The limits of outer space

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Astroculture[2]

On 19 to 22 April the conference ?Envisioning Limits: Outer Space and the End of Utopia? was held in Harnack-Haus in Berlin. The conference was organized by the research group The Future in the Stars led by the German historian Alexander C. T. Geppert, Freie Universität Berlin.?

The dark age of space history

?The goal of the conference was to bring a number of researchers together to discuss and analyse the 1970s as a period in the history of outer space with the special requirement that contributions should be about Europe and European space history.

The 1970s is regarded by many as a kind of dark age in the history of outer space. In 1972, the American lunar landing programme, Apollo, was ended prematurely and the era that began with Sputnik in 1957 was over. The ending of the Apollo programme was, among other things, caused by the problems presented in the book Limits to Growth (1972) concerning population growth and Earth?s limited resources, the Vietnam War, and many other factors that made the focus turn from space and back to Earth. The U.S. had won the space race and Mars could wait.

The end of the space age ? or a new beginning?

?Only when the space shuttle flew in 1981 did manned spaceflight begin to move forward again in earnest. But it was nothing compared to what Michael Michaud in his book Reaching for the High Frontier calls the ?classic space agenda?: Moon landings, a Moon base, onward journey to Mars, colonisation of the solar system. The utopian vision of humanity?s expansion into the infinite universe predicted in science fiction was not to be.

But what really happened in the 1970s in terms of the history of outer space? Was it a period of transition, a ?lost decade,? or perhaps a period of revitalised utopian dreaming? Princeton physicist Gerard K. O'Neill?s visionary ideas about colonies in space, and astrocultural phenomena in the form of for example the wildly popular science fiction film Star Wars (1977), show that interest in space, at least as an imaginary place, did not necessarily die out during the 1970s. The picture, however, is unclear and the conference papers showed that there is much to discuss.?

A diversity of perspectives

?The conference offered, as conferences always do, a glorious diversity of perspectives, issues, and approaches. There were, for example, a review of the German science magazine X?ts portrayal of space from 1969 to 1973, fascinating papers on legal issues related to space, and an analysis of British novels from the 1970s. There were also an eye-opening exposition of NASA?s involvement in the Vietnam War, intriguing
expositions of Gerard K. O'Neill’s space colonies, and a summary of artists’ use of satellite media in their work?and much more. As for myself, I gave a paper on the so-called ?Classic Space LEGO? from 1978-79 seen in an astro-cultural context

**Skepticism of progress and transnationalism**

Here I will highlight just a few presentations that were of particular relevance and interest to me. The English historian Robert Poole, from the University of Cumbria, gave a presentation on Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which the thesis was put forward that the film questions a progressive view of human history. In light of contemporary theories of the origin and evolution of humans, the movie was described as arguing that humans in the future will be as primitive and aggressive as the apes of 2001, gathering screeching about the black monolith on the savannah at the dawn of man.

Historian Andrew Jenks from California State University, USA, talked about the role, which the group of astronauts and cosmonauts who called themselves ?the Association of Space Explorers,? played in the 70s. This exclusive group attempted, with the American astronaut Rusty Schweickart in the lead, to work for a transnational understanding of the era of the Space Age. Here, the French astronaut Jean-Loup Chrétien played a special role, as did his compatriot and explorer of the Earth’s ?inner? space, Jacques Cousteau. And they did so by virtue of being Europeans and therefore somewhat neutral towards the Cold War that raged between West and East.

**Space religiosity**

Finally, Roger D. Launius, curator of the Department of Space History at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum, Washington, DC (and NASA’s former chief historian) held a presentation that I particularly looked forward to. The mere title, ?Human Space Flight as Religion in the Aftermath of the Space Race? was enough to raise my pulse.

For several years I have had the feeling that the study of what I myself have, in an earlier blog-post, called ?outer space religion? was on the verge of breaking through in the area of spaceflight. When a distinguished scientist such as Launius makes his appearance on this stage, it shows that the time has come to address this major issue. There have certainly been attempts before but, by and large, they have been peripheral and characterised by a lack of theory and method of the history of religions.

Launius? approach was that American spaceflight can be read as a religion, pure and simple, with everything from religious rituals, over holy scripture, to the desire for salvation. In the ensuing discussion, I suggested a few potential problems that might be worth taking into consideration concerning the relationship between religion and outer space. Virgiliu Pop from the Romanian Space Agency, who has written about the relationship between the Soviet space programme and religiosity from an astrosociological perspective, immediately followed up the lead and suggested that we should do a special issue of the journal *Astropolitics* on the theme ?outer space and religion.? The journal’s editor has now given the green light for this.

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I was interviewed by Swiss Radio on my LEGO paper at the Envisioning Limits conference; the broadcast can be heard here: [http://www.drs2.ch/www/de/drs2/sendungen/wissenschaft-drs-2/2803.bt10222...](http://www.drs2.ch/www/de/drs2/sendungen/wissenschaft-drs-2/2803.bt10222...) [3].

An earlier version of this blog post was published in Danish on videnskab.dk on 26 April 2012.