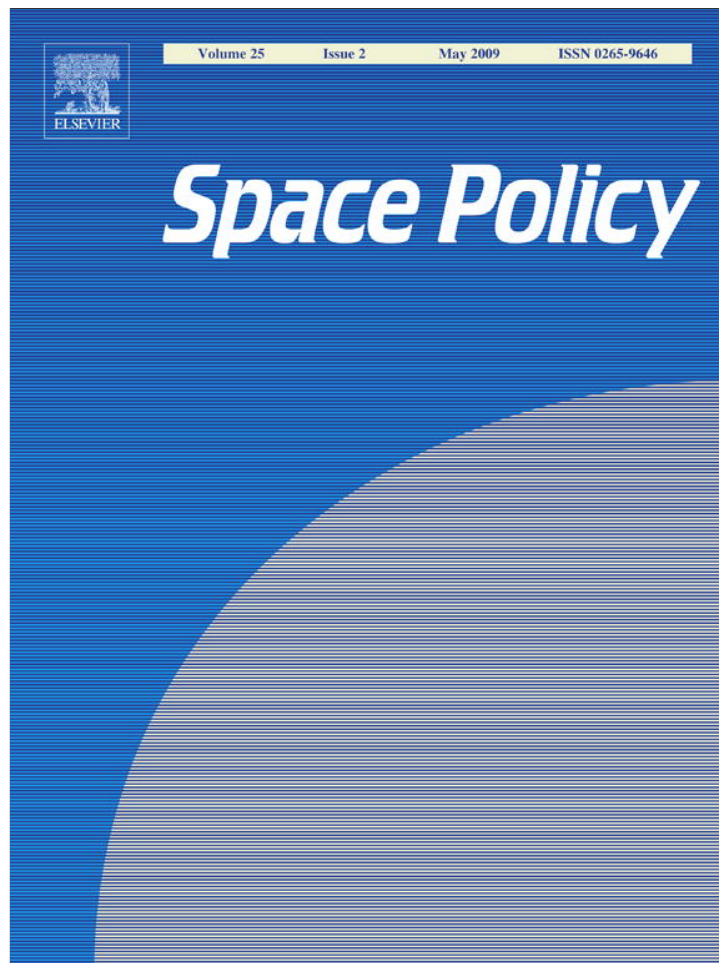




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Space Policy 25 (2009) 136

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Book Review

***Von Menschen und Ausserirdischen: Transterrestrische Begegnungen im Spiegel der Kulturwissenschaft*, Michael Schetsche and Martin Engelbrecht (Eds), transcript, Bielefeld, 2008 (280 pp., €27.80, ISBN: 978 3 89942 855 1)**

The appearance of this book signals on several levels, if not a new era in space studies, then at least its possible point of origin. First and foremost, it is one of the very few available books which address issues typically ascribed to the so-called 'hard sciences' from the perspective of '*Kulturwissenschaft*', i.e. the humanities and social sciences — even if the use of this label by the editors seems not too well-considered, since the established plural of '*Kulturwissenschaften*' might have been more adequate in covering the disciplines represented by the book's 10 authors.

This, however, is a minor point compared to the highly interesting, if heterogeneous arguments and ideas put forward by the book. Held together by the common theme of '*transterrestrische Begegnungen*' (transterrestrial encounters) between human and alien life, the 11 chapters each approach the subject from a different angle. After a valiantly short foreword by the editors, one of them, Martin Engelbrecht, offers an analysis of literary and movie narratives about aliens, developing from his evidence a mind map for the human cultural construction of aliens organised by four generic cornerstone paradigms — God(s), the noble savage, vermin and the monster. Matthias Hurst then focuses still more strongly and comprehensively on TV and movies, diagnosing an insurmountable dialectical dynamic between (alien) alterity and (human) identity inherent in such constructions.

One of the most interesting, because unexpectedly rich chapters is that by Marie-Luise Heuser, who shows that the Renaissance writings of Nikolaus von Cues, Giordano Bruno and Johannes Kepler were already based on a solid concept of transterrestrial reality. This concept, even though it was mostly derived from conjecture and suppositions of probability, still allowed for some astonishingly farsighted ideas — from today's perspective — about the possibilities of life in outer space. In Ingbert Jüdt's also fascinating, if at times overly didactic, contribution on Erich von Däniken the projection is reversed: where Kepler and his contemporaries surmise about a transterrestrial future, von Däniken creates a past in which aliens have long since visited the Earth, interpreting enigmatic shapes like old Egyptian obelisks as traces left behind in the human cultural memory when the aliens vanished again.

The following chapters tackle the complex field of UFO sightings and related areas — Gerhard Mayer reconstructing

the discourse on such sightings in German mass media over the past few decades, Ina Schmied-Knittel and Edgar Wunder using statistical information to make the point that the average person sighting a UFO is indeed just that, i.e. average, meaning that the cliché of mental instability often associated with UFO sightings has no empirical foundation whatsoever. Both chapters, being solidly researched, yield equally pertinent and revealing results by applying the heuristic instruments of discourse analysis to their documentary material, as does Michael Schetsche in his chapter on the community of those who believe/remember themselves to have been kidnapped by aliens at some time in their lives.

Gerd H. Hövelmann's text on the scientific principles of UFO research is one of the most critically piercing contributions in this book, as he maintains that this particular area of research is deeply affected by an implicit theory of perception which it is still not fully aware of. Martin Engelbrecht argues along similar lines that the SETI community is just as little aware of the fact that its work parameters, starting from the assumption that aliens have the same concept of communication as humans, are still too modelled on an anthropomorphic point of view to be really useful in the long run, while Michael Schetsche develops four different sociological scenarios for possible contacts between extraterrestrial and human life. Finally, Kai-Uwe Schrogl points out that neither space politics nor space law have as yet provided frameworks to cover the practical, much less the moral contingencies of such contacts.

All in all, the book is an impressive achievement. Its conceptual coherence is convincing, and its contributions represent both solid research work and innovative thinking. They are linked by a common thread woven from the intelligent sensitivity with which they do justice to even such empirically unstable areas as UFO research, on the one hand, and a pronounced grasp of the elementarily epistemological nature of their subject matters, on the other. It is to be hoped that the book will find readers on both sides of the gap that still seems to divide the 'hard sciences' from the humanities and social sciences, as its authors have certainly generated a range of ideas which will in time prove useful across disciplinary boundaries.

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