

Carrasco, Rocío Carrasco. *New Heroes on Screen: Prototypes of Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*. Spain: University of Huelva, 2006. ISBN 84-96373-32-0.

Book Review by Chris Robé, Ph.D, Assistant Professor at Florida Atlantic University, School of Communication and Multimedia Studies

Science fiction has long held a privileged place within feminist film studies. The genre's central concern with problematizing notions of identity through its use of cyborgs, replicants, and androids while exploring the nebulous contours of virtual reality proved particularly appealing to a group of film theorists who considered naturalized understandings of gender and sexuality suspect, if not outright harmful. Despite the genre often reinforcing the very gender identities that it ostensibly challenged, it was nonetheless viewed as a significant attempt within popular culture to broach questions concerning our destabilized, postmodern identities. It only seemed a matter of time before the more recent theoretical formation of masculinity studies would also turn to this genre to investigate its implications regarding men's identities. Rocío Carrasco Carrasco's *New Heroes on Screen* offers one of the first book-length studies to do so.

Carrasco argues that "SF can be said to be a privileged genre for representing the dissolution and lack of boundaries proposed by postmodernism, and hence it offers many different couplings (human-animal, human-machine, physical-non-physical, etc) where gender differences are not clearly cut visually speaking" (202). Yet, at the same time, the author recognizes the ways in which traditional patriarchal values are nonetheless often reincorporated by the genre. Ultimately, Carrasco believes that contemporary science fiction films hold "a constant tension between high technology and postmodern values and those patriarchal values embodied precisely by hybrid beings, cyborgs and even aliens" (92). Yet one needs to be aware that the book is less interested in exploring the repercussions of "high technology," which

Carrasco mainly uses as an interchangeable term for cyberspace, than investigating science fiction's interconnections with gender issues and postmodern values.

At its best, *New Heroes on Screen* relates close-readings of specific films to wider cultural-historical moments. For example, Carrasco claims that *Dune* (1984) mediates homophobic anxieties about the AIDS epidemic through its villainization of the members of the planet Giedi Prime. Homoerotic, violent behavior is linked with images of disease—faces covered with puss-ridden skin lesions, a planet smothered in pollution. Carrasco asserts, “The film’s overall insistence on the threatening aspect of the inhabitants of this planet aims at reflecting this popularized anxiety concerning gender relations in the 80s in a very explicit way” (135). The author reveals how science fiction offers a cloak of “fantasy” to address pressing controversial, contemporary anxieties while, at the same time, underplays the ways in which developments within technology might intersect with them. Although often regarded as playing a central role within science fiction, technology serves a more metaphorical function to address tangential cultural concerns.

On the other hand, the work is weakest when it moves from historical specificity to sweeping, general claims about the postmodern condition. The author simply rehearses the well-trodden yet cliché Baudrillardian notions of hyper-reality, simulation, and the implosion of meaning without seeming to be aware of some of the theoretical objections against them. The main challenge that would have most benefited the author is the fact that the postmodern condition is not representative of a world-wide gestalt, but is instead mainly limited to the white, middle-to-upper class of the First World, which then universalizes its own existential angst as the world’s burden. Likewise, the author offers a footnote acknowledging her omission of ethnic and racial difference from the study. However, this does not excuse her inability to realize that

science fiction, at least within the US, has been the privileged domain of white, middle-class men and boys. As a result, her argument about Hollywood science fiction films speaking for the US population as a whole becomes suspect. Instead, the study should have explored how science fiction serves as an ideal genre to explore the postmodern condition precisely because it is marketed to an audience group that most readily identifies with it. This would also help explain how technology is defined within such films as a metaphorical index of white, middle-class, male hopes and fears rather than serving as a genuine analytical tool in its own right.

In addition to exploring issues of masculinity within science fiction, *New Heroes on Screen* also introduces masculinity studies to an international audience. The first half of the book discusses its origins and gradual integration into film studies. Carrasco highlights the influential works of Steve Neale and Richard Dyer in developing film studies' theoretical focus on masculinity and views them in dialogue with Laura Mulvey's canonical essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Yet, at times, Carrasco undercuts feminist film theory's contributions to masculinity studies. For example, she states that Mulvey's theory "considered the disadvantaged position of female spectators and the biased images of women in Hollywood cinema, though her project seemed to leave issues such as male representations on screen, or the male body as spectacle unquestioned" (49). But Mulvey intentionally limited her focus to women precisely because of their absence from forty years of prior film theory. By ignoring the cultural moment surrounding Mulvey's essay, Carrasco undercuts its importance in drawing gender to the forefront and providing the requisite theoretical terrain that eventually would allow questions of masculinity to emerge within the field.

One might also take issue with certain omissions from the book's historical overview of masculinity. For example, Carrasco states that "the concept of 'masculinity' as such started to be

used in the 18th century . . .” (30). Yet “masculinity” actually was coined later during the fin-de-siècle. Preceding the notion of “masculinity” was that of “manhood,” a supposedly innate quality that defined white, middle-class males. But as the US transformed itself from a producer-based economy to that of a consumer-based one during the late nineteenth-century, this character-based conception of “manhood” was supplanted by a new personality-based concept: “masculinity,” which had to be constantly performed in order to be affirmed and distanced from another new identity: “femininity.” By acknowledging its roots within a highly performative and unstable commodity culture, one can better understand why masculinity has been in supposed “crisis” ever since its historical emergence.

Overall, *New Heroes on Screen* offers a good introduction to masculinity studies for international audiences who might be unfamiliar with its theoretical and historical backgrounds. Most importantly, Carrasco draws attention to how any discussion of technology must address the inevitable gender assumptions that accompany it. Technology and gender have always been intimately intertwined since technology itself is never produced nor discussed outside gender-laden contexts. Regardless of whether it concerns the Luddites who rebelled against the effeminizing effects of the Industrial Revolution, or the emergence of cyber-feminism, gender issues always lurk underneath technology’s seemingly gender-free façade. *New Heroes on Screen* reveals that in order to be literate about technology one must also be well-versed in gender theory. This holds particularly true in regards to science fiction where technology is often used as metaphor for white, male anxieties. Despite some of the utopian promises offered by our gurus of technology who assume that gender equality naturally accompanies the developments of digital technology, Carrasco insists that feminism and masculinity studies still provide much needed theoretical frameworks to reveal how the future is still very much “a man’s world.”

In general, *New Heroes on Screen* is more appropriate as supplementary reading material for a course on science fiction or masculinity studies rather than essential reading for classes addressing technology as an analytical tool. Since the author is not mainly concerned with illuminating the critical venues where literacy and technology intersect, but instead focuses on the relations between science fiction and gender, the work somewhat expands the theoretical focus of masculinity studies while offering relatively little to disciplines primarily concerned with literacy and technology.