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REWRITING THE AMERICAN ASTRONAUT FROM A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: MICHAEL LOPEZ-ALEGRIA IN MANUEL HUERGA'S DOCUMENTARY FILM *SON AND MOON* (2009)

Manuel Huerga's documentary *Son and Moon* (2009) is a singular hybrid: an English-language film on Spanish-American astronaut Michael Lopez-Alegria by a Catalan team. Huerga's film is particularly interesting for Masculinities Studies. First, it makes us consider how limited international distribution conditions the availability of relevant cross-cultural alternative representations of masculinity. Second, Huerga offers an innovative representation of the American astronaut, here the concerned father of a 7-year-old son who resists communicating with him while in space. Astronaut and film argue that a father has the right to (partly) sacrifice family life for his career but also that he must justify his choices to his children. This is an engaging alternative to previous one-dimensional representations of the American astronaut.

Keywords: cross-cultural representation, masculinity, documentary, astronaut, Michael Lopez-Alegria, Manuel Huerga, *Son & Moon*

Analysis of the representation of diverse masculinities seldom includes consideration of how the availability of examined texts conditions consumer and scholarly choice. Obviously, the study of social practices associated with masculinity and with the material realities of men's lives is also conditioned by particular availability constraints. There is, simply, no systematic program to examine all the masculinities in the world. No institution can be that ambitious or capable. This means

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that, whether actual or in representation, the masculinities we regard as significant, or worth considering, form a haphazard selection, with plenty of blanks on the global map. Many instances, no matter how hegemonic or alternative locally, may pass unnoticed unless scholars pay attention to them. The problem is how to be alert and find them, which is unlikely to happen even in the case of the best informed specialists. For all we know, Basque television or Brazilian theatre might be generating the most potent debates on masculinities. Yet only speakers of their local languages might see this.

Below I call attention to this state of matters by focusing on one of the ignored alternative texts on masculinity: Manuel Huerga's documentary *Son & Moon* (2009). It is not my intention to discuss which specific strategies must be followed to locate this particular text, or others similarly relevant for the study of masculinity. I aim, rather, at discussing this Catalan documentary film first in the context of the restrictive distribution-related politics of the falsely globalised film market, and second, as an example of how a persona as central to American masculinity as that of the astronaut can be, if not thoroughly challenged, at least renewed from the periphery of the Western world. *Son & Moon* shows, in short, that the field of Masculinities Studies can be much enhanced by considering the increasingly important role of documentary film, particularly because of its cross-cultural flexibility; also, that the onscreen representation of the American (male) astronaut can and must be reconstructed to make up for the loss of his former heroic status in aspiringly post-patriarchal contexts. This reconstruction can perhaps best be carried out from outside the United States, as Huerga's excellent cross-cultural film shows.

**LIMITED AVAILABILITY:
ALTERNATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITY IN
CROSS-CULTURAL DOCUMENTARIES (AND THE MYTH OF GLOBALIZATION)**

Extant scholarship on the representation of masculinity focuses mainly on English-language texts: literature, films, TV, comics, video-games, advertising, etc. This is the case whether the academic work is produced in Anglo-American universities or beyond these. The study of masculinities has no doubt opened up to a diversity of angles, such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, age and many other identity markers. There is, however, little cross-cultural interaction. Whenever non-English-language masculinities are examined¹ (and I refer particularly to their representation), this is, somehow, assumed to be of "local" interest, whereas English-language texts representing masculinities are granted a "global" interest. Language no doubt determines the limited cross-cultural academic exchange.

Another issue often by-passed is how cross-cultural texts represent masculinity. The example I examine here, Manuel Huerga's documentary film *Son & Moon*, proves that appealing alternative views of U.S. masculinities may be found in texts written in other cultural settings. The problem, however, is their limited impact due to the limited international distribution circuits. In *Son & Moon*, language is not quite the problem, as it was made originally in English (although the production team is Catalan). The problem, in this case, is distribution. *Son and Moon* did

¹ See, for instance, the monographic issue of *Men and Masculinities*, "Iberian Masculinities" (October 2012, 15:4).

very well when premièred at the international Sitges Film Festival (October 2009) but has had very limited subsequent national exposure within Spain and practically none internationally.² This is, after all, a modest documentary film made on a 600,000€ budget and distributed to cinemas in just five copies, four in Catalonia and one in Madrid (López Pérez, 2010). The producer himself, Loris Omedes,³ confirms the data, stressing that, nevertheless, documentaries are hardly ever shown in Spanish cinemas. Nationwide release was necessary, though, to aspire to the main national film award, the Goya—which, incidentally, *Son and Moon* did not get.

Logically, authors want to have their rights protected nationally and internationally since generating texts costs money. Up to a certain point, however, copyright protection can be self-defeating, as unless efficient international distribution is secured, there is always a risk of stranding your product (or “text”) in the obscurest corner of the planet. Peer-to-peer type distribution certainly gives more visibility though often, depending on local jurisdiction, at the cost of lost revenue. The key issue here, as regards my argumentation, is that a text on masculinity that is unknown because unavailable, has limited distribution, or has received too little publicity, is, in fact, an “inexistent” text.

Writing about *Son & Moon*, then, is my attempt at making this “inexistent” text visible. I firmly believe that Huerga’s documentary deserves attention, both for its high quality as a film and for its alternative presentation of masculinity, specifically that of the American astronaut. Because of its moderate availability,⁴ however, *Son & Moon* cannot compete for the attention of global consumers and scholars with other films dealing with a similar topic such as, for instance, Duncan Jones’s fictional *Moon*, or Ron Howard’s docudrama *Apollo XIII*. In my personal canon *Son & Moon* already occupies a place of honor in the history of the representation of the astronaut on screen. Of course, this is not a canon I can alter single-handedly but it is my aim here to, at least, call attention to the existence of Huerga’s film and, hopefully, invite scholars to work on similarly neglected texts, in English or in any other language.

The cross-cultural study of representations of masculinity is dominated, of course, by academic post-colonialism. This applies quite imperfectly to *Son & Moon*, however. Catalan culture from which the film emerges is European and, as such, Western, though, arguably, peripheral as part of the South of Europe. Catalan culture does not maintain a (post-)colonial association with the United States, unless we assume that *Son & Moon* is the product of a subservient admiration of U.S. culture as represented by the astronaut (it is not). I am aware that this may be a controversial point but, although technically Lopez-Alegria is a migrant from Spain, Huerga regards him as fully American (neither Hispanic nor Latino), and so do I for the purposes of this article.

I will briefly recap, nonetheless, a few notes on the evolution of academic post-colonial interest in the transcultural masculinity of the migrant. This seems to have crystallized around the same time as Masculinities Studies’ parallel interest in glob-

² *Son & Moon* was also exhibited at the Miami International Film Festival, section ‘Dox Competitions’ (2010), and at La Mirada Film Festival (Melbourne, 2010).

³ Personal communication with the author (26 March, 2012).

⁴ The DVD edition is available from Amazon.es, with limited global access.

alization. Connell published his pioneering essay “Masculinities and Globalization” in 1998, the same year of Daniel Coleman’s *Masculine Migrations* and the special issue of *Jouvert*, “Post-Colonial Masculinities” —for which co-editors Coleman and Lahoucine Ouzgane interviewed Connell. Since then, the men of colonial and post-colonial cultures, of the diaspora and of the so-called Third World, have been an object of constant scholarly interest (see e.g., Haschemi, 2011; Morrell & Swart, 2005).

Current approaches to masculinity-and-globalization focus on the issue of whether there is an equivalence between cultural and gender hegemony. The “world gender order” which Connell set out to study in 1998 is arguably dominated by a hegemonic Northern and Western transnational masculinity connected with international business relations. Some scholars, however, dispute this view as too homogeneous. For Beasley the problem is that judgments about which masculinities are hegemonic are not as “self-evident” as many assume (2008, p. 93). This is useful for my argumentation, since *Son & Moon* shows how a non-hegemonic, peripheral Western approach to masculinity can deconstruct an American icon that most would consider hegemonic. The study of masculinity and globalization, however, has very little to say about this kind of cross-cultural representation. Typically, collective volumes on masculinity and globalization tend to put together articles on a diversity of local masculinities, without wondering how they interact beyond the dominant (hegemonic) English-speaking cultures, or even within them.⁵ A new trend may be emerging with volumes such as Sun Jung’s *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption* (2011), which considers the cross-cultural interaction among Asian cultures, though it still ignores how this affects the representation of men in particular, focusing as it does on consumption.

This cosmopolitanism, which contemplates a diversity of nations as fully empowered cultural agents engaged in mutually enriching cultural exchange, might be a refreshing alternative to the current academic paradigm in the study of masculinity, too fixed on globalization. Schoene presents cosmopolitanism as a positive tool to resist nationalism and imperialism, but also U.S.-dominated globalization and even post-colonialism. As he argues, we live “in no homogenized or consensual world of perfect equality, in which the core-periphery axiomatic of past imperialisms has dissolved” (2009, p. 5). For him, authentic globalization has not happened yet, and we should regard the world “as merely globalised, that is, as caught up in an ongoing—some might say “unremitting”—process of globalization” (p. 5, original italics). This process, led so far by the English-language novel, should focus, Schoene claims, on what is common in human experience rather than what is different. Thus, contemporary writers of any nationality should be able to represent that experience, including masculinity, beyond their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The problem with Schoene’s cosmopolitan vision, leaving aside the thorny matter of whether the stress should be laid on universal similarity or on celebrating difference in mutual respect, is, I believe, that, characteristically, it overlooks (cultural) distribution inequalities even within the English-speaking areas. Consider,

⁵ See volumes edited by Pease and Pringle (2001), Davids and Francien (2005), Cohen and Brodie (2007), Gonzalez and Seidler (2008), as well as Jackson and Balaji (2011).

for instance, the immense impact of Mel Gibson's film on the iconic Scottish hero William Wallace, *Braveheart* (1995). This American film was celebrated by Scottish audiences, particularly men. *Braveheart*, however, was not met with a Scottish film about an American icon, say Lincoln. It led, rather, to a local debate on the reasons why Scottish cinema had so far mainly presented Scottish men as defeated and self-defeating. In a truly cosmopolitan global climate *Braveheart* could have come from any culture, not just the U.S., and Scots would be producing films about any men anywhere in the world. The main principle of true cosmopolitanism should be, after all, equality in cultural exchange and by no means a situation in which a dominant culture extends its influence on the rest by means of its practical monopoly on the distribution of cultural products.

Whereas the cosmopolitanism of fiction (novels and films), then, seems limited because of the overwhelming hold of U.S.-based distributors on the global market, documentaries, as I wish to stress here, appear to be *the* truly cosmopolitan, transnational, cross-cultural genre. They obey no barriers other than financial limitations, now fast diminishing as cheaper digital cameras are marketed. Barbash and Castaing-Taylor (1993, pp. 5-7) remind us, first, that the documentary is always implicitly ethnographic and second, that it is open to a (stunning) variety of cross-cultural positions: the filmmaker may not belong to the filmed culture nor to the audience s/he addresses; s/he may be filming people who belong to more than one culture or perhaps address multicultural audiences; finally, s/he may work with mixed crews or may be him/herself bi-cultural.

This potential for cross-cultural richness is met by the generous funding provided by non-profit national televisions, like the BBC, characterized by a strong public service ethos. Commercial documentaries made for cinema, in contrast, still depend, despite the high box-office appeal of many in the current wave, on much smaller audiences and a certainly problematic film distribution. As Sin emphasizes, distribution, the invisible art, "a process known only to those within the industry, barely written about" is, nonetheless, "the most important part of the film industry, where completed films are brought to life and connected with an audience" (n.d.: website). Paul Arthur, on his side, has carefully traced "the 'mainstreaming' of documentary" (2005, n.p.),⁶ particularly the feature-length variety popularized by Michael Moore and a host of creative filmmakers.

A handful of documentary films, usually popularized by Oscar nominations and awards, and film festivals, are now being distributed by major companies and compete in cineplexes with Hollywood blockbusters. What appeals to American audiences, Arthur claims (ignoring this is a global phenomenon) is a first-person, unmediated realism,

...symptomatic of a sphere encompassing blogging, WebCam sites, literary memoirs, and low-end reality television shows. They include a gritty DIY sensibility that privileges gestures of intimacy and confession; construing personal identity as an effect of self-conscious, albeit quotidian or casual, performance; an assumed interpenetration of 'public' and 'private' experience; and the acceptance of 'simulation' as unproblematic bearer of reality. (2005, n.p.)

⁶I'm using the VLEX online version without pagination.

This perfectly fits *Son & Moon*, a film seeking to document the astronaut's work from his own personal, everyday perspective for the benefit of his public image. Paradoxically, spectators understand that documentaries are not to be fully trusted, that they are always a manipulated *representation* of the truth. The "hunger for the real" that cinema documentaries have unleashed responds to boredom "with the mass-produced, formulaic television documentary" (Aufderheide, 2005, n.p.).⁷ This tension between the film and the television documentary, and the emergence of other screens, shows how unstable the fast-changing circuit of distribution is. This is why guru Peter Broderick counsels documentary filmmakers to "design a customized distribution strategy" reminding them that "a distribution team is as important as a production team" (2013, website). Film scholarship, ironically, tends to ignore distribution to foreground film aesthetics and, in the case of the documentary, also ethics. Stella Bruzzi summarizes the quandary spot on: "Continuously invoked by documentary theory is the idealized notion, on the one hand, of the pure documentary in which the relationship between the image and the real is straightforward and, on the other hand, the very impossibility of this aspiration" (2000, p. 3). For Bruzzi, as for Arthur, spectators are perfectly equipped "to understand that a documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other" (p. 4). Even "fly-on-the-wall" or "vérité" documentaries like *Son & Moon*, have "a paradoxical relationship with 'drama,'" (Corner, 1996, p. 33) which makes them more, not less, attractive.

Returning to the representation of masculinity, I wish to stress here the fact that documentary films, particularly the more creative ones, constitute a huge repository of texts dealing with contemporary masculinities, practically untapped by scholarly analysis. Because of their proven cross-cultural functionality documentaries are particularly interesting as examples of authentic cosmopolitan, transcultural representation and dialogue. To reinforce my argument, I offer here a list of outstanding Oscar winners and nominees of the last twelve years, all dealing mainly with the representation of men and masculinities, whether this was intended or not:

- 2002 (winner) *Bowling for Columbine*
- 2003 (winner) *The Fog of War*
- 2003 (nominee) *Capturing the Friedmans*
- 2004 (nominee) *Super Size Me*
- 2004 (nominee) *Tupac: Resurrection*
- 2005 (nominee) *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*
- 2005 (nominee) *Murderball*
- 2006 (nominee) *Deliver Us from Evil*
- 2007 (nominee) *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience*
- 2008 (winner) *Man on Wire*
- 2009 (winner) *The Cove*
- 2009 (nominee) *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*
- 2010 (winner) *Exit Through the Gift Shop*
- 2011 (winner) *Undeclared*
- 2012 (winner) *Searching for Sugar Man*

⁷VLEX online version without pagination.

Most of these documentaries have American themes, protagonists, and film-makers, which, surely, shows how biased the Oscars are towards U.S. films. Malik Bendjelloul's excellent *Searching for Sugar Man*, however, is a very attractive exception and proof of committed cosmopolitanism. Bendjelloul, who passed away in May 2014, was a Swedish reporter and documentary maker. He came across his subject in South Africa. There the wholly unknown American Latino singer (Sixto) Rodriguez was venerated as a local idol during Apartheid—unknown to Rodriguez himself, who led a very simple life as a working man in the U.S. Bendjelloul's portrait of the loser who didn't know he was a winner is one of the most fascinating recent insights into American masculinity. And it comes from abroad.

Despite this, so far scholarship on gender and the documentary has been produced by women feminists and has focused mainly (though by no means exclusively) on women and femininity. I do not intend here to reinforce the gender binary but to highlight, rather, the fact that whereas feminist analysis of documentary films has always included men as authors and in representation, the (mostly male) scholars working in Masculinities Studies have ignored this issue altogether. There is no equivalent for Masculinities Studies of Waldman and Walker's volume *Feminism and Documentary* (1999), an innovative collection which already included a feminist analysis by Susan Knobloch of masculinity in D.A. Pennebaker's documentary film *Don't Look Back* (on Bob Dylan). I could locate only a few academic articles dealing with men in documentaries, mostly on marginal films on music. Carl Plantinga's "Gender, Power, and a Cucumber: Satirizing Masculinity in *This is Spinal Tap*" (1998) does deal with a popular film. Yet other scholars analyze lesser rockumentary films like *Hard Core* (Brown, 2009) or *Gimme Shelter* on Mick Jagger (Howell, 2012). Non-hegemonic masculinities have attracted some attention, with at least two academic pieces devoted to the contrast between the documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* and the film *Milk* by Gus van Sant (Martín, 2013; Rich, 2013).

A documentary arguably closest to *Son & Moon* is Lourdes Portillo's short film *My McQueen* (2003, 19') a meta-filmic analysis by this prestige Mexican filmmaker of "the influence of Steve McQueen and his movie, *Bullit*, on masculinity, the city of San Francisco and ethnicity."⁸ As Huerga does, here someone from a foreign culture approaches an iconic U.S. male figure to deconstruct it, deconstructing the very genre of the documentary in the process. I cannot, however, present a first-hand opinion on Portillo's film since *My McQueen*, apparently screened only twice,⁹ is practically impossible to get hold of (there's a DVD limited edition published in 2003 by Xochitl Films). A screening can be ordered from Portillo's webpage but the 100\$ fee is quite a deterrent, out of tune with current distribution methods.

I could have opted for (costly) international interlibrary loan but this is besides the point that I am making here: *My McQueen* might be the most exciting cross-cultural documentary film ever made on (American) masculinity but for all intents and purposes it does not exist, as its extremely limited distribution makes it (practically) inaccessible—quite a self-defeating strategy for any filmmaker to follow.

⁸ From Portillo's official website, http://www.lourdesportillo.com/films/films_mcqueen.php (retrieved 2013, August 31).

⁹ In 2002 at the Venice Biennale Di Venezia and in 2005 as part of the exhibition *In the air: Projections of Mexico* (Guggenheim Museum, New York).

Actually, without Sofía Ruiz Alfaro's academic article (2009) discussing it (freely available on the internet) I would not have known of the film's existence.

I now turn to *Son & Moon*, hoping that my essay never becomes the only trace left by Huerga's film.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF THE AMERICAN ASTRONAUT: THE CATALAN VERSION

*Son and Moon: Diario de un Astronauta*¹⁰ describes Michael Lopez-Alegria's seven-month stay on board the International Space Station (19 September 2006 to 21 April 2007). The footage mixes Lopez-Alegria's own amateur camerawork on board the ISS, NASA's official mission recordings, and Huerga's filming of the astronauts' training program at the Houston Space Centre, and of the complex process leading to take-off at the Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan. Huerga replaces the trivial sense of adventure overexploited by Hollywood science-fiction with an updated perception of the altruistic heroism motivating real astronauts to work for the progress of humanity. *Son and Moon* is much more than just a space "home movie", as it might seem, or a *Big Brother*-style slice-of-life. The non-fictional nature of Huerga's film works as a subtle form of protest against the indifference of the human species towards actual space exploration. This is due to our limited collective understanding of science, the ensuing preference for fantastic over realistic science-fiction and also, certainly, to the astronaut's progressive loss of heroic status. Presented with Lopez-Alegria's deep commitment to his task, and with his own eager narrative voice, spectators are invited to agree that something is sorely missing in a society incapable of feeling the deep emotions that the human conquest of space should elicit.

Following the taxonomy that Nichols established for the documentary, with its six modes of representation—poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, performative—*Son & Moon* is both reflexive and performative (with many poetic touches). As Nichols explains, whereas "the reflexive mode is the most self-conscious and self-questioning mode of representation" (2001, p. 127), performative documentaries "stress subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse" (p. 138), here that of the science documentary which *Son & Moon* resists. Following Plantinga, Huerga's film appears to be an "open-voice" documentary associated with "vérité" styles, as "the open voice refuses to assert explicit epistemic authority over the viewer, and does not impart a clear, high-level explanation of the phenomena it presents" (1997, p. 105). Again, quite unlike the science documentary. This is not a documentary film with an overt didactic aim, shot and edited in the expository style typical of the traditional science documentary, but a film that aims at showing how it feels to be an astronaut on a mission from the personal perspective of a professional man. Lopez-Alegria's serene voice carries the weight of the reflexion on the task he is carrying out as the images show him performing the steps necessary for his mission to succeed. This overlapping of the personal voice and the professional performance generates a sense of intimacy with the astronaut that is missing in more epic accounts. Some may find Huerga's film a boring, anti-

¹⁰ See the section in Manuel Huerga's official website for *Son & Moon*: <http://manuel-huerga.com/son-moon/> (retrieved 2013, August 31).

climactic depiction of the tedious everyday jobs involved in current space exploration. Others, myself included, see in *Son & Moon* a unique chance to get closer than ever to the man behind the astronaut.

The particular focus of *Son & Moon* is in fact the cost that the astronaut's professional commitment adds to the personal life of Lopez-Alegria, the father of 7-year-old Nico. By focusing on fatherhood, Huerga raises issues hardly ever, if at all, considered in space exploration (whether fictional or real) discourses.¹¹ It is nonetheless difficult to read unambiguously either Huerga's film or Lopez-Alegria's need to justify himself (to his son): is theirs a *bona fide* post-patriarchal stance or an excuse to justify the plain patriarchal selfishness of the traditional hero? Dario Llinares rightly refers to the "hegemonic 'potential'" (2011, p. 13) of the astronaut as there is always the chance that representations of the astronaut "fortify a symbolic link between cultural idealization and institutional power thus establishing coherence of meaning" (p. 13). In his view, the astronaut's masculinity survives into our days by means of a constant recycling based on "subtle negotiations in his construction that transcend the break from modernity to postmodernity and reaffirm gendered cultural hegemony" (p. 16). The strategies used to renew this representation, from nostalgia to parody, bespeak an obvious anxiety, though, at the loss of his hegemonic value.

This is why the astronaut is "conceived as a cipher, reflecting the complexities and contradictions of masculinity" although I do not completely agree that the "processes of reaffirmation through which the cultural significance and gendered power of this ubiquitous icon is unquestionably maintained" (p. 18) are as successful as Llinares claims. We can read *Son & Moon* even as a cynical example of the strategies to renew traditional heroic masculinity, in this case through the emphasis on fatherhood. Yet, in the 21st century the context of space exploration is so altered, and exploration itself so much at risk of disappearing, that Huerga's film seems, rather, a plea to recruit new men for the job—both "more men" and "alternative men". The "right stuff" is no longer to be found in misogynistic tough heroes but in post-patriarchal team players like Lopez-Alegria, very much aware of the emotional cost of fulfilling a personal dream. These men are, besides, called to share space with women at all levels, from the confined cubicles of the ISS to "the infinite and beyond" if the political will is found on Earth to continue space exploration.

Manuel Huerga (Barcelona, 1957) is known in Spain mainly as the director of the remarkable political biopic *Salvador (Puig Antich)* (2006). He belongs to a brilliant new wave of Spanish documentalists, particularly abundant in Catalonia.¹² Huerga

¹¹ Huerga, according to Omedes, was not aware of astronaut Jerry M. Linenberg's *Letters from MIR: An astronaut's letters to his son* (2000a), a sort of companion to Linenberg's own *Off the planet: Surviving five perilous months aboard the space station MIR* (2000b). Linenberg addressed his 14-month-old son, fearing he might not survive the chaotic mission.

¹² As Torreiro (2010) explains, this boom was sustained by generous funding from public television (Catalan TV3, particularly), the emergence of a new non-fiction cinema culture, the success of independent filmmakers (Pere Portabella, Francesc Betriu), the task as teachers of key filmmakers (José Luis Guerín, Joaquim Jordà), and, finally, the MA programs at Universitat Pompeu Fabra and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

is a restless visual experimenter who contributed much, particularly with his work for the series *Arsenal* (1987), to the cool look of the early TV3, the Catalan public channel inaugurated in 1984, and of its second channel, Canal 33.¹³ This other channel, offering a wide range of documentaries films and series, opened, in fact, with Huerga's first work *Gaudí* (1989).¹⁴ Huerga's creativity can also be appreciated in his documentaries and TV movies on other complex male figures: musicians Glenn Gould (*Las Variacions Gould*, 1992) and Jorge Drexler (*Un Instance Preciso*, 2009), poet Pablo Neruda (*Neruda en el Corazón*, 2004), comedian Pepe Rubianes (*Pepe & Rubianes*, 2011), and Catalan politicians Jordi Pujol (*Jordi Pujol, 80 Anys*, 2010), Francesc Macià and Lluís Companys (the TV movie *14 d'Abril, Macià contra Companys*, 2011). In view of the many works that Huerga has devoted to prominent men, film critic Alex Gorina has called his documentaries the film equivalent of the biographical essay series *Homenots* (1958-62, 1969-74), or "charismatic men", by major Catalan writer Josep Pla.¹⁵ Because of this manifest interest in men, his enthusiasm for Stanley Kubrick's *2001* and his curiosity about astronauts, Huerga was simply thrilled when inventive producer Loris Omedes¹⁶ commissioned him to make a documentary about an astronaut's life on board the ISS.

Son & Moon was in preparation for three years, generating a colossal mass of material. The problem that soon surfaced was that, once edited, the potentially usable twelve hours were just plain boring. Huerga just couldn't find the necessary human angle. Then a small miracle happened. Though shy and very protective of his private life, Lopez-Alegria offered Huerga the recordings of the video communications with his family while on the ISS, almost 40 hours. Huerga was moved by the astronaut's efforts to stay in touch with a son too young to notice the father's distress at his apathy, and finally found an enticing perspective: "The story," he declared, "was that he realized how his son became increasingly distant" (in Heredia, 2010: website).¹⁷ Although initially Lopez-Alegria resisted the idea, he finally allowed Huerga to portray him as an oversensitive, even ridiculously anxious father trying but failing to impress his son—for the sake of publicizing space exploration. He also contributed the poetic title. The resulting film, though frankly moving, never falls on the wrong side of easy sentimentalism.

Culturally, *Son & Moon* filters the current American obsession for the father-son relationship present in countless Hollywood films (Martín, 2008) through Huerga's Catalan (also Spanish and European) sensibility. This is complicated by Lopez-Ale-

¹³ Huerga also helped to establish the local channel BarcelonaTV, which he directed (1997-2003) to great acclaim.

¹⁴ This is a mockumentary inspired by Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983), for which Huerga re-created, on the basis of an early 20th century very short silent film in which the illustrious Catalan architect appeared, plenty of 'false' footage, admirably convincing.

¹⁵ See "Manuel Huerga (interview)," 26 November 2011, Sala 33, Canal 33, *Televisió de Catalunya*. <http://www.tv3.cat/videos/3829030/Sala-33-empren-una-missio-a-lespai> (retrieved 2013, August 15).

¹⁶ Omedes has an extensive career, including the production of the Oscar-nominee documentary *Balseiros* (2002) and the Goya-award winning documentary film *María y yo* (2010).

¹⁷ "La historia era que él se daba cuenta de que su hijo se le iba distanciando." (This and all the other translations from the original Spanish are by the author).

gria's ambiguous condition as Spanish local hero.¹⁸ Born in Madrid in 1958¹⁹ — the same post-Sputnik year when NASA was founded — to parents from Badajoz (Western Spain), he migrated as a young child with them to California, where he was raised. Lopez-Alegria kept, as can be seen by his hyphenated surname, some of his Spanish roots; also his double nationality. Yet, his American-English accent, the occasionally odd grammar of his spoken Spanish and, above all, his hefty body (so different from that of skinny Spanish astronaut Pedro Duque), show him to be not quite Spanish, odd as this may sound. Neither Hispanic nor Latino, in the current categories. He is, plainly, an American man.

Huerga clearly admires Lopez-Alegria — a handsome, manly man — and he does cut indeed an impressive figure on screen. If found in any science-fiction novel or film, Lopez-Alegria might even impress as too much of a heroic astronaut. A U.S. Navy Captain and test pilot, Lopez-Alegria was admitted to NASA in 1992. He holds the American record for the longest spaceflight (the 215 days Huerga documented), second only to Valeriy Polyakov. Experienced in diverse Shuttle crews, Lopez-Alegria was Commander of Expedition 14 on board ISS (the one in *Son & Moon*). He has been out in space on 10 EVAs (or Extra Vehicular Activities), and is the second most experienced spacewalker ever, only behind Anatoly Solovyev. He is also a polyglot, fluent in English, Spanish, French and Russian. After Expedition 14, his last mission, Lopez-Alegria was appointed Assistant Director for the ISS's Flight Crew Operations, a post he kept until March 2012, when he resigned from NASA to become the President of the Commercial Spaceflight Federation.²⁰

As a record of this outstanding man's last mission as an astronaut, *Son & Moon* is, thus, not just a diary offered by the father to his son, which is what it appears to be formally, but also the astronaut's last attempt at mobilizing uncaring audiences. Lopez-Alegria realizes that in comparison to the heroes that first stepped on the Moon, contemporary astronauts are "just ordinary."²¹ Also that this ordinariness or even "domesticity" affects very negatively a model of space exploration which is now based on collaboration rather than (Cold War) competition: "There's no money. The space race was a great impulse and we could develop whatever technology it required. But, since there's no *threat*, there's no will" (in Roldán, 2010; emphasis added).²² Thus, although the ISS should be daily celebrated as a model of

¹⁸This was not, however, a relevant factor. Omedes just happened to contact Lopez-Alegria through a common friend, and took the chance to approach him. NASA complied once the astronaut accepted (Omedes in personal communication with the author, 26 March 2012).

¹⁹See his NASA biography (2008) at <http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/htmlbios/lopez-al.html>.

²⁰See the March 12, 2012 news at <http://www.commercialspaceflight.org>: "Astronaut Michael Lopez-Alegria named president of the Commercial Spaceflight Federation."

²¹"Nosotros somos cotidianos" were his exact words. See "Michael Lopez-Alegria" (interview), *Buenafuente*, La Sexta (12 May, 2010). Available from <http://www.dailymotion.com/embed/video/k5xXGzebDkIKY2kVfX?width=500&theme=cappuccino&foreground=%23E8D9AC&highlight=%23FFF6D9&background=%23493D27&hideInfos=1> (retrieved 2013, August 31).

²²"Falta dinero. La carrera espacial fue un gran impulso y pudimos desarrollar la tecnología que fuera necesaria. Pero como no hay amenaza, no hay voluntad."

international scientific cooperation, it is hardly ever news. Science-fiction is possibly partly to blame, as its impossible faster-than-light space travel makes the ISS pale by comparison. *Son & Moon* could and should contribute to changing that perception, yet Lopez-Alegria's disappointment (and his new job) suggest that the era of the heroic astronaut at the service of publicly-funded science is reaching its end, to be replaced by the crass economics of commercial space exploration.

Part of the appeal of the astronaut is, obviously, his willingness to sacrifice himself for the common good with no reward but glory. This is actually an image that NASA seized upon when, as Tom Wolfe's non-fiction classic *The Right Stuff* (1979) narrates, the seven military pilots chosen in 1959 to man the frail Mercury space-ships²³ were presented by the media, unexpectedly, as (sanitized) all-American heroes. As Launius explains, the Mercury seven "defined the myth of the astronaut," also firmly attached to "their mainstream Euro-American maleness" (2005, n.p.). This myth, Launius expands, was based on five features characterizing the astronaut as "'everyman' in a Frank Capraesque manner," "defender of the nation," "fun-loving young man," "a virile, masculine representative of the American ideal," and a "hero" (2005, n.p.). Launius, though, notes that unlike another similar favorite, the sports star, the astronaut must "attain great feats" to "remain a hero" (2005, n.p.).

Susan Faludi is far more radical when she argues that the astronaut could never be heroic as he was from the beginning co-opted by the media circus: "The astronauts were billed as reincarnations of Daniel Boone, setting out across a new wilderness to inhabit virgin lands. But their manifest destiny, it seems, was to travel in media space and open up a new entertainment age" (2000, p. 452). Mocking (or perhaps lamenting) their feminization, she writes that these frontiersmen came back "as space-age equivalents of pin-up girls" for men on Earth with as few chances of being truly heroic as these new poster boys (p. 459). Launius sees in the mystical space suit the link between the hero astronaut and the medieval knight in armor (though he fails to consider how this applies to *female* astronauts). Ironically, in Debra Benita Shaw's contrary view, "the suited spaceman is, paradoxically, unmanned, by a technology that blurs the structures of identity so necessary to the maintenance of the liberal humanist self" (2004, p. 126).

Lopez-Alegria, although also a military pilot like the 1959 heroes, belongs to a very different post-feminist, perhaps even post-patriarchal, generation. Hersch explains how in the early 1970s, under pressure from the scientific community, NASA opened the ranks of the space crews to female scientists, the first civilians to undermine the myth of the astronaut hero (2011, p. 81). The popularity of science-fiction television was apparently a key factor in NASA's decision to open up recruitment in 1978 to "ensure that capable women and minority candidates—who had filled *Star Trek's* cast but had been excluded from NASA's astronaut corps—would be well-represented among the nominees and selected personnel" (p. 84). This new trend coincided with the beginning of the Shuttle program (1981-2011), which, as Hersch observes, contributed much to the domestication of the male hero astronaut by providing a spaceship with an environment cozy enough for women

²³ These were Malcolm S. Carpenter, Leroy G. Cooper, John H. Glenn, Jr., Virgil I. Grissom, Walter M. Schirra, Jr., Alan B. Shepard, Jr., and Donald K. Slayton.

to be finally recruited as space travellers.²⁴

Hersch even claims that “[i]nstead of a steely pilot with a demure and faithful wife, the astronaut ideal has been most recently embodied by recently retired Space Shuttle Commander, Air Force Colonel, wife, and mother, Eileen Collins” (p. 88), surely a far-fetched claim. Collins is, sadly, by no means as well-known as the female astronaut with the saddest fate—Christa McAuliffe, the teacher who died in the Challenger disaster of 1986. Constance Penley has openly criticized the Teacher in Space program leading to McAuliffe’s imprudent recruitment, a program “strongly opposed by U.S. education leaders” and, in Penley’s view, “a Reagan-Bush-NASA media circus” (1997, p. 23). McAuliffe, totally unfamiliar with space exploration outside *Star Trek* (Penley, p. 24), was a victim of “NASA’s mismanagement” (p. 22), becoming after her death the butt of a myriad sick jokes backing “several pernicious cultural narratives about women in space” (p. 22). Interestingly, Penley notes that McAuliffe’s father, Ed Corrigan, “had observed NASA’s ineptitude first hand, especially at the launch site, but had agreed (along with the other astronauts’ spouses and families) to appear loyal to NASA” (p. 69), a decision he later regretted but that he never discussed in public.

The rarefied climate surrounding the astronaut generated by the now defunct Shuttle program helps, arguably, to understand why men like Lopez-Alegria are liminal figures placed between the golden age masculinist myth of the space explorer and the more recent myth of the post-feminist, sensitive, domesticated New Man. For Sage, “[t]his re-telling of a spatial division of labor, as a teleological sequence, where male explorers precede female pioneers, reveals the way prescriptive bodily performances were retrospectively legitimated within a heterosexual matrix, even by women themselves” (2009, p. 160). Ultimately, though, the long stays on board the ISS, combining the cozy domesticity of daily routine with the boredom of subjecting the body and the mind to the strain of a prolonged absence from Earth, have denied heroic status both to men and women astronauts. The former heroes are losing glamour as the thrill of space exploration is replaced by the drudgery of scientific experimentation.

The problem with recent cultural analyses of the astronaut’s representation by, for instance, Dario Llinares (2011) and Brian Baker (2008) is that they ignore recent developments in the history of space exploration. They concentrate too narrowly on representations in popular texts that, though chronologically diverse, centre mainly on the 1950s Mercury and 1960s Apollo astronauts as presented in *Life* magazine articles and popular films like *The Right Stuff* (1983), *Apollo 13* (1995), or even *Toy Story* (also 1995). No item on the currently available Cultural Studies bibliography on the male astronaut focuses on the memoirs actually generated by the men and women themselves. With the exception of books by Mailer, Wolfe and Lovell²⁵ and their film versions, non-fiction is ignored and so are documentaries and popular science books and magazines. It seems particularly urgent, then, to move beyond the myth of the astronaut as a nostalgic figure for the Kennedy-era male hero, and to consider his (and her) representation in the 21st century.

²⁴ Sally Kristen Ride, recruited in 1979, was the second female astronaut to fly into space (in 1983) after Russian Valentina Tereshkova (in 1963).

²⁵ See Norman Mailer, *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970); Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (1979); Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger, *Lost Moon: The Perilous Voyage of Apollo 13* (1994).

As I have noted, this is focused in *Son & Moon* on the astronaut as father, and on the problem of whether personal ambition can override family life, which is now much more central than it used to be in the 20th century for professional men. Unlike what is habitual in scientific documentaries, the narrator's voice in Huerga's film, as I have observed, does not refer to the events on screen. It is rather the voice of a father articulating a long oral love letter to his son, Nico. Actually, the diary format assumed by the film is the result of a NASA experiment, by which astronauts were asked to keep a journal. As Lopez-Alegria himself explained, "specialists," presumably in psychology, "read them trying to highlight themes mentioned in all the diaries" ("Los especialistas los leen intentando sacar temas que salen en todos los diarios"; in Roldán, 2010: website). He decided to address his own journal to young Nico, thus addressing his guilt at being an absent father.

A lesson is hammered home again and again in Huerga's film: the father counsels the son to fulfill his dreams as he apologizes for fulfilling his own at a high emotional cost for the boy. The actual distance, about 400 kilometers, is not that big, but what makes this story so singular are the circumstances. The film aims at explaining to both son and spectators why the sacrifice of family life made by the father is worthwhile. We see Lopez-Alegria submit himself to grueling training, undertake a very dangerous journey (still potentially lethal), fulfill with absolute rigor a mission that requires total attention to many minute details, put up with evident bodily and mental fatigue, share as well as he can manage the cramped space of the ISS with others, long for the presence of his family.... Inevitably, the spectator wonders why anyone would accept all this discomfort, whether enduring it makes sense. The breath-taking images showing Lopez-Alegria working in space outside the ISS provide an answer: if given the chance to enjoy that view, how many would reject it?

Still, we are left with a bittersweet feeling. Cute little Nico—so fragile-looking in contrast with his big daddy—is not interested at all in his father's adventure. Unlike many little boys, Lopez-Alegria included, Nico has never dreamed of being an astronaut. His rejection of his father's career, is due, as Lopez-Alegria himself suggests in the film, to the Shuttle disaster that preceded that of the Challenger: in 2003, the Columbia disintegrated over Texas and Louisiana on reentering Earth's atmosphere, killing its crew of seven men. Born in 1999, little Nico could not understand the specific nature of the accident, but, as his concerned father realizes, he did learn that being an astronaut is dangerous. Lopez-Alegria reports briefly the decisive discussion at the time with his wife Daria about whether he should continue flying, and how he convinced her that his job was a crucial part of his identity. More adamant, Nico, although proud of his father, dreams of being an architect or, perhaps, an actor, resisting thus the lure of the traditional masculine myth of the astronaut (or just trying to control the fear of losing his dad).

This is why the father's struggle to communicate with young Nico is so central to the film's narrative and gender politics. We watch on, in embarrassed sympathy, while Lopez-Alegria struggles just to keep his boy visible on screen, as Nico fools around or plainly refuses to listen. Huerga found a convenient aid to narrate this emotional distance in the low-quality, grainy images of the video-conferences passed on by Lopez-Alegria, as they contrast sharply with the high-quality footage narrating the rigors of preparation for space travel at Houston and Baikonur, and the sometimes funny and often boring (or lonely) routine on board the ISS. The blurry images and the faulty sound work wonderfully at showing how technology can never replace a hug or, if necessary, a face-to-face telling off.

The disadvantage of this narrative strategy is, of course, that the video-conferences strongly recall Kubrick's classic *2001*, in which, famously, a character traveling to the Moon, Dr. Heywood R. Floyd, calls home from the space station orbiting Earth using this technology. The effect of the covert allusions to *2001* is increased by the combination of the stunning space images with the emotive soundtrack by the suitably named Micka Luna (not a pseudonym). I use "disadvantage" in the sense that Huerga and Kubrick portray the astronaut from opposite angles, despite Huerga's veneration for his idol and his obvious borrowing of inspiration from *2001*. For Huerga, Nico's paradoxical rejection of his father's career does not demythify the astronaut; on the contrary, it humanizes him. Kubrick, in contrast, turned his fictional astronaut Dave Bowman into a dehumanized, mystifying new myth, intended to transcend the vision of the astronaut as unheroic cog-in-the-machine.

Kubrick is also very much present in the science-fiction film that is *Son & Moon's* main fictional companion: Duncan Jones's *Moon* (also 2009). Like Huerga and Kubrick, Jones films life in space as mainly tedious routine. The differences are, nevertheless, striking. Huerga returns lost glamour to the astronaut by appealing to our emotional sympathy for him as a father. Jones starts from the same premise but stresses, with a clever plot twist, how space-station inhabitants are simple tools, easily replaceable by others exactly like them. His astronaut Sam Bell has a daughter, and so has Kubrick's Dr. Floyd. Both little girls are seen in video-conferences, yet neither questions the father's absence as Nico does in his own peculiar way.

A daughter also plays a major role in Alfonso Cuarón's highly acclaimed *Gravity* (2013), a film much in line with the current view of the astronaut as glorified space worker though focused, exceptionally, on a woman. The androgynously named Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) suffers together with two male colleagues a terrifying accident when the Explorer, their shuttle, is hit by debris from a satellite destroyed by a Russian missile. Ryan finds herself eventually alone in space, struggling to survive in the most adverse circumstances, finding comfort and courage in thinking about her daughter. The little girl, as happens, died aged 4 in a freak playground accident. Her death seems intended to problematise Ryan's motivation to survive²⁶ yet it raises, in my view, problematic issues. A living daughter would have provided more plausible motivation for this mother's epic struggle. In addition, the little girl's absence uncomfortably suggests, whether intentionally or not, that Stone, a medical engineer, has been hired as an astronaut because her lack of family responsibilities makes her preferable to other women candidates. As regards Ryan's status as a (female) hero, this is also questionable since she just survives a catastrophic situation without achieving any feat in space exploration. Her predicament is, certainly, similar to that of the male astronauts in *Apollo XII* but the chance is missed in this first major film about a woman astronaut to focus on tangible sci-

²⁶ *Gravity* was scripted by Alfonso Cuarón himself and his son Jonás Cuarón. They followed, though, Sandra Bullock's suggestions concerning Ryan's daughter. As she declared in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*: "I said I didn't want her going back to a child, because of course someone's going to fight for that. So what if she had absolutely nothing to fight for—she's lost a child, there's nothing back home, she's a person who's basically a machine? That was my idea, and Alfonso was so open to it" (in Valby, 2013; website; retrieved 15 July 2014).

entific achievement. Ryan is not, in short, a role model to entice little girls into space exploration. Her misadventure might even have the opposite effect on budding vocations.

Lopez-Alegria just happens to have a son and it is certainly beside the point to consider what Huerga's documentary would have been like had the child been a girl (it would have required a different title to begin with). In any case, and in order to further consider to what extent *Son & Moon* fails to be consistently post-patriarchal, I'll comment next on the three women who *do* appear in the film: the wife, Daria Lopez-Alegria, and the crewmates, astronauts Sunita L. Williams and Anoushe Ansari.

Huerga's film is so vague about Lopez-Alegria's marriage that spectators may mistakenly deduce that Michael and Daria (Mitch and Dash) are separated, as she (a Swiss citizen) lives with Nico in Geneva. A second viewing showed that I had missed a fleeting moment in which Nico begs his mother not to cry; smiling, she grants that she has cried enough. Yet only a Google search revealed how different Daria is from the stereotypical astronaut's wife. She is actually the co-founder of Space Bridges, a Geneva-based firm of consultants devoted "to facilitating cooperative multinational initiatives in pure science research, space exploration, and advanced technology."²⁷ There's no mention, though, of her career in *Son & Moon*. Perhaps not much has changed after all since the days when, according to Apollo 8 wife Susan Borman "NASA wanted perfect wives, perfect children, perfect homes. There was certainly some pressure there" (in Cuddon, 2007: website). Daria does not seem to be at all the kind of wife that would give in to NASA pressure (if it is still on). Seeing, though, how Huerga deals with the son's resistance to his father's dream it is hard not to wonder how and why the wife put up with it. Or how husbands married to female astronauts deal with their wives' dreams.

The two women astronauts are treated very differently from each other both by Lopez-Alegria and by Huerga. The professional American astronaut of Indian origin Sunita L. Williams²⁸ deserves their respect whereas, clearly, the amateur astronaut Anousheh Ansari²⁹ is much less welcome. Sunita is given substantial screen time alongside her male colleagues, and is never patronized. Still, though her presence is a sign of the opportunities offered by NASA to gender and ethnic minorities, these issues are bypassed. Ansari, a Persian migrant to the U.S. and prominent businesswoman, bought herself a 20-million-dollar ticket to the ISS as a space tourist (the fourth one in history and the first woman), a situation which Lopez-Alegria did not relish much. Her name is not even mentioned during the long segment narrating her trip on the Soyuz TMA-9 to the ISS with Lopez-Alegria and Russian astronaut Mikhail Tyurin. When it is finally mentioned this is during a press con-

²⁷ See the corporation's website at <http://www.spacebridges.com/> and Daria Lopez-Alegria's own presentation, "About Daria Lopez-Alegria" at <http://www.spacebridges.com/about/team/about-daria-lopez-alegria/>: "Daria is an entrepreneur and policy strategist whose passion is fostering broad dialogue about scientific research and its impact on society" (Retrieved 31 August, 2013).

²⁸ See her NASA bio (2012) at <http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/htmlbios/williams-s.html>. Williams is quite a celebrity in India, where diverse books about her have been published (none in her native United States).

²⁹ See Ansari's official website: <http://www.anoushehansari.com>.

ference on board the ISS. Asked what exactly her chores are, she quips, to my discomfort, that “[a]s Michael said, I was ironing and cooking here”—everyone laughs. She soon clarifies that it’s “like I’m sitting in my office, really” but nothing is added about what kind of office she runs. In her own memoirs, *My dream of stars: From daughter of Iran to space pioneer*, she recalls that when she first met her two male crewmates “Misha greeted me warmly but the NASA astronaut Michael Lopez-Alegria ... was difficult to read” (Ansari & Hickham, 2001, p. 152).³⁰ Indeed, he is.

Curiously, another documentary, shot simultaneously with Huerga’s, captured Ansari’s adventure: Christian Frei’s *Space Tourists* (2009). In this far inferior film—for which Frei won an award as best director at Sundance (2010, category World Cinema Documentary)—Ansari is presented as a capricious rich woman: she squanders her money in an absurd space adventure while, back on Earth, the Kazakhstan poor survive by scavenging the debris of each Soyuz launch to the ISS. Frei offers a representation of Ansari that borders on racist, classist, misogynist insult and that makes Huerga’s indifference towards her almost positive.³¹ Regrettably, Frei’s biased, sexist film has been honored (at the prestige Sundance Festival) while Huerga’s constructive re-assessment of the male astronaut, and to some extent of his female companions, remains practically unknown.

CONCLUSIONS

Son and Moon is proof of how a creative filmmaker from outside American culture can bring to the quintessential American frontier myth of the male astronaut a new sensibility, very useful to highlight its patriarchal and post-feminist ambiguities. Hopefully, the documentary will soon receive the academic attention it deserves, particularly as regards the representation of the diverse masculinities which, as I hope I haven shown, this genre approaches from a truly cosmopolitan, transnational, cross-cultural perspective still lacking in fiction (print and film) and, too often, in academic research.

³⁰ Ansari adds: “He nearly always wore his military uniform while most of us wore jeans and t-shirts, and I rarely saw him smile” (p. 152). A disquieting comment.

³¹ Huerga’s crew, by the way, is not seen in *Space tourists* although, of course, Lopez-Alegria is present, much more fleetingly than Ansari in *Son and Moon*.

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