Instead, the film became a comedic celebration of marriage. As Cavell has described, the nearness of melodrama to comedy is not without emotional impact – a marriage is at stake. Similarly, Johnson's potentially devastating outburst in his limousine upon hearing about Mrs. Glenn's refusal to speak to him, as has become clear from the generic nearness of melodrama and comedy, cannot but work comically in this film. The bond between the Glenns is re-established to comic effect. John Glenn effectively will have it

all, both his marriage and his career, because he has managed to find a direct route from his bedroom to the launch pad.[26]

### Conclusion: Unsung hero versus Texan stars

The film's most elaborate single scene is an extended parallel-editing sequence towards the end. A small coda concludes the film when the last of the Mercury Seven is launched. The parallel sequence features Chuck Yeager in a near disastrous attempt to fly his experimental 'Starfighter' plane to undiscovered heights, while the Mercury Seven 'enjoy' a Texan barbeque-style welcome in an indoor sports arena in Houston. While Yeager reaches for the stars the astronauts are treated to an ill-received act by burlesque dancer Sally Rand (1904-1979) on French impressionist classical music. As James Scott has pointed out, Kaufman's rendition of Rand's performance was historically accurate.[27] Yet, the parallel with Yeager was available only to the film audience.[28] Kaufman presents vice president Johnson's welcoming of the Mercury Seven to Texas, documented on the 4th of July, 1962 as exactly coinciding with Yeager's ultimate test flight.

The astronauts became television stars, not unlike Sally Rand in the 1950s. On that day in Houston they physically and symbolically were closer to Rand than to Yeager. In Texas they became public assets. It was Johnson who recognised the political capital involved in relocating the Mercury project to Houston. As Johnson understood, Texans were not becoming internationally oriented; instead, Johnson let his astronaut guests adapt to the customs of their Texan hosts. This is how Johnson capitalised on the Mercury Seven. Johnson managed to open the Space Center in Houston not to please an international audience but to harvest local prestige and the Texan vote. Sally Rand was not interesting because of her references to French music; what counted for beer-drinking Texans was her reputation as a stripper. Interestingly, the sports stadium in Texas no longer features John Glenn as *primus inter pares*. Glenn was crucial only when a PR campaign still needed development. The move to Texas in fact proved that public relations already had become key. In that sense the Hallelujah press conference and the Texas barbeque were each other's opposites.

In his article James Scott suggests that the film nostalgically adapted Yeager's virtues to what Scott calls the conservatism of the eighties.[29] However, as the parallel sequence towards the end of the film shows,

Yeager's heroics lost their audience. During the ascendancy of television Yeager's virtues were replaced by John Glenn's family values. To be sure, these family values can indeed be understood as conservative, for example vis-à-vis the sexual morality embodied by several of Glenn's colleagues. Indeed, the genre conventions relevant even for contemporary, 21st century astronauts are the conventions personified in the film by John Glenn. Hence, contrary to what Scott suggests, Glenn's family values are not secondary to Yeager's prowess. The film's parallel between Chuck Yeager and Sally Rand not only generates nostalgic images reminiscent of the Western but also distinctly emphasises that by the time of the move to Texas the test pilot's successor, the astronaut, had grown into a more contemporary media personality.

*The Right Stuff* replaces the cowboy with the married man. Cowboy Yeager tamed his experimental airplanes as if they were wild horses, but his talent would no longer fit the age of television. Family-man Glenn, on the other hand, with his one-liners and engaging personality, did fit the small screen. In the film Annie and John Glenn at first appear to be characters in a melodrama, but eventually the Glenns control their marriage crisis in the format of a Cavellian comedy of remarriage. John Glenn saves his marriage by protecting his wife's privacy, while at the same time publically presenting himself as part of a marriage between partners. In *The Right Stuff*, John Glenn's success as an astronaut coincides with the re-affirmation of his marriage. It is only after this confirmation has taken effect that Yeager returns to the screen. By then, however, his time has passed. *The Right Stuff* has made clear that Glenn better suits the public relations implied by the USA space programs. Glenn on television made the difference. Eventually, that is why even 21st century astronauts do not resemble cowboy Yeager but still resemble family-man Glenn. The right stuff, as *The Right Stuff* has made clear, used to be a mythically-proportioned Western heroism, but it has changed into the conservative family values embodied by the Glenns. The film has generated the means by which we familiarise ourselves with the strange new worlds that space travel promises.

## Author

Wim Staat is Assistant Professor of Film and Visual Culture in the Department of Media Studies of the University of Amsterdam. Ethics and film are his main topics, and he is interested in the ways in which film can be considered as performatively displaying ethical concern. He has taught in the US and in the Netherlands and has written on film ethics in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*; on Lars von Trier's *Dogville* in relation to Ford's version of *The Grapes of Wrath*; on responsibility in Claire Denis' *L'intrus*; and on the representation of law in melodramas and comedies as described by Stanley Cavell. <http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/w.staat/> .

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## Notes

- [1] For this article the 2003 Warner Home Video DVD was used. The film originally was released by The Ladd Company in 1983. The DVD running time is 193 minutes. After 179 minutes the end titles appear.
- [2] Most elaborately by Charity 1997 and Insdorf 2012.

- [3] James Scott writes that the film 'shares a yearning for (...) "the good old days" (...) organized (...) around the myth of the American West' (Scott 2010, p. 47). According to Scott the film contributed to the success of Ronald Reagan's conservatism in the 1980s. Scott argues that Philip Kaufman's depiction of American Hero and protagonist test pilot Chuck Yeager is a token of nostalgia, characteristic of the Reagan 1980s.
- [4] Scott 2010, p. 49.
- [5] Charity (1997, pp. 26-27; 35-37) and Insdorf (2012, pp. 78-101) agree on the Western references made in *The Right Stuff*. Insdorf, more elaborately than Charity, points out how the film's Western references make it different from Tom Wolfe's book (Insdorf 2012, pp. 87-90; 95-101). Charity and Insdorf do not corroborate Scott's idea that Yeager's cowboy virtues qualify him for 1980s politics.
- [6] Insdorf 2012, p. 78.
- [7] According to Cavell 1996, the Hollywood melodrama is defined by its lack of recognition for women. For Cavell the melodrama of the unknown woman relates to what he calls the comedy of remarriage.
- [8] In Corlin 2004, he claims that by 1962 the era of the traditional Hollywood Western was coming to an end. According to Corlin the next phase is the time of 'Cold War Westerns'.
- [9] The Western's renewed success postdated *The Right Stuff*. Alexandra Keller writes: '[t]he Western's resurgence with the Oscar winning *Dances with Wolves* in 1990 and *Unforgiven* in 1992, coincide[s] with the seismic shifts in American culture that were the Reagan-Bush years' (2003, p. 47).
- [10] Insdorf 2012, p. 78.
- [11] Charity writes that in 1984 most of the actors were unknown. They could actually be cast because they physically resembled the astronauts they portrayed. The exception was Sam Shepard, who played Chuck Yeager (1997, p. 36-7).
- [12] Keller claims that Hollywood was reluctant to invest in Westerns after the 'critical and financial catastrophe of *Heaven's Gate* in 1980' (2003, p. 47).
- [13] Insdorf quotes Kaufman's script to make clear that the Bell X-1 is less a machine than a stallion: 'a bronc that can't be broken' (2012, p. 82).
- [14] Yeager was shun from the space program supposedly because he did not have a college degree. However, Matthew Hersch points out that there is no evidence corroborating this line of recruitment (2011, p. 76).
- [15] Charity points out that Kaufman was experienced with Westerns: Kaufman directed *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (1972) and wrote *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Clint Eastwood, 1976). According to Charity, Kaufman was inspired by these experiences to present Yeager as a 'renegade hero' (1997, p. 26).
- [16] Cavell writes about Tania Modleski in *Contesting Tears* (1996, pp. 32-37). In *Cities of Words*, Cavell summarises how 'feminism tended (...) to distrust [Women's] films, (...) seeing them (...) as luring their primarily females audiences to excessive investments of feeling and identification with their narratives, placing themselves in service of a conventional patriarchal hierarchy' (2004, p. 238).
- [17] Cavell 2004, p. 245.
- [18] Cavell 1996, p. 83.
- [19] Cavell 1981, p. 216.
- [20] See Kauffman 1991.
- [21] According to Charity, NASA never sent recruiters to Edwards. Also, Cooper, Grissom, and Slayton can never have met at Edwards in the way suggested by *The Right Stuff*. The real Mercury astronauts, did not appear to be concerned much with historical accuracy; their only concern

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was the episode with the safety hatch in Grissom's capsule, which controversially caused his capsule to sink to the ocean floor (1997, pp. 49, 68).

- [22] About Glenn's introduction on television, Insdorf writes: 'Kaufman improves on the book by first showing John Glenn on television: he will indeed become the most comfortable with the media, the spokesman and public darling' (2012, p. 87).
- [23] *Fallen Astronauts: Heroes Who Died Reaching for the Moon* explains that John Glenn's conversation with John Kennedy, senator at the time, was instrumental to NASA signing a contract with *Life* magazine in 1959 (Burgess & Doolan & Vis 2003, pp. 17-18).
- [24] Immediately following the bedroom scene, the film shows a range of failed tests with rockets, subsequently the Soviet launch of Yuri Gagarin, and eventually the successful launch of Alan Shepard, the first American in space (85th to 113th minute).
- [25] Before the Glens become the moral centerpiece of the film several women are shown roaming the Mercury Seven hotel rooms, informing each other about their sexual conquests: 'four down, three to go' (87th minute). Hersch, in 'Return of the Lost Spaceman,' explains that NASA had an active policy aiming to reduce alcohol abuse and sexual excess among astronauts (2011, p. 78).
- [26] Insdorf agrees that *The Right Stuff* implies an understanding of the astronaut as a family man: '[*The Right Stuff* is] about the domestic integrity of protecting a loved one on the ground' (2012, p. 90).
- [27] Scott had access to the programming details for the publicity event introducing the Mercury Seven to Texas. In '*The Right Stuff* at the Wrong Time' he mentions Rand's impression of Icarus flying too close to the sun (2010, p. 55), performed in her famous 'fan dance' on Debussy's composition 'Clair de lune'.
- [28] In the film Yeager breaches protocol when he tests the Starfighter. Insdorf writes that it was Kaufman who suggested that Yeager did not have authorisation. In Kaufman's words: Yeager was 'the lone gunfighter going out against authority' (2012, p. 95).
- [29] Scott does appear to acknowledge that Glenn does well on television; yet, Scott does not let Glenn become more than what he calls 'the poster child of the Mercury project' (2010, p. 50). What is argued here, contrary to Scott, is that Glenn's television personality, as opposed to Yeager's Western-style heroism, is crucial for Glenn becoming the central character of the Mercury project.