


Astronaut Space Selfies: Soft Polluter or Marvelous Messenger?

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ABSTRACT

This article uses a philosophical hermeneutic perspective to present a reading of selected astronaut space selfies by drawing on ideas of Michel Serres, Paul Virilio, Hannah Arendt, Bonnie Mann, Joanna Zylińska, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and W. J. T. Mitchell. The image of the astronaut is unpacked as a visual apocalyptic trope that embodies collective dreams of going beyond Earth in post-Earth projections. Michel Serres distinguished between two regimes of pollution, namely “hard pollution” and “soft pollution.” The author uses Serres’s distinction between hard and soft pollution to investigate the image of the astronaut as an agent of post-Earth dreams. The essay asks: Are space selfies potential soft pollution in Michel Serres’s terms? The conclusion drawn after considering evidence of space travel on human physiology and psychology is that although astronauts may be “marvelous messengers,” their images mostly act as soft pollution that positions viewers in a particular way toward Earth.

KEYWORDS

Astronaut, Astronaut Morbidity, Extra Vehicular Activity, Post-Earth, Post-Human, Soft Pollution, Space Selfie, Well-Being

*What we do today depends on our image of the future
rather than the future depending on what we do today (Prigogine, 2014, p. 5)*

INTRODUCTION

We live in an “image-dominated network society” (Mirzoeff, 2016, p. 11) in which images and signs constantly infiltrate and flood public and natural spaces. One of those images that have recently filled our screens and minds is the image of the astronaut, notably since recently we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon landing in 1969. However, even before the anniversary of the Moon landing, the image of the astronaut has become prevalent, filling album covers, showing up in advertisements and online memes, art exhibitions, becoming a dominant theme in recent blockbuster films and a hit on social networking sites with astronaut selfies or space selfies.¹ In what follows, I aim to hermeneutically and iconologically explore the image of the astronaut as an agent that embodies particular ideas and perceptions about Earth. Although the ideas and images may be competing and even opposing, I argue there is a current trope that depicts outer space not only as livable but very bearable. Thus, the astronaut is popularly presented as a “marvelous messenger” of life beyond Earth, while it is at the same time possible to identify the astronaut as a visual trope that softly “pollute” our imaginations during the early twenty-first century. Here I want to use the French philosopher of

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science, Michel Serres's (1930–2019) distinction between “hard” and “soft” pollution to investigate the image of the astronaut hermeneutically as an agent that propagates post-Earth dreams.

Images manifest our conscious and unconscious hopes, repressed fears, dreams, fantasies, realities, and nightmares. Images are implicated in ideas and vice versa because as W. J. T. Mitchell (1986) notes, *idea* comes from the Greek word meaning *to see* (p. 5). To see an image is also, in some sense, “to see” an idea because ideas find likenesses in images. As an “abstract, general, spiritual ‘likeness’” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 31), images make visible what may have otherwise remained invisible. Images and ideas do not stand in a one to one correlation though but work more in a doubled or doubling relation. To ask what the image of the astronaut makes visible is also then to ask what the image represents in terms of idea likeness. Do images of astronauts reveal an optimism about an intergalactic future? Is it a utopian eagerness to leave Earth behind that resides in the astronaut image or is it a dystopian mirage heralding the bleak prospect of what urbanist and philosopher Paul Virilio (2010, p. 102) terms an “extraterrestrial and exobiological” future? What type of world is imagined through the image of the astronaut?

In what follows, the image of the astronaut is unpacked as a visual “apocalyptic trope” (Zylinska, 2018, chap. “Apocalypse, Now!”) that embodies collective dreams of going beyond Earth, in what I have termed *post-Earth projections*.² The vision of leaving Earth behind is not a new conjecture, with warnings of “world-alienation” (p. 6) in the age of science, already signaled by Hannah Arendt in 1958. What Arendt (1958) reflects on is the eagerness of scientists to forget that “the earth is the quintessence of the human condition” and in fact that the “earthly nature” (p. 2) may be unique in the universe to provide humans with a habitat where they can move and breathe unaided. Arendt shows that the devolution of Earth, as a material necessity for our existence, in favor of the freedom of the human subject (freed from necessities), is a project of the modern world (1958, p. 6). The trajectory of modern world alienation cannot be retraced here, but as a feminist scholar, Bonnie Mann (2006) shows most body-unfriendly dreams of disembodiment treat the body as a form of imprisonment just as those same prepositions are transferred to the Earth as a form of prison-house.

It is not to argue that life beyond Earth is not possible, the many outer space missions have undoubtedly established that life is indeed possible or rather life can be sustained in outer space for limited periods. But it is more a question of what type of life is possible post-Earth? And if life is sustainable in deep space, is it necessarily bearable? Even though the human label has become precarious within recent Anthropocene, non-human, post-human, and interspecies debates (and rightly so in many instances), it is necessary to ask the obvious, namely, if we go beyond Earth, can we still be considered to be human? Is being human, for better or worse, not intimately linked to the Earth, as Arendt suggests?

HARD AND SOFT POLLUTION

Michel Serres distinguished between two regimes of pollution, namely *hard pollution* that refers to the physical destruction of nature, while *soft pollution* involves the destruction of the world through signs. Serres's work has been fashioned by two forms of scientific thinking, namely thermodynamics (19th century), and information theory (the 1950s onwards; Connor, 2009, p. 5). Through these scientific theories, he shows the interconnectedness of matter and information, where matter is associated with hard and information with soft. Images and signs communicate information and accordingly fall on the side of the soft but they have a definite impact on the hard, or matter. Serres clarified the difference between hard and soft pollution as follows:

Let us define two [types of pollution] and clearly distinguish them from one another: first the hard, and second the soft. By the first I mean on the one hand solid residues, liquids, and gases, emitted throughout the atmosphere by big industrial companies or gigantic garbage dumps, the shameful signature of big cities. By the second, tsunamis of writing, signs, images, and logos flooding rural,

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