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Nasa/Trek

By Tom Carthy

Tom McCarthy reviews C. Penley's latest book

The Challenger disaster of 1986 may have plunged NASA's scientists into a dark night of the soul, but it pales into insignificance when set against the catastrophic scenario envisaged by Peter Hyams' 1978 film *Capricorn One*. Here, the agency fakes a manned voyage to Mars, filming the landing in a television studio only to have its empty capsule burn up and its astronauts escape to spill the beans. Hyams' critique is two fold: not only is the agency incompetent, but it is corrupt and devious as well - accusations which cut to the bone since, for NASA, image has always been of paramount importance. Funding is dependent on good PR, as is the more symbolic task of forging paradigms of America as the launching pad for enterprise and freedom. And the Star Trek series, Constance Penley argues, gave NASA its paradigm par excellence.

The plumbing of the Barthesian Well of trivia Americana by cultural theorists is often tedious, but Penley strikes nectar. Her examination of the ways in which Roddenberry's creation and the Space Program have reciprocally and self-consciously traded tropes (Mae Jemison, for example, the first black female astronaut, began each radio communication with Lt. Uhura's line "Hailing frequencies open") unfolds into an eloquent, persuasive plea for a more mythopoetic empiricism, one which celebrates "the omnipresence of fantasmatic thought" - a Pynchonesque science, if you like. Her study of Challenger jokes initiates an appraisal of the Freudian phenomenon of 'working through' collective trauma. Equally Pynchonesque are Penley's 'slashers' - dissident, secretive Trekkies who circulate among themselves porno stories in which Kirk and Spock copulate with one another. Like the interracial bonding of Huck and Jim or Ishmael and Queequeg, Penley suggests, Kirk and Spock's love is a kind of working through as well, a formal exorcism of the great American catastrophe of slavery. An excellent book.

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Nasa/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America by Constance Penley, Verso, £11 pp 169