Fall 2020 Course Description

Instructor: Dr. Josh DiCaglio
Course: ENGL 481
Title: Dreams of Infinity, and Beyond!: The Rhetoric of Space Travel

Description: Chances are you didn’t live through the Space Race. It is hard to grasp the context under which, in less than a decade, human beings could rally together enormous resources, focus, and resolve to perform an astonishing feat that humans had only dreamed of previously. But of course, we know that rhetoric—the one that heralds the Space Race as some amazing height of human achievement. We are just as likely to note, with a well-practiced bitterness, the Cold War, fears of Nuclear annihilation, Vietnam, the first whispers of ecological crisis, the neglect of the poor, or the oppression and repression at home that went along with that coordinated effort. And now corporations routinely fail to launch a basic space shuttle while NASA is continually defunded. So much for the wonder of space travel.

And yet it is precisely because those concerns and that disillusionment was present at the time of the Space Race, that it is so worth studying. The turbulence of those times also coincided with the burgeoning of new kinds of media and the thriving of new kinds of rhetoric. Just as Vietnam was the first televised war, the Space Race was the first coordinated and on-going experiment in the cooperation between science, public relations, and mass market media, which led to a widespread conversation on the value of modern technology, the goals of man, and the direction of society.

In this course we will look at the rhetoric around space in order to examine these political, personal, and social questions as they manifested in the 1960s, as well as their legacy for today. We will consider some of the cultural and rhetorical artifacts that set the stage for thinking about space then spend some time looking at the media events and reactions of the actual Space Race, both in their original form and in more recent representations of them. We will then turn to reflections on the value of Space travel, which will lead us to the current rhetoric around NASA, the trip to Mars, and space photographs.

Proposed Readings: Cicero, Dream of Scipio
Lucian, A True Story
From the Earth to the Moon (film)
Sputnik coverage
Poole, Earthrise
Fuller, Operating Manual For Spaceship Earth
2001: A Space Odyssey
Chelsey Bonstell paintings
Mitchell, Way of the Explorer
From the Earth to the Moon
Media events on moon landing
Tribbe, No Requiem for a Space Age
Arendt, The Human Condition (sections on Sputnik)
Brand, Why haven’t we seen a photo of the Earth from space?
Original Whole Earth Catalog
Mitchell, Way of the Explorer
White, the Overview Effect
Cosmos: A Personal Voyage
Sagan, Pale Blue Dot
Poole, Earthrise
Challenger Explosion coverage
Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey
Space X and Virgin Galactic coverage
Mars One project
Pluto Photos
SETI@Home
Kepler Photographs
Interstellar (film)