

Henry Keazor (ed.)

We Are All Astronauts

The Image of the Space Traveler in Arts and Media

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Contents

- 7 // **Henry Keazor**
“We Are All Astronauts”.
The Image of the Space Traveler in Arts and Media
- 35 // **Matthew H. Hersch**
Redemptive Space.
Duty, Death, and the Astronaut-Soldier, 1949–1969
- 55 // **Umberto Rossi**
All We Mad Starmen.
Contextualizing Barry N. Malzberg’s NASA Trilogy and
Its Deranged Astronauts
- 73 // **Ansgar Oswald**
The Space Traveler.
Ambassador, Cult Figure, and Cultural Icon
- 89 // **Colleen Boyle**
Through the Eyes of the Astronaut.
Mediator of the Human Imagination
- 109 // **Alexander Hauk / Sophia Hauk**
Wall Calendar Journalism.
How an Astronaut is Giving Journalism New Impetus:
The Protestonaut as an Appeal for a Better World
- 125 // **Jörg Hartmann**
Female Space Travelers in Science Fiction Films 1898–2017

- 157 // **Marc Blancher**
“Let’s discover Space!”
Tintin and Other French-Belgian Comic Characters as Astronauts
- 175 // **Nils Daniel Peiler**
Backlash of the Future.
A Comparison of the Astronaut Image in
Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and
Peter Hyams’ *2010: The Year We Make Contact* (1984)
- 191 // **Marc Bonner**
‘Climb the Penrose Stairs to Merge with the (In)Finite’.
The Astronaut as Reciprocal Posthuman
- 211 // **Martin Butler**
The Future that Never Was.
Analogue Nostalgia and the Ambivalent Astronaut in
the Songs of Man ... or Astro-man?
- 225 // **Marc Bonner / Thomas Hensel**
Astronaut and Avatar.
Some Remarks about the Video Game as Outer Space
- 243 // Table of Figures

Henry Keazor

“We Are All Astronauts”

The Image of the Space Traveler in Arts and Media

“We are all astronauts” the American architect and thinker Richard Buckminster Fuller declared in his book *Operating Manual For Spaceship Earth*, first published in 1968.¹ Buckminster Fuller thus compared Earth to a spaceship, provided with exhaustible resources while flying through space. Although the metaphor of Earth as a ship had previously been employed by the US-American economist Henry George in 1879 in his book *Progress and Poverty*, where he called our planet “a well-provisioned ship, this on which we sail through space”,² in Buckminster Fuller’s case his comparison was more likely to have been inspired by Yuri Gagarin’s words in 1961 about the uniqueness and beauty of Earth,³ and especially by the view, captured by satellites from 1967 onwards, showing Earth as an isolated ‘blue marble’ floating through space. This view anticipates the famous image captured by astronaut Harrison Schmitt in 1972 on board Apollo 17⁴ – a photograph that not only remains one of the most iconic and most widely distributed images in human history, but was also used frequently in the context of the ecology movement in the 1970s (Colleen Boyle further develops this idea of the astronaut’s eye as a “mediator of the human imagination” in her article in this volume).⁵

1 Richard Buckminster Fuller: *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. Mattituck, NY: Aeonian 1969, p. 14.

2 Henry George: *Progress and Poverty*. New York: D. Appleton 1879, p. 173.

3 Meanwhile also communicated to children in books, such as Ben Hubbard: *Yuri Gagarin and the Race to Space*. London: Raintree 2016, p. 43.

4 Don Nardo: *The Blue Marble: How a Photograph Revealed Earth’s Fragile Beauty*. North Mankato, MN: Compass Point 2014, p. 8.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

The phrase “we are all astronauts” on the one hand gives us an idea of the phenomenon of the astro-/cosmonaut in public consciousness from the second half of the twentieth century onwards; on the other hand, the wording might also have played a significant role in shaping the symbolic role of the space-exploring human and in shaping an image of humankind in general. However, Buckminster Fuller’s phrase also announces a change in the public perception of astro-/cosmonauts, as we will see later. Space travelers were indeed initially presented and conceived as courageous heroes and popular figures to be identified with. They were even presented as representatives of a new step in human evolution (this is, as Ansgar Oswald shows in his article on “The Space Traveler: Ambassador, Cult Figure, and Cultural Icon” in this book, a historical as well as a contemporary phenomenon).

In his articles and in his 2010 book *Maternités Cosmiques*, the French art historian Arnauld Pierre has shown that not only in everyday speech, but especially in artistic representations accompanying the history of space exploration, “the astronaut appeared as the central figure of a modern angelology which dealt with the future cosmic condition of humankind which had succeeded in adapting to space.”⁶ In his article on the “Angelology of the Astronaut and the Eschatology of Space Travel” from 2014, he also discusses paintings such as those by the artist Robert McCall, today famous for his promotional paintings for Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (a film that Nils Daniel Peiler writes about in his contribution for this volume, where, under the title “Backlash of the Future”, he compares Kubrick’s original movie with its sequel, *2010: The Year We Make Contact*, directed 16 years later by Peter Hyams, focusing on the image of the astronaut as conceived in each film). McCall’s painting of the spacecraft “Orion” and his depiction of the lunar surface with the Moon station “Clavius Base” in the background were both used for the movie posters and for the promotion of the film. Pierre stresses the numinous and religious undertones of some of McCall’s paintings, such as the symbol of the cross or the presence of halos, thus making the astronauts appear to be superhuman, angelic beings (Marc Bonner deals with these and similar conceptions of the astronaut as a post-humanistic being in his

6 Arnauld Pierre: Le scaphandrier des nuages: Angéologie de l’astronaute et eschatologie du voyage spatial. In: Christine Poullain / Guillaume Theulière (eds): *Futurs: De la ville aux étoiles: Matisse, Miró, Calder*. Centre de la Vieille Charité, Marseille Exhibition Catalog. Marseille: RMN 2015, pp. 46–53, here p. 52. In the original French: “l’astronaute apparaît comme la figure centrale d’une angéologie moderne discourant de la future condition cosmique de l’homme ayant réussi son adaptation à l’espace” (my translation). See also Arnauld Pierre: *Maternités Cosmiques*. Paris: Hazan 2010.

article on the “The Astronaut as Reciprocal Post-human” in the present volume).⁷ This very positive image, however, began to change by the beginning of the 1970s, if not earlier; the fact that paintings such as those done by McCall continued to uphold this positive image is not an argument against this change, but should be seen as a counter-reaction.

In his 2005 book *Moon Dust*, the journalist Andrew Smith relates this change to the classification of epochs that the British historian Eric Hobsbawm defined in his book *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, published in 1994. Hobsbawm distinguishes a “Golden Age” (1945–1972) that encompasses the dawn of “the Space Age” from an ensuing “landslide”, leading in turn to the “crisis decades”.⁸ The first phase, marked by “upheaval, uncertainty, optimism, energy” would then, according to Smith, have reverted into a skeptical and pessimistic era that found itself disappointed by its own hopes, where its former heroes would have lost all their splendor.⁹

Buckminster Fuller’s metaphor of humankind as the crew of a spaceship “Earth” now had admonitory connotations: “So, planners, architects, and engineers take the initiative,” urges Buckminster Fuller towards the end of his book, in order to tackle the ensuing challenges of caring for this spaceship Earth and to find solutions for the problem of its resources, which he considers – in contrast to George’s view from 1879 of the Earth as a still “well-provisioned ship” – exhaustible.¹⁰ A certain optimism towards science may still be implicit in Buckminster Fuller’s text, but the image of the astro-/cosmonaut in the arts and in the media has subsequently, right up to this day, tended more towards the negative: astronauts are mostly depicted as deceived, failing or failed characters.

Thus, the astronauts in the works of contemporary photographs such as Bernard Bailly, Hunter Freeman, Jeremy Geddes, and Ken Hermann find themselves on a planet Earth that is apparently abandoned by humans and (judging by the spacesuits the astronauts are wearing) also hostile to life; they wander alone and lonely through empty streets, landscapes and houses (Fig. 1).¹¹ In his series

7 Pierre: *Le scaphandrier*, pp. 51–52.

8 Eric Hobsbawm: *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*. London: Joseph 1994.

9 Andrew Smith: *Moon Dust*. London: Bloomsbury 2005, pp. 292–293.

10 Buckminster-Fuller: *Operating Manual*, p. 43.

11 For Bailly see <http://theinspirationgrid.com/surreal-astronaut-photos-by-bernard-bailly/> (accessed: November 30, 2018); for Geddes who with his photos inspired Bailly for some of his works see <https://www.jeremygeddesart.com/> (accessed: November 30, 2018); for Freemann see <https://hunterfreeman.com/PROJECTS/ASTRONAUTS/thumbs> (accessed: November 30, 2018) and for Hermann see <http://kenhermann.dk/portfolio/crash-landed/#e-1> (accessed: November 30, 2018).



Fig. 1a: Bernard Bailly: *Lost Astronaut*, 2007. Photography.



Fig. 1b: Hunter Freeman: *Astronaut Salt Flats*, 2011. Photography.



Fig. 1c: Jeremy Geddes: *The Street*, 2010. Photography.



Fig. 1d: Ken Hermann: *Crash Landed*, 2014. Photography.

Astronaut Suicides from 2011, the photographer Neil DaCosta has drawn his own conclusions from this negative image by showing how seemingly desperate astronauts, still wearing their full outfit, are putting an end to their isolated existence in various ways (Fig. 2).¹² The American artist Scott Listfield interprets similar topics through the medium of painting and depicts the space travelers as they stroll alone through a desolate landscape littered with adverts for consumer goods. These isolated astronauts, according to Listfield, help him to depict the alienation of our present age (Fig. 3).¹³

The iconography of the lonesome astronaut wandering through deserted rooms and buildings, as depicted by Listfield and DaCosta, was transferred into moving images on two occasions in William Eubank's 2011 film *Love*. It tells the story of an astronaut named Lee Miller, who is stranded alone aboard a space station, while on Earth a global war has apparently broken out, which extinguishes all human life. Using various methods, Miller struggles to survive, not only mentally but also physically, as the space station begins to develop technical faults. During a repair mission, in one module Miller finds the journal of a Union soldier, Captain Lee Briggs, who was sent on a mission in 1864 during the American Civil War to investigate an alien, mysterious object. After having read the entries in the journal and following a brief interview section with a modern soldier talking about love being the most important thing in life, Miller apparently fantasizes about making love to a sensuous woman, whose voice can be heard whispering "Are you waiting for someone?",¹⁴ while he is shown sitting alone in his astronaut suit at a bus stop in a situation similar to those depicted by Listfield and DaCosta (Fig. 4a). Later in the movie, when the oxygen system aboard the station begins to fail, Miller decides to commit suicide by leaving the station in his spacesuit and letting himself drift towards Earth in order to burn up in its atmosphere. It remains unclear if he succeeds or if he aborts the attempt and returns to the station – the following sequences could just be his imagination while hurtling towards Earth and dying, but could also be depicting actual events. Years later an unkempt Miller is contacted from outside the station by alien entities, who tell him to dock to their giant vehicle; inside it the astronaut finds deserted rooms containing a server mainframe and, later on, a hotel

12 For DaCosta see <http://neildacosta.com/astronaut-suicides> (accessed: November 30, 2018).

13 For Listfield see <https://www.astronautdinosaur.com/art97.htm> (accessed: November 30, 2018). Note his frequent references to sci-fi films such as *The Empire Strikes Back*, *2001: A Space Odyssey* or catastrophes such as the Challenger disaster from 1986.

14 William Eubank: *Love* (US 2011). DVD. Cologne: Splendid Film 2012, 0:44:06.



Fig. 2: Neil DaCosta: *The Astronaut Suicides*, 2011. Photography.

lobby, both moments echoing again the images of Listfield and DaCosta (Fig. 4b). *Love* is, of course, also indebted to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Not only does Eubank's astronaut resemble Dave Bowman during his passage through the so-called "Star Gate" when Miller finds the diary in the module and colorful lights are reflected by the visor of his helmet,¹⁵ but the hotel lobby he ultimately enters is also an echo of the "Louis-Seize" hotel room, in which Bowman finds himself at the end of Kubrick's movie.¹⁶ The two living areas even seem to serve the same purpose; Miller is told in the end by the aliens that they have built the place as "a scrapbook of sorts, a collection of memories and mementos of mankind's brief existence", which is apparently supposed to make him feel at home in the alien environment.¹⁷ It is likewise assumed that the Louis XVI room in

15 Ibid., 0:41:23 and, as a similar scene, 1:15:11–1:15:33.

16 Ibid., 1:07:50–1:09:00. On the "Louis Seize" room, see Ralf Michael Fischer: *Raum und Zeit im filmischen Œuvre von Stanley Kubrick*. Berlin: Gebrüder Mann 2009, pp. 286–287, 293–296.

17 Eubank: *Love*, 1:14:18–1:14:24.

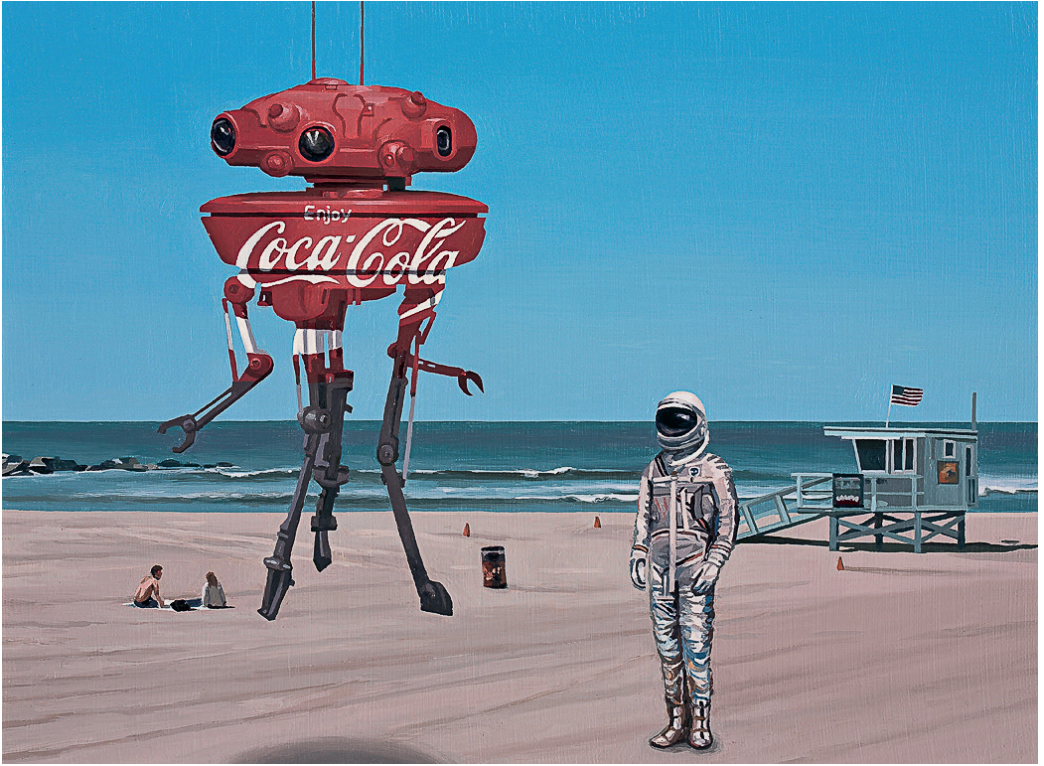


Fig. 3: Scott Listfield: *Coke Droid*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 9 x 12 inches.

Kubrick's movie is supposed to function as a kind of familiar-looking waiting room for Bowman to die and be reborn in.¹⁸

Even meetings between astronauts in space often are not sufficient for them to overcome their isolation. The encounter between Hergé's comic character "Tintin", who (as Marc Blancher shows in his article "Let's discover Space! Tintin and Other Characters of French-Belgian Comics as Astronauts") is shown planning and making a trip to the Moon as early as 1953/54, and a 'real', contemporary astronaut, as depicted by the Italian artist Tom Colbie in his painting *Close*

18 Fischer: *Raum und Zeit*, p. 293. The "Louis Seize" room in the film corresponds most likely to the (however, modern) hotel room Bowman finds himself in the novel by Arthur C. Clarke: *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Tiptree, Essex: Anchor 1968, pp. 241–249, in the chapter, most tellingly called "Reception". The astronaut himself suspects that the room was built in order to "not [...] deceive but rather – he hoped – to reassure", *ibid.*, p. 243.



Fig. 4a & b: Screenshots from *Love* (US 2011, D: William Eubank).

Encounter from 2015, accordingly takes place in a rather bleak and joyless atmosphere (Fig. 5). One can clearly see the contrast between the spacesuits of Tintin and Snowy with their jolly colors and the strict and severe appearance of the real astronaut, who, moreover, appears alone and isolated unlike Tintin and his dog Snowy (it is almost as if Tintin and Snowy do not even notice the presence of the real astronaut).¹⁹

The British sculptor David Mach puts all this in a nutshell. In 2000, he created *Spaceman* (today located in the glass foyer of the Space One building in Hammersmith, London: Fig. 6): a figure who not only trudges alone through the surrounding exhibition rooms, but who already seems to be isolated because

19 See <http://tomcolbieart.tumblr.com/post/111945822059/close-encounters> (accessed: November 30, 2018).

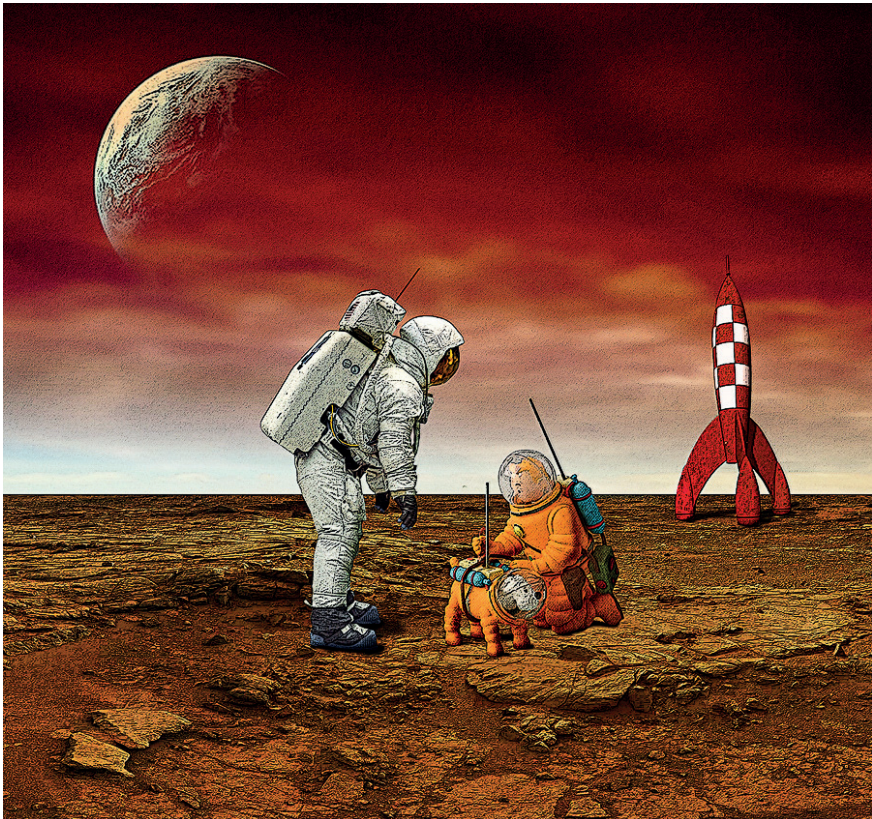


Fig. 5: Tom Colbie: *Close Encounter*, 2015. Print, 11.8 x 11.8 inches.

of his repellent appearance – a myriad of clothes-hanger hooks are poking out of his body, building a cocoon that surrounds and encapsulates him like an armor-ing whirl of energy.²⁰

Given all these depictions, one is reminded of a quote from the American science-fiction author A(lfred) A(ngelo) Attanasio: “Being human is the most terrible loneliness in the universe.”²¹ The quote was also used in 2011 to powerful effect as a prelude to the music video for the song *Astronaut* by the Canadian rock band Simple Plan, where the iconography of loneliness and isolation associated with

20 See <https://www.davidmach.com/gallery/> (accessed: 30.11.2018).

21 A[lfred] A[ngelo] Attanasio: *The Dragon and the Unicorn*. New York: HarperPrism 1996, p. 196.

astronauts is put into moving images, accompanied by the music and matching lyrics, emphasizing the figure of the astronaut as a fitting metaphor. Interestingly, the song was played in December 2012 aboard the orbiting space station ISS by Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield, who will be discussed further below.²²

We also encounter the failing or failed astronaut in the genre of the music video, as well as that of film. I am referring here to the video made by Dom & Nic for the 2001 song *What I Mean* by the French house duo Modjo, where an astronaut (as portrayed by the singer Yann Destagnol) is shown as being haunted in outer space by phantasmal images of a woman. The astronaut ultimately gets lost in the depths of space when he, apparently still under the influence of the ghostly vision of the woman, makes a fatal mistake during a repair mission. At the beginning of the video, there is a drop of water in outer space, visible outside the window of the hatch, deliberately placed there to allude to the ghostly appearance of the woman later on, as she seems to materialize out of drops of water. These drops of water then fly towards the astronaut (the images are vaguely in tune with the lyrics, which deal with the loss of a beloved woman). The fatal mistake committed by the astronaut, which unleashes a strong jet of water that blows him into space, is clearly implied to be her doing.

An astronaut (played by lead singer Morten Harket) who is similarly deluded by a woman can be found in the music video for the song *Minor Earth, Major Sky* by the Norwegian group a-ha. The video was directed by Philipp Stölzl a year before the Modjo video. After a successful landing on the Moon and an exploratory walk across its surface, the astronaut is separated from his two companions on the way back to the landing module, being fatally attracted to a “Fata Morgana” that lures him into the phantasmagorical realities of a party on Earth and then into the bedroom of a beautiful and beguiling woman. The deceptive illusion vanishes the moment his colleagues, who have been waiting impatiently for him, head back to Earth in the module, leaving him helpless and alone on the Moon.

This motif of the deluded, seduced, and confused astronaut of course had its predecessor thirty-one years earlier in the video that accompanied an early studio version of the song *Space Oddity* by David Bowie. The well-known song is about Major Tom, who (as the lyrics put it) floats “in a most peculiar way” in his “tin can” through space, observing that “the stars look very different today”

22 See Dominika Marsová: Astronaut Chris Hadfield Played “Astronaut” in Space. In: *Simple Plan*, May 14, 2013. <http://www.simpleplan.cz/en/index.php/astronaut-chris-hadfield-plays-astronaut-in-space/> (accessed: November 30, 2018).

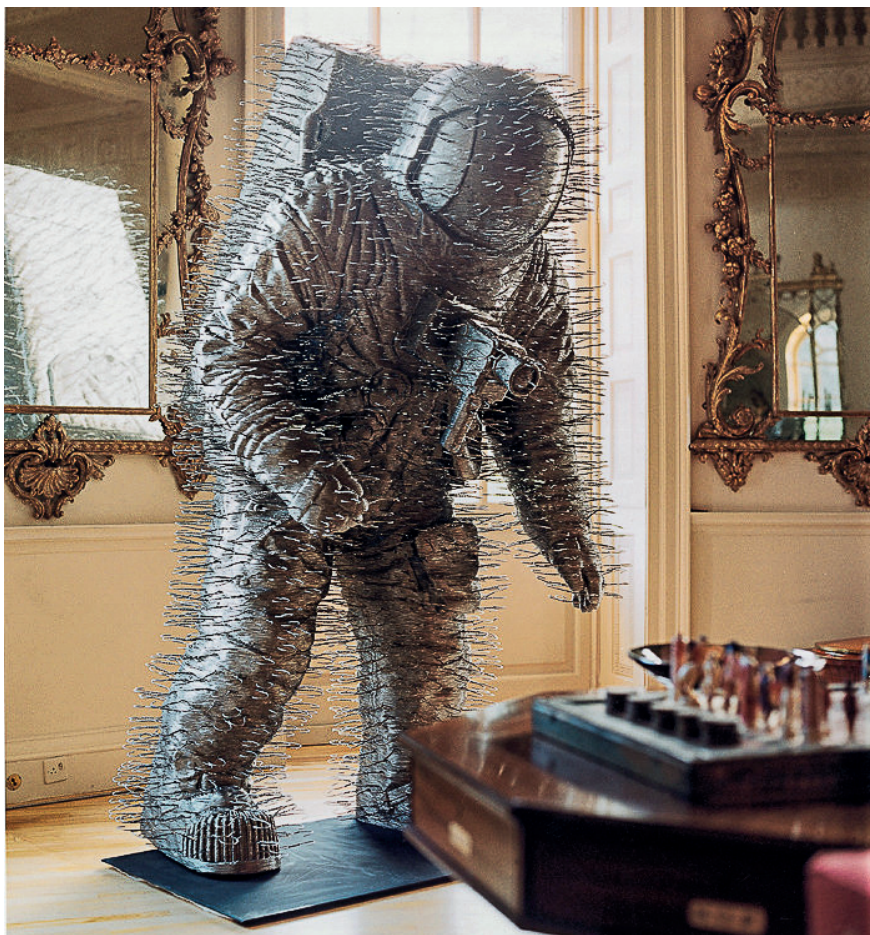


Fig. 6: David Mach: *Spaceman*, 2000. Welded and silver nickel plated coat hangers, 88.5 x 43.3 x 43.3 inches, Hammersmith, Space One-Building, London.

and then apparently gets lost (an allusion that was interpreted by director Malcolm J. Thomson in his video – which is in fact an extract from the promotional film *Love You Till Tuesday* – by having his astronaut, portrayed by Bowie, meet two space sirens who lure him into pulling off his protective suit while still in space).

When conceiving their videos for the a-ha and the Modjo songs, Stölzl and Dom & Nic chose to make the fatally alluring females more abstract than Thomson in his Bowie video. The images created by Dom & Nic at times anticipate

the visuals of Alfonso Cuarón's 2013 film *Gravity*, which was received with great public acclaim and deals with failing astronauts. It is the more successful female new astronaut, Dr Ryan Stone, who at the end of the movie appears to be reborn: it is not by chance that her capsule splashes into the sea, since Stone is thus briefly shown floating weightlessly, as before in outer space (Fig. 7a). When leaving the sunken vehicle, she receives a kind of baptism before stepping ashore. Moreover, the scientist turned astronaut appears to be psychologically reborn; during the time she was shipwrecked in space she managed to overcome the trauma of the loss of her daughter. At the same time, when stepping ashore she also re-enacts the evolutionary step from aquatic to terrestrial animal (Figs. 7b–c), thus showing that she is not only reborn as an individual, but in certain way represents a new kind of human, a kind of super-human. This is also why in this sequence she is filmed in such a way that she takes on giant proportions (Fig. 7d). Or, to use Arnauld Pierre's words, she is "a representative of humankind which had succeeded in adapting to and surviving space"²³ (in his article on "Female Space Travelers in Science Fiction Films 1898–2017", Jörg Hartmann not only writes about *Gravity*, but in particular about the tradition it belongs to).

The space vehicles that crash in *Gravity* have a precursor in the 2011 music video for the song *The Commission* by the English band Breton (D: BretonLABS / Stuart Sinclair). In the video, an elderly and lonely astronaut, apparently craving to return home to his family, is shown, by way of contrast, on board a very new and clean-looking space station that is reminiscent of the ISS. He eventually crashes down to Earth with the whole station, partially burning up during the uncontrolled re-entry and then smashing into a residential district. One could moreover refer here to a large group of recent films where other astronauts are shown as victims who fall prey to extraterrestrial life on moons, planets, and space stations (see for example in 2011: *Apollo 18* by Gonzalo López-Gallego, 2013: *Last Days on Mars* by Ruairi Robinson, 2013: *Europa Report* by Sebastián Cordero, 2017: *Life* by Daniél Espinosa).

However, astronauts are not only depicted as victims, but also as culprits. In the 2013 music video, produced by Delo Creative for the song *Ashes in the Air* by the American rock band The Flaming Lips (a collaboration with the American singer-songwriter project Bon Iver), an astronaut is shown first rescuing a baby (surreally shown with the head of an adult) from a crashed space capsule, but then, after having entered his own spaceship, throwing it into a mincer (in

23 Pierre: *Le scaphandrier*, p. 52. In the original French: "les représentants d' une humanité [...] ayant réussi son adaptation à l'espace."

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