

# From Gods to the Unknown: Epistemological Reflections on Faith, Science, and Media Narratives

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**Abstract.** This paper discusses how media narratives translate miracles into scientified “unknowns” in two cultural traditions. Ancient myths in two cultural traditions made the incomprehensible divine will—Nuwa’s creation of humanity, Pangu’s separation of heaven and earth, Genesis, and Prometheus—thus locating mystery in the position of sacred authority. In contemporary techno-narratives Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem*, Luc Besson’s *Lucy*, and Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* made the incomprehensible higher-dimensional physics or cognitive evolution, thus locating awe in the position of sacred authority, while also placing it in the position of scientific authority. Analysis demonstrates that atheism’s denial of the unknown renders it a form of idealism; true materialism is in the position of humble recognition of what is unknown.

## 1 Introduction

Throughout human history, the unknown has never disappeared; it has just appeared in different ways. Ancient myths in two cultural traditions made the incomprehensible divine-will—Nuwa’s creation of humanity, Pangu’s separation of heaven and earth, Genesis, and Prometheus—thus locating mystery in the position of sacred authority. In contemporary techno-narratives Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem*, Luc Besson’s *Lucy*, and Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* made the incomprehensible higher-dimensional physics or cognitive evolution, thus locating awe in the position of sacred authority, while also placing it in the position of scientific authority. Analysis demonstrates that atheism’s denial of the unknown renders it a form of idealism; true materialism is in the position of humble recognition of what is unknown.

Previous scholarship has contributed to the study of myths, religion, and media. Notably, recent works on digital religion have shown how religion online reconfigure authority and that miracles are presented as ordinary and shareable events. Meanwhile, classical media psychology theories such as Framing Theory and Cultivation Analysis are still indispensable in explaining how narratives guide interpretation and long-term audience perceptions. Few works, however, have systematized comparisons of how Eastern and Western traditions narrate the unknown, or have examined how techno-narratives continue, challenge, and

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transform the functions of myth in the contemporary context. To fill this gap, this study integrated media psychology and contemporary philosophy of science to analyze how miracles are reframed as unknowns across cultures and media forms.

This analysis builds on Framing Theory and Cultivation Analysis. The analysis is enriched by Bruno Latour's Gaia and human–nonhuman networks, which consider media as mediators that make unknown relations visible [1], and by Alain Badiou's notion of the Event and truth procedures, which consider miracles as ruptures that demand new intelligibility [2].

This paper addresses the following three research questions:

- RQ1: How do media narratives in different cultural traditions use framing strategies to transform mythological miracles into scientificized “unknowns,” thereby transforming relationships between humanity, the sacred, and nature?
- RQ2: What framing mechanisms exist between Eastern and Western traditions, and what similarities and differences are there between them?
- RQ3: How do techno-narratives, in representing “miracles,” continue, challenge, or transform the functions of traditional myths?

## **2 Case discussion**

### **2.1 Eastern myths: place the unknown in maternal deity**

In Eastern systems, nuwa, Pangu, Nezha are the embodiments of human beings' first attempts to tell the unknown. Nuwa forming human from clay shows that people were trying to explain the mysterious origin of human without scientific knowledge. By personifying creation, the story actually places the unknown in a maternal divine female, who is outside of chaos and order. Pangu separating heaven and earth with his body and staying in a proper place shows that the unknown is placed in a cosmos order, which makes natural phenomena intelligible. His sacrifice shows that the unknown is in a cosmic order outside of the human body. Nezha self sacrificing and then being rebuilt by lotus root shows that the unknown is placed in a human body, which can be renewed and transcended. The story dramatizes the overcoming of human physical limits and puts forward a symbolic solution to the fear of death.

All these show that the unknown was placed in maternal deities, giants and heroes in early Chinese myths, who made miracles, which were visible explanations for inexplicable phenomena. They did not remove the unknown, but allowed human societies to live with it by means of gods and heroes. In this sense, myths were epistemological tools, which made the invisible visible and gave cultural meanings to what human beings could not see or understand.

### **2.2 Western myths: place the unknown in sacred order**

In Western traditions, Genesis, Prometheus, miracle narratives in Christian hagiography are the embodiments of Western people's attempts to frame the unknown through divine agency. Genesis shows that the creation of the world and human was from the direct will of God, which made the inexplicable origin of human and the world comprehensible. It put the unknown in a cosmic order, which made it intelligible. Although Prometheus stealing fire from heaven for human was a kind of knowledge transgression, the story showed that technology was also a kind of miraculous knowledge, which made the unknown comprehensible. The unknown was placed in a cosmic order and human knowledge limit. In Christian hagiography, miracle stories, such as the saints healing the sick, the dead, commanding nature, were the cultural legitimations of divine authority, which gave people tangible evidence that God was with them.

These myths in Western traditions put the unknown in visible orders made by divine agency. Armstrong (2005) even thought that myths in Western traditions were not so much explanations in an abstract sense, but narratives of divine agency, which gave meaning to suffering and hope to human beings [3]. In addition, Segal (2004) also thought that miracles in Judeo-Christian traditions gave epistemological anchors to human beings, who put their uncertainty in divine providence [4]. All these show that the West tried to frame the unknown into structured accounts of God's will, who did not remove the unknown, but placed it in the domain of faith.

### **2.3 Eastern science fiction: place the unknown in cognitive relativity**

In contemporary techno-narratives, Liu Cixin's *The three-body problem* is a clear example of making miracles scientific. The sophon (a nearly omniscient proton artificially unfolded) seems like a miracle to humans: it can spy on any experiment, stop any scientific development, and make scientists despair. This to human protagonists looks like god's punishment, an inexplicable force. Still, in the story, the sophon is explained to be the achievement of a higher-dimensional civilization: what seems miraculous is made physics, though in a way incomprehensible to the characters.

The example shows how contemporary Chinese science fiction makes miracles cognitive relativity: miracles are not absolute events that happen in the world, but relative to human epistemic positions. *The three-body problem* uses its scientific imagination to dramatize the conflict between human knowledge and cosmic intelligence. Liu's writing grounds his mythological imagination in modern science and puts Chinese cultural narratives into a global conversation about the unknown. Therefore, in contemporary Chinese techno-narratives, myth continues its function, not to drive out the unknown, but to make it scientific speculation.

### **2.4 Western science fiction makes the miraculous scientific possibility**

Western techno-narratives such as Luc Besson's *Lucy* (2014) and Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) demonstrate how miracles are reframed through scientific or speculative logic. In *Lucy*, the protagonist's brain capacity expands toward 100%, granting her powers traditionally associated with deities: omnipresence, manipulation of matter, and transcendence of time. What appears miraculous is explained through neuroscience and information theory, transforming divine-like transcendence into the logical extension of human cognition. As Dodgson (2017) notes, *Lucy* reflects a long-standing Western fascination with the link between knowledge and power, reinterpreting mystical abilities as potential outcomes of human evolution.

*Interstellar* handles the miraculous through physics and cosmology. The movie depicts gravitational anomalies, time dilation, and a transcendent "fifth-dimensional" space in which communication across time becomes possible. To the characters, these events initially appear as inexplicable interventions; yet the narrative frames them as permissible under advanced physics. Nolan's vision is what Csicsery-Ronay (2008) calls the "science-fictional sublime." Here, the unknown awes but it is managed through scientific imagination [5]. In both cases, Western techno-narratives reframed miracles not as divine interventions but as scientific possibilities. Therefore, these narratives continued the relationship with myth but placed mystery within a rational discourse.

### **3 Analysis on the problems**

#### **3.1 Denying the unknown turns atheism into idealism**

Atheism has promised to rescue us from superstition and god'sutches by confessing a materialist world-view. Unfortunately, when atheism denies the unknown it describes a world in which human cognition is taken as the measure of all things. Atheism has turned idealism (about human cognition) into materialism. True materialists must be humble. They know that reality has features, phenomena, and events that escape our current comprehension.

This failure of epistemic humility manifests itself in two myths. In Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*, human scientists despair when faced with the sophon—an invisible, omnipotent piece of technology that cannot be experimented with. Humans lack the ability to manipulate higher-dimensional space. They have no capacity to manipulate higher-dimensional space.

In contrast, when faced with unexplained cosmological and biological origins, *Genesis* states that the universe and life were caused by God's will. In both cases, denying the unknown—whether through atheistic rationality or via a divine fiat—leaves humans epistemologically trapped.

Philosophers have recognised this. Suvin (1979) writes that science fiction produces “cognitive estrangement,” a mode that exposes human limitations and postulates alternative intelligibilities[6]. Plantinga (2011) argues that science and religion need not be regarded as mutually exclusive; both acknowledge that human knowledge is partial and provisional [7]. When atheists deny the unknown, they make an idealist move. They subordinate reality to the limits of thought. Only by recognising the unknown can materialism remain whole. Only then can myth, science, and speculative imagination coexist as distinct frames that relate to mystery.

#### **3.2 Media frames transform miracles from divine will to scientific logic**

Media do not relate events; they frame them. They choose some aspects of reality to speak of and others not to. As Entman (1993) writes, framing highlights certain interpretations and causal linkages, making it clear how audiences understand complex phenomena. Myths and techno-narratives show how miracles are framed over time, changing from divine causality to scientific logic.

In Eastern mythology, Nuwa creates humanity. Humanity's origin has been set by a maternal deity. Humans are miraculous but the agent is not. In contrast, in Western hagiographies, the miracles of saints—miraculously healing the sick or reviving the dead—serve as visible proofs of God's power. Saints are miraculous and God compassionate. These are the frames we have around the unknown where faith lies.

In contrast, techno-narratives reframe the miraculous in either scientific or speculative logic. In *The Three-Body Problem*, the sophon feels like divine-like punishment but the sophon gets relegated into the position of higher-dimensional technology. In *Lucy*, Lucy's transcendence is reframed as neurological expansion and *Interstellar* reframes gravitational anomalies into extrapolations of physics. All of these reframings attempt to preserve awe towards the miraculous while grounding it in science.

Media do not merely reflect boundaries between the sacred and the secular; they actively produce them, shaping how we as communities make sense of transcendence. Media reframings produce what counts as credible knowledge within public discourse. Applied here, myths reframed the miraculous as divine will while techno-narratives reframed it as scientific possibility. Both strategies obscure the unknown; rather, it places it within interpretive boundaries that societies can use to make sense of mystery on their own.

### 3.3 Repeated narratives cultivate rational awe toward the unknown

Cultivation theory focuses on the long-term effects of watching media: repeated narratives over time shape audience expectations and worldviews. Applied originally to television, the theory has since been extended to digital culture and science fiction, where repeated narratives of the miraculous cultivate new expectations and understandings of the unknown.

In Eastern techno-narratives, Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* repeatedly reminds readers that sophon is everywhere. When audiences repeatedly see the sophon appear, they learn that it is not divine punishment. Instead, they learn to conceive of the unknown as possibly being contained within higher-dimensional technology. In contrast, in *Lucy* and *Interstellar*, audiences repeatedly see transcendence reframed as neurological evolution and advanced physics, respectively. Repeated narratives of the miraculous train audiences to understand the unknown as potentially being contained within the realm of rationally conceivable science, even if it is awe-inspiring.

This is also true of digital religion. Repeated exposure to religious content online cultivates young people's worldviews by embedding them within hybrid logic that combines traditional belief and modern media logic. Campbell and Tsuria (2017) also note that digital platforms normalize experiences of transcendence by embedding them within everyday online practices [8]. While television once cultivated fear or trust through repeated narratives, digital and techno-narratives cultivate rational awe: audiences are trained to expect that mysteries can be contained within the realm of science while still evoking wonder.

Cultivation analysis thus reveals how repeated narratives mediate the shift from supernatural attribution to rational awe. Miracles are no longer attributed to an absolute break with reality; instead, they are understood as being contained within some realm of knowledge that societies can make sense of. In this way, repeated narratives across myth, science fiction, and digital religion do not erase the unknown—they habituate societies to understand it on their own terms.

### 3.4 Latour and Badiou recast miracles as networks and events

Media psychology has shown us the impact of framing and cultivation, but contemporary philosophy of science can provide us with valuable tools to understand how the miraculous and unknown can be redefined. Latour and Badiou may come at it from different angles, but both emphasize that miracles do not have to be understood as either irrational superstition or as rare scientific anomalies. Rather, they are redefined as parts of other processes – networks for the former and events for the latter.

Latour claims that “society, science, religion are not three spheres but actor – network, in which humans, nonhumans, texts, and technologies participate in making the world visible” (2005) [9]. From this vantage point, miracles can be understood as specific relational effects within networks. The sophon from *The Three-Body Problem* is not just a piece of higher-dimensional technology, but a mediator that reorganizes humanity's relationship with science and cosmic order. The former's mediation effects on the latter two are also visible in the gravitational anomalies from *Interstellar* – mediators that make invisible dimensions comprehensible through cinema.

Badiou (2005) offers an understanding of the Event – “a break that cuts off the field of pre-existing knowledge and posits a new truth procedure” [10]. Miracles, then, are not something that violate our understanding of reality, but things that force us to rethink. When viewing *Lucy*, audiences can read her cognitive transcendence as an event – a sudden break that forces us to play the fidelity game and imagine a new horizon for human possibility. As Hallward (2003) notes, Badiou reads miracles ontologically as the starting point of fidelity – a commitment to a new truth that reorganizes one's positionality [11].

Combined, Latour and Badiou move us beyond the idea of miracles as “exceptions” to an understanding that they are processes of translation – networks and events that make the miraculous visible and intelligible. Media narratives stage these networks and events in order to maintain the visibility and narratability of the unknown. Academia cannot continue to dismiss miracles as false or rebrand them as science, but has to see them as invitations to reorganize our epistemological boundaries.

## **4 Suggestions**

### **4.1 Academia should treat media narratives as epistemological tools**

Myths should not be studied as cultural narratives, but as epistemological tools that mediated human contact with the unknown. Myths made the incomprehensible comprehensible through the lens of divine will. Techno-narratives reframe similar mysteries through the lens of science or higher-dimensions. Both are tools that serve the same basic function – to make invisible realities visible and mystery narratable. Only by acknowledging this continuity can academia bridge the divides between religious studies, media studies, and science fiction scholarship.

Myths cannot be treated as dead texts but that they are living stories that shape our modern worldview. Likewise, science fiction plays the role of a “mythology of modernity” and makes the miraculous visible in scientific terms. When we treat narratives in media as epistemological mediators, it allows academia to transcend its own boundaries and see how modern societies continue to make sense of the unknown. Only then can we recognize not only how we have remained culturally coherent but also how humanity has found new strategies to dialogue with mystery.

### **4.2 Audiences should remain humble and curious in the face of the unknown**

For the audience, the engagement with the unknown should be in a state of humility and wonder, not in a fixed mind of belief in, or rejection of, mystery. Myths and techno-discourse make people awestruck: People are awestruck when listening to Nezha’s rebirth or watching the miracles of the saint; They are awestruck in *The Three-Body Problem* and *Interstellar* because they have science to help them, but in this way, these films tell us that we humans have limits, and the glory of the holy is not the victory over reason, but the expansion of it.

Lövheim (2013) notes that repeated exposure to transcendence in digital media compels young people to reflect on their religious and existential identities, rather than passively accepting them [12]. Campbell (2020) further notes that digital creativity aids new forms of negotiating religious meaning, and that audiences can be taught to reinterpret mystery through participatory practices [13]. By remaining humble and curious in the face of the unknown, audiences maintain both reason and existential awe, and can see that the unknown is not something to be dismissed or worshipped without question; it is something to pursue continuously.

### **4.3 Media practice should unite science and cultural tradition**

For media practitioners, it is their responsibility to produce narratives that unite scientific reason with cultural traditions, in order to inspire rational awe, rather than superstition. As we have seen, myth and science fiction already show us that this is possible: the scientific ambition of Lucy’s cognitive leap is mirrored in Prometheus’s defiance of the gods; Nuwa’s act of creation is echoed in the astrophysical genesis depicted in *Interstellar*. These examples

show us that it is possible for media to simultaneously pay homage to our cultural traditions, and to nurture scientific imagination.

Hoover and Echchaibi (2014) contend that media function as ‘containers of religious and secular discourse’ through which societies manage transcendence. Campbell and Tsuria (2021) also underscore that digital media sanction religious imagination by situating it within everyday digital practices that blur the line between tradition and novelty [14]. The message for media creators is simple: do not commodify the unknown as a spectacle or pseudo-science, but depict it as a ‘cultural–scientific communication’ (this is) by presenting science in relation to tradition. In this way, media can offer audiences wonder and rational explanation, and maintain a productive engagement with the unknown.

#### **4.4 Future research: new media and emerging technologies**

Future research should attend to how new media and emerging technologies transform the framing and cultivation of the unknown. Short-video and streaming platforms already popularise miracle-like narratives by situating them within everyday digital practices. New technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and gaming allow users to experience transcendence as immersive practice by engaging with representations of the miraculous as if they were real. AI takes things one step further: what implications will AI-generated sermons, chatbots, and virtual deities, for example, pose for religious authority, authenticity, and human imagination?

Virtual religion produces hybrid space in which believers relate to the sacred presence through digital means. Digital creatives mobilise new technologies to negotiate religious meaning. Future research should attend to these emerging fields of study. By engaging with new technologies, digital media will not only expose new ways of narrating the unknown; it will also expose new ethical and cultural challenges.

## **5 Conclusion**

From gods to the unknown, we have seen that mystery did not disappear. It merely changed form. Ancient myth externalised incomprehensible phenomena as god(s) intervening in the world, while techno-narratives rearticulate these same mysteries through scientific logic. This continuity reveals that both traditions are epistemological means through which societies continue to make sense of the unknown by externalising it, making it visible, and narrating it.

The analysis has shown that denying the unknown makes atheism a form of idealism. True materialism is found in humbly accepting what we cannot explain. Media frames transform miracles from a matter of divine will to one of scientific possibility. Repeated exposure cultivates in audiences a habit of rational awe. Latour’s networks and Badiou’s events also show that miracles are not irrational, but they are processes of translation and transformation that broaden epistemological horizons.

For academia, this should mean treating myths and techno-narratives as epistemological mediators; for audiences, a humble and curious attitude; for media practice, a combination of scientific reasoning and cultural tradition. Future work on new media, immersive technologies and AI will need to consider how the miraculous will be redescribed in the digital era. In the end, miracles are a matter of relative perception and understanding – shaped by culture and media – and the unknown should remind us once again that we humans are fallible, that wonder remains an open possibility.

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