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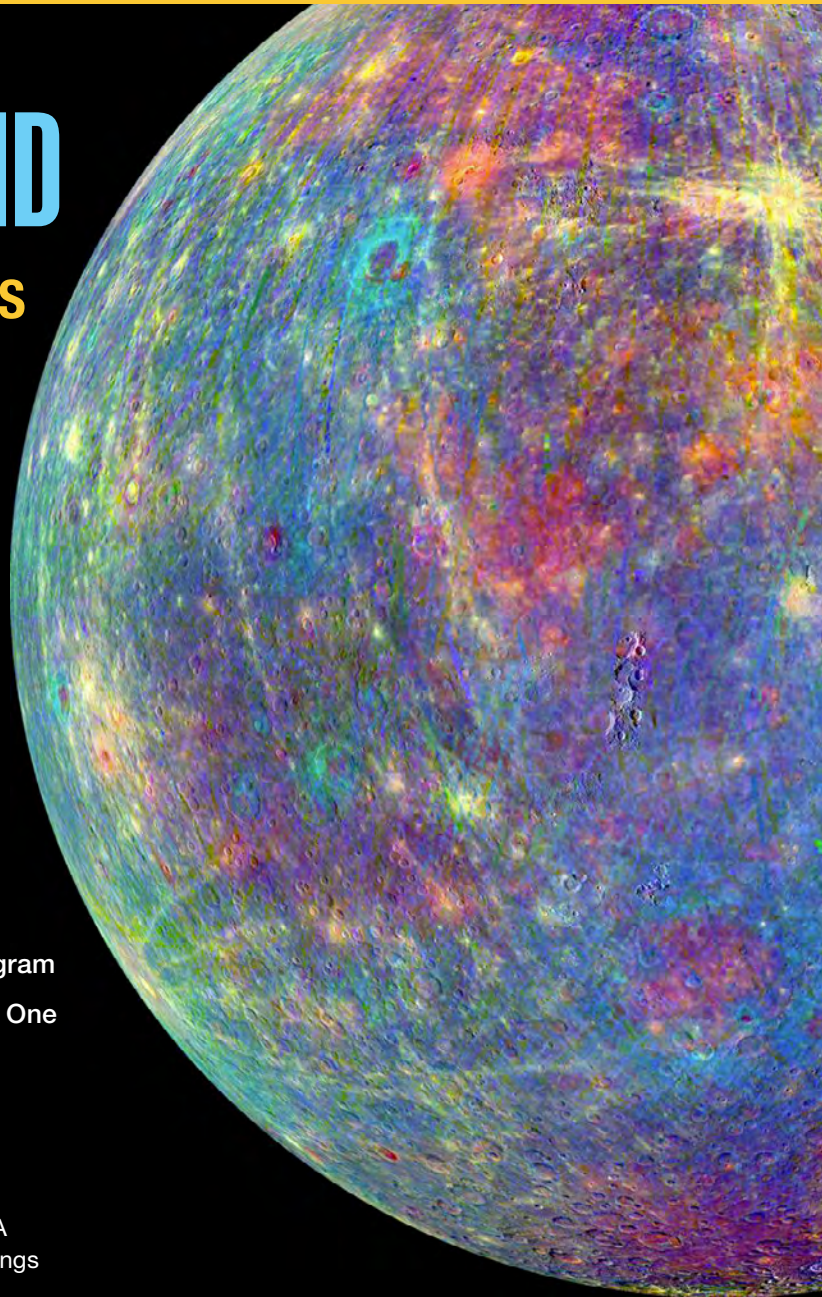
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➤ Data acquired from NASA's MErcury Surface, Space ENvironment, GEOchemistry, and Ranging (MESSENGER) spacecraft showing the composition of Mercury's surface rock is overlain on a monochrome global mosaic. (Image credit: NASA/Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory/Carnegie Institution of Washington)



Thinking Outer Space

Astroculture and the Intellectual History of Planetaryity

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SINCE THE ADVENT of the Space Age, the thrill of escaping terrestrial bonds has been accompanied by an anxious glance back at Earth. This twofold conjuncture becomes increasingly polarized in the present moment. As renewed geopolitical competitions and privatized interest in space exploration continue, pressing concerns have been raised about the sustainability of the terrestrial environment. One popular motif in both undertakings, notably, is the portrayal of planet Earth in the universe, with all its mystery, beauty, and fragility. Yet this contemporary appeal to planetaryity may find its foundations in centuries of thinking on outer space. The act of envisioning going into space, followed by the eventual realization of that vision, made humans see the world from a new lens—as a planet in the vast universe.

Probing this intellectual history of outer space and the concurrent process

→ Alexander Geppert, co-convenor of the “Thinking Outer Space” conference, speaks during the Panel “A Planetary Turn?” at the NYU Berlin conference venue on 19 July 2023. Describing the recurrent visual icon of planet Earth in publications around global history, Geppert differentiated the process of “planetization” from that of “globalization,” pointing out the intellectual lineage of the former back to the 1940s. (Image credit: Michèle Matetschk)

through which the world was turned into a planet in the minds of humans was the focus of the recent conference “Thinking Outer Space: Philosophy, Astroculture and the Histories of Planetaryity,” organized by Alexander Geppert (New York/Shanghai) and Rory Rowan (Dublin) and held at New York University (NYU), Berlin, from 19 to 21 July 2023.¹ Through nine thematically organized and chronologically arranged panels, 45 participants from all over the world examined the notion of planetaryity—the thinking of Earth as a planet—from numerous historical lineages and philosophical contexts. The conference also facilitated exchange across disciplines, bringing together historians, geographers, anthropologists, literary scholars, political scientists, scholars of religion, and sociologists. The goal, as Geppert

and Rowan pointed out, was to collectively develop a “canon” of space thinking across intellectual traditions and understand how space history and astroculture contribute to contemporary discussions around planetaryity.

Intellectual Foundations

When did we start to perceive Earth in planetary terms? The presenters deromanticized conventional narratives that associated this process of “planetization” with the iconic Apollo *Earthrise* (1968) and *Blue Marble* (1972) images, pointing out the increasing portrayal of Earth in photographs since the 1940s, the establishment of satellite infrastructures, and concurrent development of Earth system science and environmental studies. Others traced the existence of planetary thinking to the work of early astronomers and geographers such as James Gall (1808–95) and Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). Apart from the technological, philosophical, and infrastructural aspects, a panel on “The Juridification of Outer Space” examined the role of law in shaping planetary imaginaries. One key marker was the proposition of “Metalaw” by American lawyer Andrew Haley in 1956, which upholds the principle of treating other beings the way

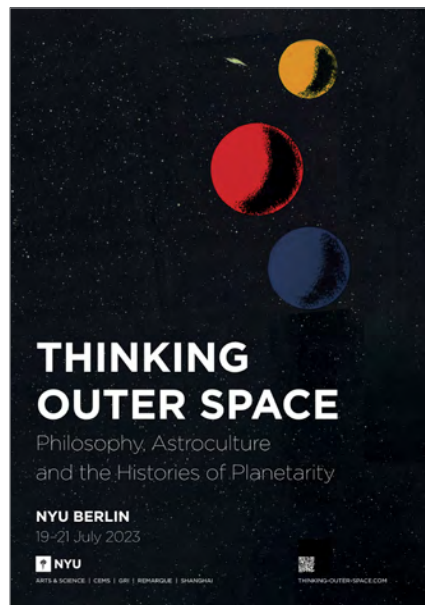


Thinking Outer Space (continued)

they desire to be treated rather than abiding by human frames of reference. Panelists explored how Metalaw and other related legal doctrines contested existing definitions of national sovereignty and advocated the utopian ideal of supranational order against the backdrop of the Cold War.

Astroculture

The three panels “Cosmic Philosophies,” “Poetics of Planetization,” and “Narrating Outer Space” addressed cultural manifestations of outer space and how they evoked different ways of relating to planet Earth. The subjects of inquiry ranged from public experiences of planetariums in the Weimar Republic, to the cyborgian thinking in 1950s American science fiction, to the autobiographical writings of contemporary Black astrophysicists and authors, to varied understandings of cosmism in present-day esoteric thought. In particular, panelists examined the constant mirroring between our imaginations of outer space and human responsibility to the planet. In a close reading of three modern Scandinavian writers—Harry Martinson (1904–78), Nils Mustelin (1931–2004), and Thorkild Bjørnvig (1918–2004)—varying degrees of caution against dystopian aspects of spaceflight could be detected, which called on the public to reflect on environmental destruction on Earth due to human activities. In another presentation on the growing UFO debates in Europe and North America in the latter half of the 20th century, it was evident that humans not only had established a more intimate connection to outer space, but also had come to encounter their own vulnerability on an existential level. In juxtaposition, based on the cosmology of Buddhist modernist Alan Watts (1915–73), human knowledge



↑ Poster for the “Thinking Outer Space” conference held at NYU Berlin, 19–21 July 2023.

of outer space already resides in the inner self and actually derives from an inner speculation. This inquiry into the human psyche was another shared manifestation of planetary thinking and was discussed by the participants.

Political Imaginaries

As much as it is a philosophical concept, the term “planetarity” also carries specific political agendas and ideologies. Such instances included how the doctrine of panpsychism was closely tied to European colonialism in the writing of German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) or how the concept of “Russian cosmism” was arguably invented in the 1970s with intentions of fashioning Soviet nationalism. Other presentations examined the way planetary thinking transformed disciplinary practices in the humanities and social sciences. Propositions were made to integrate planetarity into ethnographic methods,

developing strategies that find relationality between human and nonhuman subjects in field research. New questions arose as to whether planetarism could challenge existing ideologies of neoliberalism and nationalism and lead to new political imaginaries. Drawing on works of Jean-François Lyotard and Carl Sagan, participants also speculated on a post-human future after the solar catastrophe and how to integrate this distant horizon into the study of human geography.

Through the three-day exchange, the conference conjured a rich set of analytical tools, schools of thought, and historical roots in understanding contemporary planetarity. In the concluding discussion, participants raised further points of inquiry that emerged from the panels, such as the biopolitical implications of humanity in face of the Anthropocene, the possible political backlashes from planetization, and the techno-industrial bases of spaceflight that gave form to planetary thinking. Overall, the breadth of subjects and contexts 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 reinterpreted by it. For space historians, how to unpack this complex entwinement remains an open task. ■

Endnote

- 1 See <https://www.thinking-outer-space.com> for more information, including the complete conference program, lineup of speakers, and abstracts of all presentations.