

Envisioning Limits: Outer Space and the End of Utopia (Berlin)

Freie Universität Berlin

Deadline: Oct 5, 2011

William R. Macauley

"The Future in the Stars: European Astroculture and Extraterrestrial Life in the Twentieth Century"

Emmy Noether Research Group

Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut

Freie Universität Berlin

Call for Papers

Envisioning Limits: Outer Space and the End of Utopia

Berlin, 19-21 April 2012

Deadline for proposals: 5 October 2011

If space exploration is understood as not just one of the twentieth century's most prestigious feats of engineering, but also a central theme in period visions of the future and utopias, then how might we understand the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s, with its emphasis on reduced possibilities and limitations to progress? Were the 1970s an intermission in twentieth century themes, or a decade of transition to new cultural configurations? Recent historiography has taken up this question, reassessing the 1970s in their economic, political and cultural dimensions. Though histories of outer space and spaceflight have rarely been brought together with this new scholarship on the decade of détente, the ecology movement, and the 'limits to growth', fresh perspectives can help explain concomitant shifts and intermissions in spaceflight and astroculture. Common references such as the loss of popular interest after the Apollo moon landings, the end of the Space Race, and a sharp decline in political support for costly manned exploration programs can be re-evaluated in terms of their historical impact and importance. The 1970s also witnessed, for example, the foundation of the European Space Agency in 1975, unprecedented success of robotic space exploration missions, and renewed interest in space colonization.

This conference will examine the argument that the 1970s constitute a crucial transitional period in the history of outer space, spaceflight and extraterrestrial life. It aims to shift the focus away from explanations of transition from Cold War contexts and produce more nuanced narratives: from the familiar struggle between two superpowers, namely the USA and the former USSR, to distinctly European perspectives, and from political to other socio-cultural dimensions of the Space Age. How were limits created, challenged and maintained? In what sense was outer space

invoked to transform cultural boundaries and how were these conveyed to different audiences? How were the exploration of outer space and limits envisaged in Western Europe, for example, in the form of national and international space programs, the visual arts, news and entertainment media? Human exploration of outer space has routinely involved redefining and supposedly transcending limitations associated with life on Earth. Paradoxically, attempts to envisage boundless possibilities for humankind in outer space also reveal constraints imposed by human actors and social institutions. The conference will look at utopia not as a socio-cultural objective but rather as a process. Through defining limitless opportunities afforded by outer space, advocates of space exploration not only opened up new possibilities for accelerating or even surpassing human development, but also delineated the historicity and limitations of the human imagination.

Confirmed conference speakers include Martin Collins (Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum), David A. Kirby (University of Manchester), Roger D. Launius (Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum) and Robert Poole (University of Cumbria).

Proposals for papers are invited from those working in history, science and technology studies and other disciplines. Short papers of 10-15 pages will be circulated before the conference to leave ample time for discussion among its participants. Please submit an abstract of no more than 300 words together with a short CV before 5 October 2011 to the conveners Alexander C.T. Geppert, William R. Macauley and Daniel Brandau at astrofuturismus@fu-berlin.de

Address

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Conference Venue

Harnack-Haus der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft

Ihnestrasse 16-20

D-14195 Berlin

<http://www.harnackhaus-berlin.mpg.de/>

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