

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

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CONCEPTUAL SPACE: CASE STUDIES FROM THE NEXUS BETWEEN POPULAR CULTURE
AND OUTER SPACE

Abstract

In this paper a follow-up to our 2019 study is presented, in which was argued that modern popular culture has the power to engage the public with space, and 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. A range of examples were presented to illustrate how the space aspect figures in particular contexts, and how these leverage the power of modern media and popular culture to engage the public with space in a more thoughtful way, with the use of space in popular culture, for example, supporting education, or allowing for the telling of stories and the exploration of various aspects of the human condition by providing a detached context for social commentary on politically sensitive issues. Here, we present three case studies with in-depth analyses on (i) the space activities of animals in African fairy tales in light of international space regulations, (ii) the role of ‘good science’ in the interplay between video games (as modern popular culture artefacts), space, and education, and (iii) how ‘traditional’ circus can be defined in space narratives, and how space narratives expand on and transcend the cultural imaginary of the circus and its comic protagonist, the clown, in particular.” Together, these three case studies examine both educational and cultural aspects, and their connections to space activities, in unique ways, presenting the fruits of the collaborative energy of the co-constituted relationships of popular culture and outer space – the nexus of which emerges as a new conceptual space. The findings reinforce the importance of scientific education as it inspires and raises interest in our universe and environment, illustrate that video games as popular culture artefacts are also educational enablers of the next wave of space exploration, and highlight that space stories recognise the circus’s role as a cultural agent. Together, they broaden our understanding of the various ways in which the public engages in space through culture.