

Thinking Outer Space: Philosophy, Astroculture and the Histories of Planetaryity

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Datum, Ort: 19.07.2023 - 21.07.2023, Berlin

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With renewed geopolitical competition and privatized interest in space exploration exploding in recent years, pressing concerns have been raised about ecological crises on earth and the sustainability of the terrestrial environment. For historians, this contemporary conjuncture alludes to a recurring pattern across centuries of thinking of outer space, where the thrill of escaping terrestrial bonds has long been accompanied by an anxious glance back to earth in all its mystery, beauty and fragility. Throughout the twentieth century, intellectuals from Hannah Arendt and Hans Blumenberg to Carl Schmitt and Marshall McLuhan have critiqued the arena of outer space in transforming intellectual thought and human self-understanding from such an extra-terrestrial perspective. How did the envisioning and actual endeavor of going into outer space make humans see the world from new perspectives – as a planet in the vast universe? What are the geopolitical, societal and philosophical implications of this view from without? And to what extent can the historiography on outer space and space-flight contribute to unpacking contemporary debates such as the climate crisis and the Anthropocene?

Probing this intellectual history of outer space and the concurrent processes through which the world was transformed into a planet was the focus of the recent conference „Thinking Outer Space: Philosophy, Astroculture and the Histories of Planetaryity“, organized by Alexander Geppert and Rory Rowan and held at NYU Berlin from 19 to 21 July 2023.¹ Through nine thematically-organized and chronologically arranged panels, 45 participants from a dozen countries examined the notion of planetaryity – the thinking of Earth as a planet – from numerous historical lin-

eages and philosophical contexts. The conference also facilitated exchange across disciplines, bringing together historians, geographers, anthropologists, ethnographers, literary scholars, political scientists, scholars of religion and sociologists. The goal, as Geppert and Rowan pointed out, was to collectively work out a ‘canon’ of space thinking across intellectual traditions and to understand the role of space history and astroculture in contemporary discussions around planetaryity.

From globalization studies, earth systems science to literary criticism and philosophy, the term ‘planetaryity’ has been invoked regularly across the arts and sciences as a spatial metaphor for the world. In face of the ongoing climate crisis, it is most often coupled with the contested epoch of the Anthropocene when human behavior has a significant impact on earth’s ecosystems. The historical formation of the ‘planetary’ as a motif, however, has not been thoroughly studied. Identifying long-standing anticipations of planetization from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, conference presentations looked at the planet as an object of interest in the thinking of outer space across time to better contextualize and ground contemporary debates. With John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as the analytical undertext, VLADIMIR BRILJAK (Durham) examined the ready existence of planetary thinking in the works of cartographer and astronomer James Gall (1808–1895). By analyzing the transplanetary speculations in Gall’s work, Briljak proposed developing a different periodization of planetaryity which precedes European modernity. This proposition was taken up in the presentation of OLIVER DUN-

¹ See <https://www.thinking-outer-space.com> for further information including the complete conference program, lineup of speakers and abstracts of all presentations. Media coverage coverage of the conference include Ulf von Rauchhaupt, *Der Aufstieg des Planetarischen. Der Blick vom All zur Erde bewegt uns nicht erst, seit wir uns ihrer Gefährdung bewusst wurden*, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (16 July 2023), 60, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wissen/geist-soziales/wie-unser-blick-auf-die-erde-sich-veraendert-hat-19033729.html> (31.10.2023) and Jannis Puhmann, *Als die Zukunft noch in den Sternen lag. Der Weltraum ist unser Produkt*, in: *Der Tagesspiegel* (19 July 2023), 12, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/als-die-zukunft-noch-in-den-sternen-lag-die-geschichte-der-raumfahrt-10163992.html> (31.10.2023).

NETT (Belfast), who argued for a bridge more than a divide between pre-modern and contemporary imaginaries of spaceflight. Dunnett revisited the writing of German geographer Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). He unpacked how von Humboldt's concept of the *Kosmos* encompassed a cosmographical understanding of the earth and its resonance in late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries of planetary thinking. Taking Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's (1881–1955) coining of the term 'planétisation' in 1946 as an analytical point of departure, ALEXANDER GEPPERT (New York / Shanghai) and BRAD TABAS (Brest) historicized the so-called planetary turn in association with the iconic Apollo images of Earthrise (1968) and Blue Marble (1972). They argued that the idea of 'planetization' developed alongside two processes, namely the long-standing 'picturization' of earth from extra-terrestrial perspectives since the early twentieth century and its 'satellization' through the setup of orbital infrastructures during the 1960s. Geppert and Tabas particularly distinguished 'planetization' from the widely-used term 'globalization' in political and environmental theories, pointing out that the articulation of the latter in terrestrial scopes was incumbent upon space history and the extraterrestrial perspectives the former offered.

Apart from the various philosophical lineages and technological mediations that contributed to planetization, the panel on 'The Juridification of Outer Space' examined the role of law in shaping planetary imaginaries. The focus of discussion was the proposition of Metalaw by American lawyer Andrew Haley (1904–1966) in 1956, which upholds the principle of treating other beings the way they desire to be treated rather than abiding by human frames of reference. GABRIELA RADULESCU (Berlin) unpacked the political rationale in the set-up of Metalaw in the 1950s, where nation states were faced with the challenge of regulating radio signals in space — a primary channel for imparting extraterrestrial intelligence. Radulescu examined the limits of the existing international law in establishing outer space as a legal territory for such regulation, and how the creation of Metalaw re-calibrated national sovereignty

to better enable radio astronomical activities in outer space. STEPHEN BUONO (Cambridge, MA) examined the epistemic tenet of Metalaw. Buono saw Metalaw as bearing traces from early space thought, the setup of which encompasses an attempt to exceed organized codification of law and its underlying expansionist logic. Further bringing in Latin-American jurists such as Mexican Modesta Seara Vásquez, Brazilian Haroldo Valladao and Taiwanese democracy activist Ming-Min Peng, FRANÇOIS RULIER (Toulouse) argued that space law discussions gave rise to a supra-national order that saw humanity as a single entity, which brought forth a more internationalist discourse around space exploration.

Accompanying the theoretical discussions around planetarity was the study of astroculture and its varied manifestations in literature, architecture and ritualistic practices. In his close reading of poetic texts on the cosmos and space exploration by three Scandinavian authors Harry Martinson (1904–1978), Nils Mustelin (1931–2004) and Thorkild Bjørnvig (1918–2004), THORE BJØRNVIG (Copenhagen) analyzed the sense of human incapacity in understanding outer space and the concern with negative environmental consequences of space exploration across their works. This gloomy undertone contributed to what Bjørnvig described as a process of 'inner planetization,' which called for human responsibility to take care of earth. Using the example of the planet Earth image in Buddhist contemplation practices in Australia, SASKIA ABRAHMS-KAVUNENKO (Copenhagen) presented the influences of *fin-de-siècle* esoteric movements on twentieth-century speculations of outer space, leading to a more grounded understanding of and care for earth in present-day environmental movements. ARTHUR Z. WANG (Philadelphia) drew attention to the representation of space travel in the writing of Black scientists and artists, arguing for the reflection of oppressive political structures and racist discourses in institutions such as NASA. During the discussion, participants further examined the constant mirroring between the imagination of outer space and the introspection of earthly and societal conditions across the dis-

tinctive cases.

Querying the human psyche was another important component of planetary thinking raised by the panelists. Focusing on the emotional terrain of imagining outer space, HELEN AHNER (Berlin) examined public experiences of planetariums in Weimar Republic Germany during the 1920s and 1930s. Ahner argued that the mixed feelings of wonder, amazement and horror from planetarium visitors not only galvanized human fascination with outer space by creating an embodied engagement, but also turned the planetarium into an epistemic site for pondering the limits of human thought. JÖRG KREIENBROCK (Chicago) examined the philosophical and scientific contexts that informed the cybernetic thinking of German philosopher Gotthardt Günther (1900–1984). Closely reading his introductions to the German translations of American science fiction in 1952, Kreienbrock suggested that Günther's writing positioned science fiction as a channel for propagating a new ontology of human relationship to space, where human minds and cybernetic machines became indistinguishable. Moving into the latter half of the twentieth century, GREG EGHIGIAN (University Park) investigated the proliferating UFO debates in Europe and North America, arguing that the phenomenon indicated both an increasingly intimate connection with outer space in society and a sense of vulnerability in the human psyche in the postwar era. BEN VAN OVERMEIRE (Kunshan) unpacked the cosmology of Buddhist modernist Alan Watts (1915–1973) by analyzing his exchange with Arthur C. Clarke in the early 1970s. For Watts, the knowledge of outer space is interdependent on the lived human experiences. Therefore, the understanding of outer space calls for an inner speculation of the individual self rather than outward explorations through spaceflight missions.

Across its rich philosophical and cultural references, the term 'planetary' also carries specific political agendas and ideologies. IAN KLINKE (Oxford) identified colonialist incentives in the doctrine of panpsychism discussed by German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), whose work constituted a Cold War bridge between post-WWII

disillusionment and residual fascist ideals in Europe. By highlighting this ontological convergence, Klinke alerted to the invocation of astropolitics and space expansionism underlying the seemingly disinterested theorizations of space-time relationality in human geography. MICHAEL HAGEMEISTER (Bochum) revisited the propagandistic undertext of 'Russian Cosmism,' a term that has gained popularity since the 1970s – according to Hagemeister a typical case of „invented tradition.“ He pointed out that the syncretic formation of cosmism from early thinkers like Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903), Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857–1935) and Alexander Leonidovich Chizhevsky (1897–1964) deviated significantly from Russian intellectual traditions and orthodox clergy at the time. Accordingly, the specific configuration of Russian Cosmism in the 1970s was rather invented to propagate Soviet nationalism with totalitarian and universalist motives. OLGA DUBROVINA (Padua) zoomed into the last decade of the Soviet Union to analyze the geopolitical rationale of Gorbachev's space policy. Dubrovina argued that the aerospace sector under Gorbachev's leadership constituted a more propagandistic than strategic channel for promoting disarmament and peaceful collaboration with other nations, with cosmic thinking as the motif for a universal ideal of mankind's common home.

Thanks to the multidisciplinary nature of the conference, various presentations examined the way planetary thinking transformed methodologies and frameworks in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. From a political science perspective, STEFAN PEDERSEN (Sussex) traced how the field of earth system science and ecologism made significant impacts in public consciousness through 'a new planetary dimension' in the 1970s, which gave rise to a new cosmology that could challenge existing ideologies of neoliberalism and nationalism. JAMES LOWDER (Glasgow) examined the outlook of planetary thinking in the work of philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) and astronomer Carl Sagan (1934–1996) to unveil both thinkers' anticipation of a post-human future after the solar catastrophe. Instead

of focusing on the near future of human existence, Lowder proposed integrating this more-than-human future into the study of human geography. Finally, ANNA SZOLUCHA (Krakow) offered a different interpretation of planetarity as an imperative to think beyond common representations. Szolucha discussed ways of integrating this planetary thinking into ethnographic research on the level of methodology, which she envisioned as finding relationality between humans and non-humans in field research.

Throughout the three-day discussion, the conference demonstrated the affinity between space history and the thinking of the world as a planet on intellectual, technopolitical, judicial and cultural levels. The interdisciplinary input from other fields such as earth systems sciences, religious studies and ethnographies of outer space proved essential in contextualizing this historical process of planetization across multiple scales and times. Conference presentations particularly attended to the function of literary form, fictional narratives and aesthetics in schematizing planetarity. The breadth of these manifestations both globalized and provincialized the scope of astroculture beyond western-centric modes of knowledge production, thus expanding and troubling the aforementioned 'canon' of space thought in-the-making. The concept of planetarity threads through the philosophical backbone of space history but is simultaneously transformed and re-interpreted by it. For space historians, how to parse the relationship between the *longue durée* and twentieth-century issues of planetization remains an open and urgent task to understand the space-based condition of the world we live in.

Conference overview:

Welcome and Introduction

Alexander Geppert (New York / Shanghai) / Rory Rowan (Dublin): Outer Space and the Thinking of a Planet

Panel I: A Planetary Turn?

Chair: Bronislaw Szerszynski (Lancaster)

Stefan Pedersen (Sussex): The Earth System, Cosmology and Planetary Politics

Alexander Geppert (New York / Shanghai) /

Brad Tabas (Brest): Planetization: Five Theses

Panel II: Proto-Planetarians

Chair: Laurence Guignard (Paris)

Vladimir Brljak (Durham): The Stars and the Angels: The Cosmos of a Nineteenth-Century Clergyman

Oliver Dunnett (Belfast): Alexander von Humboldt and his Influence in Planetary Thinking since 1845

Ian Klinke (Oxford): Panpsychism, Space Colonization and the Origins of Astropolitics

Panel III: Cosmic Philosophies

Chair: Helmuth Trischler (Munich)

Michael Hagemeister (Bochum): Russian Cosmism

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenkeno (Copenhagen): Spiritual Universalisms and the Invention of the Fragile Planet: Theosophy, the Occult and the Race towards Heaven and Earth

Panel IV: The Juridification of Outer Space

Chair: Christoph Conrad (Genève)

Gabriela Radulescu (Berlin): Metalaw: Regulating Relations between all Beings in the Universe at the Dawn of the Space Age

Stephen Buono (Cambridge, MA): Metalaw: Philosophy and the Birth of a Discipline

François Rulier (Toulouse): Planetizing International Space Law for a Pacifist Space Exploration

Panel V: Poetics of Planetization

Chair: Haitian Ma (Amsterdam)

Helen Ahner (Berlin): Feeling Outer Space: Planetariums as Sites of Epistemic Emotions

Thore Bjørnvig (Copenhagen): The Milky Way Can Wait: Scandinavian Planetization of Earth, 1956–1982

Panel VI: Narrating Astroculture

Chair: Michèle Matetschk (Berlin)

Jörg Kreienbrock (Chicago): The Philosophy of Science Fiction: Gotthard Günther in Outer Space

Arthur Z. Wang (Philadelphia): Escape Velocity: Black Scientists and Life Writing in Outer Space

Panel VII: Exploring Inner Space

Chair: John Brewer (Pasadena / Cambridge, MA)

Greg Eghigian (State College, PA): UFOs and the Inner Space of Outer Space

Ben Van Overmeire (Kunshan): Inner and Outer Space in the Thought of the Buddhist Modernist Alan Watts

Panel VIII: Planetary after the End of History

Chair: Bernd Weisbrod (Göttingen)

Olga Dubrovina (Padova): Gorbachev's New Thinking in Space: The Universe as a Common Home

James Lowder (Glasgow): Beyond Solar Catastrophe: The Post-Earth Futures of Jean-François Lyotard and Carl Sagan

Panel IX: Ethnographies of the Planetary Present

Chair: Piero Messina (Paris)

Anna Szolucha (Krakow): Rescuing the Planetary for Ethnographic Research: Philosophical Meanings and Research Application

Concluding Discussion

Chair: Rory Rowan (Dublin)

Alexander Geppert (New York / Shanghai) / Brad Tabas (Brest)

Tagungsbericht *Thinking Outer Space: Philosophy, Astroculture and the Histories of Planetary*. 19.07.2023 - 21.07.2023, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 01.11.2023.