

KIDS IN (OUTER) SPACE. LOCATING THE CHILD IN AUDIOVISUAL ASTROCULTURE – THE CASE OF THE COSMOS SERIES

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to determine what place in relation to the cosmos is assigned to children in selected narratives of contemporary astroculture, particularly in space documentaries. Films and TV series representing this genre generally fit into the idea of edutainment, and their target audience are young viewers, often children. The author of the paper claims that the functioning of non-adult characters in these series generally boils down to three main models, which can be described as “future explorer”, “future administrator of Earth’s resources”, and “bearer of human DNA”. To prove this statement, she analyzes TV series *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (2014) and its sequel *Cosmos: Possible Worlds* (2020). In the second part of the article, the author points to a number of contexts that can be helpful in determining the role played by children in the pop-cultural mapping of the universe.

KEYWORDS: *children and astroculture, space documentaries, universe in pop-culture*

Introduction

“In the glittering darkness, a girl looks out her bedroom window. She sees the stars wheeling in silence. She learns celestial names. Orion. Cassiopeia. The Pleiades. But what are they? What makes them shine?” (Watson, 2019) – an excerpt from the story of Vera Rubin, a famous American astronomer, is a perfect starting point for reflecting on the place occupied by children in contemporary astroculture. After all, the image of a little girl who, with the help of her father, builds her first telescope to watch the sky from her bedroom window links two extremely opposite types of space: the familiar space of a child’s room somewhere in the suburbs and the unimaginable vastness of the infinite cosmos.

It is not surprising that this image often recurs in Rubin's biographies. It corresponds perfectly with the most common pop culture narratives about children and the cosmos. In most of them, the astronomical or physical exploration of the universe begins when kids are playing in the backyard garden (see, for example, *The Cat in the Hat Knows a Lot About Space*, 2017, dir. Paul Hunt) or invade the home of their nearest neighbors, who may be friendly aliens (as in *Ready Jet Go!* TV series, 2016, dir. Craig Bartlett et al.) or brilliant astrophysicists (as in Lucy and Stephen Hawking's novel *George's Secret Key to the Universe*, 2007). The science fiction genre is, of course, familiar with much darker stories about kids who are raised in space colonies from birth and even fight brutal wars in them (e.g., Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, 1985), but let's stick to the stories that aim to educate and shape the attitudes of the young. Here, the case is usually quite clear: space travel is great – exciting and educational – but the adventure must end where it began: at home. After all – and all the time – it is all about the place, where we can find everything that matters most to us: the Earth.

Alexander C. Geppert (2012: 8) explains that “astroculture comprises a heterogeneous array of images and artifacts, media and practices that all aim to ascribe meaning to outer space while stirring both the individual and the collective imagination”. Astro-cultural researchers are intrigued by the historical variability of perceptions of the universe, which they read as correlating with human expectations about the future of our planet and species (Geppert, 2012: 14). Their basic premise is that our vision of the universe is woven from fragments of shifting narratives, images, issues, policies, and ideologies. Importantly, it is a vision that is not only dynamic, but also capable of shaping both individual and collective worldviews, which seems particularly relevant for cultural texts whose target audience are children.

In his book *How Outer Space Made America. Geography, Organization and Cosmic Sublime*, Daniel Sage (2014) notes that the cosmic ideas that we encounter in contemporary media are closely connected to earthly geographies: nations, places, localities, relationships, organizations, landscapes, museums, and popular cultures. “Mapping the cosmos” in mass culture, therefore, has little to do with cosmography *per se*; instead, it can certainly be seen as projecting into outer space the *quasi*-cartographic grid of concepts describing our local policies and relationships (Sage, 2014: 4). In a slightly broader context, this problem is captured by Brad Samuel Tabas (2021: 7), who states that: “Outer space (...) is not out there, but exists as a tangled web of culturally generated significations within our collective practices. (...) [its] meaning (...) cannot have much to do with the stars: it has only to do with the human relation to the human production of a culture's vision of cosmic reality”. These observations raise a number of questions about the ways in which representations of particular social groups are included in the “outer space mapping” process. What about children,

who seem to be the key to the success of possible future space missions, given how time-consuming these missions will be?

An interesting case for analysis are space documentaries, i.e., films and documentary series on the exploration of space. In film studies, the genre is often considered in the light of the cosmic sublime¹, or more specifically: its trivialization. From Carl Sagan's *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* (dir. Adrian Malone) in 1980 to *Universe* (dir. Ashley Gething) in 2021, standard space documentaries all too often employ the strategy of alleviating the sense of homelessness and powerlessness accompanying the observation of the universe with a particular type of "domesticated" sublimity. "Domesticated" means that the boundlessness of the cosmos is depicted by using categories close to everyday human life, for example labor input, available materials and potential (Boczkowska, 2017: 27)². The reason for using such procedures is that films and TV series representing the genre generally fit into the idea of edutainment³, and their main target audience are young viewers. One of the main purposes of such productions is to arouse and strengthen interest in issues related to space exploration. However, their impact does not end here. After all, as Deborah Martin notes, "the child is constructed in contemporary culture as a figure of possibility and transformation, of potentiality and becoming" (Martin, 2019: 6). The presence of the child therefore seems obvious in narratives about a transformation as fundamental for humanity as the colonization of outer space. But what is the nature of this presence? I believe that – leaving aside the question of being the target audience – the functioning of the non-adult characters in these series generally boils down to three main models, which

¹ See, for example, Corey Owen's (2020: 1–14) analysis of building the sense of sublimity in *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (2014, dir. Brannon Braga, Bill Pope, Ann Druyan).

² The trivialization of the experience of outer space also takes place through a variety of formal means: for example, *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* and its remake *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* feature dramatized sequences in which the hosts of these programs navigate an ultra-modern "imagination ship" or walk through a "space calendar", and in some episodes, animated and studio-recorded shots are linked to dramatized live-action sequences (Boczkowska, 2017: 28).

³ An overview of various definitions of edutainment can be found, among others, in Nalan Aksakal's paper (2015). In my paper, following the definition proposed by Sari Walldén and Anne Soronen (2004: 2), I understand edutainment as "entertaining TV programs and computer software, which are primarily meant for educational purposes", or – in other words – "as educational material utilizing entertainment methods and used via information technology". It is worth noting that Walldén and Soronen point to three main types of edutainment TV programs: "1) programs for those in school age are often meant to support formal learning (...), 2) programs to be alternatives for traditional formal learning which are tied to place and time (...), and 3) programs to allure viewers to other forms of education and training" (Walldén and Soronen, 2004: 9.). However, the authors' reflections are based mainly on their observation of how edutainment works in Finland. The fact that edutainment strategies and approaches can vary from culture to culture is argued by Kim H. Veltman (2003: 1–31). The author analyzes three models of edutainment: Japanese, American, and European.

can be described as “future explorer”, “future administrator of Earth’s resources”, and “bearer of human DNA”.

These models, in various configurations and with varying degrees of intensity, appear in documentary series such as *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage, Wonders of the Universe* (2010, dir. Chris Holt, Stephen Hooter, Michael Lachmann) or *Through the Wormhole* (2010–2017, dir. Kurt Sayenga et al.). In this paper, I will focus on the American series *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (2014, dir. Brannon Braga, Bill Pope, Ann Druyan), which is most representative of this group, and its sequel *Cosmos: Possible Worlds* (2020, dir. Ann Druyan, Brannon Braga), hosted by the Afro-American astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson and broadcasted by such networks as National Geographic Channel and Fox.

Connected to the universe: children and the cosmos

As a popular science series, *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* and its second season: *Cosmos: Possible Worlds* makes effective use of one of the basic principles of edutainment⁴, that is, they are based on storytelling. Walldén and Soronen (2004: 10) note that: “A typical way to represent content in edutainment television programs is to blend facts and fiction. This means that fictive elements are used for making the educative content lighter or easier to approach, and for keeping the interest of viewers”. By way of promoting the vision of a future explorer, the *Cosmos* series revolves around inspiring stories of once young enthusiasts who have grown into great explorers over time. In the form of animated or live-action scenes, the series presents a whole range of such narratives. Edmund Halley is portrayed as a boy who, unlike his contemporaries, felt no fear of a comet visible in the sky (season 1, episode 3); Isaac Newton as a kid who escaped from family problems into the world of science (season 1, episode 3); John Herschel as the son of a great scientist who, walking on the beach at night with his father, discovered the secrets of light (season 1, episode 4); Joseph von Fraunhofer as a boy forced to work hard at smelting glass (season 1, episode 5);

⁴ It should be noted that space documentaries are not typical educational television programs (of which *Sesame Street* [1969-] is the best known example), but they merely use certain edutainment strategies. Walldén and Soronen (2004: 10) state that: “The first educational programs on television were, in practice, broadcast lectures, but viewers did not pay much attention to them. As a consequence, the style of educational programs was changed: educational contents were integrated into program formats known to be entertaining”. Space documentaries retain the original idea of a lecture, presented, however, in a visually (and often musically) attractive form, which in *Cosmos* consists of, among other things, CGI effects, animation elements, futuristic set design, and the main theme composed by Alan Silvestri. That the series does in fact pursue certain ideas of edutainment has been noted by critics (see for example: Bishop, 2014).

Annie Jump Cannon as the underestimated astronomer who became deaf as a child as a result of scarlet fever (season 1, episode 8); Albert Einstein as a boy whose father showed him the action of a magnet on a compass needle during a walk in the park (season 1, episode 9); Michael Faraday as a slum-born kid who had big problems at school (season 1, episode 9); James Clerk Maxwell as the only son of a wealthy couple (season 1, episode 9); Syukuro Manabe as a boy who spent much of his childhood in a bomb shelter (season 2, episode 12); and Carl Sagan as a little Jewish visionary from Brooklyn (season 2, episodes 2 and 6).

It is easy to notice that these narratives emphasize the social and class (and to a lesser extent gender and national) diversity of a timeless community of great scholars who have contributed to the development of human civilization. This is in line with the idea explicitly expressed in the fifth episode of the first season: “You never know where the next genius will be born”, which leads to a conclusion that is meant to be obvious to a young viewer, regardless of his or her current social and existential status: “You may be one of them”.

For those who are not brilliant mathematicians or physicists, the *Cosmos* series suggests a model of a future administrator of Earth’s resources. This is where astroculture meets the pro-environment narrative. Marina Benjamin (2003) argues that the possibility of seeing Earth from space has led us to focus our attention on our home planet, fundamentally affecting people’s relationship with the natural world and triggering a revolution in the understanding of Earth as a living system. The author demonstrates this phenomenon through a number of examples: she points out, among other things, that it was no coincidence that Earth Day was first celebrated on 22 April 1970, during the Apollo program. In contemporary astroculture, humanity is presented as a species in search of a second Earth. Since our blue planet will not always be able to serve as our home, it is in our common interest to manage the resources available to us in a reasonable way, so as to ensure the survival of humankind until such time that we are actually able to colonize other worlds. Almost directly, this theme resounds in *Cosmos* in the twelfth episode of the second season when, holding a baby in his arms, Neil deGrasse Tyson speaks to him or her: “You are the latest page in a four-billion-year-old book of life. (...) I see your future life: it may be longer, better and less limited than in any of the past generations. I also sense the dangers”. Later in the episode, the host directs other advice and tips to the infant (and in practice: to the young viewer of the series), such as: „If we keep an eye on the ozone layer, the cavity [in it] will be sealed by your fiftieth birthday”.

A perfect man of the future, according to the series, is an environmental conservative striving to preserve nature intact, as well as an innovator perfecting technology in search of planets suitable for colonization. Such a model was backed, among others, by Stephen Hawking and his daughter Lucy in a series of children’s novels (Hawking

and Hawking, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2016), whose protagonist is George, a teenage son of environmental activists, who befriends the daughter of a brilliant astrophysicist. The protagonist's life is not easy – it is sometimes difficult for him to return from a fascinating laboratory or an orbital station to a home where people only eat what they manage to grow in their own garden, and gifts are forbidden because the toys made of plastic are considered an environmental threat. Over time, George begins to see the deeper meaning in the attitude of the ecosystem defenders. All this in line with the idea once expressed by Vera Rubin: „Each one of you can change the world, for you are made of star stuff, and you are connected to the universe” (Nickel 2021).

In *Cosmos* and other space documentaries, there is yet a third, more veiled message, in which the responsibility for maintaining generational continuity is placed on the child. The thirteenth episode of the first season ends with a kind of *credo* containing words: “I intend to be a good, strong link in the chain of generations (...). Our children will continue the mission of knowledge, just as we continue the work of our ancestors; they will discover wonders we never dreamed of”. The emphasis on knowledge masks the overall tone of the episode presenting the cosmic, natural, and ecological catastrophes that have threatened life on Earth over the past three billion years. In fact, it is not only the transmission of knowledge that is the theme of the episode, but also survival and reproduction, and therefore the transmission of genes.

An interesting implementation of the same strategy can be found in the Netflix series *Our Universe* (2022, dir. Naomi Austin, Stephen Cooter, Alice Jones). The protagonist of each episode is a different animal: generally, a female who either already has offspring or will become a mother by the end of the episode. The creators of *Our Universe* use a typical mode of wildlife films, which often tell stories about “families”, “feelings”, “raising children”. The long process of evolutionary adaptation of individual species to the laws governing the universe is in this series narratively linked to the hardships of having offspring, who are also required to have offspring and thus pass on priceless genes. In a series that is a wildlife film, but at the same time a space documentary, such a message and the anthropomorphization of animal relationships gain additional meaning: after all, so far, humans are the only known species with a conscious desire to prolong the existence of their genome until it can be moved to other planets.

Specks of light: contextualizing space documentaries

This short paper shows only a small fraction of issues relevant to the perspective of locating children in contemporary astroculture. Among the topics that seem important in understanding the role of space documentaries in this process are, for example, the

differences between European and American astrocultural narratives. Programs made by the BBC do not appeal to the child's potential agency as strongly as the American series. One reason for this may be the fundamental difference between European and American approaches to the idea of edutainment. As Kim H. Veltman (2003: 24) notes, "In Japan, as in Europe, edutainment is closely linked with 'serious' learning. (...) In the United States, by contrast, edutainment is frequently perceived, even by Americans themselves (...) as a commercially successful 'necessary' evil which undermines the 'hard fun' and challenges of true learning". *Cosmos*, therefore, not only presents scientific facts in an appealing way, but also tries to reach as wide an audience as possible with its message, resulting in a series that is definitely easier to follow than the British *Wonders of the Solar System* or *The Planets* (2019, dir. Stephen Cooter, Martin Johnson), hosted by Brian Cox.

Another reason for emphasizing the child's potential agency in *Cosmos* is the series' entanglement with ongoing ideological discussions. The 1980 original series, *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, already had an overtly political undertone. Its host and creator, the American astronomer Carl Sagan, made no secret of the fact that one of his ideas was to call for an end to the Cold War and the threat of nuclear conflict. Sagan presented his views on the subject in a long monologue in the final episode of the series, stating, among other things, that: "National boundaries are not evident when we view the Earth from space. Fanatical ethnic or religious or national chauvinisms are a little difficult to maintain when we see our planet as a fragile blue crescent fading to become an inconspicuous point of light against the bastion and citadel of the stars". The reason why, after more than thirty years, Sagan's collaborators, including his widow Ann Druyan, decided to produce a remake of the series also has a political context, related to ideological tensions within American society. The series producers spoke of the "recent political-cultural attacks on science, be it climate change or the teaching of evolution in schools" (Poniewozik 2014). In this context, the critics draw attention to the structure of the opening episode of the 2014 series: "The centerpiece of the first episode is a lengthy animated story about the persecution of the 16th-century monk and astronomer Giordano Bruno. The message is plain: there is a right side and a wrong side of intellectual history, and *Cosmos* is not afraid to say that science is on the right one" (Przewoznik 2014).

The series therefore appeals primarily to young audiences in order to familiarize them with arguments that might allow them to respond to the ongoing debates on the contemporary status of science in the light of issues such as the environmental crisis, but also the rise of religious fundamentalism and other ideologies that question the achievements of research conducted over the centuries. The point raised here indicates at the same time that edutainment is only one element of the structure of this series. If, as Nalan Aksakal (2015: 1233) points out, "The main purpose of edutainment is to attract student's attention and to make [them] focus on events and teaching materials

during learning”, then for the producers of *Cosmos*, this main objective has more of an ideological impact: to make young audiences see the importance, value, and potential of science in a rapidly changing world, and to encourage them to keep their distance from opinions that seek to negate these values.

There are, of course, also gender issues that should be discussed. *Cosmos* presents prominent female researchers who have made significant contributions to our knowledge of the universe, such as Annie Jump Cannon, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, and Vera Rubin. However, despite the efforts of the series producers, the narratives in space documentaries are still male-centric, which is reflected, among other things, in the fact that the hosts of these programs are usually male scientists: Michio Kaku (e.g. *Sci Fi Science: Physics of the Impossible*, 2009, dir. Stuart Rose, Fred Hepburn), Brian Greene (*The Fabric of the Cosmos*, 2011, dir. Rushmore DeNoouer et al.), Brian Cox (*The Planets, Universe*)... Although nowadays there are many female physicists, astrophysicists, cosmologists, and astronomers, space documentaries still seem to suggest that exploring the universe is mainly a boys' business. This happens even in the alternative narratives offered, for example, by Werner and Rudolph Herzog's space documentaries. In *Last Exit: Space* (2002, dir. Rudolph Herzog), a lot of time is devoted to Lucienne Walkowicz – it is her monologue against the backdrop of the Akaka waterfall that ends the film – but ultimately, her speeches are framed by the voice of Werner Herzog, the film's narrator.

However, alternative narratives, such as *Last Exit: Space* or Werner Herzog and Clive Oppenheimer's *Fireball: Visitors from Darker Worlds* (2020), offer a more independent, authorial perspective, avoiding or limiting strategies of edutainment. They present a vision of space that is decidedly „not for children” – in fact, not even for humans. In this narrative, the universe is a black abyss where the lack of Earth's gravity and cosmic radiation make procreation essentially impossible – and without procreation neither the so-called generation ships nor the colonization of other planets can be imagined. These films are not, of course, aimed at an audience as young as, for example, the audience of *Cosmos*. They promise neither exciting adventures in space nor the glory of a future savior of humanity. Given their specific narrative, their rhetorical impact is likely to be low. However, there is also little ideological impact.

Finally, there is the case of the specificity of space documentaries in relation to mainstream feature films and the narratives about the child and childhood embedded in them. Astroculture offers a whole spectrum of film narratives about children and space: while Elliott (*E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, 1982, dir. Steven Spielberg) befriends the child-like alien E.T., Ender (*Ender's Game*, 2013, dir. Gavin Hood) performs a “xenocide” on representatives of an alien race. Little Newt from James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986) is the treasure that Ellen Ripley wants to save at all costs from the terrors of space, while the ten-year-old Murphy from Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) grows up to be an

outstanding explorer who will lead humanity from a dying Earth to the orbit of Saturn, although deep down she will always remain a girl who wants her astronaut father to return to her from his space journey. For many reasons, children seem to be the key element of mainstream visions of the cosmos, as evidenced by the popularity of characters such as Grogu / Baby Yoda from the *Mandalorian* series (2019–, dir. Jon Favreau et al.), or Leia Organa from the *Obi-wan Kenobi* series (2022–, dir. Deborah Chow).

What unites these diverse visions with space documentaries is a tendency to link the child with the future. Moreover, as Steven Spielberg has already shown in the famous shot from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), in which a little boy stands in an open doorway illuminated by the glow of a spaceship, it is children who are particularly open to the possibilities that space has to offer. In astroculture, the child is, therefore, a figure of hope for a better future, rebirth, a new beginning, and sometimes the redemption of guilt. Such a narrative is, in its most general outline, consistent with visions of childhood contained in space documentaries such as *Cosmos*, although further research in this area would be necessary.

Conclusion

“Future explorer”, “future administrator of Earth’s resources”, and “bearer of human DNA”... What draws attention in such a positioning of the child in space documentaries is the almost explicative message directed at the non-adult, which can be encapsulated as: “You are not yet, you are yet to become” or “You are not yet, but you may become”. The bright side of this message relates to the potential, the choice, the various possibilities open to the young viewer. But there is also a dark side to this narrative: the child figures in it as an incomplete being, or a being whose value is yet to be revealed either through the acquisition of knowledge and the management of resources, or through reproduction and survival.

Locating children in today’s astroculture takes place at every possible level. Within it, as consumers of the content it offers, the underdogs have economic, but also biological and ideological functions. A metaphorical illustration of this fact can be found in a shot from the *Cosmos* series (season 2, episode 3), in which an infant’s eyes reflect the brilliance of the stars and galaxies spread out above his or her head. Let’s recall that astroculture is based on projecting our earthly policies, ideologies, and problems into outer space. From there – like the reflected light – they return to us in the form of narratives that find their way into the minds of astroculture participants. The stars wheeling in silence that once fascinated little Vera Rubin – passed through the lens of space documentaries – are not innocent, and the stuff between them may indeed be quite a dark matter.

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DJECA U SVEMIRU. SMJEŠTANJE DJETETA U AUDIOVIZUALNU ASTROKULTURU – SLUČAJ SERIJE COSMOS

Sažetak

Svrha je rada utvrditi koje je mjesto u odnosu na kozmos dodijeljeno djeci u odabranim narativima suvremene astrokulture, posebice u svemirskim dokumentarcima. Filmovi i TV serije koji predstavljaju ovaj žanr uglavnom se uklapaju u ideju edutainmenta, a njihova su ciljna publika mladi gledatelji, često djeca. Autor rada tvrdi da se funkcioniranje neodraslih likova u ovim serijama općenito svodi na tri glavna modela, koji se mogu opisati kao „budući istraživač“, „budući upravitelj resursima Zemlje“ i „nositelj ljudske DNK“. Kako bi dokazala ovu tvrdnju, autorica analizira TV seriju *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (2014.) i njezin nastavak *Cosmos: Possible Worlds* (2020.). U drugom dijelu članka autorica upućuje na niz konteksta koji mogu pomoći u određivanju uloge djece u popkulturnom mapiranju svemira.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: dokumentarni filmovi o svemiru, djeca i astrokultura, svemir u pop kulturi