

IAF SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Space Culture – Public Engagement in Space through Culture (9)

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OUTER SPACE AND POPULAR CULTURE: UNTAPPED POTENTIAL FOR SPACE EDUCATION
AND OUTREACH

Abstract

While the outreach work of entities such as space agencies, museums, and non-profit organisations is invaluable to engaging with the public in the cultural sphere, it is the argument presented in this study that such outreach is continually happening on a much grander and more pervasive scale – through popular culture. Neither a single organisation nor a network of them can compete with the power of modern popular culture to engage the public with space, mainly through the visual and performing arts. It is here in the nexus between science fact, science fiction, and entertainment that the majority of the public encounters space for the first time. Examples abound, but the Cosmos series presented by Carl Sagan is a premier example demonstrating the power of popular culture to communicate space concepts to the public. Despite this, the interrelationship between space and popular culture has been underexplored in the scientific literature, particularly how space has become – and can further be – embedded in the popular culture and consciousness. Additionally, not all influences of popular culture are as sound as Cosmos. Cartoons, advertisements, music, art, video games, and many others make use of space concepts that can misrepresent space in the public mind. The hysteria accompanying the radio broadcast of The War of the Worlds is probably the best example. However, many examples abound of these same media representing space positively and meaningfully as well. Thus, with thoughtful engagement, popular culture can be, and is, leveraged to communicate good science to the public. This also extends beyond science since space themes can be used to explore various aspects of the human condition and provide a detached context for social commentary on politically sensitive issues. Moreover, the influence of space has also been expressed through popular culture by, for example, storytelling in the Global South. This study will present and discuss a range of examples with an analysis of how the space aspect figures in particular contexts. Leveraging the power of modern media and popular culture to engage the public with space in a more thoughtful way can significantly contribute to the process, critical thinking, and methodologies underlying space education and outreach events. By not engaging with popular culture in this manner, and the ways space figure in it, outreach efforts will struggle to reach the broader public.