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From the Stars and Back : The Journey Motif in Carl Sagan's Cosmos and Peter Nilson's Stjärnvägar

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From the Stars and Back

The Journey Motif in Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* and Peter Nilson's *Stjärnvägar*

Abstract

In popular science and science writing, the journey motif is fairly common. In this paper I explore and analyse the journey motif through the words and images of two different works: the American astronomer and author Carl Sagan's TV-series *Cosmos* (1980), and the Swedish astronomer and author Peter Nilson's essay book *Stjärnvägar* (1991; "Star paths"). The overarching aim of both works is to convey the world view of modern science and to reflect upon mankind's place within it. In doing this, the journey motif is used. In the paper I discern three levels of the motif, roughly corresponding to three different time scales, that are, in spite of the difference in media, present in both works: the personal level, the historical level, and the cosmic level. The personal level involves Sagan traveling to different places in the Universe in his ship of the imagination, and Nilson traveling to different places on Earth and several billion years into the future in a time machine. The historical level involves visiting different historical eras, as well as presenting modern explorations of space as a continuation of historical explorations of the Earth. The cosmic level involves the evolution of matter in cosmic time, from the Big Bang to present day humanity. Finally, I show how the motif is used to conceptualise mankind's place in the Universe. Central in both works is the idea that humans and the Earth itself are "star stuff", i.e. composed of elements produced in stars. Thus, the different levels of the journey motif are combined: we originate from the stars (the cosmic level), and through science and exploration we can understand our origins and return to the stars (the personal and the historical levels).