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The Interstellar Semiotic

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ABSTRACT

Humanity's journey into space is not just a physical expansion, but also a profound reconfiguration of our symbolic and mythological structures. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's semiotic theory and Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, this essay explores how interstellar expansion catalyzes mythological renewal. By analyzing key works of science fiction by Stanley Kubrick, Frank Herbert, Dan Simmons, and Ursula K. Le Guin, it argues that space travel serves as a mythopoetic process, where encounters with the unknown generate new myths, symbols, and archetypes that reflect humanity's evolving relationship with the cosmos.

INTRODUCTION

Humanity's journey into the cosmos is not merely a physical expansion, but also a profound extension of our symbolic and mythological universe. As we venture beyond the confines of Earth, we are not simply exploring new territory; we are encountering new existential and metaphysical horizons that challenge our most fundamental symbols, archetypes, and mythic narratives. Drawing from Julia Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic theories and Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, this essay explores how humanity's interstellar expansion catalyzes the creation of new myths. Through the lens of science fiction, particularly the works of Stanley Kubrick, Frank Herbert, Dan Simmons, and Ursula K. Le Guin, we see how space travel is not just a scientific endeavor, but also a mythopoetic one, transforming our understanding of the self, the universe, and the transcendent.

As beings of "star stuff," we are drawn to the stars not simply for survival or conquest but also a deeper connection to our origins, a return to the furnace where our atoms were forged, scattered across nebulae like embers from a dying fire. Carl Sagan once observed, "The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself,"¹ invoking the idea that our very movement into the stars is an attempt to reconnect with the cosmic forces that shaped us. The interstellar diaspora, therefore, is not just a journey but also a profound return to the warmth of creation—a journey back to the heart of the cosmos.

However, this journey is not simply a metaphorical or symbolic quest. It represents a profound disruption and reshaping of semiotic structures that govern our engagement with the universe. As Kristeva articulated, the semiotic is that prelinguistic, pre-structured realm of drives, rhythms, and instincts before language formation. This realm, which she identifies with the chora, is fluid and

¹ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, Episode 1, "The shores of the Cosmic Ocean." Aired September 28, 1980, on PBS.

preverbal, preceding the establishment of subjects and objects, of signifiers and signified.² It is here, in this preverbal space, that humanity's engagement with the stars begins. The cosmic realities we encounter beyond Earth provoke not only new symbolic meanings, but also new semiotic experiences—experiences that challenge the terrestrial limits of language and understanding.

This is why I propose the concept of the interstellar semiotic. Just as myths have traditionally provided humanity with symbolic frameworks to navigate existential mysteries—birth, death, and the cosmos—the interstellar semiotic suggests that space itself will become a crucible for mythological renewal. The vastness, alien encounters, and the unknown that space travel introduces push human consciousness to confront the ineffable, much like ancient myth-makers faced the mysteries of nature and the divine. This confrontation, as we will see, is vividly depicted in major works of science fiction.

As humanity expands into space, mythological formation will continue at every new vantage point, catalyzed by encounters with the transcendent, the alien, or the unknowable void of interstellar space. Each of these experiences will draw on the semiotic—on those primal, prelinguistic drives—giving rise to new images, metaphors, and potential myths that transcend terrestrial frameworks of meaning. These new myths will not merely be linguistic constructions, but will also emerge from the very roots of human consciousness, where the semiotic and symbolic co-exist in tension, constantly disrupting and renewing one another.³

The journey into space thus represents a rupture in the symbolic order, one that invites a return to the semiotic. In *Paradises Lost*, Ursula K. Le Guin explores the difficulty of finding words to express the experience of interstellar travel, saying, "To leave the ship; to go through the airlock into the lander, that was a comprehensible thing terrifying, fiercely exciting, absolute, an act of transgression, of defiance, of affirmation. The last act. / To leave the lander: to go down those five steps onto the surface of the planet, that was to leave comprehension behind, to lose understanding; to go mad. To be translated into a language where no word—ground, air—transgress, affirm—act, do—made sense. A world without words. Without meaning. A universe undefined."⁴ Here, Le Guin captures the struggle to articulate the ineffable—the way space

and the cosmos resist the categories of language. This struggle reflects precisely what Kristeva identifies as the disruption of the symbolic by the semiotic: the preverbal awe and wonder that arise in the face of the unknown, where language fails to encompass the experience fully.

INTERSTELLAR EXPANSION AND THE RENEWAL OF MYTH: SEMIOTIC AND SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN SCIENCE FICTION

Humanity's expansion into the cosmos, as depicted in major science fiction works like Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Dan Simmons's *Hyperion Cantos*, and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Paradises Lost*, presents a profound context for exploring the dissolution of old mythological symbols and the rise of new ones. These works navigate the transformative process of myth-making, showing how space travel, encounters with the unknown, and interactions with the transcendent generate new symbols and archetypes. In these instances, mythological images are not merely replaced; they are also re-energized—revitalized to address new existential concerns.

Julia Kristeva's exploration of the semiotic and symbolic provides a nuanced lens through which to view the dynamic tension between ancient myths and the emerging symbolic structures of a future shaped by space exploration. Kristeva's semiotic, a prelinguistic space of drives and rhythms, represents the primal energies that disrupt structured language and symbolic meaning. This interplay between the semiotic and symbolic is crucial for understanding how mythological renewal occurs in the context of interstellar expansion. In contrast, the symbolic represents the domain of language, social rules, and structure—the realm governed by the paternal function, in Kristeva's terms. The constant interaction between the semiotic and the symbolic reveals the dynamism at the heart of human expression, where mythological symbols are ruptured and renewed in response to new experiences. Kristeva suggests that the semiotic chora—a preverbal space of pulsations and rhythms—accompanies the symbolic, acting as a force of both disruption and renewal, making this dynamic crucial for understanding how science fiction renews myth.

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Dune*, *Hyperion Cantos*, and *Paradises Lost*, we observe this semiotic-symbolic interplay across different mythic transformations. These works of science fiction, far from being secular explorations of the future, engage deeply with mytho-

2 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 26.

3 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 41.

4 Ursula Le Guin, "Paradises Lost," in *The Birthday of the World: and Other Stories* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 348.

logical renewal, presenting cosmic journeys as opportunities to unveil the transcendent, evoke numinous experiences, and create new metaphors and images around which human meaning coalesces. In each case, the semiotic disrupts the symbolic, creating space for the formation of new mythological systems in response to humanity's spread throughout the stars.

THE SEMIOTIC AND SYMBOLIC IN KRISTEVA'S THOUGHT

Before delving into these specific works of science fiction, it is essential to understand Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic fully as it underpins the theoretical framework of our analysis. The semiotic, in Kristeva's philosophy, refers to the instinctual, prelinguistic drives and rhythms originating from the maternal body. These drives are not governed by structure, logic, or language, but by non-verbal elements such as tone, rhythm, and movement, which precede the acquisition of language. This semiotic realm operates within what Kristeva calls the *chora*—a term borrowed from Plato to describe a preverbal space of pulsations and rhythms linked to the maternal body. The *chora* is a fluid, prelinguistic state “that precedes the establishment of the subject and all distinctions between subject and object, between signifier and signified.”⁵

Kristeva positions the *chora* as the foundational space where the semiotic exists, serving as a fluid and continuous source of expression that resists the structured language of the symbolic. This tension becomes critical as individuals acquire language and enter the symbolic order—the realm associated with rules, structures, and the paternal function. The symbolic is the realm of grammatical coherence, shared meaning, and structured social relations. Kristeva explains that the symbolic order is shaped by the paternal function, whether real, imaginary, or symbolic, which enforces norms that structure communication and social interaction.

However, the semiotic never fully disappears once individuals enter the symbolic order. Instead, the semiotic and symbolic remain in constant interaction, with the semiotic continuing to disrupt and animate the symbolic through rhythms, tones, and prelinguistic processes that challenge logic and structure. This tension is particularly important in the formation of new myths or renewed symbols, in which the semiotic ruptures the symbolic, opening a space for creativity, renewal, and transformation. Kristeva describes this interaction, noting that “the symbolic function of language involves logic and syntax, which are disrupted

by the rhythm, tone, and other prelinguistic processes of the semiotic.”⁶ While Kristeva focuses on the prelinguistic drives and their disruptions of symbolic order, Cassirer's notion of myth as a dynamic symbolic form complements this view. Together, they offer a framework for understanding how humanity's expansion into the cosmos catalyzes not only symbolic renewal, but also the re-emergence of primal, preverbal forces in myth-making.

It is this semiotic rupture—the moment when language, structure, and order break down to reveal something primal and prelinguistic—that provides the opportunity for the renewal of mythological symbols in science fiction. In the journey through space, traditional myths no longer hold the same power or meaning, and the semiotic erupts to create new forms of expression and belief.

MYTHOLOGICAL FORMATION AND THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

Ernst Cassirer's theories of mythological formation are rooted in his broader philosophy of symbolic forms, which he posits as the fundamental ways humans engage with and make sense of the world. For Cassirer, myths, like language and science, are symbolic structures that allow humans to represent and interpret their experience. In his seminal work *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer argues that myth is one of the earliest and most primal forms of symbolic representation, providing a framework for understanding the world not through logical or empirical means, but through metaphor, image, and narrative.

At the core of Cassirer's philosophy is the idea that humans are not simply rational beings, but also symbolic ones, constantly creating and interpreting symbols to navigate their experiences. In this view, myth is not a primitive or outdated mode of thought, but rather a crucial, ongoing process by which people give shape and meaning to reality. Cassirer's theory suggests that myths are dynamic, living systems that form through the continuous interaction between humans and their environments. These myths provide a way to organize experience, explain the unexplainable, and connect individuals to their communities and the cosmos at large.

Mythological formation, in Cassirer's view, is a process driven by the phenomenological unveiling of a transcendent world. As the human mind (and soul) encounters external reality that provides insight into a larger but not fully graspable sense of meaning, in those moments, the human mind creates a mytholog-

5 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 26.

6 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 24.

ical form—a momentary god. Myths emerge as symbolic forms that externalize inner human experiences and existential concerns. These symbolic forms are not static; they evolve, dissolve, and re-emerge in response to changing realities. Cassirer's work acknowledges that as human societies progress, their mythologies adapt to new understandings and knowledge systems, but they never entirely disappear. Instead, they are continuously reinterpreted and reimagined in different contexts, forming new narratives and metaphors that reflect the shifting relationship between humanity and the world.

MOMENTARY GODS AND THE FLUX OF MYTH

One of Cassirer's key contributions to the understanding of mythological formation is his notion of *momentary gods*. This concept refers to mythological figures and symbols' fluid and transient nature, which arise spontaneously to address specific human needs or crises. These gods are not eternal, unchanging beings; rather, they are symbolic representations that emerge in response to particular moments of cultural or existential significance. For Cassirer, gods and mythological figures are less about fixed, permanent entities and more about dynamic, momentary manifestations of the human need to impose order and meaning on chaos.

The idea of momentary gods highlights the flexible and adaptive nature of myth. Mythological symbols are not bound to static forms; they shift and transform in response to the evolving needs of human societies. This flexibility allows myths to remain relevant and potent even in modern contexts, where science and technology have displaced many traditional cosmologies. For example, the ancient Greek gods, though no longer worshipped, continue to resonate in modern literature, art, and philosophy, constantly reimagined and repurposed to address contemporary concerns.

In this sense, mythological formation is an ongoing process that reflects human culture's dynamic and evolving nature. As Cassirer writes, "We cannot entirely suppress or quell [myth]; it always recurs in a new shape . . . It is not destroyed or annihilated; it has only changed its form. But this very change is of paramount importance."⁷ This idea of myth as a process of perpetual becoming aligns with the fluidity of human symbolic thought, which is always in motion, always adapting to new realities.

BRIDGING CASSIRER TO KRISTEVA'S SEMIOTIC: THE DYNAMIC OF CREATION AND DISSOLUTION

Cassirer's vision of myth as a dynamic, evolving form of symbolic representation finds an intriguing parallel in Julia Kristeva's theory of the semiotic. Both thinkers emphasize the constant flux and transformation of symbolic structures, but they approach this transformation from different angles. While Cassirer focuses on myth as a cultural process of meaning-making, Kristeva's semiotic explores the deeper, prelinguistic forces that underlie and disrupt these processes. Both perspectives, however, share a concern with how symbols, myths, and meanings arise, shift, and dissolve in response to human experience. These theoretical insights are not confined to abstract philosophical discourse. They find concrete expression in the mythopoetic landscapes of science fiction, where authors like Kubrick, Herbert, and Le Guin grapple with the dissolution of terrestrial myths and the emergence of new, cosmic archetypes.

Kristeva's semiotic, as discussed earlier, refers to the prelinguistic, instinctual drives and rhythms that exist beneath structured language and symbolic systems. It is a fluid, preverbal space of pulsations and energies that constantly disrupt and challenge the structured order of the symbolic. In Kristeva's view, the semiotic is always present beneath the surface of the symbolic, manifesting as a force of chaos and renewal. Just as Cassirer's momentary gods emerge in times of cultural flux to provide new symbolic structures, Kristeva's semiotic forces give rise to new symbols and myths by disrupting and reconfiguring the existing symbolic order.

The connection between Cassirer's mythological formation and Kristeva's semiotic lies in their shared understanding of symbols as dynamic, rather than static, elements. In both cases, myths and symbols are born out of a process of creation and dissolution, driven by the need to make sense of experience. For Cassirer, this process is primarily cultural—myths are created to explain natural and existential phenomena, and they dissolve when they no longer serve their purpose. For Kristeva, the semiotic forces disrupt and renew the symbolic order, creating space for new forms of meaning to arise.

Both thinkers also recognize the importance of the preverbal, instinctual realm in the formation of symbolic structures. Cassirer acknowledges that myths often emerge from deep, unconscious sources, from the primal human need to impose meaning on chaos. This aligns with Kristeva's view that the semiotic, tied to the maternal and the preverbal, is a crucial source

⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 246.

of symbolic disruption and renewal. The semiotic is where new symbols and myths are born, challenging the fixed structures of the symbolic and allowing for creativity, transformation, and new mythological formations.

THE INTERSTELLAR SEMIOTIC: SYNTHESIZING CASSIRER AND KRISTEVA

By synthesizing Cassirer's theory of mythological formation with Kristeva's concept of the semiotic, we can begin to understand how humanity's expansion into space will catalyze the formation of new myths and symbolic structures. Cassirer's notion of momentary gods is particularly relevant here, as new mythological figures and symbols are likely to emerge in response to the unique challenges and experiences of interstellar travel. These momentary gods will not be the same static deities of Earthbound religions, but rather dynamic, transient figures that reflect humanity's evolving relationship with the cosmos.

At the same time, Kristeva's semiotic provides a framework for understanding how the prelinguistic, primal experiences of space travel—such as the awe of the *Overview Effect* or the existential terror of the void—will disrupt and reconfigure the symbolic structures that shape our understanding of the universe. The interstellar semiotic, in this sense, is a new mode of mythological formation, one that draws on both Cassirer's vision of myth as a dynamic, adaptive process and Kristeva's insight into the primal forces that underlie and disrupt symbolic systems.

As humanity encounters the vastness of space, the truly alien, and the unknowable void, we will witness the emergence of new myths and symbols—myths that are not bound by terrestrial concerns but are shaped by the unique experiences of the cosmos. These myths will reflect the dynamic interplay between the symbolic and the semiotic, between the structured systems of meaning we create and the primal, preverbal forces that constantly challenge and renew those systems.

In conclusion, Cassirer's theory of mythological formation and Kristeva's semiotic together offer a powerful framework for understanding the future of human meaning-making in the context of space exploration. The interstellar diaspora will not only lead to the creation of new symbols and myths, but also challenge and renew the very foundations of human symbolic thought, giving rise to an interstellar semiotic that reflects both the awe and the terror of the cosmos. Through this synthesis of Cassirer and Kristeva, we can begin to glimpse the new mythopo-

etic language that will shape humanity's future among the stars.

THE OVERVIEW EFFECT AND THE SEMIOTIC

One of the most profound examples of this semiotic rupture is the *Overview Effect*, a cognitive shift that astronauts experience when viewing Earth from space. Frank White, who coined the term, describes it as a moment of transcendence, in which the boundaries between self and planet dissolve, replaced by a sense of unity and interconnectedness. This experience is not easily reducible to language; it evokes a deep emotional and instinctual response—a return, as Kristeva would argue, to the chora. The Overview Effect collapses distinctions between subject and object, self and other, evoking the semiotic realm of prelinguistic drives and rhythms.⁸

In this sense, the Overview Effect represents a rupture of terrestrial language and symbolic meaning. The symbolic structures that govern our understanding of the Earth as a separate, isolated body in the cosmos give way to a new semiotic experience of interconnectedness and awe. This experience catalyzes new images and metaphors, reshaping how humanity understands its place in the universe. The semiotic, in this context, is not just a theoretical concept, but also a lived reality, one that astronauts describe in terms of overwhelming emotions, feelings of unity, and a profound sense of the fragility of life on Earth. These are the seeds of a new interstellar mythology—a mythology that arises from the semiotic disruption of the symbolic order.

The cosmic vastness that astronauts encounter in space evokes a primal, preverbal awe that cannot be fully articulated in words. As White himself notes, the Overview Effect compels us to reimagine our relationship to the Earth, not as a collection of nations or political entities, but as a single, fragile organism suspended in the void. This shift in perception is not only symbolic, but also semiotic, rooted in the bodily, emotional response to the cosmic perspective. In this sense, the Overview Effect offers a glimpse into the formation of the interstellar semiotic—a new language of meaning that transcends terrestrial experience and draws on the primal, prelinguistic drives that shape human consciousness.

⁸ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 26.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE TRULY ALIEN

The encounter with truly alien life forms or intelligences presents another rupture in the symbolic order. Kristeva's exploration of the *abject*—that which defies categorization and disrupts the boundaries of the self—offers a useful framework for understanding how such encounters might challenge human language and meaning. In her work *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the abject as that which is "opposed to I," a force that disrupts the symbolic order by confronting the self with its own limits.⁹ In the context of interstellar exploration, the encounter with the alien represents precisely such a disruption.

Alien life, by its very nature, resists categorization within the symbolic structures of human language and culture. It evokes a primal, semiotic response—fear, wonder, confusion—that cannot be fully captured by words. This semiotic response, rooted in the preverbal drives and instincts that precede language, gives rise to new myths and metaphors, new ways of understanding the alien as both a threat and a revelation. These myths will not emerge from reasoned discourse or symbolic analysis but from the semiotic engagement with the unknown—a bodily, instinctual reaction to that which defies comprehension.

In this sense, an encounter with the alien represents a return to the semiotic, a space in which the symbolic order collapses and new mythological formations begin to take shape. As we venture further into the cosmos and encounter the truly alien, we will see the emergence of new archetypes and metaphors—archetypes that reflect not only the alien as other, but also our own alienation from the familiar categories of human thought. These new myths will be rooted in the semiotic, in the primal drives and rhythms that shape human consciousness, and they will reflect the profound disruption of terrestrial symbolic systems.

THE VOID AND THE FATHOMLESS HORROR

The interstellar void presents yet another site of semiotic rupture with its fathomless emptiness and existential horror. Human language falters in the face of the void, unable to encompass the terror and awe that such emptiness evokes completely. Kristeva's exploration of the semiotic as a space of chaos and disruption provides a valuable lens for understanding how the void functions as a mirror for non-meaning. In its infinite vastness, the void represents the breakdown of the symbolic order—the collapse of meaning in the face of the unknown.

Kristeva sees the semiotic as an ever-present, chaotic force that challenges the structure of the symbolic, enabling the creation of new myths.¹⁰ The void, with its lack of structure and meaning, embodies this chaos, confronting humanity with insignificance and existential terror. In this context, the void becomes a site of mythological formation, where new myths of the abyss, of dissolution and non-being, begin to take shape. These myths emerge from the semiotic engagement with the void, from the primal fears and drives that the void evokes.

The void also represents a confrontation with human knowledge and understanding limits. It is a space in which the symbolic order of language and meaning breaks down, where the human subject faces non-meaning chaos. In this sense, the void functions as a catalyst for new mythological formations—myths that reflect not only the terror of the unknown but also the possibility of new beginnings, of new ways of understanding existence. The interstellar semiotic, in this context, is grounded in the confrontation with the void, in the rupture of the symbolic order, and in the emergence of new archetypal energies.

THE FORMATION OF AN INTERSTELLAR SEMIOTIC

Drawing from Kristeva's definition of the semiotic as a prelinguistic space of drives and rhythms, the concept of an interstellar semiotic proposes that the new contexts of space reshape these primal forces. The interstellar semiotic is not simply a theoretical construct; it is a lived reality, one that emerges from the profound experiences of cosmic awe, alien encounters, and the fathomless horror of the void. Each of these experiences draws on the semiotic, disrupting terrestrial symbolic systems and giving rise to new myths and metaphors that reflect humanity's cosmic journey.

As Kristeva notes, the semiotic is always present beneath the surface of the symbolic, constantly disrupting and renewing the structures of language and meaning.¹¹ The interstellar semiotic, therefore, is not a departure from human experience but an extension of it—a continuation of the primal drives and rhythms that have shaped human consciousness throughout history, now reconfigured in the context of our cosmic expansion. This new semiotic arises from the prelinguistic drives and archetypal energies that space travel provokes, creating a mythopoetic language that transcends Earth-bound frameworks.

Kristeva's semiotic is deeply tied to the maternal, to the rhythms and instincts that precede structured,

9 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

10 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 23.

11 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 41.

symbolic language. These elements are foundational to human expression, yet they remain in tension with the structured, paternal domain of the symbolic. As humanity ventures further into the cosmos, this tension between the semiotic and the symbolic is heightened, as our symbolic systems of meaning—rooted in terrestrial experiences—are disrupted by the vast, incomprehensible realities of space. The interstellar semiotic, then, is an expansion of these primal drives into new cosmic domains, generating new mythological forms and archetypes that speak to our evolving relationship with the universe.

Joseph Campbell anticipated this mythological renewal when he reflected on how space exploration would transform the images and metaphors that form our collective mythology. “It makes a difference from what outer space the images of a mythology are drawn,” he noted, emphasizing that as humanity moves into space, we will witness the emergence of new myths, metaphors, and symbols that are appropriate for the intervals between the stars.¹² These new myths will not merely reflect our scientific advancements; they will also draw from the semiotic, from the primal, preverbal experiences that space travel evokes. Campbell believed that this process would take time—perhaps another century or two—but that the seeds of this interstellar mythology are already present, waiting to be fully realized.

REBIRTH IN THE STARS: COSMIC HEARTHES AND MYTHOLOGICAL RENEWAL

As humanity ventures into space, we are, in a sense, reborn. The interstellar diaspora represents not just a movement away from Earth, but also a return to the cosmic origins from which we emerged. Our atoms, flung violently from the death of stars, have found temporary refuge on Earth, but space offers the possibility of returning to the hearth of creation. This theme of rebirth is echoed in the symbols and imagery that accompany space exploration. In the Denver Science Museum’s interstellar travel exhibit, egg-shaped designs—buttons, chairs, icons—dominate the visual language, evoking the symbology of birth and new beginnings. These symbols reflect a deeper semiotic truth: that space travel is not just an exploration of the unknown, but also a symbolic return to our cosmic origins.

This return to the cosmic hearth is more than a metaphor; it represents a fundamental shift in how we understand ourselves in relation to the universe. As we

journey into space, we carry with us the symbolic systems of meaning that have shaped human culture for millennia. Yet, as Kristeva reminds us, these symbolic structures are constantly disrupted by the semiotic, by the primal drives and rhythms that precede language. Space travel, in its capacity to evoke awe, wonder, and terror, taps into these primal energies, catalyzing the formation of new myths and metaphors that reflect our evolving relationship with the cosmos.

As we leave Earth behind, we are reminded of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky’s famous words: “The Earth is the cradle of mankind, but one does not live in the cradle forever.”¹³ Tsiolkovsky, writing in 1911, foresaw the eventual necessity of humanity’s expansion into space, a necessity not only for survival, but also for the continued evolution of human consciousness. In leaving the cradle of Earth, we are not abandoning our symbolic roots but extending them into new, cosmic domains. The interstellar semiotic that emerges from this journey represents the next stage in humanity’s mythological development—a stage in which new archetypes, new myths, and new symbols arise from the primal experiences of space.

MYTHOLOGICAL FORMATION IN THE INTERSTELLAR DIASPORA

Mythological formation has always been tied to humanity’s relationship with the unknown, with the transcendent, and with the forces that shape our existence. As humanity moves into space, the myths that emerge will be shaped not only by our intellectual and symbolic understanding of the cosmos, but also by the semiotic, by the preverbal drives and instincts that arise in response to the vastness, emptiness, and alienness of space. These new myths will reflect the unique challenges and experiences of the interstellar diaspora, forming a new symbolic language that speaks to the cosmic realities we encounter.

In Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion Cantos*, the pilgrimage to the Time Tombs represents a mythic journey that reshapes human consciousness. The Time Tombs, which exist in a state of temporal flux, defy human comprehension, forcing the pilgrims to confront the limits of language and meaning. In one passage, the character Aenea reflects on the nature of myth and reality, stating, “The Void Which Binds is always under and above the surface of our thoughts and senses, invisible but as present as the breathing of our beloved next to us in the night. Its actual but unaccessible presence in our universe is one of the prime causes for our species elaborating myth

12 Joseph Campbell, “Joseph Campbell Papers,” Box 31, File 31.53, New York Public Library.

13 Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, “Exploration of Outer Space by Means of Rocket Devices,” 1911.

and religion."¹⁴ Here, Simmons echoes Kristeva's notion of the semiotic as that which disrupts and animates the symbolic order, giving rise to new mythological forms.

This theme of mythological renewal in the face of the unknown is central to the formation of the interstellar semiotic. As humanity encounters the vastness of space, the truly alien, and the horror of the void, our symbolic systems of meaning will be disrupted, giving rise to new myths that reflect these primal experiences. These myths will not be confined to the intellectual or symbolic realm; they will emerge from the semiotic, from the preverbal drives and rhythms that shape human consciousness. The interstellar semiotic, therefore, represents the birth of a new mythopoetic language, one that speaks to the unique challenges and experiences of space travel.

TOWARD AN INTERSTELLAR SEMIOTIC: THE NEW MYTHOPOETIC LANGUAGE

The formation of an *interstellar semiotic* is not merely speculative; it is an inevitable outcome of humanity's expansion into the cosmos. As we encounter new realities—cosmic vastness, alien life, the existential terror of the void—our symbolic systems of meaning will be disrupted and renewed by the semiotic. The primal drives and rhythms that shape human consciousness, which have always existed beneath the surface of language, will be reconfigured in the context of space, giving rise to new myths, new metaphors, and new symbolic forms.

These new myths will not only reflect our cosmic experiences, but also speak to the primal, preverbal aspects of human consciousness. As Kristeva notes, the semiotic is always present beneath the surface of the symbolic, constantly disrupting and renewing the structures of language and meaning.¹⁵ The interstellar semiotic, then, is not a departure from human experience but a continuation of it—a continuation that extends the primal drives and rhythms of the semiotic into new cosmic domains.

In *Dune*, Frank Herbert explores the dissolution of old myths and the rise of new ones, particularly in the context of humanity's expansion into the stars. Paul Atreides, in his journey to become the Kwisatz Haderach, confronts the limitations of terrestrial mythological structures and the need for new myths that reflect the cosmic realities of space. In one passage, Paul reflects on the nature of myth and reality, stating, "That metaphysical world where all physical limitations were removed.... In the landscape of a myth, he could not

orient himself and say 'I am I because I am here.'"¹⁶ Herbert, like Kristeva, recognizes the fluidity of myth and the ways in which it must adapt to new contexts, particularly in the face of cosmic expansion.

THE MONOLITH AND THE SEMIOTIC SUBLIME IN 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the Monolith is the central symbol around which mythological renewal occurs, functioning as both a semiotic rupture and a symbolic artifact. Kubrick's depiction of the Monolith exemplifies a moment where the semiotic—Kristeva's realm of preverbal, primal energies—collides with the symbolic order of human technology and evolution. The Star Gate sequence, in particular, represents a breakdown of structured meaning, where Bowman's transformation into the Star Child symbolizes the rebirth of humanity. This rebirth echoes Campbell's Hero's Journey but is updated for an interstellar context, in which myth and technology merge into a single, profound image of transformation. In both Stanley Kubrick's film and Arthur C. Clarke's novel, the Monolith functions as an object of cosmic significance, representing the unfathomable forces that drive human evolution. Its presence is deeply numinous, evoking both awe and terror—what Rudolf Otto famously described as the "mysterium tremendum."¹⁷ Yet the Monolith also exemplifies Kristeva's semiotic rupture, destabilizing structured meaning and allowing new myths to form.

The Monolith operates as a semiotic presence that defies language and structure, interrupting the symbolic order and pushing humanity into a transcendent experience. In Kristeva's terms, the Monolith evokes the semiotic chora, existing in a preverbal space of pulsations and rhythms, a point where distinctions between subject and object break down. In the film, the Star Gate sequence—where Dave Bowman is pulled into a vortex of lights and colors—illustrates this semiotic breakdown. Kubrick's cinematic portrayal of Bowman's experience eschews narrative coherence, replacing it with disorienting imagery that bypasses rational understanding. Bowman's transformation into the Star Child symbolizes the rebirth of humanity, a process rooted in prelinguistic transformation.

Clarke's novel similarly portrays the Monolith as a semiotic force—an object that transcends explanation and operates at the boundaries of human understanding. The Monolith catalyzes humanity's evolution, but

14 Dan Simmons, *Rise of Endymion* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 326.

15 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 41.

16 Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Ace Books, 1965), Chapter 40.
17 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 19.

its precise nature remains unknowable, representing the limits of the symbolic order and the need for new metaphors and symbols to emerge in response to its presence.

As Kristeva writes, the semiotic is articulated by “heterogeneous, non-signifying elements that do not exist for themselves as in the symbolic” but remain deeply intertwined with it, constantly disrupting and renewing it.¹⁸ In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the Monolith is the embodiment of this dynamic, its presence acting as both a rupture and renewal of myth, pushing humanity beyond the limits of structured language and into a confrontation with the cosmic semiotic.

At the same time, Ernst Cassirer’s symbolic forms help to explain the evolving function of the Monolith. For Cassirer, myth is a dynamic, evolving force that responds to the existential realities of human life. In *2001*, the Monolith evolves from a symbol of divine intervention (at the dawn of humans) to a symbol of technological transcendence. The Monolith’s role changes with each stage of human development, reflecting Cassirer’s view that myths adapt to new cultural and technological realities. The Monolith becomes a post-technological axis mundi, a symbol that connects humanity to the cosmic forces governing its evolution.

THE REVITALIZATION OF ARCHETYPES IN DUNE

Frank Herbert’s *Dune* similarly explores the dissolution of old mythological systems and the rise of new ones, particularly through the character of Paul Atreides and the planet Arrakis. As humanity spreads throughout the stars, traditional myths connected to Earth-based religions begin to lose relevance, and new symbols—tied to political control, ecological survival, and cosmic destiny—emerge.

Paul Atreides becomes the focal point of this transformation, embodying the messianic archetype in the Jungian sense. In Jung’s theory, the messiah is not only a figure of salvation, but also a manifestation of the Self, the archetypal drive toward wholeness. Paul’s journey reflects this drive, as he confronts the dissolution of earthly myths and the creation of new cosmic archetypes that resonate with his unique, almost god-like position. The Kwisatz Haderach is a re-imagining of the messiah figure—drawing from Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist traditions—yet reshaped for a universe far removed from Earth. As the Kwisatz Haderach, Paul embodies the messianic archetype, re-energized in the context of interstellar politics and genetic manipulation. The figure of the messiah, a traditional symbol of salvation, is reframed in *Dune* through Paul’s role as both a

political leader and a figure of cosmic prophecy. Herbert’s Kwisatz Haderach presents a new hybrid symbol of salvation and power.

Arrakis, the desert planet, also plays a crucial role in this mythological renewal. The sandworms, worshipped as Shai-Hulud by the Fremen, represent a re-energized version of the archetypal Great Mother—both a life-giving force and a symbol of destruction. The harsh environment of Arrakis becomes a sacred space, where survival is tied to an intimate understanding of the planet’s cycles and rhythms. This reverence for the planet itself reflects the semiotic nature of *Dune*’s mythos, where the prelinguistic rhythms of the desert shape the Fremen’s culture and religion.

In Kristeva’s terms, the experience of the spice melange, which grants prescient visions and allows Paul to access his future selves, represents a semiotic disruption. These visions, which allow Paul to transcend the linear constraints of time, pull him into the chora, where boundaries between past, present, and future dissolve. The spice operates as a semiotic force that destabilizes the symbolic structures of language and thought, pushing Paul toward a confrontation with his cosmic destiny.

ARCHETYPAL DEATH AND REBIRTH IN HYPERION CANTOS

In Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion Cantos*, the Shrike functions as a momentary god, echoing Ernst Cassirer’s idea that gods emerge in response to specific existential crises. The Shrike, a terrifying figure associated with death and destruction, becomes the focal point of worship, representing Jung’s archetypal Shadow. As an embodiment of humanity’s fear of death and the unknown, the Shrike forces the pilgrims—and readers—to confront the darker aspects of human existence. Like the Shadow, the Shrike symbolizes both a destructive force and a pathway to deeper self-awareness, as the journey to the Time Tombs compels all the characters to confront their own mortality. In this sense, Simmons’s work plays on the archetypal tension between life and death, offering a mythic exploration of human existential fears in an interstellar context. The pilgrims’ journey to the Time Tombs mirrors the Hero’s Journey, but it is twisted through the presence of the Shrike, which serves as both a divine figure and a force of terror. Hillman’s assertion that “soul has a special relationship with death” resonates here, as the Shrike embodies the soul’s confrontation with mortality in its most primal form.¹⁹

The cruciform, a parasitic artifact that grants immortality through endless cycles of resurrection, distorts the Christian symbol of the cross into something grotesque,

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 41.

¹⁹ James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), xvi.

reflecting humanity's struggle with death and the consequences of biological immortality. The cruciform re-energizes the archetype of resurrection, but it does so in a way that denies spiritual transcendence, reducing resurrection to an endless cycle of physical rebirth without meaning.

NEW MYTHS IN PARADISES LOST

In Ursula K. Le Guin's novella *Paradises Lost*, the dissolution of old mythologies is intricately tied to the experience of multi-generational space travel. The starship *Discovery* becomes a sacred space, and the old myths tied to Earth lose their power. The Religion of Bliss emerges as a new belief system, reflecting the semiotic-symbolic tension as new cosmologies are formed to address the unique existential realities of life aboard a starship.

The journey takes on mythic significance, as the starship becomes a metaphor for spiritual transcendence, much like the ark or cosmic vessel in traditional mythologies. This journey through space represents the semiotic rupture that allows new mythological images to emerge, creating a new form of religious experience disconnected from Earth-bound symbols.

CONCLUSION: MYTHOLOGICAL RENEWAL IN THE COSMOS

In sum, the interstellar diaspora represents not only a physical expansion into space, but also a symbolic and semiotic expansion—a profound shift in human consciousness. As we move beyond Earth, our encounters with cosmic vastness, alien life, and the existential horror of the void challenge our terrestrial symbols and myths, forcing them to evolve. Drawing from Kristeva's semiotic and Cassirer's symbolic forms, we can see how these encounters give rise to new myths that speak to the primal, preverbal experiences of space. The interstellar semiotic points to a future in which mythmaking becomes a universal process, blending ancient archetypes with new cosmic symbols. Joseph Campbell predicted that space exploration would transform our collective mythology, and as humanity ventures deeper into the stars, we are already witnessing the seeds of this transformation. As humanity moves beyond Earth, we will encounter new realities that challenge our terrestrial symbolic systems, giving rise to new myths, metaphors, and archetypes. These myths will not emerge solely from intellectual contemplation, but also from the primal, preverbal experiences that space travel evokes—experiences rooted in the semiotic, in the drives and rhythms that shape human consciousness. The dissolution of old mythological systems and the rise of new ones are cen-

tral themes in the works of Kubrick and Clarke, Herbert, Simmons, and Le Guin, where space travel and encounters with the unknown create opportunities for mythological renewal. While Kristeva's theories illuminate the underlying forces at play, it is also essential to consider how these frameworks resonate with modern existential questions posed by our current technological advancements and their implications for space travel.

Through the lens of Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic, we see how the primal forces of the semiotic break through the constraints of the symbolic, reshaping meaning at its deepest levels and generating new symbols and archetypes that are born from the primal experiences of space. Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms helps to explain how these new myths evolve in response to the changing existential realities of space exploration. Jung's archetypes reveal the timeless patterns that reappear in new forms, guiding humanity's journey into the stars. The interstellar semiotic represents the next stage in humanity's mythological development, where new symbolic forms emerge from encounters with the vastness of the cosmos, the genuinely alien, and the horror of the void.

As humanity ventures deeper into space, we may be on the cusp of a mythological renaissance in which new cosmic symbols and archetypes transform our understanding of the universe and redefine what it means to be human. These myths, born from our encounter with the unknown, could be as influential as the myths that shaped the early cultures of Earth. The interstellar semiotic points to a future in which mythmaking becomes a universal process, drawing on our primal instincts and evolving understanding of the universe. Just as Campbell predicted, the mythology of the stars will one day rival the myths of Earth, forever reshaping our collective consciousness. These new myths, reflecting awe, terror, and wonder, will shape our understanding of the universe and reshape our understanding of ourselves as beings of "star stuff," destined to explore the cosmos and discover new forms of meaning in the stars.

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