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"When John Smith Arrived in Space"

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**Abstract:** The courageous, reckless, slightly-outlaw, strong, white man has been set as a symbol for the American identity, and as the United States themselves were, it was modelled by a migrant - a young English soldier from the 16th century who could not ignore the call of adventures: John Smith. The main aim of this essay is to explore how the idealization of this character of the Renaissance has been used throughout the History of the United States as a tool to impulse nationalism, creating in society a need to fix itself to certain canons so that they could be crowned as "perfect and valuable Americans" whose duty and destiny was to expand through the territory no matter the cost (usually human lives) to increase the power of the country; starting from the expansion of the US Frontier during the Conquer of the West - John Smith as the cowboy; until the 20th century, when the silent war against the USSR led the US government to impulse the Space Race - John Smith as an astronaut. By firstly analyzing what made John Smith a national hero, this essay will compare him with the myth of the cowboy, together with the ideal and current American hero that is set in the astronaut - portrayed in the popular culture through mass media (cinematography) and studied in this work taking John Wayne (the American cowboy) and Matthew McConaughey in Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* as concrete examples of this matter.

**Keywords:** John Smith, American identity, expansionism, imperialism, Frontier, Space Race.

**Maya CARAVELLA**

## **When John Smith Arrived in Space**

### **0. Introduction.**

With the "birth of a new American nation" early Americans looked back to their ancestors to "establish a new historical identity" (Corbett 2). After the American Revolution and Independence, 18th century Americans started to revise their recent past History, looking for heroes and events that could help them high rise the nationalist sentiment so their project of a new country could see the light, and so they began to "scan the colonial past in search of figures like Pocahontas and Smith" as Robert Tilton points out in his work *Pocahontas: the Evolution of an American Narrative* (qtd. in Corbett 2-3); having as a result a symbol for the brand new, self-made American man that felt the need to fill the emptiness and wideness of the territory that, according to his own self assumptions, had no History attached to it - disregarding the existence of former tribes and civilizations. America was a passive blank space which demanded the hands of a man full with "indomitable courage, self-reliance, resourcefulness, and faith in the future of the new land" (Hubbell 276) and the post-revolutionary intellectuals found, in Captain John Smith, a mythological persona that would give every male citizen of the United States a role model to look up to (Corbett 52).

From that moment on, the identity of the American started to be handmade, adapting and changing it according to the circumstances. In general terms, the American man was supposed to be, alike Smith, "not only a hero of strength and power, but as also possessing moral and noble features that transcended his combat prowess" (qtd. in 38). A man with a "high sense of honor, fortitude, bravery, and clear focus on his goals" (Loker 48), and who "function remarkably well in every foreign society he encountered" (67). However, it has been studied how certain patterns of Smith's personality have been adapted when times required it, highlighting for instance his "liberalism, tolerance, and multiculturalism", or otherwise, his "authoritarian and militaristic" self (Corbett 32). That is why, as a result - to mention some instances, the importance of conquering the West lead to an exaltation of the "restless and nervous energy" of the frontier man, together with the "buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom" that characterized him (Turner 38) and pushed him to move forward; the attached destruction of native tribes was justified on the sake of the idea that it was their purpose to bring education and democracy to them for "Americans were a providential people destined to regenerate the other peoples of the world" (Horsman 103), and president John Fitzgerald Kennedy made a call for American honor and prestige when boosting the Space Race against the USSR, insisting on the importance of "getting ahead the Soviet Union" (Holland 13) so they could "regain international confidence in America after the Bay of Pigs incident, the failed US paramilitary invasion of Cuba that had damaged the reputation of the US" (14).

From this idea of freedom, moving and exploring, conquering, power, honor, and greatness and uniqueness - as Bulkeley suggested in *The Gospel Covenant*, "thou shouldst be special people, an only people, none like thee in all earth" (qtd. in Horsman 83) the myth of John Smith was born. A perfect man, a hero that established the basis for the development of the American identity, remaining as significant to the United States as the stars and bars in their flag; and although he is mentioned no more as a role model in speeches or articles,

there are still some traces of John Smith in popular culture, which highlight and reinforce the values and goals of the nation.

### **1. John Smith as a model figure: Frontiersman, Soldier and Astronaut**

Tracing the birth of the American birth, its historical background traces back to 1578 when Queen Elizabeth of England commanded the colonization of the "heathen and barbarian" lands of the New World that the Admiral Christopher Columbus had reached together with his sailormen almost a decade before. It was Walter Raleigh who "established the first British colony in North America, on Roanoke Island off the coast of North Carolina", setting the starting point to the development of what later on would be baptized as the United States of America. However, it was not until the foundation of Jamestown succeeded that colonization by itself began (Hamby 10-12). "Made up of townsmen and adventurers more interested in finding gold than farming" (12), a new nation was about to be built up and John Smith, a British young soldier and hero, became the "brand image" of it.

John Smith was born and raised at his family's farm in Lincolnshire, England. Educated as a merchant, he soon substituted the easiness of trade for the adventurous and full-of-mysteries life experience of a soldier. At the age of sixteen, he fearlessly participated in the Netherland's Wars of Independence against Spain, and two years later he would join the Austrian forces as a mercenary to face the Turks on his conquest of Europe. Named Captain already, he was captured by the enemy troops and it was not until three years later that he escaped and went back to the Motherland.

The Virginia Company was set to leave to the new continent and Smith attached himself to the group in December 1606. A few months later, they would arrive to the coast of Chesapeake Bay, and later to Jamestown. The Company included him in the government and soon he would show disagreement to some of them. In "The Proceedings and Accidents of the English Colony in Virginia" - title of the third book of the captain's work *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*, John Smith ironically points out that the colony was starving to death. Besides, he criticizes the rationing of food which, what is more, was rotten and spoiled:

Had we been as free from all sins as [we were free from] gluttony and drunkenness we might have been canonized for saints, but our President would never have been admitted for engrossing to his private, oatmeal, sack, oil, aqua vitae, beef, eggs, or what not but kettle; that indeed he allowed equally to be distributed, and that was half a pint of wheat, and as much barley boiled with water for a man a day; and this, having fried some twenty-six weeks in the ship's hold, contained as many worms as grains so that we might truly call it rather so much bran than corn; our drink was water, our lodgings castles in the air. (57-58)

Under such circumstances, the expected adventure that Smith was looking for seemed on delay. It took five months and fifty lives to depose the current president and substitute him for Ratcliffe. Given food by Native American tribes, John Smith once more disagreed with the government and their conformity policy. Smith saw the importance of working the land and getting their own resources, and that is why he, "by his own example, good words, and fair

promises, set some to mow, others to bind thatch, some to build houses, others to thatch them" (58). Duties divided, he made use of his commercial knowledge and "shipped himself in the shallop to search the country for trade" (59). Taking a close account of the geography of the island, they entered the territories of Powhatan, the ruling emperor, who kept him captive and would have killed him if his daughter, the well-known Pocahontas, would have not placed herself between Smith and her father.

Once more he had to escape from captivity and once in Jamestown his actions were rewarded. He became president of the colony, being "seen as the savior of Jamestown" (Corbett 5), who had dealt with the Indians - he established commercial relationships, that "motivated the colonists to grow food instead of look for gold" (5) starting a policy based on the mantra "he that will not worke shall not eate (except by sicknesse he be disabled)" (Smith 174), and who explored the territory and made a general overview of it.

As a result, John Smith became an inspiration for every man who desired to move to the Americas. He represented a sign of hope and encouragement for those who, just like him were "born of low status" (Corbett 40) and dreamt of a better situation. Indeed, he established a canon for the ideal colonist, therefore American:

A man constantly rebelling against his superiors, who also enforces harsh and strict leadership upon others; a man who heroically slays countless foes, who also values human life and is repulsed by war; and a man who dominates, outsmarts, and outfights Native Americans, who also is seen as a fair, kind, and diplomatic multiculturalist. (40-41)

This kind of contradictory description is what, according to the Historian Richard Slotkin, characterizes the "hero-figures in our mythology" (qtd. in Corbett 40), and that is how, together with the romantization of Captain Smith that took action during the 19th Century, he became a symbol to the American Identity that was about to be shaped, which would have an enormous impact on future policies and governmental actions, to the point that Smith's personality would be reflected and absorbed by the American man no matter the time period, becoming even a justification to certain attitudes.

In this exploration of John Smith throughout History, frontiersman, soldier and astronaut, it has already been mentioned Smith's unconformity, restlessness and need of adventure, and how it was directly taken as an impulse for further exploration and advances beyond the country.

Beginning with his fellow countrymen, Smith encouraged through his writing to left England behind and move to the New World, where "our pleasure here is still gains". In his words, America is described as a land for self-building, satisfaction and happiness, full of wealth and possibilities for the fisher could fish; the miner, mine; the farmer, farm, and non would never lack of the basic tools and resources to survive (68-69).

The exuberant number of migrants that arrived at the continent persuaded by the promises of wealth, development and indeed freedom, greatly increased the foundation of new settlements and subsequent cities. The northeastern colonies of New England were followed by those of the interior - Pennsylvania, for instance and the southern ones - Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas (Alonzo 24-26). A new nation started to be built up and the

corresponding frontier, too.

Frederick Jackson Turner defines, in *The Significance of the Frontier in American history*, the American frontier as a "line of the most rapid and effective Americanization" (Jackson Turner 3). It was understood by Spottswood a promoter that pushed servants that "being out of their time, settle themselves where land is to be taken up and that will produce the necessities of life with little labour" (qtd. by Jackson Turner 20), agreeing with the idea that Smith set two centuries before.

Wilderness was to be conquered and mastered. It was a duty and an inner call who lead to the "exploitation of the beast" who "took hunters and trade or the west", as well as "the exploitation of the grasses took the rancher", too (17). The American Dream was starting to be defined and created, and the continent began to be seen as "the region in which lay the land of eternal youth and happiness and as an arena for the destiny of nations" (qtd. in Horsman 83), where everyone could find a place to better themselves.

As well as William Gilmore Smith considered that "God had directed Smith's footsteps" (qtd. in Corbett 69), American citizens believed of themselves to be elected by God to bring civilization and democracy to the rest of the world, and even though the Restoration brought certain anti-secularism linked to rationalism and the English idea of crusading in name of God was slightly disregarded, "the Americans never lost the belief that they were a special, chosen people, a people destined to change the world for the better" (Horsman 82). The puritan idea of divine election and greatness that was claimed by Peter Bulkeley: "the lord looks for more from thee, then from other people" (qtd. in 82), was reflected in the 19th Century with the definition of the Manifest Destiny as a "concept of American exceptionalism, that is, the belief that America occupies a special place among the countries of the world" (qtd. in *Manifest Destiny and U.S Westward Expansion* 1) and it was particularly popularized meanwhile the adhesion of the Mexican territories of Texas and California was being pursued.

In his article "John O'Sullivan Declares America's Manifest Destiny", John O'Sullivan stated that the occupation of Texas was a victory against those nations who had:

undertaken to intrude themselves ... in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions. (5-6, 9-10)

This text was used as an impulse and motivation for war, strengthen the unstoppable of American expansion and power. This ideology was used as a justification for the destruction, annihilation and displacement of multiple indigenous tribes during the 19th century, and as well as John Smith has been considered to be "full of exaggerations and aggrandizements" (Corbett 39), American men started to reflect the exact same pattern.

Thomas Jefferson's attempt to turn the continent "into an empire for liberty" (Horsman 103), took for granted the fact that there were other inhabitants of the territory that were, in fact, before them. Thus, the Indians were the main victims of the "manifest destiny". They were thought to be willing "to give up their way of life and gladly accept the God and the civilization that was being accepted to them" (103-104). Long story short, they

were not. As a result, "Indians could therefore be thrown off the land, mistreated, or slaughtered" (104) for they were given an opportunity to improve themselves, and they decided to reject it, whereas the American was "fulfilling a law of nature", for "the Creator has implanted in this group of races an instinct that, in spite of themselves, drives them [...] to carry out their great mission of civilizing the earth" (Nott and Gliddon qtd. in Horsman 137).

This idea of "destiny" and a mission directed to "less developed" peoples, did not end there as it has been continually used even nowadays as a mean of justifying the so-called American New Imperialism, as well as the country's participation in foreign wars such as World War I. It was George Kirchwey, in fact, the one who justified the participation of the country in the Great War through his "Pax Americana", an essay in which he explained that it was the only way to achieve worldwide peace. Quoting the current president Woodrow Wilson, Kirchwey reinforces the American duty of making "the world safe for democracy", for they were "the champions of mankind" and "shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of the nation that make them" (qtd. in Kirchwey 42).

Becoming a "global hegemonic power", Americans had to "use that power to enforce a new order based on their interests and values" no matter the cost, even if they had to establish a "long-term military presence" in the occupied countries (Hadar 75). Keeping this idea in mind, the apparently harmless puritan idea which has been already mentioned in the previous paragraphs, turned into the definition of the ideal American man compared to the European: whereas the latest was considered "nothing more than emasculated, impotent, effeminate", the first ones were "real men, virile and tough, ready to fight for their women against the barbarians at the gate" (Kagan and co. qtd in 79).

In his thesis, Corbett refers to the movie "Captain John Smith and Pocahontas", and he explains how the hero is portrayed as "the near-flawless hero type. [...] fearless, calm, powerful, trustworthy, leader", but also able to win the girl; (53) description which closely relates to the one given by Kagan and his colleagues in the neoconservative movement, and could be used as an argument to support the theory that popular culture works as a tool to introduce certain values and canons in people. Another example is, related to the conquest of the West, the "tsunami of cowboys" that crowded the big screen at the beginning of the 20th century that substituted the myth of the Frontier man for that of the cowboy, impersonated by John Wayne as one of the most representative figures. Following the same path of Smith as a model for the American persona, the cowboy was also praised for representing "the ideal of an individual uncontrolled by any constraints of state authority" (Hobsbawm 17). On the other hand, it was also the representation of "the rise of both segregation and anti-immigrant racism" (8). Mexican, Indian and black cowboys were completely excluded by Hollywood productions, and as widely popular as they were, white men became the only reference of American population the world had, erasing every person -or men- of color from History until recent times.

Moving along the century and leaving the conquest of the West or wars behind, the government of the United States focused all its efforts on the Cold War that took place silently against the USSR. As part of the conflict, the exploration of the outer space became an obsession and the way that president Kennedy had "to demonstrate superiority over the Soviet Union" (Holland 14), as well as the "American greatness to the rest of the world" (15).

The Space Race took off, and in order to convince people of the utility of it, the project started to be advertised to engross the national pride. In relation to this, Holland points out that "it is very evident that the American persona, which values ideals like innovation, curiosity, and determination, is reflected in how the US has interpreted its role in international exploration" (6).

A new frontier began to be defined in a moment when no place on earth was to be "conquered" anymore, and it was important for them, in order to achieve their goals, to recover once more the idea that Smith projected in the 17th century. As a result, as well as Western movies proliferated, so did the ones deal with the arrival to the moon or space travels.

Taking as an example the 2016 movie *Interstellar*, written and directed by Christopher Nolan, the spectator finds in Joseph Cooper a strong parallelism with the mythological American character by excellence: Captain John Smith. Born farmers, both of them have a previous past experience from which they returned as heroes: Smith, after his captivity against the Turks; Cooper, being a very well-considered pilot of the NASA. What is more, when Cooper is suggested to invest himself in a possible no-return-journey that could be the only way to save the human race for destruction, he finds himself in a huge crossroad between his inner desire for adventure and the duty that he has towards his family. Evidently, he ends up choosing the first option. In the first teaser trailer of the movie, Matthew McConaughey voices:

We've always defined ourselves by the ability to overcome the impossible. And we count these moments. These moments when we dare to aim higher, to break barriers, to reach for the stars, to make the unknown known. We count these moments as our proudest achievements. But we lost all that. Or perhaps we've just forgotten that we are still pioneers. And we've barely begun. And that our greatest accomplishments cannot be behind us, because our destiny lies above us. (Nolan 00:00:19- 00:01:32)

The echo of puritanism and the manifest destiny is evident, as well as the ghost of Smith. Both characters represent the American ideal: a man courageous and reckless enough to leave everything behind and get himself into the unknown. John Smith wrote "what we should find, or want, or where we should be, we were all ignorant" (58), and in spite of it, he joined the Virginia Company. So does Cooper. And as well as the Captain, who firstly arrived in America with the purpose of establishing a commonwealth, the spacial pilot's mission consists on finding the best place to build up a new home for humanity.

## **2. Conclusion**

With the Space Race, Americans not only highlighted their superiority in political, technological and economical terms; but also made a huge point on the fact that they still believed that they were -and are- the Chosen Ones, and how they present themselves to the rest of the people is proof enough of it.

We find it in the previously commented cowboy movies, and the astronaut ones too. However, these are not the only cases in which Hollywood has used popular culture to empower themselves, or at least the idea of them. It is a common thought to believe that

action movies - such as *Die Hard* or *Fast and Furious*, or warlike ones - *Pearl Harbor* and *Saving Private Ryan*, for example, are amazingly good and enjoyable and their quality is unquestionable, so called "American fanfaronades", in which everything is so exaggerated that it is almost impossible to believe. Just like Smith, accused of the same flaw when writing that he was "beset with 200 savages" (Smith 60) and spite of being attacked by them the arrows simply "stuck in his clothes" (61) as if he was some kind of "colonial Achilles", the American capacities shown in the ability of Bruce Willis to expend almost the totality of a film series - *Die Hard*, *Die Hard 2*, *Live Free or Die Hard*, *Die Hard With a Vengeance* and *A Good Day to Die Hard*, jumping from skyscrapers and surviving massive explosions or gun shutting appears to be too overestimated for what the real human being is able to actually perform. Nevertheless, this exaltation of the ego, as funny as it is in this particular example, it is also a very dangerous weapon of mental brainwashing, and proof of it is that due to cinema, a majority of the people still believe that it was thanks to the Army of the United States that the Allies won the Second World War, instead of showing the truth: that the conflict was completely lost until Russia entered in it.

Taking this into account, Hollywood productions could be seen as a smooth but enormously effective weapon for New Imperialism. But not only that, as it has been explained throughout the essay, it is also a way to spread the American way of live, morals and expectations towards the citizen. Taking John Smith, whose influence is proven to be lasting even nowadays, as the foundation, the desire for adventure and national pride is highly used to justify invasions and mass murdering - native American population, black people, Mexican, Vietnamese and so on; it has furthermore being a patron to shape the canon - the blond white heterosexual guy, strong and fit, with certain picaresque attached to his character and yet noble of heart, whose actions can be completely forgiven for he had good intentions.

It is no surprise then that the United States of America, being always on the top, are one of the most racist countries among the "first world" powers, as the World Values Survey shows in a study published by the Washington Post in 2013 (Fisher). Empowered by the idea of electiveness that comes as a heritage of their Puritan origins, Americans have understood their existence to be graceful and of more importance, and related to that, they have responded with both violence and segregation, but also with the false modesty to convince themselves and the others that their actions were performed in name of the greater good.

Facing our most recent enemy: the Climate Change, it could be said that as well as the Puritans fought for the salvation of humanity from devil, nowadays' Americans may attempt to avoid human extinction for an environmental cataclysm, and taking humanity to another planet is one of the options that might be open to us. It is shown in *Interstellar*, but the Mars One project goes beyond fiction, for a colonization of the Red Planet is not an idea anymore, but a reality.

It is impossible to know whether the NASA will reach its goals or if we are going to be able to stop the catastrophe that is about to come for us on Earth. The truth is, on the other hand, that the U.S will boast off as the great salvatores, and History is the empirical prove of it. However, it is important to keep in mind that the Puritans believed in their own salvation while dooming the rest of the world, so the only hope that is left for the rest of us is praying that, when the moment come, they will change their minds.



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