

# CFP: Cosmic enthusiasm: The cultural impact of space exploration on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe since the 1950's.

International conference, January 22-24, 2009, Basel (Switzerland).

Organizers: Prof. Dr. Monica Rùthers (Univ. Fribourg), Dr. Carmen Scheide (Univ. Basel), Dr. des. Julia Richers (Univ. Basel), Eva Maurer M.A. (Univ. Fribourg)

## Focus:

Soviet space expeditions in their historical and cultural context, the impact of space exploration on everyday culture, the effects of military competition and competing consumer cultures, the construction of gender, emotions and social as well as cultural spaces.

Disciplinary range: history, cultural anthropology; architecture, design, natural sciences, philosophy of science (time/space), media sciences

## ***I. Introduction: Scope of the conference***

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the first man-made object in space, the successful launch of *Sputnik* in October 1957, much attention has been paid to the history of space missions/explorations and the discourses following the opening of the „cosmic era“ in the U.S. and (Western) Europe. Its influence on military competition, Cold War politics and Western imagination have received much attention. But space exploration was much more than a technological breakthrough. It left a distinct and lasting impact on everyday life and popular culture in many countries. The interdependence between space, politics and Lebenswelten (meaning the daily life of human beings) in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe is a new field of research and interest.

In 1957 the Soviet government was surprised by the attention the world's media paid to *Sputnik*, but managed to come around and make use of the political potential space travel had to offer. With Yuri Gagarin's first manned space flight in 1961, euphoria took over. The *kosmos* became an integral part of Soviet everyday life: Every child knew the names of the first cosmonauts by heart and took part in their lives and achievements. When Soviet society in the late fifties and early sixties developed into a mass consumer society of a socialist, „rationalist“ kind, space imagery came to be part of a wide ranging Soviet propaganda : *Sputnik* and Gagarin meant leadership in the rivalry with the U.S. and were also a cohesive force in the Eastern countries. While the cultural exchange with the West caused some pressure regarding the general standard of living, Soviet citizens who were promised more consumer goods to come, were nevertheless proud of their country: The achievements in outer space more than anything symbolized the „relaunch of socialism after Stalin“, and space travel became a theme in the competition of modernities and consumer cultures. Following the Soviet euphoria of the first

years, however, life on earth did not get continually brighter and better, and interest in space travel began to fade, especially after the death of Gagarin in 1968 and the success of the American Neil Armstrong in walking on the moon in 1969. As launchings and landings of space rockets became daily events, no one cared to remember the names of the later cohort of Soviet cosmonauts anymore.

In the context of the 50th anniversary of Sputnik in October 1957, recent conferences have focussed on the influence of space travel on imagination, *Weltanschauung*, aesthetics, science-fiction and discourse, on the one hand, and on its impact on Cold War politics and the space race, on the other. Those are discourses of the social elites. Until now, little attention has been paid to Eastern European interior perspectives or the influences of space travel, space technology and space race on life and culture on an everyday level.

In view of the 50th anniversary of Gagarin's first manned flight into orbit in April 2011, we plan an international and interdisciplinary conference entitled "Cosmic enthusiasm: The cultural impact of space exploration on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe since the 1950's".

## ***II. Call for Papers***

For the conference, we have envisaged three broad fields of research:

### **Thick descriptions: The imprint of space travel in Soviet everyday and popular culture**

The conference's primary theme is the examination of how space exploration influenced popular culture, everyday life and *Lebenswelten* in the Soviet Union. How did space travel change material and visual cultures, aesthetic forms, consumption and construction (e.g., space design: the influence on material culture, living environments and automation of the home? How did cosmos exploration change earthly symbols, icons, language? Did space travel lead to a new *Lebensgefühl*, a change in emotional styles and expressions? Which social groups proved most susceptible to the space craze? How did ethnic, social, generational or gender boundaries affect the influence of space in everyday life? In what ways were space events brought to the public - which media were important, and in what ways was the topic of space travel intertwined with the channels of its communication?

### **Long-term and long-range effects: Repercussions of Soviet spaceflight in Eastern Europe and for Soviet History**

A second focus will be placed on space travel's impact over more extended periods of time in Soviet history as well as over more extended geographical and political areas. For one - did space exploration have an impact on the social constitution of the Soviet Union? Are there good reasons to speak of a Sputnik generation? The ongoing popularity of the Soviet space project as a *lieu de mémoire* for 'Soviet

nostalgia' in contemporary Russia certainly suggests a strong influence on the individual as well as shared memories of the Soviet post-war society.

And if cosmonauts were used as icons and ambassadors for the new, post-Stalin Soviet Union, how did they communicate the Soviet Union's competing modernity both to its own citizens, and also abroad? Focussing on Eastern Europe, we encourage comparative approaches and would like to ask especially how Soviet space achievements and their propagation reach audiences in Socialist Eastern Europe, where the Sputnik years were at the same time marked by instability and opposition to Soviet dominance.

### **Comparative perspectives: East and West, natural and cultural sciences**

Not only do we have little comparative work on the impact of space travel in East and West until now, but also the technological making of space exploration is usually discussed apart from its cultural repercussions and discursive framings. We would like to bridge the gap between natural and cultural scientists and encourage researchers of Soviet and Western space technology to enter into a dialogue with scholars studying various cultural perspectives. From the highly-debated costs of space exploration to questions of space travel's impact on the physiology of the men and women in space, many subjects would profit from sharing knowledge and stimulating questions.

A publication of the papers is planned.

Please send your abstracts (1 page) with a short CV to [conference@spacecultures.net](mailto:conference@spacecultures.net) no later than March 31, 2008.