

Document Citation

Title	Who decides who has the right stuff?
Author(s)	Sheila Benson
Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	1983 Oct 30
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The right stuff, Kaufman, Philip, 1983

A CRITIC'S NOTES

WHO DECIDES
WHO HAS THE
RIGHT STUFF?

By SHEILA BENSON

The "Right Stuff" is an enormous accomplishment, so for more than a week now I've been questioning why it left me a little hungry.

Director/screenwriter Philip Kaufman has taken breathtaking risks in "Right Stuff." Almost every one of them has paid off: He's made both an intelligent film and a beautiful three-ring circus of a movie with something terrific going on in each of those rings all the time. You are rarely conscious of the film's more than three hours; what you take home with you is a mosaic of small, quite wonderful details and a blur of extraordinary images and performances.

And yet, there remains a question of hunger for something more.

The answer, ironically enough, may be Kaufman's own skills as a film maker. "Right Stuff" is anything but simplistic, and its detail and contrasts accumulate more emotional voltage than it discharges. But by the end it has taken us back to a simplistic choice: Who, indeed, has the right to the right stuff?

Kaufman adapted his script from a work of hyperjournalism at its zenith: Tom Wolfe's idiosyncratic book in which a painstaking logging of factual detail lies concealed under a brash and throbbing style. Beneath Wolfe's showiness, however, lies a fairly sappy choice, his uncomplicated definition of the right and the wrong stuff. Wolfe leaves no doubt that he goes for the private hero (test pilot Chuck Yeager) and that Americans have bought the bravura and ballyhoo surrounding these more public heroes (the Mercury astronauts).

Kaufman's film is more ambitious. Like any true artist, he would give us a dozen different perspectives. He has set out to render an epoch, how we thought, what

we believed, what was going through our minds at a time when the absurd and the heroic collided almost daily. And in his refusal to oversimplify the material into a hyperpatriotic picture, what he has given us is the carnival that was America at that time.

He has two elements to work with: Yeager, the first man to fly beyond Mach 1 (and in Wolfe's view the unquestioned owner of the rightest stuff ever), and the seven pilot/astronauts who also have it but, because of the limitations of their missions, are virtually prevented from demonstrating it.

They are initially set almost in opposition to one another; Sam Shepard's Yeager is the cool (but sexually hot) hand surveying these jock, fly-boy interlopers. In Wolfe, it is a setup, the better to present Yeager with the laurel of unquestioned rightness. Kaufman sees it more broadly, not as a polarity but as a full spectrum.

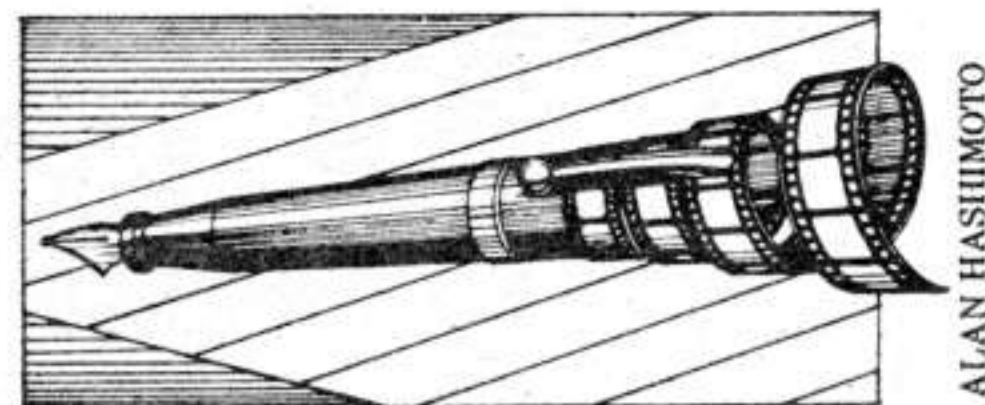
Kaufman shows us his astronauts as men caught between private life and public expectation; we get glimpses of them as athletes, scientists, beer drinking rowdies, devoted husbands. But under pressure they exhibit the pilot's cool and the command that will save the Mercury program and get America out of its humiliating position, tagging forlornly after the Russians, post-Sputnik, post-Gagarin.

Finally, Kaufman ties together his Yeager/astronauts theme in a mammoth carnival sequence, which he intercuts with the solitary Yeager, doggedly trying to break the Russians' altitude record, using the NF-104, a needle-nosed, stubby winged plane that looks more like a guided missile.

The astronauts are in Houston, it's the 4th of July, the place is going crazy, President Lyndon B. Johnson is photographed to look about 11 feet tall up on a stage in front of a stars-and-stripes that must be as long as the Astrodome. The pilots and their wives have been driven into the place in open cars as though they were in a ticker-tape parade, there are slabs of beef being barbecued, the din is unnerving, and after everyone is seated, L.B.J. reverently presents Sally Rand and her fan dance.

Rand is fortunately not played by a dancer anywhere near the platinum-haired stripper's age at the time, whose flesh Wolfe described as looking like the meat of a casaba melon in the winter. Backlit and photographed in medium shots, she is an amazing apparition and the great fluttering plumes of her fan connect to a sense of being airborne.

And intercut with the airiness of her fans is the agony of Chuck Yeager at



supersonic heights, alone, almost unwatched, the singular hero yet again. And when he comes down it is as the myth personified, echoed by a line which might have come out of the Lone Ranger: "Is that a *man*?" "You're damn right it is."

On the ground at Houston, as this lunacy of a naked fan dancer entertaining them sinks in, a deep look of camaraderie passes between the men, beginning with John Glenn. It is not entirely easy to read. Since Glenn throughout has been presented as Mr. Clean Marine, the Presbyterian Pilot, you're not sure for a minute that he isn't going to lead the boys straight out of that faintly off-color situation. What the look may be is a knowing grin of complicity that they have been as much a part of the hoopla as this fan dancer.

All told, it is an electrifying sequence, but by this time the movie audience has put in a little more than three hours, and we are straining for *what it all really meant* and what we get is Sally Rand vs. a private act of heroism. What Kaufman has demonstrated all the way through the film is that there are ways and ways of being a hero and the solitary loner is not the only possibility.

The choice that the audience is led to in these last moments, the private hero or the Big Parade, is narrower than the breadth of all that has gone before. If this is what it is, then why have we spent all this time with these heroic "average" Joes? Our own training as moviegoers and Kaufman's filmic ingenuity have made us want more than this final sequence. Breathtaking though it may be, it returns the audience to Wolfe's narrow choice of what indeed constitutes the right stuff. □