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Exceptional Spaces: Pop-Cultural Debris and the Spatial (Re)Construction of American Exceptionalism in Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*

Abstract: This paper discusses the cosmic setting of Alfonso Cuarón's movie *Gravity*, taking into account its fictional population with the themes, tropes, myths, and symbols that have regularly been identified as exemplary for the composition of a uniquely American personal and national character. Making use of a deconstructive approach and a methodology that is informed by the theories of spatial turn scholarship in the humanities, the paper zooms in at the sociocultural dynamics, aesthetics, mise-en-scène, and key motifs of Cuarón's representation of space in the movie, arguing that this representation in fact draws on, endorses, and positions itself firmly within the epistemological framework of American exceptionalism, which becomes visible mainly through the movie's relationship to geography, technocracy, and popular culture.

Keywords: Alfonso Cuarón, *Gravity*, space, American exceptionalism, popular culture

"An Airborne Life": Introduction

> One day the stars will be as familiar to each man as the landmarks, the curves, and the hills on the road that leads to his door, and one day that will be an airborne life.
>
> Beryl Markham, *West with the Night*

For many American audiences Space has become a field of endless prospects, a real yet for the vast majority inaccessible thus fictitious domain.[1] Frequently, Space defies a clear distinction between scientific realism and purely fictional imaginings within the vertiginous array of virtually endless cosmic permutations (Cartwright 287).[2] In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre reflects upon the intangible ontological quality of the universe, which "one can neither conceive of [having] a beginning (an origin) nor yet do without such an idea" (22). Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace describes space as a conciliatory realm that brings together "the subjectivity and

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1 In order to delimit it from its geographical, socio-cultural, or other meanings, the term space is capitalized in this paper where it refers to outer space, namely "the physical universe (excluding celestial objects) beyond the earth's atmosphere, consisting of near vacuum with small amounts of gas and dust" ("Space").

2 A prominent example for this is Ronald Reagan's 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also known as the 'Star Wars' program, which proposed the usage of Space-based antiballistic missiles systems as a defense from Soviet nuclear aggression (Weisman).

objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body,... everyday life and unending history" (57). In literature, Space has become a laboratory proper for authors to experiment with, criticize, and survey the validity of terrestrial ethics, politics, and ideologies. From the imaginative spheres populated by the fictions of grand visionaries Jules Verne and H.G. Wells to the Golden Age of science fiction with authors such as Isaac Asimov (*I, Robot*) and Robert A. Heinlein (*Starship Troopers*), the cosmos and its potential alien inhabitants have worked as catalysts for the pressing issues of their times.

Space thus came to be seen as a tabula rasa ready to be inscribed with amazing stories, but also as a resonating chamber for those voices and agendas that emphasize the unique qualities of a coherent American identity. The sublime nature of the cosmic frontier and the individuals who dare to venture there hint at its exceptional status within the American national framework of transcendental and identity-shaping landscapes. Likewise, the NASA Space program evolved into a gauge for international prestige and ideological paragon of American values and character during the space race of the Cold War era. In the field of pop-cultural entertainment an ongoing space craze engendered a plethora of successful Hollywood productions, for instance *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, or *Alien* that quickly acquired a cult following. Because their plots often unfold in the deep Space of galaxies far away from the coarse realities of earth, these movies employ fictional and pseudo-scientific elements more liberally than for instance Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013), which attempts to visualize more readily imaginable scenarios.

Praised by critics for its visual aesthetics, zero-G cinematography, and 3-D special effects (Hornaday; Seitz; Travers; Turan), the film features NASA astronauts Dr. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) and Matthew "Matt" Kowalski (George Clooney) attempting to repair a malfunctioning telescope. Disaster strikes when a debris storm caused by a discarded Russian satellite damages the astronauts' shuttle beyond repair.[3] Lost in Space and cut off from communication with Houston, their struggle for survival begins. As its depiction in *Gravity* demonstrates, while it might be "a disorientatingly spaceless and timeless abyss" (Sage 2) and thus a virgin territory for earthly reasoning, Space has been and continues to be instilled and "humanized" with meaning in the form of political, sociocultural, and religious agendas as well as those myths and symbols that some American studies scholars have laid out as exemplary for the American character. The goal of this paper is to examine several of the movie's motifs and key scenes within the transcendental nexus of American exceptionalism by employing a deconstructive approach that focuses on Cuarón's use of spatial aesthetics, mise-en-scène, as well as key motifs and symbols. Based

3 At this point, the script transgresses the line of implied scientific realism and enters science-fiction territory: A high-speed accident like this is in fact impossible because "[a]ll objects in the same orbit move at the same speed, so a collision between them is no more likely than if all of the cars on a highway were moving at exactly 60 mph. The gap between any two would never widen or narrow at all" (Kluger).

on these evaluations, I argue that the representation of Space in *Gravity* draws on, endorses, and positions itself within the ideology of an exceptional American identity, which is shaped primarily by its relationship to geography, technocracy, and popular culture.

"Because It Is There": Exceptional Geographies

> Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest,was asked why did he want to climb it. He said, 'Because it is there.' Well, space is there, and we're going to climb it.
>
> John F. Kennedy, "Address on the Nation's Space Effort"

The "triumph" over the North American physical space during the westward expansion of the nineteenth century and the important role of geography for the formation of a national identity together laid the foundation for what Henry Luce in 1941 prophetically termed the "American Century" (cf. Keller). In the same vein, the cosmic endeavor also functions through this "uniquely" American mode by adding both substance and cohesion to the notion of an exceptional national character. However, this is not accomplished merely through the de facto exploration of and control over a spatial extend of territory. Conversely, apart from imperial or hegemonic aspirations, spatial territory is first taken into possession through human settlement and subsequently co-opted into a preexisting ideological or spiritual superstructure. Space for the myth of American identity then occupies a dual function: first, its relationship to space *is* unique because it is not merely the territorial repository of but also the prerequisite for identity formation; second, this idiosyncrasy also *makes* unique because it transcends the formulaic dynamics between human civilization and natural environment, which in its essence describes the unilateral humanization of a habitat. A formerly barren and hence meaningless space in terms of civilization is transformed into a place—a state, region, or city—via its anthropocentric re-inscription as an object "which people have made meaningful" (Cresswell 7).

Although by no means exempt from this core dynamic, the American myth of Manifest Destiny exceeds this lineal mode of operation by assigning agential quality to the environment itself. Within this paradigm, space becomes more than a necessary source of macroeconomic sustenance and individual prosperity—a mere people's enclosing, bordered *lebensraum* as it was incumbent in the European political geography. Instead, in the process of its exploration, the supposedly untouched American wilderness itself became an agent engaged in reciprocal action with its inhabitants by vanquishing their ethnic and cultural differences through common hardships and homogenizing their character through the shared experience of endurance in unfamiliar and hostile surroundings. Hence, "[t]he rapid expansion of the US from coast to coast, the immensity of its railroad system, the scale of its bridges, and the productivity of its factories, all became sublime tropes for the new nation" (Nye 321).

Therefore, the relationship of people with different and sometimes adverse sociocultural and sectarian backgrounds blends together via their movement through and emplacement in a geography that functioned as a democratizing accelerator, resulting in "a foundational understanding of the US as formed by the Americanization of (European) migrants" (Madsen 369). This exalted geographical setting then supposedly acted as a hotbed for the development of distinctly American "conventions, customs, techniques [and] transformations such as metonyms, tropes, and metaphors that are intrinsic elements in the constitution, continuity, and the change of people's identity as a people of certain locations or spatial spheres" (Schlottner 259).[4] In "Little Gidding," T. S. Eliot, often named as one of the "American Century's" most exceptional writers, gives poetic expression to this notion which is rooted in the desire to include all humanly accessible spaces in the modernist quest of attaining a coherent identity, and consequently the actualization of the cosmos as a valid object for the national impulse to expand its physical—and through this process also its mental—geography (Sage 2):

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
> Through the unknown, unremembered gate
> When the last of earth left to discover
> Is that which was the beginning.

In *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture*, Chinese geographer Yi-Fu Tuan traces this peculiar allocation of nature with its religious, ethic, poetic, and aesthetic dimensions back to its eighteenth and nineteenth century roots. Using the exalted spatial and legal status of national parks as a pointer for the adamant contemporary allotment of space with mythical and foundational qualities, he understands "open space and free land [as] a source of spiritual and democratic values, including liberty, simplicity and equality" (204). Hence, the aesthetics of space as well as its transformations and correlative impact on its inhabitants are not only one single aspect, but actually the core of Americanness as a whole. This might not least stem from what Tuan calls "simplicity," namely a sense of inherent pastoral grandeur and universally approachable delight in the continent's landscapes that is comprehensible across all societal strata. In fact, the American frontier landscapes provided a "definable, recognizable and repeatable aesthetic framework [and] stage upon which an exceptional... version of American identity could be performed"

4 Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 "frontier thesis" describes the American character as being defined by "coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom" (qtd. in Tindall and Shi 740-41).

(Sage 25). The same idea holds true for the cosmic landscape as it is presented in the movie *Gravity*, whose simplistic yet spectacular visual style is equally—if not more—stunning to behold and its straight-forward plot acknowledgeable by the broadest of audiences.

The narratives that emerge naturally from the encounters that take place within this realm then comprise the core themes of spatial exceptionalism. They often illustrate a spatio-temporal antagonism by depicting the clashes between civilization and wilderness (*Leatherstocking Tales*) or democracy and totalitarianism (*Moby-Dick*). Their explicitly violent quality is an integral component of these confrontations and is not only inherent in many American founding myths from the Revolutionary War to the westward expansion and Civil War but also in *Gravity*'s aesthetic of constant destruction and fragmentation within a life-threatening environment. The derivations and repercussions of these pivotal and ongoing struggles are subsequently condensed and sublimated into a distinctly American mindset. At its core, this mentality is characterized by its understanding of socio-spatial performance as an egalitarian concept, capable of transcending class distinctions and distilling a set of unparalleled features. The universe is an ideal setting and metaphor to convey this paradigm of Americanness because it functions as an unbroken physical manifestation of said virtues and therefore as the positivistic-scientific verification of their verisimilitude. In this understanding, the cosmos itself becomes Americanized, that is to say deeply egalitarian and ruggedly individualistic; its hardships and perils affect everyone who dares to enter it, regardless of their race or gender. Consequently, astronauts are depicted as simultaneously collaborative and autonomous bodies who must suffer the consequences of their own mistakes, and therefore genuinely self-reliant agents. The directives from mission control do not curtail this uninterrupted sense of independence since they cannot actually be enforced from the earthbound command center in Houston. In the movie, Space stations and Space ships are truly sovereign, self-governing bodies whose isolation and claustrophobic lack of room both promote the proliferation of democratic structures and proclivity to flat hierarchies. Thus, they both signify two central dimensions of American exceptionalism, which Amy Kaplan identifies as "uniqueness and universality" (qtd. in Reichardt 449), whereas the principal values of democracy are pluralized in order to attach themselves to any available physical and cultural spaces. As Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor explains, "the world as a whole... is following American precedent" (54).

Gravity also aligns itself with the notion of American society as a multicultural melting pot, which becomes apparent in the different ethnic backgrounds of its protagonists as implied by their last names, i.e. Stone (Anglo-Saxon), Kowalski (Eastern European), and Shariff (Middle Eastern). Yet their interactions and struggles with the surrounding hostile geography melts down their ethnic and religious differences in order to produce something unique: an American identity. The opening credits state the intentionally incorrect: "Life in space is impossible." In fact, as implied by the succeeding display of astronauts floating in Space, the conditions for this possibility are outlined as the ontological status of being exceptional as well as the epistemologically

enabled performance of this exceptionality. In other words, both *being* and *acting* American. The movie's final sequence in particular implies the possibility of new exceptional spaces to be attained. As Stone manages to escape from the sinking rescue capsule to reach the muddy shores of a sublimely picturesque landscape, the movie "hints at some massive cosmic rebirth; a sense that these people are the first or last human beings in the universe" (Bredshaw). Interestingly, at this crucial point in its dramaturgy *Gravity* mixes secular with religious symbolism. On the one hand is the Darwinist notion of evolution symbolized through human life emerging from the water. On the other hand, however, stands the metaphor of Stone embracing the wet clay as the source material of biblical creation ex nihilo, hence the metaphysical generation of life from the earth itself. Against this interpretive background, the cosmos turns into a new frontier for the American exceptionalist aspiration, ready to be shaped and molded by human ingenuity, yet also to itself act as a creative and character shaping force. Within this framework, Stone and Kowalski are figuratively portrayed as yeoman settlers in Space, surrounded by the very wilderness that forges the traits of their unique identity. Encircled between the freezing emptiness of outer Space and the incinerating heat of unprotected orbital re-entry, they are forced to negotiate and improve the conditions of their existence solely through self-reliance and the performance of Americanness.

"A Thing of Trophies": Technocratic Exceptionalism

As Fraser MacDonald aptly notes in his essay "Anti-*Astropolitik*—Outer Space and the Orbit of Geography," any attempt to map out "a geography of outer space is a logical extension of earlier geographies of imperial exploration" (596). However, while it may be true that under geopolitical aspects "the move into space has its origins in older imperial enterprises" (MacDonald 596), I will refrain—for reasons of space, ironically—from discussing these aspects in greater depth. Rather, the following analysis considers *Gravity* mainly within the fabric of those exceptional-transcendental geographies laid out in the previous chapter.

Indeed, whereas "*2001*, *Solaris*, and *Contact* used the premise of outer space to explore larger philosophical questions... *Gravity* [puts] focus on the perils, dangers, promise, and gratification of space exploration" (Hameed). With its orbital setting, vivid illustration of and focus on techno-scientific structures and their relations to human existence, the movie magnifies the paradigm of American geographical transcendence by drawing on technocracy as both a generator of and metaphor for exceptional meaning.[5] A core text of the myth-and-symbol school, Leo Marx's 1964 *The Machine in the Garden* provides a model for this concept as

5 I do not use the term technocracy in its strict meaning as the "[g]overnment or control by an elite of technical experts" ("technocracy") where "questions of ethics, values and emotional state are replaced with technical, and economic, calculations of efficiency and cost-effectiveness" (Sage 61). Instead, I understand it in a more fluid sense as the conglomeration of man-made technological structures and skills used to enable, maintain, and control human existence in Space.

it "presented the American experience through the conflicts between the pastoral ideal and the proliferation of technology" (Umberger). In fact, a brief comparison between Melville's *Pequod* and Cuarón's depiction of the International Space Station (ISS) reveals both vessels as exactly those transcendental and democratizing 'machines in the garden' through which said Marxian dichotomy can produce "nationalistic triumphs of the technological sublime" (Nye 325). Both are no ordinary ships, but in fact rather unique vessels: They are patchwork structures, palimpsests inscribed and charged with multiple histories, and held together by their metaphorical contents. The *Pequod* mirrors the ISS's battered yet sturdy looks as her "masts—cut somewhere on the coast of Japan, where her original ones were lost overboard in a gale—... stood stiffly up like the spines of the three old kings of Cologne" (Melville 59). Just as the ISS is filled with the lucky charms of oddly superstitious astronauts, the *Pequod* also "was as a thing of trophies," emanating an air of improvisation that is animated by arcane and ideological motives, vesting both structures with the divine nimbus of "[a] noble craft, but somehow a most melancholy" (Melville 59). In both vessels, unfamiliar spaces are populated with symbols that function to uphold the identitarian unity of their inhabitants. For instance, during the moment of her greatest desperation, Stone draws new hope from an Orthodox Saint Christopher icon she finds inside the Russian Soyuz module, and which reconnects her with the meaningfulness of man-made objects, shielding her against the dark nothingness of deep space. The fact that she is not religious and—as she later confides during a strange conversation with a Chinese radio operator—"I've never prayed in my life" become irrelevant here: The main protagonist is safe as long she can adhere to something that elicits an emotional response, namely an artifact whose melancholy value is able to transcend the Marxian divergence between the machine and the garden.

Moreover, the technocratic substructures and scientific preconditions for the American astronautics program also work towards the paradigm of an exceptional geography. In his review of K. Maria D. Lane's *Geographies of Mars*, Roger Launius remarks how the establishment of astronomical observatories on remote mountaintops in the second half of the nineteenth century with its "sense of adventure and hardship... raised the status of those who worked in those places. In essence, these activities were hard and, therefore, those who engaged in them were dedicated scientific explorers and their conclusions were to be embraced." Lane continues to argue that "a metropolitan-versus-mountain dichotomy provided the critical means of differentiating among the credibility of observatories, astronomers, and hypotheses. The higher, the more remote, the more rugged, and the more sublime, the better" (95). The same correlation between hostile environment, credibility, and sublime exaltation is visible in the joint effort of *Gravity*'s astronauts to subsist, survive, and populate Space with meaningful structures that delineate their exceptional performance. The most obvious instance of this symbolic population is a prolonged sequence that shows the ISS entangled in a damaged parachute of a Soyuz escape capsule, highly reminiscent of the Stars and Stripes banner. Moreover, the astronauts'

initial mission to carry out repairs on the Hubble Space Telescope (HST) exemplifies the above-mentioned reciprocity even more strikingly as the device itself becomes emblematic for the sublime qualities of cosmic technology. Since its launch into orbit in 1990, the HST has functioned as a literal *deus ex machina*. Medical researchers, for instance, have adapted the know-how used originally to detect a malfunction in the HST's photo-optical system (which produced only blurry images) and applied it to the field of mammography, therefore "leading to significant advances in the early detection of breast cancer. Countless women are alive today because of efforts to fix a design flaw in the Hubble Space Telescope" (Tyson).[6]

In *Gravity*, anthropocentric significance is also generated as Space is populated (or, from an environmentalist perspective, contaminated) with the technological artifacts of human civilization. While waste materials, burned out rocket stages, and derelict pieces of outdated machinery drift into Space, they also take with them the anticipation of being discovered and hence to overcome earthbound parochialism and to reach out to more advanced civilizations who might be able to answer humanity's most haunting questions, open up new and meaningful horizons of knowledge and power, or even fulfill modernity's repressed desires of an afterlife. Hence, although Kowalski's slow departure into the darkness of outer Space superficially implies his certain death in the freezing vacuum, it also connotes a highly idiosyncratic ascription of meaning. Even though his individual existence and human agency are doomed to end as he either succumbs to hypothermia or suffocates, his body is ascribed with new and possibly even greater symbolic value because it is reclassified as a cultural artifact and "ambassador" of Americanness, and hence humanity as a whole. Peacefully entering the spatio-temporal infinity of the cosmic *terra incognita*, Kowalski thus achieves twofold immortality: Firstly, the vacuum protects his organic integrity against the terrestrial certainty of decay, thus affixing to his—male, white, and American—features a status of representative epistemic universality and archetypal Foucauldian discursive power. Much like the nobility's mummified remains of ancient Egyptian civilization serve as the centerpieces of their scientific and public imagination, Kowalski's frozen hull will be regarded as representative for humanity as a whole by its possibly alien finders. Secondly, with his lily-white suit conveying innocence and placidity, he appears as a shining light in an ocean of darkness, fleeing the dismal confounds of the Old World and thus "representing the US as an exception to the rule of European normalization" (Pease 265). Similar to the last unspoiled humans in Cormack McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, his natural task has become to "carry the fire" (234), or to actually become the fire himself. His post-mortem mission therefore is to keep alive what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature" and in this way provide an example for the rest to follow: a glittering city upon a hill that materializes the

6 In a 2009 speech, Barack Obama remarked that the "Apollo program produced technologies that have improved kidney dialysis and water purification systems; sensors to test for hazardous gasses; energy-saving building materials [and] fire-resistant fabrics used by firefighters and soldiers."

"unifying element [of] the [American] cult of freedom" (Ricard 15).

Finally, Kowalski's calm and collected attitude in the prospect of an agonizing death in fact hints at his intuitive awareness of this augmentation of representational power through death and symbolic cosmic rebirth via this final performance of American exceptionalism. A paragon of personal transcendence, his fearlessness therefore embraces both the Pilgrim's emancipating voyage into an unknown New World and the Puritan credo of the quest into uncharted wilderness as a means of spiritual redemption. Therefore, *Gravity's* representation of American technocracy ultimately constitutes a fallback to and celestial affirmation of those singular character traits that appoint "a universal sense of freedom as being part and parcel of what it is to be American: a future without limits [as] *the* distinguishing trait of American identity" (Sage 13, original emphasis). In Cuarón's movie, the universe in its most verbatim definition therefore works as the truly universal empty canvas on which exceptional tales are painted with a broad palette of possible colors.

"Neil Armstrong Bakes Pizza": The Exceptional Culture

The democratic quality of physical space as an agent of exceptionalism has produced both the geographical place America and the collective conception of a distinctly American popular culture, engendering an identity that becomes visible "in the grid pattern imposed everywhere on the landscape, or in the idea of inter-changeable parts that can be found in factories, fast-food restaurants,... in skyscrapers, in the poetry of Walt Whitman, and in the structure of jazz" (Nye 323). Today, a plethora of voices contest an essential American character as white and male-centric and hence marginalizing women as well as African Americans and other minorities (cf. Alsultany; Halttunen). As Kirsten Silva Gruesz contends, "'America' has generally been used as a term of consolidation, homogenization, and unification, not a term that invites recognition of difference, dissonance, and plurality" (20). But irrespective of these valid points of criticism, it should at least be possible to assert with some certainty that "the centrality of the debate about American distinctiveness... may in itself be a key component of American identity" (Kean 2).

In fact, American popular culture draws some of its singularity from the inclination to contrast itself against and view highbrow culture as a symptom of the Old World's corruption, social dislocations, and aristocratic elitism. Still, pop icons such as Elvis Presley or Superman occupy positions that seem no less exceptional than Shakespearean characters or the demigods of Greek mythology. Nonetheless, the key difference between them is apparent in their peculiar double status. On the one hand, they are exempted from everyday experience; a spotlight is put on them, which demarcates them from pedestrian reality. On the other hand, they are not raised above the limits of their own personhood and usually not endowed with mystical qualities, hence never fully detached from being "one of us." By staying grounded in the egalitarian status quo, "stars" and other supposedly exceptional figures are actually no superior exceptions—or even an implicit

critique—of democratic and mass-cultural indifference, but in fact their promotion and simultaneous confirmation of Middle American values. Hence, "The King" was never elevated into divine rank but attributed merely a secular title, and his majesty suffered a quite prosaic death caused by obesity and drug abuse just like the lowest of his "subalterns" could. Likewise, despite his herculean powers Superman must spend the bulk of his days performing a run-of-the-mill office job disguised as the painfully pedestrian Clark Kent in order to cloak his exceptional identity. What follows from this is that pop icons are equally mimetic of the extraordinary as they are of the ordinary, i.e. everyday democratic processes and institutions. In *Gravity*, Stone's elevated position as a NASA astronaut is similarly rectified and democratized when she relates the "pointless" death of her four-year-old daughter who slipped and hit her head while playing tag.

Many myth-and-symbol texts in American studies have emphasized the role of both popular culture and geography for American identity formation, most notably Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* and Richard Slotkin's frontier trilogy. Although pointed out as frequently championing high culture, lacking methodological coherence, as well as promoting "platonic" ideas and "a crude Cartesian view of mind" (Kuklick 437), these texts also worked on the deconstruction of the popular/mass versus high culture dichotomy. In her 1989 keynote address, then ASA president Linda K. Kerber observed that "the Myth and Symbol writers broadened the definition of what qualified as art, and devoted to the imagery of 'second-rate' literature the attention which the New Critics reserved for 'high' art.... [They understood] that Emerson's essays must share the shelves with *Our Nig* and Campbell's soup cans" (423-424). In the same vein, H. N. Smith's book underpins its assumption of America as a "society [that] has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward" (4) with the "readings of major figures of intellectual and literary history such as Thomas Jefferson, James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, and others, but also through analysis of dime novels and other forms of popular and mass culture" (Streeby 434).[7] Even Marxist and postmodernist Fredric Jameson, an outspoken critic of popular culture, "later realized [that] the products of popular culture could serve utopian functions.... Amusements could be understood not simply as forms of false consciousness, but as a psychic release from the world" (Nye 327).

If widely shared consumption patterns of geographic key experiences, dissociation of high culture, and egalitarianism make up the groundwork of American popular culture, *Gravity's* depiction of Space firmly embeds itself within this epistemic habitat. Regardless of their unique position outside of earthly constraints, astronauts are by no means exempt from the principles laid out above, because,

7 However, Smith contended that the "unabashed and systematic use of [mass cultural] formulas strips from the writing every vestige of the interest usually sought in works of the imagination." As a consequence, the "individual writer abandons his own personality and identifies himself with the reveries of his readers," suppressing any spark of stylistic uniqueness and instead assuming "the character of automatic writing" (101).

as Darren Jorgensen explicates with reference to the characterization of the heroic figures of Apollo 11:

> The August 1969 *Life* Special Issue, released to commemorate the landing, wants to produce sympathetic accounts of the astronauts. It is filled with glossy, high color photographs of the astronauts not only mastering outer space, but their domestic spaces as well. Neil Armstrong bakes pizza, Buzz Aldrin jogs through the suburbs, and Mike Collins prunes his garden. (qtd. in Sage 160)

The astronauts in *Gravity* also appear as ordinary citizens with their personal and quite mundane qualms. For instance, throughout the opening scene Kowalski and Stone make small talk, joke and fool around with Houston mission control while all-American country music plays in the background. Later, when the two survivors make their way to the ISS after the fatal debris storm, Kowalski complains about his wife taking off with her lawyer in his (Kowalski's) '74 Pontiac GTO, a quintessentially car for American pop culture.

Still, the astronauts are vested with special training, unique abilities, and what art historian Albert Boime calls the "magisterial gaze," referring to the empowering top-down visual trajectory that gives them definatory power over the perception of both earth and Space (cf. Sage 21). The "magisterial gaze" is complemented by the "Apollonian gaze," which results from the possibility to photograph earth from Space "that had been dreamed about since the age of Cicero" (MacDonald 597-598) and that the film effectively simulated through its cinematography. Like the HST's "gorgeous images," Cuarón makes "Americans feel [like] participants in cosmic discovery" (Tyson). While this exceptional panorama for them is established as entirely normal and only mentioned *en passent*, its elaborate simulation for movie audiences clearly represents the dramaturgic, aesthetic, and to a degree also narrative focus of *Gravity*. To amplify the sense of immersion even more, Cuarón makes use of long shots to "slowly immerse audiences into [the] environment" in order to make viewers "feel as if they are a third character that is floating with our other two characters in space" (Murphy). Thus, as viewers descend into the 3-D enhanced Baudrillardian simulation of this unequaled spatial vista in combination with its simulated weightlessness, they are empowered and encouraged to themselves assume the "magisterial gaze," hence recreating the sublime spectacle of a prodigiously American space. As a consequence, audiences perceive the blue planet in its entirety, while personal problems suddenly appear petty and societal issues pale in the face of this shiver-inducing prospect. The possible future reality of widespread, affordable Space travel is already anticipated by its own simulacrum, resulting in a "simulation [that] threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false'" (Baudrillard 168). In light of the poststructuralist inclination to emphasize the constructiveness of human place-making, *Gravity's* representation of Space may in fact be engaged in the process of "disneyfication" as its screenplay is being "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest [i.e., a coherent, exceptional American identity] is real" (Baudrillard 172; Halttunen 5).

This simulated sense of escapist ecstasy is best captured in the words of Kurt Vonnegut, who observed that "Earth is a pretty blue and pink and white pearl in the pictures NASA sent me.... Life is said to be horrible down there in many places, but it looked like the Garden of Eden to me" (qtd. in Klinkowitz 109). Likewise, after the 1957 Sputnik launch political theorist Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* observed that humanity's endeavor into the depths of Space might indeed effect a "repudiation of the earth who was the Mother of all living things under the sky" (2). A telling dialog between the astronauts in *Gravity* underlines this notion of escaping into exceptional spaces. When Kowalski asks Stone, "[s]o, what do you like about being up here?" she replies, "[t]he silence," thus amplifying the notion of escaping from a planet whose social order is perceived as noisy, crowded, and chaotic. In the context of the monosyllabic and image-centric style of the film, this intimated lamentation translates into an abbreviated performance of another device said to be emblematic of an exceptional American identity, namely the Puritan Jeremiad. At its core, the subtext of Stone's answer in fact implies a laconic bemoaning of the transition from the post-World War II serenity and sense of national coherence to the confusing disarray of the postindustrial United States in the era of globalization.[8] "The silence" therefore suggests an attempt to recover in the universe what is already lost in planetary terms, and to explore and populate novel spaces where highly idealized concepts and imaginations may be revitalized and strike new roots. *Gravity*'s commercial success and critical acclaim both suggest that its homogenizing re-rooting of exceptionalist sentiments has indeed struck a common chord in America's cultural landscape.

"Off Structure and Drifting": Recovering the Exceptional

Ultimately, the astronauts' brief dialog cited above presents their journey as a literal flight from a perplexing globalist order that emerged after the downfall of the Berlin Wall and that took down with it the easily intelligible Manichean divisions of the Cold War, thus heralding "the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1). Within this environment, transnational (al-Qaeda) and territorial (ISIS) terrorist organizations and widespread opposition against American geopolitics and culture together with the post 9/11 Homeland Security State rendered visible what Paul Giles defined as "vectors that threaten to push the nation further and further away from the representative center of its own imagined community" (58). Over the last decades, these "vectors" have facilitated an inward turn and renewed interest in depictions of an "exceptionalist meta-narrative," which promises to resurrect and stabilize time-honored values, unpack unifying traits, and therefore "recover a lost national origin [that] organized the national subject's quest in the form of a sequence of purposive events" (Pease 265).[9]

8 Marilyn Young points out that "[t]he Cold War enshrined World War II as the 'good war,' a sacred icon of national virtue [and] the pursuit of world justice" (286).

9 Such reassuring narratives may depict fictional events like *Gravity* or draw from

This ideological fragmentation—apparent in the movie's frequent use of floating debris and disorienting perspectives—in the wake of the ideological blocs' downfall becomes evident in the movie's illustration of Space not as an exclusively American but multinational and multilingual domain. As already mentioned, *Gravity* was directed by Alfonso Cuarón who, together with his son Jonás, is also responsible for the film's screenplay. Born in Mexico City, Cuarón worked his way up from a job as a technician in Mexican television to directing films like *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004) and *Children of Men* (2006).[10] In addition to the transnational background of its auteur, *Gravity* moreover is a co-production of Esperanto Filmoj, a California based company owned by Cuarón, and the British Heyday Films studio. On the surface, this transnational makeup regarding the production and artistic direction of the film seems to call into question its interpretation as a vehicle of American exceptionalism. However, the opposite is the case; the estimation of the nation as a carrier of exceptional values is by no means a sentiment that is exclusive to those who possess US citizenship, but a decisively borderless concept. In fact, it could even be argued that today some components of American exceptionalism such as "the land of the free" hold even more sway for inhabitants of countries that may be lacking personal and/or religious freedoms and who actually see the US as a kind of city upon a hill, or even a modern variant of Cockaigne when it comes to economic possibilities. As a result, transnationalism and the globalized export of ideas have elicited quite a fascinating inverse development, in which domestic calls for exceptionalism seem to become ever more hushed, whereas the concept itself becomes borderless and is discussed, assumed, and appropriated in transnational contexts.

This conceptual borderlessness also resonates in the challenges that the astronauts face in the movie. Stone, for example, is only able to escape the doomed ISS by learning to command a Russian Space module while wearing a Russian Space suit. During the movie's climax, her survival and successful return to earth is possible only because she finds shelter in a Chinese rescue capsule. Additionally, the techno-scientific and verbal disarray resulting from the transnational quality of Space is also evident in Stone's desperate attempts to decipher and make sense of control panels of foreign space vessels that are labeled in Cyrillic and Chinese letters. Unable to understand what the letters mean, she succeeds only because the panels turn out to be exact replicas of each other, which works as a tongue-in-cheek gibe at globalization and mass production, yet also hints at egalitarianism and universalism as American core values. It comes as no surprise that some of the Cold War's systemic antitheses are also recovered in *Gravity*'s plot, implying a revival of the forlorn coherence of an era in which the US was "accustomed to seeing itself as the *de facto* center of the world—the military superpower, the largest economy, and the moral arbiter to boot" (Dimock 2; original emphasis). The process of recovering

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documentary and (semi)historical sources, for example in productions like *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) or *American Sniper* (2014).

10 Cuarón was the first Latin American to receive an Oscar in the category Best Director (for *Gravity*).

this notion of exceptionalism is picturesquely exemplified by the movie's opening sequence. Here, the orbital storm of satellite debris corresponds to a hail of projectiles intruding the US from the territory of its erstwhile "threatening socialist totalitarian Russian Other" (Pease 266). Although it might also originate from some belligerent Native American tribe, it is in fact caused by (willful?) negligence on the part of the Russians who thus re-establish their well-worn role as the shadowy antagonists against whom American values become clearly recognizable. Catherine Hall explains this process, noting that "[w]e can understand the nation only by defining what is not part of it, for identity depends on the outside, on the marking both of its positive presence and content of its negative and excluded parts" (9).[11] Hence, Russia is once again portrayed as—maybe not ideologically motivated but probably as a result of post-Cold War fragmentation and disarray—disturbing the peaceful and egalitarian American Space when it destroy its own (spy?) satellite, even though it may be acting upon its geopolitical "right of disposal." With this action and the ensuing chain reaction, the Russians directly threaten the technological integrity of the US, which today rests mainly on the efficient functioning of social networks. As Kowalski dryly remarks: "Half of North America just lost their Facebook."

Additionally, Stone's struggle for survival in Space also aligns itself as a quest in the tradition of captain Ahab's or Charles Marlow's epic and perilous journeys into the peripheral spheres of mundane reality and beyond the quotidian experiences of their times. The voyages of these exceptional literary figures therefore turn into what Edward Said in his essay "Introduction to *Moby-Dick*" identifies as "investigations of the largely unknown limits of their worlds" (358), which evoke "discourses of American specialness [and] the salutary effect as well as the destructiveness of the American world presence" (364).[12] Although detached from any obvious highbrow ambitions, Cuarón's protagonists nevertheless occupy such an extraordinary position as spatial *grenzgängers*. In fact, the movie's drama emerges primarily from its characters' unique and ill-fated status as being caught between the poles of two variables. On one side is the ostensibly safe haven of earth, whose stunning 3-D vistas populate the silver screen. But the blue planet's comforting familiarity is—during the most dramatic scenes literally as well as symbolically—clouded by an increasingly uncanny defamiliarization. Because by surmounting the planet's gravitational pull, the astronauts have entered a realm that "falls outside of geography's disciplined passion to describe and explain concrete

11 According to Stuart Hall's interpretive cultural framework, meaning is produced through the difference visualized by this "*binary* form of representation" (229, original emphasis). But there also exists a power relation between the opposite pairs that marks one of them as dominant, for instance "*white*/black, *men*/women" (235, original emphasis), or *America*/Russia in *Gravity*.

12 In his last published book *Freud and the Non-European* (2003), postcolonial theorist Edward Said also recognizes a permanent cultural formative power of exceptional authors whose texts "brush up unstintingly against historical constraints [and who] we keep with us, generation after generation" (27).

spaces that are mappable" (Sage 1). Drifting in the borderlands between terrestrial commensurability and the inconceivable vastness of deep Space, Stone and Kowalski are unable to find purchase on either of the two domains, effectively turning them into trailblazers of a largely unmapped and hence wholly imagined cartography—an effective *terra nullius* or no mans land. Exempted from the ostensibly universal and shared macro-reality of everyday personal and public experiences, the film's protagonists transcend the humanist-positivist reach of terrestrial epistemological and ontological integration. As they gain access to a new world of difference, fluctuation, and unfamiliar variables they also expose themselves to a new quality of Otherness and categorical in-betweenness. A dilemma commonly associated with multiethnic identities, the characters' quandaries in this case result from a "monospatial" instead of a "monoracial cultural logic" (Alsultany 143). Hence, in the tradition of other liminal characters like Ahab, Marlow, or Natty Bumppo, their exceptional personalities violate the paradigm of stable meaning emerging from the difference found in universally valid binary patterns of representation. This makes them the targets of systemic retaliation for their transgressions and might explains Cuarón's inclination to produce a de facto disaster movie that constantly attempts to kill off its own heroes.

At the same time, this very ill-defined position of the astronauts ultimately enables them to perform exceptionally and thereby recover the cosmos as a space of American exceptionality. When Stone is subjected to the life-threatening limbo between near earth and deep Space, she realizes that the hollow realm of the latter corresponds to desolation and death, exemplified by her distraught emergency call to Houston, "I am off structure and I'm drifting." In fact, throughout the movie she can constantly be seen trying to hold on to the remaining intact structures of her spacecraft, the HST, and ISS. Floating and spinning uncontrollably, her primary incentive has become to embrace the leftover functionality of techno-scientific artifacts according to their exceptional-technocratic policy, break free from her entanglement in the lines of the parachute, and therefore re-orient herself within the coordinate system of American exceptionalism. Against this background it becomes clear that the astronauts' connectedness to fellow humans as well as man-made structures that are both infused with history and positivist meaning is crucial not only for their own survival but also their exceptional status. Hence, Stone relies on conjunctive tethers to avoid the lethal meaninglessness of outer Space and remains in the earth's orbital vicinity throughout the movie.

Kowalski aptly condenses this concept by laconically declaring: "Pretty scary shit being untethered up here, isn't it?" For him, however, this very detachment turns out to be ultimately fatal. Using a jetpack prototype, his cosmic existence is condemned *ab initio* since he is—in spite of his exceptional mobility and spectacular aesthetic performance—disconnected from the mythical symbols and artifacts of the American cosmic geography. His dire fate is the epitome of the already mentioned spatio-temporal antagonism and results, in accordance with the fierce frontier logic, in his demise. After Kowalski's disappearance into the void, Stone finally reaches the

transient safety of the ISS, using her last reserves of oxygen. In one continuous shot, seemingly achieved with a free-floating camera, she shuts the airlock tight, emerges from her bulky space suit, closes her eyes and floats weightlessly curled into a fetal position. Her tether encircles her like an umbilical cord that symbolically reconnects the astronaut to stable meaning, reminding her of the singularity of her situation and in this way recovering the coherence of her personal and national identity. Unlike her untethered companion, she will survive the disaster.

"Man's Destiny of Tomorrow": Conclusion

> I'd like to just (say) what I believe history will record.That America's challenge of today has forged man's destiny of tomorrow.
>
> Eugene Cernan, "EVA-3 Close-out"13

What remains is to remark firstly that this rather compact attempt to examine the cosmos as a generator and agent of American exceptionalism and its pop-cultural representation has nevertheless lead to some noteworthy insights. Most importantly, it has demonstrated how contemporary films like *Gravity* may utilize Space to endorse and position themselves in relation to American exceptionalism, shaping and revitalizing it through its relationship to geography, technocracy, and popular culture. It also brings with it the realization that the academic task of unraveling some 'true core' of the American character may have forfeited its credibility or even its *raison d'être* with the demise of the myth-and-symbol school and structuralist approaches in general. However, while the exceptionalist impulse today is mostly superseded by other topics in the reverberant halls of poststructuralist and transnational academia, it still exerts a fundamental impact on broad levels of American culture and society. Even though it might not integrate nicely with most research agendas, exceptionalism cannot simply be written off as a quirky form of patriotism or reduced to an idiosyncrasy of geopolitical ambitions of an American empire. Instead, more focus has to be put on the environments, manifestations, and forces that embrace exceptionalism as a powerful agent of identity formation. Interdisciplinary methods must be developed and put to use in order to pervade the deeply entrenched historical, socio-cultural, economic, and ideological strata of a phenomenon whose obstinacy and transcendental properties cannot effectively be explained with empirical and positivistic methodologies. The overall importance of such inquiries accrues not from attempts to resurrect the exceptionalist nexus as a monolithic framework for American studies, but instead from its appreciation as an object of renewed scholarly interest and investigation.

Inherent hopes of retracing the space age's grandeur are eminent in fictional scenarios as laid out by Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* or Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar*

13 Cernan, the commander of Apollo 17, was the last person to stand on the lunar surface during his mission's final extravehicular activity (EVA) in December 1972 (radio transmission qtd. in Jones).

(2014), which extends the purview of exceptionalism into the depths of outer Space. But real life expectations for cosmic identity formation are also far from lost in spite of the retirement of the space shuttle program in 2011, a more inwardly oriented exceptionalism of the Trump era, and demands to tend to amassing terrestrial issues before conquering the universe. As Neil deGrasse Tyson in his essay "The Case for Space" proposes, with merely "a penny on the tax dollar... the country could reclaim its preeminence in a field that shaped its twentieth-century ascendancy [and] [t]he United States will once again witness how space ambitions can shape the destiny of nations." At the moment, however, as foretold by many science fiction authors, the cosmic future seems to belong to privately owned and operated aerospace manufacturers and space transport services like SpaceX that conquer gravity solely through the exceptional effectivity of American marketing and capitalism.

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