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The Right Stuff

Tom Charity



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Rob White

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Dedication

For Fiona

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Introduction

The Right Stuff is a return to the roots of the Western. It was made in answer to the question: 'What happened to the Western?' *Philip Kaufman*¹

The Western is the quintessential American genre, where white America grapples with its character, its conscience and its sense of self. The Western affords America an heroic vision of its history and heritage, a mythology to call its own. It romanticises the pioneer and eulogises the wilderness. It negotiates the ambivalent terrain between law and anarchy, social responsibility and individual freedom, stasis and flux. Its trajectory is inevitably towards obsolescence: by the time the Western became established, the West was all over bar the shouting, and as the genre matured, 'progress' had begun to sound like a dirty word. It is the purest form of movie, the starkest and most physical of philosophical dramas. It is prone to announce itself with an iconic rider against the landscape, and often ends the same way. It is a very masculine genre, trading on fantasies of absolute male autonomy, dexterity and moral imperative. It is fundamentally concerned with the construction of the hero.

The Right Stuff is not a Western exactly, but it is very definitely a film about pioneer mythology, the changing light of history and the nature of heroism in modern America. Hailing an 'instant classic', the American reviewers must have jinxed it, for this big-budget epic flopped at the box-office and has never recovered its lustre. Something of a media phenomenon on its release (featured on the cover of *Newsweek* on down), the film has scarcely been written about since, enjoying little of the rich cultural afterlife associated with analogous titles such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Raging Bull* or even *Heaven's Gate*. *The Right Stuff* is too idiosyncratic a picture to fit neatly into larger theoretical frameworks. A hip movie about 'square' subjects (astronauts, the military, courage, patriotism), it ranges freely across apparently contradictory styles: mythic and satiric, documentary and surreal, even epic and underground. An auteur's film, written and directed by Philip