

Feeling free in flight

Description

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As Indiaâ??s Mangalyaan rocket sets its course for Mars, itâ??s worth reflecting on those deep seated reasons for aiming so high, and at such a cost.

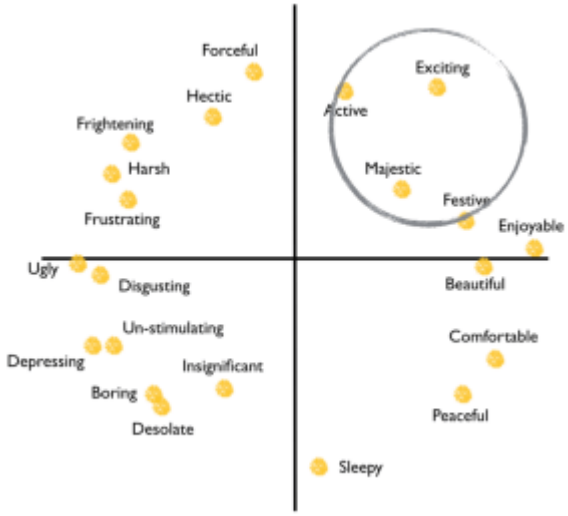
Not much further down the list from national pride, international competition, hothousing engineering and scientific talent and the slim probability of distant economic rewards come the symbolic and psychological associations of going up and out into space.



This word cloud doesnâ??t relate to space travel, an experience beyond most of us, but being in an aeroplane. I conducted a simple on-line poll in a class of about 50 Media and Culture students. Without priming they were asked to consider the following picture and rate it on two scales in terms of whether it invoked feelings of displeasure or pleasure, and whether the picture was soporific or arousing.



The valence scores placed the classâ?? feelings well within the top right quadrant of the Russell and Pratt affect grid. I also asked the class to provide brief descriptive comments of their feelings, which I then processed in Wordle. The comments indicate feelings closer to the bottom right quadrant, but positive none-the-less.



The prevalence of the word â??freeâ?• is interesting. Being 30,000 feet above ground in a hollow tube on a route over which passengers have no control is anything but free.

This exercise was a simple demonstration of the ready association we form between flight and freedom. To be sure, respondents may be thinking of the freedom of leaving home, or going on holiday. But would they report feeling that way with a picture from the window of a train or a bus?



The ontological significance of space travel

NASA scientists in the 1960s addressed the challenge of adjusting astronautsâ?? physiological functioning by artificial means so that they could survive and thrive in the extreme environments of outer space: zero gravity, lack of oxygen, and high radiation levels.

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Scientists Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline proposed artificial physiological controls that included sensors planted into the human body and that detect excess radiation levels and regulate injections of protective drugs in appropriate doses.

This was the birth of the cyborg idea: â??The Cyborg deliberately incorporates exogenous components extending the self-regulatory control function of the organism in order to adapt it to new environmentsâ?• (31). Particular inputs are processed through microcircuits in which are contained algorithms and rules to produce particular responses.

The invention of the cyborg was not a purely technical project, and had a transcendent agenda. Clynes and Cline begin their famous paper on cyborgs and space by stating: â??Space travel challenges mankind not only technically but also spiritually, in that it invites man to take an active part in his own biological evolutionâ?• (29).

There is clearly a goal in mind, the progression of human kind to something greater. With such control systems in place and operating without the conscious awareness of the human, the cyborg is free â??to explore, to create, to think, and to feelâ?• (31).

They concluded that such devices will mark significant scientific advance, but â??may well provide a new and larger dimension for manâ??s spirit as wellâ?• (33). So the cyborg provides a step towards human kindâ??s greater realization of its true nature, greater progress towards making itself truly free.

Clynes relates weightlessness to the emotion of joy, and even proposes an as yet unnamed emotion, best described as â??a feeling of not being totally earthbound, but perhaps part of an infusing processâ?• (41).

The conception of the cyborg employs the terminology of union between human, nature, and machine, the realization of human kindâ??s potential, evolutionary progression, and participation in a state of

weightlessness and bliss, all part of the our putative Posthuman condition.

Re-entry

Airspace and outer space are crucial regions for the excursion of the human spirit, which really only makes sense if thereâ??s a return to earth (of bodies, machines or data), that gravity makes inevitable and the Indian project requires.

Traveling to outer space, including to Mars, is a symbolic journey into ecstasy, release from the constraints of the body, and back again.

References

- Clynes, M.E. and N.S. Kline, â??Cyborgs and spaceâ??, in C.H. Gray (ed.), *The Cyborg Handbook*, New York: Routledge, 1995, 29-33.
- Coyne, R., *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999.
- Haraway, D.J., *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London: FAb, 1991.
- Russell, J. and G. Pratt, â??A Description of the Affective Quality Attributed to Environmentsâ??, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38: 2, 1980, 311-322.

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Notes

- Harawayâ??s less romantic cyborg discourse invokes a rhetoric primarily of rupture, violence, and decentering. For Haraway: â??Cyborgs are about particular sorts of breached boundaries that confuse a specific historical peopleâ??s stories about what counts as distinct categories crucial to that cultureâ??s natural-technical evolutionary narrativesâ?• (xvi).
- There was one reference to melancholy amongst the comments, a feeling associated with travel. See Absence of melancholy.
- The Indian television channel NDTV included astrologers amongst its commentators on the Mangalyaan rocket.
- On Mars also see How the internet kills curiosity.
- I adapted some of the discussion here about the cyborg from *Technoromanticism*.
- Also see Whatâ??s wrong with Posthumanism, Vertigo, Swinging, and As the mood takes you.
- Hereâ??s a funny French digital animation film about floating: Fat by Yohann Auroux Bernard, Sebastian De Oliveira Bispo, and Gary Fouchy.
- The movie *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* is of course about bounty (manna) descending from Heaven â?¦ another reason why we want to go up there.



Category

1. Body

Tags

1. freedom
2. mood
3. vertigo

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