

**The Stargate Simulacrum:
Ancient Egypt, Ancient Aliens, and Postmodern Dynamics of Occulture**

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1. Introduction¹

The film *Stargate* (1994, directed by Roland Emmerich) forms the basis of a successful science-fiction franchise spanning four television series with 380 episodes and two direct-to-DVD films. Its premise is an incredible archaeological discovery in Egypt: In 1928, a mysterious artifact is unearthed near the pyramids of Giza - a giant ring, fifteen feet in diameter, inscribed with strange characters, and made of a metal which does not occur naturally on Earth - the eponymous 'Stargate,' so-called by accompanying hieroglyphic inscriptions. For more than sixty years, no one is able to decipher the unknown symbols that presumably hold the key to its function, until the arrival of *wunderkind* Egyptologist Dr. Daniel Jackson, recruited because the artifact's apparent non-terrestrial origin and immense age lend credence to his unorthodox theories. When we first encounter him, Jackson is giving a passionate lecture arguing for a much greater antiquity of the pyramids and the Sphinx than conventional Egyptology will allow. Stubborn, elitist professors in the audience pillory him without mercy, asking whether he thought men from Atlantis built the pyramids - "or Martians perhaps!" Not Martians, but close. Jackson divines the purpose of the giant ring by recognizing the strange symbols as stylized *star constellations*: as the name implies, the Stargate is a threshold to the universe. If one enters the correct 'address' of seven of the thirty-nine symbols engraved on its surface, the gate opens a conduit between itself and an identical counterpart on another planet, much as one telephone dials another. Once Jackson and a team of soldiers step through this artificial 'wormhole,'² they are hurled across the universe within seconds and, emerging from the Stargate on the other side, find

¹ I wish to thank Dylan M. Burns for helping this Egyptologist navigate the *religionswissenschaftliche* literature that has been essential for the story told on the following pages. I am furthermore very grateful to Ingbert Jüdt, Uwe Neuhold, and Jonas Richter for generously providing me with digital copies of some of their works cited here.

² The popular term for a so-called 'Einstein-Rosen Bridge,' a sort of shortcut through space-time that has been hypothesized by astrophysicists.

themselves on the desert planet Abydos, inside an Egyptian temple near a virtual duplicate of the Great Pyramid of Giza - total vindication of Jackson's theories. The American explorers soon discover that the planet Abydos is inhabited by the descendants of Ancient Egyptians who were enslaved millennia ago by an alien tyrant who, having chanced upon Earth and primitive humans, created Egyptian civilization, assumed the persona of the sun god Ra, and took thousands of slaves through the Stargate to Abydos to work in the planet's mines, harvesting the precious metal from which the Stargates are made and which serves as the foundation of Ra's technological might. With impeccable timing, Ra himself soon appears in his ominous pyramid-shaped spaceship and lands on the pyramid near the gate. The Americans take up the fight against the god-king and his legions of warriors, who wield high-tech laser weapons and conceal their faces behind frightful helmets resembling the head of a falcon - the 'Horus guards' - while their captain Anubis wears the likeness of a jackal's head. After the Americans are able to convince the Abydonians to rebel, Ra is eventually vanquished after a fierce battle at the pyramid, the symbol of his despotism. In the television series *Stargate SG-1*, the 'Stargate Command' battles many more (usually Egyptian or otherwise 'Oriental') false gods like Ra and liberates planet after planet from their despotic grasp.

From a critical standpoint, *Stargate* gives the initial impression of a very confused pop-cultural salad, randomly tossed together out of the vegetable bins of sci-fi, American military triumphalism, and a *lot* of Orientalizing Egyptomania. Yet the film was a lasting hit that developed into a franchise, complete with television spinoffs (four serials, from 1997 to 2011), merchandising, and even Stargate-inspired conspiracy-theories. Meanwhile, other films such as *Mission to Mars* (2000), *Alien vs. Predator* (2004), or *Prometheus* (2012) also proved commercially successful ventures in exploring the theme of extraterrestrial races interfering in Earth's past, as have 'non-fiction' series such as *Ancient Aliens* (eleven seasons and counting). What is the cultural resonance of a story like that of *Stargate*, and where does such a story come from?

The present contribution seeks to address these questions by way of a multi-faceted analysis addressing questions of reception of antiquity and Egypt, as well as sociology of religion. Following general methodological remarks about reception-theory which are indebted primarily to the literary theory of reception aesthetics as well as a mnemohistorical approach in the vein of Jan Assmann, I proceed to identify the traditional images of Egypt that the film harnesses, and how they are embedded in the appropriation of contemporary discourses. One of these is the focus of my essay - the so-called Ancient Astronaut discourse

(henceforth: AAD or just AA for other attributive instances of ‘Ancient Astronaut’), or Preastronautics, popularized above all by Erich von Däniken, who claimed that ancient mythologies commemorate extraterrestrial visits in Earth’s distant past. I proceed to examine the centrality of Ancient Egypt in the AAD, starting with narratives about ancient Oriental and Egyptian wisdom that have been contested since late antiquity until they were discredited around the eighteenth century and pushed to the cultural fringe, thus becoming open to appropriation by new religious currents. I illustrate how esoteric currents, particularly Theosophy, as well as popular culture and an increasing belief in extraterrestrials, all paved the way for the birth of today’s AAD.

I will then focus on the ‘Egyptian front’ of this discourse, showing that *Stargate* responds above all to the theories of Zecharia Sitchin and Robert Bauval. A close look at key works of the genre creates a strong impression that (the) *Stargate* was in a way ‘prepared’ by an increasingly technological language applied to the Great Pyramid as a literal ‘Stairway to Heaven.’ Post-1994, the AAD exhibits a stunning development as the fictional origins of the Stargate device are silently dropped or explained away by conspiracy theories. I try to account for this phenomenon by adapting, in the vein of recent studies of fiction-based religions, Jean Braudillard’s theory of postmodernity. I argue that we are dealing with a ‘simulacrum,’ something that has become ‘hyper-real,’ supporting Carole Cusack’s assertion that “it is necessary to posit a definition of ‘religion’ that can harmonize with fiction and invention.”³ The AAD, we will observe, resembles in several facets a religious discourse to be located within the fringe realm of ‘occulture’ as defined by Christopher Partridge, particularly in its deep entanglement with popular culture. It serves as a neo-mythology able to re-enchant the world, to present an attractive anti-authoritarian option for identity formation and yet functionally equivalent to religion (according to traditional modern definitions) in its creationist tenets. In summary, the aims of this contribution are essentially twofold: One, to showcase the emergence of the AAD out of religious discourse as well as its continued religious functions despite all differences and pretensions to the contrary, and second, to sketch a concise literary history of this emergence itself, as well as the continuous mutual influence between the AAD and popular culture, exemplified via the rather spectacular case of *Stargate*. Throughout these observations, we will encounter an imaginary Egypt as providing both the primary building blocks and the

³ Carole Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 20.

general backdrop of ancient mystery from and upon which the AAD's flying pyramids are built.

2. Reception Theory, Cultural Memory, and the Mnemohistorical Approach

In the late 1960s, German literary theorists, beginning with Hans-Robert Jauß, developed the reception theory of reader-response criticism, or *Rezeptionsästhetik*.⁴ Its defining characteristic is the focus on the reader not as a passive recipient of preexisting authorial meaning, but as the active producer of meaning that may or may not conform to the meaning originally intended by the author.⁵ When the Ancient Egyptians gave expression to their worldview through their art, literature, architecture, etc., they too were encoding 'authorial meaning' which Egyptologists attempt to recover through reconstruction of the original cultural context of Egyptian texts and artefacts. In Gunter Grimm's terms, these are "interpretations [...] assessed in terms of their adequacy (*Adäquanz*) in reflecting authorial intentions"⁶ - something that only became possible in 1822 with the decipherment of the hieroglyphic script and the birth of Egyptology. Preceding this paradigm shift, and since then accompanying and fighting it, lies a long history of *Ägyptenrezeption* - a web of passionate constructions of Egypt whose primary threads go back to ancient Greece, Rome, and Israel. These cultures incorporated ideas of Egypt into founding narratives that were of central importance for what I call, following Jan and Aleida Assmann, their respective 'cultural memory' - the *memory* (as opposed to Egyptology's domain: factual *knowledge*) of Egypt in the West.⁷ The basic theory, laid out extensively by J. Assmann in 1992's *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (published in English only in 2011), sets out to accomplish what Assmann's most important

⁴ See Martyn Thompson, "Reception Theory and the Interpretation of Historical Meaning", *History and Theory* 32.3 (1993): 248–72, for summary and further reading. Jane Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) collects some of the most significant English-language essays on the subject.

⁵ On Gunter Grimm's 'pragmatic text theory' - for which see Gunter Grimm, *Rezeptionsgeschichte: Grundlegung einer Theorie* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1977), 117 – 44 - as opposed to 'substantialist theory' (meaning a more traditional approach based on authorial meaning alone) see Thompson, "Reception Theory", 251–53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁷ For a more comprehensive discussion of Assmann's culture theory and its vital yet largely underutilized importance for the study of *Ägyptenrezeption*, see Frederic Krueger, *Pyramiden und Sternentore: Gedächtnisgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Ägyptenrezeption in Stargate und der Populärkultur* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), 7–21.

predecessor, Maurice Halbwachs, had not considered: “expanding his theory of memory into the realm of a theory of culture.”⁸ His most brilliant case studies (most notably 1997’s *Moses the Egyptian*) emerged where Assmann *qui* Egyptologist applied to his main area of expertise (i.e., pharaonic Egypt) the notion that culture is, for all intents and purposes, the sum of its ‘memories’ (i.e., cultural constructions imagined as such, be they true or not) of founding myths that are shared by and thus consolidate a community of people. Important groundwork for this endeavor was laid in the concluding chapter of 1996’s *Ägypten. Eine Sinngeschichte*, where Assmann turns from the ancient Egyptians’ conceptions of self and world to the outside perspective - the history of the *memory* of Egypt that survives to this day, “enshrined in the cultural memory of western civilization.”⁹ Assmann emphasizes that identity-forming discourses of both Greco-Roman culture as well as Judeo-Christian religiosity - the two main ‘pillars’ on which Western cultural identity rests - look back to Ancient Egypt as their mythical place of origin. With respect to the overarching theme of this volume, these are the two most basic ‘master narratives’ of Western conceptions of Egypt: For the Greeks, it served as the glorified vault of mysteries and arcane wisdom from which civilization and knowledge of the gods itself reached Hellas; for Judaism (and then Christianity), it served as the abhorred prototype of false religion and the house of slavery - something to be resisted and overcome, instead of admired.¹⁰ As we will see, both images inform the representation of Egypt in *Stargate*. In adopting the premises of reception aesthetics and mnemohistory, I will consequently focus not on the veracity, but on the *history and cultural relevance* of the ideas that we will encounter.

3. *Stargate* as an Ancient Astronaut narrative

Stargate feels a bit like two movies shoehorned into one. The approximate first third covers the mythical story of Daniel Jackson’s vindication: An orphan, outcast, and misunderstood genius finds new meaning in life as he cracks an

⁸ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 32. The book was first published as *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1992).

⁹ Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 425. The book was first published as *Ägypten: Eine Sinngeschichte* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1996).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 426f. See also Krueger, *Pyramiden und Sternentore*, 12–21. Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1–22 discusses the significance of the biblical image of Egypt.

ancient mystery and is finally led to a portal to another world, where he finds himself before a giant pyramid and says blissfully, “I knew it.” At this point, his journey of (self-)discovery is essentially over, and *Stargate* switches gears as the American soldiers take it upon themselves to liberate the helpless and clueless ‘orientals’ from their evil God-king - a demonizing, biblical vision of Egypt as a ‘house of slavery’ that fuels a neocolonialist narrative negotiating legitimizing strategies about American military intervention in the Middle East shortly after the First Gulf War.¹¹ Jackson’s solving of the Stargate mystery, however, is bound up with the so-called Ancient Astronaut theory (also called ‘Pre-astronautics,’ and, increasingly ‘Paleo-SETI’ [Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence]) which constitutes a popular discourse in Western industrialized societies and particularly the German-speaking countries.¹² Its (in)famous founding father is, of course, Erich von Däniken, whose 1968 bestseller *Chariots of the Gods?* is the prototypical incarnation of the entire genre, as both his specific points and rhetorical tactics are retreaded to this day. As the ‘Bible’ of this discourse was written in German, its organized adherents are found predominantly in the germanophone sphere, and most in-depth scholarship on the subject is written in German as well (a significant exception being the work of Jason Colavito).¹³

In *Chariots*, von Däniken famously professed the idea that the gods of ancient mythology were really extraterrestrial visitors who were mistaken for deities by primitive humans, and that ancient writings and various (alleged) anomalies in

¹¹ See Floyd Cheung, “Imagining Danger, Imagining Nation: Postcolonial Discourse in *Rising Sun* and *Stargate*”, *Jouvert* 2 (1998), § 28, available online under (<http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v2i2/CHEUNG.HTM>); Caroline T. Schroeder, “Ancient Egyptian Religion on the Silver Screen. Modern Anxieties about Race, Ethnicity, and Religion”, *Journal of Religion and Film* 7.2 (2003): § 11, available online under (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol7No2/ancienteqypt.htm>); Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon, *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (Lanham et al.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 35; a comprehensive analysis of *Stargate* as a neocolonialist narrative is given in Krueger, *Pyramiden und Stermentore*, 76–95.

¹² Andreas Grünschloß, “UFO Faith and Ufological Discourses in Germany”, in *UFO Religions*, ed. Ch. Partridge (London: Routledge, 2003), 179–93.

¹³ If English translations exist, especially of von Däniken, I have used those for the most part. Wherever I quote a work under its German title, it means that the translation is my own. Meanwhile, Jason Colavito’s book *The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2005) and above all his websites <http://jcolavito.tripod.com/lostcivilizations/index.html>; www.jasoncolavito.com (accessed 11/30/2015) are highly valuable in their encyclopedic scope.

the archaeological record attest to the visits and the technology of these visitors. Von Däniken's theory has been described by Andreas Grünschloß as a 'ufological' or 'pre-astronautic Euhemerism,' as it resembles a belief held by the philosopher Euhemerus (fl. 300 CE) that the gods were really great kings of yore who had over time been deified due to their remarkable innovations and achievements.¹⁴ As will be shown, the AAD was at the peak of its popularity in the mid-1990s when it was used as the premise for *Stargate*. Although it may seem that its popularity has diminished somewhat since then, the AAD is still very much alive and influential - in fact, I suspect that it is less conspicuous today because it has become normalized as an element of popular culture and lost some of its original shock value. The 'gods' are here to stay, and they continue to inspire 'worship'.

4. The Road to von Däniken: Ancient Wisdom through the Ages

We have seen above that the mystification of Egypt originates with the ancient Greeks. One may specifically point to the transformation of Middle- and Neoplatonic philosophical speculation into religious narratives (such as the various incarnations of Gnosticism, Hermeticism, etc.) in late antiquity, sharing as a common legitimizing strategy the reference to a primordial wisdom possessed by the 'barbarians' of the Orient, including the Jews, Brahmins, Magi, and, of course, the Egyptians, usually represented by the god of wisdom Thoth, known to the Hellenistic world as Hermes Trismegistus. It was debated whether Platonic wisdom was really wisdom derived from the ancient Orient, hence the moniker 'Platonic Orientalism.'¹⁵ In these narratives, Egypt was one of the key players: "(N)ot only was Greek philosophy seen as derived from oriental sources, but the Egyptians in particular could even claim to be the true founders of philosophy as such."¹⁶ This controversy of how Greeks (and later, Christians)

¹⁴ Grünschloß, "UFO Faith", 9. For a recent discussion of Euhemerus, see Franco de Angelis and Benjamin Garstad, "Euhemerus in Context", *Classical Antiquity* 25.2 (2006): 211–42; for discussion of the classical sources about him, see Felix Jacoby, "Euhemerus von Messene", in *Pauly-Wissowa. Realencyklopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. XI (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1907), col. 952–72.

¹⁵ This brief sketch of the "ancient wisdom narrative" throughout the centuries is chiefly indebted to Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). He discusses the ancient sources on pp. 12–28; they are studied most thoroughly by Dylan M. Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 20–28.

¹⁶ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 14f.

should evaluate the ‘wisdom of the pagans’ was picked up again when the sources became known in Europe during the Renaissance. While the verdict of the church fathers was overwhelmingly negative,¹⁷ the Renaissance witnessed a new apologetics for ‘Oriental pagan wisdom,’ whose Egyptian chapter was largely defined by a platonizing misunderstanding of the hieroglyphic script that long obstructed its actual decipherment and that remains influential to this day.¹⁸ A crucial early figure in this resurgence of Platonic Orientalism is Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), who “stands at the origin of a non-institutional current of *religious* speculation, the development of which can be traced in European culture through the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century, and where ‘Plato’ stands as a generic label for a much wider complex of practices and speculations largely inherited, as we know today, from the Hellenistic culture of late antiquity.”¹⁹ This label went on to assimilate over time all those “traditional bodies of spiritual, theurgical, magical, arithmological, astrological, and alchemical lore” attributed to ancient sages such as Hermes Trismegistus, thus accumulating the collective ‘referential corpus’ sometimes referred to today as ‘Western esotericism,’ which in this essay is to be understood as a typological umbrella term for such currents.²⁰ This spectrum was eventually exiled into the ‘occultural’ fringe where we find it today, in large part due to new methods of philological criticism that began to view the narrative of ancient wisdom “as an inherently a-historical approach to historical questions.”²¹ The emerging historiographical disciplines - such as Egyptology - distanced themselves sharply from what was perceived as embarrassing and unscientific fantasy. This ‘other’ history was appropriated by new religious movements like Theosophy, founded by Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891). She and other influential esotericists “absorbed diverse culturally available elements, interpreted this material through a hermeneutic framework of their

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸ Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and Its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1961).

¹⁹ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 53.

²⁰ Ibid. The terminology of ‘esotericism’ is, of course, much debated in recent scholarship, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*; Hanegraaff, “Esotericism”, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 336–40; Kocku von Stuckrad, “Esoteric/Esotericism”, in *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion, Volume 1: A–E*, ed. von Stuckrad and Robert Segal (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 526–29; Michael Bergunder, “Was ist Esoterik?”, in *Aufklärung und Esoterik. Rezeption – Integration – Konfrontation*, ed. Monika Neugebauer-Wölk (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2008), 477–507.

²¹ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 74.

own and presented the result as a coherent doctrine.”²² For our purposes, this means that conceptions of Egypt were embedded in a larger narrative that strings together various ‘wisdom-bearing’ cultures.²³

Another important feature of many esoteric traditions that survives into the AAD is the minor significance or absence of a supreme deity.²⁴ Instead, the focus is on contact with intermediary beings such as angels that populate the heavens, sometimes understood to be extraterrestrials.²⁵ Blavatsky focuses on intermediary figures in a particular, salvific-historical framework crucial to the development of AAD.²⁶ According to Blavatsky, human development had arrived at a crucial turning point: she and other theosophical leaders were in spiritual contact (via ‘channeling’) with benevolent ascended masters, “living persons who had fully evolved through many reincarnations, had acquired and become the custodians of ‘ancient wisdom,’ and now sought to impart that wisdom to humanity in order to lead it into a new age of peace, spirituality, and global community.”²⁷

While Blavatsky’s first major work *Isis Unveiled* (1877) - with its “plea for the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom-

²² Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 53. The following depends largely on his account from here on. See also *ibid.*, 123 for examples of Blavatsky forging connections between different cultures “without any sense of the anachronism involved.” For further reading on Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society see Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Godwin, “Blavatsky”, in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, 15–31, and many of the contributions in the same volume as well as in Andreas Kilcher, ed., *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010); see also Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 309–17, 448–54.

²³ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 62 and especially 89–141, where Hammer lays down an extensive account of esoteric “imaginative history and sacred geography”, including the reception of Egypt from 109–19 onward.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.* On intermediaries in ‘esoteric’ discourse see Wouter Hanegraaff, “Intermediary Beings IV: 18th Century – Present”, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Hanegraaff (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 628–31; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, “The Coming of the Masters: The Evolutionary Reformulation of Spiritual Intermediaries in Modern Theosophy”, in Kilcher, *Constructing Tradition*, 113–60.

²⁶ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 54, 59–62.

²⁷ Christopher Partridge, “Understanding UFO Religions”, in *UFO Religions*, ed. Partridge (London: Routledge, 2003), 3–42, 11. See also Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 54. On channeling in general see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 23–41.

Religion”²⁸ - carried strong Egyptian connotations, her Theosophical Society soon shifted its focus permanently towards India, where Blavatsky claimed to have been initiated.²⁹ Among the second generation of Theosophists, Edgar Cayce (1877–1945) can be said in many ways to bridge the gap between the tradition of Theosophy and the beginning of the New Age movement of the 60s and 70s;³⁰ furthermore, the messages he claimed to receive have had a lasting impact on ‘alternative Egypts.’³¹ Cayce believed, as did many Theosophists, that ancient Egypt had preserved the primordial wisdom of the lost civilizations of Lemuria and Atlantis. He claimed to have experienced past lives in Ancient Egypt, around 10,500 BCE - long before Egyptian civilization even existed, according to orthodox Egyptology - and he prophesized that, beneath the Sphinx, the fabled ‘Hall of Thoth’ would be discovered. We will reencounter this dating and this prophecy as cornerstones of ‘alternative Egyptology’ and the AAD.³² While Cayce (who identified firmly as Christian) was very influential in the United States, Alice Bailey (1880–1949), who channeled messages from extraterrestrials, was the more prominent figurehead of second generation Theosophy and the ‘New Age’ in the United Kingdom and Europe.³³ Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), the father of Anthroposophy, also integrated Egypt into a diffusionist sequence of civilizations, beginning with Atlantis. Steiner approached the ancient texts with a strong literalist tendency, interpreting, e.g., the god Osiris as an extraterrestrial visitor, and his headdress as a spiritual sense organ.³⁴ This way of reading the ancient sources as literally true and declaring the

²⁸ Helena Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1950 = 1877), vii.

²⁹ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 61 and especially 111–13. On the shift away from the early Egyptian focus towards the “emergent Hindu coloration” see also Goodrick-Clarke, “The Coming of the Masters”, 122–32.

³⁰ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 66.

³¹ On whose history see further Picknett and Prince, “Alternative Egypts”, in *Consuming Ancient Egypt*, ed. Sally MacDonald and Michael Rice (London: UCL Press, 2003), 175–93; generally, Assmann, “Ägypten und der Ursprung der Esoterik”, in Kilcher, *Constructing Tradition*, 373–93; Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

³² For these Egyptian elements of Cayce’s beliefs, see Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 113f.; Picknett and Prince, “Alternative Egypts”, 180f. On Cayce’s significance in general see Trooper Schorey, “Sleeping Prophet: The Life and Legacy of Edgar Cayce”, in Hammer and Rothstein, *Handbook*, 135–49.

³³ Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age*, 31–54.

³⁴ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 115, n. 73. On Steiner and Theosophy in general see Katharina Brandt and Olav Hammer, “Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy”, in Hammer and Rothstein, *Handbook*, 113–33.

gods extraterrestrials marks an important step towards AA rhetoric. Literalist readings became more widespread in the New Age movement,³⁵ and messages received through channeling increasingly stem from extraterrestrials. Already in Neo-Theosophy, represented among others by Charles Webster Leadbeater (1847–1934), extraterrestrial explanations had begun to displace spiritual ones - Sanskrit, for Blavatsky the language of the gods, was declared by Leadbeater to be an extraterrestrial language, and Nirvana a sort of space station.³⁶ While Blavatsky and other early Theosophists still considered the intermediaries angelic beings who lived on an ‘etheric plane,’ later authors like A. E. Powell already show them steering physical spaceships toward Earth.³⁷

The ‘60s and ‘70s saw a veritable explosion of counter-culture,³⁸ leading to the pop-cultural entanglement of the AAD, analogous to the interdependency that informs the development of UFO religions.³⁹ Since 1947, when an alien spacecraft is alleged to have crash landed in Roswell, New Mexico, UFOs have remained something of a national obsession in the United States. This phenomenon lent further immediacy to the increased Theosophical emphasis on extraterrestrials outlined above, rooted it deeply in popular culture, and it did much to further what Christopher Partridge has called “the sacralization of the extraterrestrial.”⁴⁰ Following in the tradition of the Theosophists’ ‘channeling’ of messages from ascended masters, the teachers were now extraterrestrial beings - Theosophical mythology thus began to merge with the UFO phenomenon, a synthesis that Mikael Rothstein dubs “a case of mythological modernization or

³⁵ The definitive studies are Steven Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*; see also Daren Kemp and James Lewis, eds., *Handbook of New Age* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007).

³⁶ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 124.

³⁷ Jason Colavito, ed., *Theosophy on Ancient Astronauts: Helena Blavatsky, W. Scott-Elliott, Annie Besant, and Others* (Albany: Jason Colavito, 2012), xi–xii.

³⁸ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 73.

³⁹ For introductions and further reading on UFO religions and their dependency on the Theosophical tradition, see John Saliba, “Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena”, in *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 15–64; Andreas Grünschloß, *Wenn die Götter landen ... Religiöse Dimensionen des UFO-Glaubens* (Berlin: Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, 2000); Partridge, “Understanding UFO Religions”; Jean-François Mayer, “UFO Traditions”, in Hanegraaf et al., *Dictionary*, 1139–44; Michael Blume, “UFO-Glauben als neureligiöses Phänomen”, *Journal für UFO-Forschung* 175 (1.2008): 6–17. Colavito, *Theosophy on Ancient Astronauts* collects key texts from Theosophical authors which contain early forms of Preastronautic notions.

⁴⁰ Partridge, “Understanding UFO Religions”, 5.

updating, and...an example of Theosophical adaptability.”⁴¹ Already in 1934, Guy Ballard, who founded the I AM Activity, had claimed to be in contact with Venusian masters.⁴² Like in the New Age movement, UFO religions feature prominently a millennialist expectation that a new age and a transformation of humanity are upon us.⁴³ The extraterrestrials wish to help us through this crisis, often specifically connected to the threat posed by the atomic bomb.⁴⁴ Indeed, UFO religions and the AAD alike share a desire to establish a unified worldview where science and religion are no longer separate - a ‘re-enchanted’ world.⁴⁵ Important early UFO contactees such as George Adamski (1891–1965) described the Venusian masters of Blavatskian myth as extraterrestrial visitors who brought civilization to earth and were remembered as gods - preparing the central belief of the later AAD.⁴⁶ Recalling the extreme literalism brought to Ancient Egyptian texts by Rudolf Steiner, we encounter across the spectrum of UFO religions “the physical interpretation of scriptures and ancient mythologies” that is the basis of AA theorists’ interpretations. Those, notes Partridge, are in turn “sacralised and replicated” in religious movements: “this physicalism is explicit in the writings of all the principle [sic] individuals and groups, from Adamski to von Däniken and from the Raëlian Church to Heaven’s Gate.”⁴⁷ The AAD therefore serves as an integral origin myth in various religious movements.

A crucial transformation was achieved by the veritable ‘godfather’ of AA theories, Charles Fort (1874–1932), who, with a righteous gesture of unveiling uncomfortable secrets that had been guarded jealously by conspirational orthodox historians, offered as the answer to all kinds of perceived ancient anomalies the intervention of extraterrestrial visitors in Earth’s distant past.⁴⁸ Instead of spiritual enlightenment, Fort’s project was that of an alternative

⁴¹ Mikael Rothstein, “Mahatmas in Space: The Ufological Turn and Mythological Materiality of Post-World War II Theosophy”, in Hammer and Rothstein, *Handbook*, 217–36, 218.

⁴² Partridge, “Understanding UFO Religions”, 8. See also Tim Rudbøg, “The I AM Activity”, in Hammer and Rothstein, *Handbook*, 151–72.

⁴³ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 75 for its place in the New Age movement.

⁴⁴ Partridge, “Understanding UFO Religions”, 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid.; see also Grünschloß, *Wenn die Götter landen*, 53f.

⁴⁶ Partridge, “Understanding UFO Religions”, 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 25, 23.

⁴⁸ Grünschloß, “‘Ancient Astronaut’ Narrations”, 5–8; Richter, “Paläo-SETI”, in *An den Grenzen der Erkenntnis: Handbuch der wissenschaftlichen Anomalistik*, ed. Gergard Mayer (Stuttgart: Schattauer, 2015), 346–58, 347. See also Kripal, “Charles Fort”, in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London and New York: Routledge 2015), 288–92.

historiography, an agenda that was popularized in France by Louis Pauwles and Jaques Bergier, whose major work, *Le matin des magiciens* (1960), “is little remembered now, but it has the distinction of launching a revival of interest in the occult in the 1960s and 1970s that would culminate in the ancient-astronaut craze of the 1970s.”⁴⁹ Pauwles and Bergier were both influenced by H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937),⁵⁰ whose most famous cosmic horror stories comprising the ‘Cthulhu Mythos’ are based around monstrous extraterrestrial beings that were worshiped by primitive humans. While Colavito’s *The Cult of Alien Gods* certainly overstates Lovecraft’s influence on the AAD as a whole, it is nevertheless significant to note that these stories impacted the authors of *Le matin des magiciens*. Much of its content, as well as the works of another representative of this largely forgotten French chapter of the history of Preastronautics, Robert Charroux, were later borrowed - mostly without credit⁵¹ - by Erich von Däniken when he wrote the ‘Bible’ of the AAD, *Chariots of the Gods?*

5. The Egyptian Front: From Chariots to Stargates

While sidelined in the Theosophical ancient wisdom narrative, Egypt rules supreme in the AAD. Chapter seven of *Chariots* deals with the pyramids of Giza as “Space Travel Centers,” and several of von Däniken’s claims here would become ever-repeated tropes: First, he asserts that “ancient Egypt appears suddenly and without transition with a fantastic ready-made civilization. Great cities and enormous temples, colossal statues...splendid streets...perfect drainage systems, luxurious tombs...pyramids of overwhelming size - these and many other wonderful things shot out of the ground, so to speak. Genuine miracles in a country that is suddenly capable of such achievements without recognizable prehistory!”⁵² As the prehistorian Herbert Kühn noted, “nothing is more false than this. The prehistory of Egypt is known particularly well, and a great number of books documents it. Däniken knows nothing of them.”⁵³ The

⁴⁹ Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 133.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 141. This tendency to reassemble arguments and claims already made by someone else and packaging them as a new, unheard-of revelation is a recurring phenomenon in AA literature.

⁵² Erich von Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (New York: Berkley Books 1999 = 1969), 74.

⁵³ Herbert Kühn, “Däniken und die Vorgeschichte”, in *Waren die Götter Astronauten? Wissenschaftler diskutieren die Thesen Erich von Dänikens*, ed. Ernst von Khuon (Düsseldorf: Knauer, 1970), 190–98, 197.

notion that Egyptian civilization simply “shot out of the ground” as von Däniken puts it, or rather, “fell from the sky,” is repeated to this day, and it is representative of the anti-evolutionist overtones of AA narratives. Further important claims are the implication that the barque of the sun god Ra is actually a spaceship,⁵⁴ as well as the notion that the extraterrestrials had some part in the building of the pyramids⁵⁵ - both points are of course present in *Stargate*.

Two further aspects are particularly significant for the AAD’s quasi-religious properties. First, von Däniken suggests that it may be humanity’s destiny to follow in the footsteps of the ‘gods,’ and that we too may one day be greeted as gods by the primitive inhabitants of other worlds (which happens repeatedly in *Stargate* and the television series *Stargate SG-1*).⁵⁶ Second, von Däniken assures the reader that “(d)rawings and sagas actually indicated that the ‘gods’ promised to return from the stars.”⁵⁷ This vague reference to “certain legends” that allegedly tell of the gods coming from the stars to earth and leaving again with a promise to return, is one of the most typical clichés of AA narratives. Which specific legend that is, and on which temple wall or papyrus one may read it, is never stated - which in the case of Egypt may be explained by the fact that no such myth exists.

Von Däniken’s influence hit America in the early 1970s, mainly to the credit of Rod Serling and Alan Landsburg, respectively the host and producer of the popular science-fiction series *The Twilight Zone* (who, like von Däniken’s forgotten French precursors, were also fans of H. P. Lovecraft whose stories influenced several episodes of their show). Inspired by *Chariots*, they cooperated on a television documentary titled *In Search of Ancient Astronauts* that aired on NBC in 1973, presenting von Däniken’s main claims with impressive images. The program was a huge hit, and in its wake, *Chariots* became a massive success in the US as well, spawning many sequels, imitators, and further television events.⁵⁸

The second most influential figure in the AAD after von Däniken is Zecharia Sitchin (1920–2010). Between 1976 and 2007, Sitchin published the seven books comprising *The Earth Chronicles*, beginning with *The Twelfth Planet* (1976), where he explains that Sumerian culture, like von Däniken’s Egypt, mysteriously appeared out of nowhere. “A mysterious hand once more picked Man out of his

⁵⁴ Von Däniken, *Chariots*, 76.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 30f.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁸ Summarized in Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 11–15.

decline and raised him to an even higher level of culture, knowledge, and civilization.”⁵⁹ We learn that Sumerian civilization and the human race itself were created by extraterrestrials from Nibiru, another planet in our solar system. Those aliens, the Annunaki, were considered gods by the Sumerians, and Sitchin insists that the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia (of which all others are deemed derivative) preserves actual historical records of their activities. Sitchin’s most significant contribution to the Egyptian ‘front’ of the AAD is the second volume, *The Stairway to Heaven* (1980). Here we are told that, according to the usual unspecified “Egyptian traditions,” “in times immemorial ‘Gods of Heaven’ came to Earth from the Celestial Disk”⁶⁰ - the latter is illustrated by the symbol of the winged sun disk (which is actually a form of the god Horus, not a dwelling-place for the gods). This misinterpretation of the ‘winged disk’ as either the planet or the spaceship of the aliens is repeated in Preastronautic literature to this day.⁶¹

Furthermore, Sitchin’s entire book is framed by a narrative concerning humanity’s eternal quest for immortality, a prevalent theme in *Stargate* as well: Ra takes a human body as a host “to cheat death,” and he possesses a machine in the shape of a sarcophagus in which he perpetually recharges his life forces and is potentially immortal - reminiscent of Sitchin’s assertion that “Ra...managed to live forever because he kept rejuvenating himself.”⁶² While *Stargate*’s Ra found and enslaved humanity and Sitchin’s aliens genetically engineered humans, both do so for the specific purpose of mining a precious metal: The Annunaki made *Homo Sapiens* as a slave race that could mine the Earth’s gold resources.⁶³ In *Stargate*, Ra takes thousands of slaves through the Stargate to Abydos in order to mine the alien metal that is the basis of his technology. The entire part, the aliens as oppressors who enslave humans and abuse their status as ‘gods’ for evil, is rather atypical of the AAD, making it all the more likely that Emmerich was inspired by Sitchin.

Meanwhile, *Stargate*’s Daniel Jackson argues in his lecture at the beginning of the film that the only inscription inside the pyramid that gives the name of king Khufu - the main basis for Egyptologists’ ascribing the pyramid to this Pharaoh - is a forgery, at which point the room begins to empty, accompanied by laughter

⁵⁹ Zecharia Sitchin, *The Twelfth Planet: Book I of the Earth Chronicles* (New York: Harper, 2007 = 1976), 11.

⁶⁰ Sitchin, *The Stairway to Heaven: Book II of the Earth Chronicles* (New York: Harper, 2007 = 1980), 49.

⁶¹ According to Sitchin, *ibid.*, 124, it represents the planet Nibiru itself.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 133–36.

and jokes about Martians and Atlantis. Jackson's argument here is that the discovery of the hieroglyphs made by Col. Richard Vyse, "was a fraud." Sitchin was the first to make this accusation,⁶⁴ and argued that, as Jackson concludes, "the Pharaohs of the Fourth Dynasty did not build the great pyramids." For Sitchin, the pyramids of Giza were built by the Annunaki as guiding beacons for their starships during landing on Earth, and all other Egyptian pyramids are just inferior imitations.⁶⁵ In *Stargate*, Ra's starship is seen landing on top of a pyramid as a kind of alien airport (cf. Sitchin: "the Celestial Boat of Ra was depicted as sitting atop a mountain"),⁶⁶ and even the fact that Ra's ship is *itself* pyramid-shaped seems lifted from *Stairway*, for Sitchin explains that an Egyptian funerary pyramidion, showing the deceased in adoration of the sun god (this is literally what the accompanying hieroglyphs say), actually represents the sun god who "landed on Earth" in his "Celestial Chamber."⁶⁷ According to Sitchin, just as the Pharaohs could only build inferior imitations of the great "mountains" built by the "gods," so the journey of the deceased described in Egyptian funerary literature constitutes an emulation of *actual* journeys to the stars *actually* undertaken by the "gods" long ago. This section of his book is dominated by imagery of "doors," "portals," and "gates" - due to the fact that, for instance, the *Book of the Dead* is full of portals that the deceased needs to pass through.⁶⁸ The Egyptian gods "open for the king a path and a gateway,"⁶⁹ and Sitchin states that "the gods assume more technical aspects."⁷⁰ In light of all the other close correspondences, it seems very likely that this technologized 'gate'-language inspired Emmerich to give a concrete form to one such "gate of the star gods." Another of Emmerich's inspirations may have been the work of Peter Krassa and Reinhard Habeck who popularized certain depictions in the temple of Dendera which supposedly (not really)⁷¹ show lightbulbs. After earlier treatments, it was in their *Das Licht der Pharaonen* (1992) where the "Dendera

⁶⁴ Ibid., 337–76. This has been repeated, e.g., by Erich von Däniken, *The Eyes of the Sphinx: The Newest Evidence of Extraterrestrial Contact in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Berkley Books, 1996), 263f. and Robert Bauval and Graham Hancock, *Keeper of Genesis: A Quest for the Hidden Legacy of Mankind* (London: Heinemann, 1996), 100–4.

⁶⁵ Sitchin, *Stairway*, 305–35.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 69.

⁶⁷ This is discussed by Sitchin, *Stairway*, 98; the pyramid "starship" is seen compared to a NASA command module on the following page.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 88–91.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁷¹ Markus Pössel, *Phantastische Wissenschaft: Über Erich von Däniken und Johannes von Buttlar* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2000), 17–62.

lightbulbs” are embedded in a larger Preastronautic narrative. Krassa and Habeck were in turn von Däniken’s source when he presented the same case.⁷² Since then, the Dendera lightbulbs have become recurring stars.⁷³ Much emphasis is furthermore put in *Das Licht der Pharaonen* on the wars, weaponry, and starships used by the Egyptian “gods” - obviously inspired by Sitchin’s Mesopotamian scenarios - Krassa and Habeck even reprint (their fig. 17), and they are not the last to do so,⁷⁴ Sitchin’s absurd illustration implying that Egyptian funerary pyramids represent starships. So here we have pyramid-shaped starships, Egyptian gods as aliens with horrifying weapons, and as the formidable pilot of the “winged sun-disk” spaceship we meet the falcon-headed god Horus.⁷⁵ And just two years later, Ra’s soldiers in *Stargate* wear falcon helmets and fly fighter jets with stylized wings. The name of Emmerich’s Egyptian planet, Abydos, may be derived from early 90s AA literature as well. In 1990, a group from the AA Society took pictures of some hieroglyphs in the funerary temple of Seti I. in *Abydos* that appear to depict technological contraptions, including what looks deceptively like a helicopter. First published in 1991, the (long debunked) Abydos “technoglyphs” have joined the ranks of *Aegyptiaca technologica* in the ever-repeated canon of Preastronautic literature.⁷⁶

⁷²E. g., Erich von Däniken, *The Eyes of the Sphinx*, 170–73.

⁷³ Erdogan Ercivan, *Das Sternentor der Pyramiden: Geheime Wege in den Kosmos* (Munich: Bettendorf, 2001 = 1997), 88–90; Ercivan, *Verbotene Ägyptologie: Rätselhafte Wissenschaft und Hochtechnologie der Pharaonen* (Rottenburg: Kopp Verlag, 2003 = 2001), 104f. On Childress see Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 285–91. The Dendera lightbulbs are discussed by David Childress, *Technology of the Gods: The Incredible Sciences of the Ancients* (Kempton: Adventures Unlimited Press, 2013 = 2000), 125.

⁷⁴ It reappears in Ulrich Schaper, “Ezechiel-Raumschiff bei den Dogon”, in *Fremde aus dem All. Kosmische Spuren: Neue Funde, Entdeckungen und Phänomene*, ed. Erich von Däniken (Munich: Goldmann Verlag, 1995), 83; Ercivan, *Das Sternentor der Pyramiden*, 105–8, and probably elsewhere.

⁷⁵ Krassa and Habeck, *Das Licht der Pharaonen*, 126–46.

⁷⁶ First mentioned by Gernot Geise, “Der ‘Hubschrauber’ von Abydos: Altägyptische Darstellung zwischen Hieroglyphen”, *Efodon-News* (1.1991); one year later supported by Peter Krassa and Reinhard Habeck, *Das Licht der Pharaonen: Hochtechnologie und elektrischer Strom im alten Ägypten* (Munich: Herbig, 2000 = 1992), 245; still perpetuated in 1997 and 2001 by Ercivan, *Das Sternentor der Pyramiden*, 96–101, and Ercivan, *Verbotene Ägyptologie*, 212; also in 2000 by Andreas von Rényi, *Die Stargate-Verschörung: Geheime Spurensuche in Ägypten* (Rottenburg: Kopp Verlag, 2000), 49–61, and Childress, *Technology of the Gods*, 192; debunked by Uwe Neuhold, “Die Bagdad-Batterie und Hesekiels Raumschiff: Kunst, Wissenschaft, Esoterik – Wie aus Archäologie Science Fiction wird”, in *Das Science Fiction Jahr 2010*, ed. Sascha Manczak and Wolfgang Jeschke (Munich: Heyne, 2010), 545–602, 549–52, and on numerous websites.

In 1976, the same year that saw Sitchin's *Twelfth Planet*, Robert Temple claimed in *The Sirius Mystery* that the tribe of the Dogon in Mali possessed astronomical knowledge that they could only have inherited from the ancient Egyptians, who had it from extraterrestrials.⁷⁷ This book in turn inspired Robert Bauval to construct a complex archaeoastronomical theory, published first in two articles in *Discussions in Egyptology* in 1989 and 1990, and most famously and comprehensively together with Adrian Gilbert in *The Orion Mystery* (1994), holding that the three great pyramids of Giza were all planned in advance and aligned with the three stars of the 'belt' of Orion, representing the god of the dead Osiris. While this alone was not outside the realm of what most Egyptologists would consider possible, the notion that the foundations for this entire monumental landscape were laid around 10,500 BCE certainly was (Cayce's year again). The so-called 'Orion Correlation Theory' was popular in the 1990s, coinciding with exciting new explorations of the great pyramid of Khufu in 1993, as the UPUAUT 2 robot crawled along narrow shafts and ran into a sealed door, quickly prompting wild speculations and conspiracy theories about hidden chambers. It is this media hype around the pyramids of Giza - supposedly linked to the stars and thousands of years older than orthodox Egyptology would allow - which clearly forms the most immediate 'occultural' context for *Stargate*, released in the same year as Bauval's and Gilbert's *Orion Mystery*,⁷⁸ although the simultaneous release means that *Stargate* could hardly have been inspired by the book, but rather by the previous popularization of its main theory. At any rate, it is surely no coincidence that it is specifically the constellation of Orion that leads Daniel Jackson to realize what the Stargate really is. Remembering Sitchin's very technical 'gate' terminology that seems to have inspired (the) *Stargate*, it is noteworthy how Bauval and Gilbert opine with a similar tone "that the Grand Gallery looks like part of a machine, whose function is beyond us."⁷⁹ They refer to shafts in the King's Chamber as "channels to the stars"⁸⁰ and to the whole Giza complex as "the great star-clock of the epochs."⁸¹

⁷⁷ Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 185–203; see also Pössel, *Phantastische Wissenschaft*, 63–101, and Neuhold, "Bagdad-Batterie", 566f.

⁷⁸ For a comprehensive account of the contents of the book and its embeddedness in the history of the discourse, see Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 205–22, and Picknett and Prince, "Alternative Egypt", 183f.

⁷⁹ Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert, *The Orion Mystery: Unlocking the Secrets of the Pyramids* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1994), 43.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

In 1995, one year after *Stargate* and *The Orion Mystery*, Graham Hancock made the case for a forgotten civilization that was the real originator of the pyramids and the Sphinx (*Fingerprints of the Gods*).⁸² Then, with Robert Bauval, he fused this lost civilization theory with the ‘Orion Correlation Theory’ in 1996’s *Keeper of Genesis* (in the US: *Message of the Sphinx*). Together, they aimed “to align the pyramids with Orion circa 10,500 BCE, which they claim was the date of the lost civilization’s entry into Egypt,” during the astrological Age of Leo, represented by the Sphinx. Their calculations were also meant to demonstrate the existence of a secret chamber beneath the Sphinx - thus proving Cayce’s prophecy.⁸³ Bauval and Hancock adopt Sitchin’s conspiracy theory discrediting the inscriptions with Khufu’s name,⁸⁴ and their terminology is once more striking: The shaft containing the newly discovered door is literally called a “Stargate,”⁸⁵ and the pyramid is interpreted as a kind of salvific machine to which New Age millenarian hopes are attached “that the sages of Heliopolis, working at the dawn of history, could somehow have created an archetypal ‘device’, a device designed to trigger off messianic events across the ‘Ages’ – the Pyramid Age...and perhaps even a ‘New Age’ in Aquarius?”⁸⁶ While these theories did not involve extraterrestrials explicitly, their 1996 articles in the London *Daily Mail* postulated that the ancient cultures of Earth were actually influenced by an advanced civilization from Mars, due to a renewed interest in NASA images of the red planet, where believers wanted to see the infamous ‘Mars face’ as well as various pyramids. Bauval and Hancock teamed up again, assisted by John Grigsby, to write *The Mars Mystery* in 1998, where they announced more carefully that aliens may or may not be the originators of the “Martian monuments.”⁸⁷ A particularly interesting entry is Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince’s *The Stargate Conspiracy* (1999), because it is unusually critical and self-aware. The authors take several ‘celebrities,’ such as Temple, Bauval, and Hancock to court, expose flaws in their theories and conclude that there is an agenda to construct a new alternative orthodoxy about the pyramids, the Sphinx, the Mars face, and to arrive at all costs at the year 10,500 BCE, prophesized by Cayce. As far as this goes, most orthodox historians and Egyptologists would probably applaud the authors for having seen the light. However, this project of debunking is only the

⁸² Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 223–40.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁸⁴ Bauval and Hancock, *Keeper of Genesis*, 100–4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁸⁷ On this Martian chapter of our story, see Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 250f.

beginning. Picknett and Prince identify as the source of this artificial mythology a shadowy group preparing for a sinister new world order ushered in by the return of the Egyptian gods (or possibly, in the vein of *Stargate*, evil imposters). These gods are specifically “the Nine,” i.e., the Great Ennead of Heliopolis, the most significant genealogy in the Egyptian pantheon who have been the alleged source of messages received through ‘channeling’ since 1952.⁸⁸ Picknett and Prince chronicle the activities of various organizations at Giza and relate rumors “that the US government is searching for a physical artefact or ancient device, perhaps even of extraterrestrial origin,” prompting the authors to speculate that “(i)f the Americans are involved with ancient stargate technology, then it would be the most top secret project in history, and the number of people ‘needing to know’ about it would be minimal.”⁸⁹

This trend of seriously considering the Stargate’s existence is picked up by Andreas von Rétyi’s *Die Stargate-Verschwörung* (2000). Much of it (starting with the title) is paraphrased, if not plagiarized from Picknett and Prince, and the cover art even features the Stargate in front of a field of stars framing the famous golden mask of Tutankhamun, whose eyes are glowing bright - just like the alien ‘gods’ in *Stargate SG-1*. Perhaps the best example is Thomas Horn’s *Nephilim Stargates. The Year 2012 and the Return of the Watchers* (2007). Again we see the cover art dominated by the Stargate, this time glowing ominously behind a Mayan pyramid. While von Däniken was looking for astronauts and their rocketships, in the spirit of the space race of the 1960s, Horn is now looking for Stargates, and since there were as many doors, gates, portals, and openings of all kinds in antiquity as there were ships and chariots, he does not have to look very far: “Egyptians, Greeks, the Hindus, the American Indians, and virtually all other civilizations believed it. Beings of super intelligence sometimes referred to as ‘gods’ have since time immemorial descended through openings of sky, earth, and sea to interact with this planet’s creatures.”⁹⁰ Similar titles include Erdogan Ercivan’s *Das Sternentor der Pyramiden* (“The Stargate of the Pyramids”) or Philip Coppens’s *The Canopus Revelation. Stargate of the Gods and the Ark of Osiris*.

William Henry, a regular guest presenter on the aforementioned hit series *Ancient Aliens*, is particularly fond of evoking the Stargate in his manifold media appearances (while it needs to be stated that his concerns are primarily Christian,

⁸⁸ Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, *The Stargate Conspiracy: The Truth about Extraterrestrial Life and the Mysteries of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Berkley Books, 2001), 167.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹⁰ Thomas Horn, *Nephilim Stargates: The Year 2012 and the Return of the Watchers* (Crane: Anomalos Publishing, 2007), 1.

and not predominantly Egyptian). His website (<http://www.williamhenry.net>) shows him posing in front of a flaming circular disk, blue in the center, encircled by the zodiac (remember that the symbols on the Stargate are the constellations) and plates bearing Roman numerals, all in front of a field of stars - it is not exactly *the* Stargate, but the allusion is clear. Recently, Henry and his spouse went on a tour titled “Stargate Egypt 2015: Ancient Mysteries, the Key of Life and the Lost Secrets of Ascension,”⁹¹ and there are many video recordings of his lectures available on Youtube, in one of which Henry explains that the journey of the sun god Ra across the sky and through the underworld, which in Egyptian iconography is depicted as a journey on a boat over a river, actually represents extraterrestrials traveling through Stargates - the river of course being a wormhole.⁹²

Meanwhile, a sensationalist documentary speculates that the rationale for the Second Iraq War was the attempted recovery of a Stargate hidden in the ancient city of Ur.⁹³ At 2:46, an ‘expert’ explains: “Iraq has long been known as the location of one of the oldest Stargates on planet Earth,” followed by a slick computer animation of a large metal ring - because that is of course what a Stargate must look like, following the occultural authority of the movie and television series. We also find evidence of people believing a ‘Stargate conspiracy’ as formulated by Picknett and Prince may be at work to cover up the existence of the gate, and that the film and television series *Stargate* may even be complicit in this scheme. If one enters “Is the Stargate” into Google, roughly every second search suggestion based on frequently-asked questions is not related to the movie or television series per se, but to the Stargate’s existence: “Is the Stargate (±program) real”; “Is the Stargate possible.” If we search for the former, already the second result takes us to a discussion in a message board on a website called “Above Top Secret” (ATS) where the following conspiracy is entertained (errors in grammar and spelling in the original):

Has it ever occurred to any one that the shows Stargate SG1 and Atlantis have been made to coverup the fact that the American military posses a stargate in real life. The show is amazing but it was there so that it takes the scent of whats actually going on in real life. If you tell people that such a device as a stargate exists you get answers like are you insane or you do

⁹¹ <http://www.williamhenry.net/stargate2015.html> (accessed: 12/3/2015 at 00:06 AM).

⁹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai3i88JPHWQ> (accessed: 12/3/2015 at 00:10 AM).

⁹³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JR_Hmgk8pys (accessed 12/3/2015 at 00:28 AM).

know that's just a TV programme you know. I know there are already people that believe the stargate exists on ATS and there is also a few other posts to do with this on ATS. But I am only interested in people's views on whether the show is a coverup or not.⁹⁴

6. The Hyper-Real Dynamics of Occulture

Even though both Lovecraft and Emmerich explicitly stated that they were writing fiction, this has not stopped their creations from being taken as fact.⁹⁵ While Lovecraft's alien gods have been incorporated into the loose canon of Satanism (note especially their invocation by Kenneth Grant's Typhonian *Ordo Templis Orientis*), and occultists seek out copies of the fictional book *Necronomicon*,⁹⁶ AA theorists likewise succumb to the allure of the Stargate and have begun convincing themselves and their audience that it actually exists. I believe this puzzling trend can best be accounted for by an approach grounded in recent scholarship on the subject of fiction-based religion by Carole Cusack and especially Adam Possamai's *Religion and Popular Culture* (2005). Possamai explains how, according to the great theorist of postmodernity Jean Baudrillard, we live in an economy of symbols and signs that are exchanged for each other and whose reference to a physical reality behind the medial representation has become irrelevant, collapsing the difference between real and unreal, resulting in what Baudrillard calls "hyper-reality."⁹⁷ This implosion, Possamai argues, can account for fiction-based religions such as Jediism, based on the spirituality presented in the *Star Wars* films, asserting that "for these spiritual consumers, the real and the unreal might have imploded and might have created an unclear sense of distinction between them."⁹⁸ The Stargate's intrusion into serious belief can be described as a 'simulacrum,' a kind of virtual reality with which something is imbued.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread256723/pg1> (accessed 12/2/2015).

⁹⁵ On Lovecraft, see Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 80–106; on Emmerich see Jo Müller, *Roland Emmerich: Eine Werkbiografie* (Cologne: vgs, 1998), 11.

⁹⁶ On the 'Cthulhu Mythos' in Satanism see Chris Mathews, *Modern Satanism: Anatomy of a Radical Subculture* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2009), 115f.; on the *Necronomicon* see Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 171–4.

⁹⁷ Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2007 = 2005), 71–9.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

It is helpful to observe how this term has been employed by Tera Pruitt, who discusses the ‘pyramids’ (which the archaeological community agrees are not pyramids at all but mountain formations) near the Bosnian town of Visoko. The pyramids have been popularized by charismatic media figure and pseudoarchaeologist Semir Osmanagić, becoming a veritable pilgrimage site and tourist attraction with considerable economic impact, as well as a symbol of national identity.¹⁰⁰ Pruitt analyzes how “(t)hrough the performance of language, and through media transmission of his material, Osmanagić and his media support *are actively creating the pyramids through a media experience.*”¹⁰¹ She argues that Osmanagić is producing a hallucinatory effect and creating the ‘virtuality’ of the national pyramid monument that the people want to see,¹⁰² and calls this phenomenon a “simulacrum,” something that is “not a copy of the real, but rather something virtual that becomes truth or replaces truth in its own right, something that is ‘hyperreal.’”¹⁰³ This is precisely what is happening with the assimilation of the Stargate into the AAD: Like the Bosnian pyramids, believers in the AA ‘religion’ are thinking, willing, filming, writing, and reading into virtual existence the Egyptian gateway to the stars. And the simulacrum is growing: In the 2016 film *Gods of Egypt*, a loose retelling of Egyptian mythology, the god Horus (whose design here is itself clearly influenced by *Stargate*, and many more examples from this film and from across the spectrum of pop-culture could be cited)¹⁰⁴ journeys to the solar barque of Ra through a massive ring erected on the top of a mountain. It looks like a giant gear with nine ‘notches’ pointing *outward* at regular intervals - obviously an inversion of the design of the Stargate which has nine (two are often concealed) triangular ‘chevrons’ pointing *inward* (compare fig. 1 and 2). At this point, the simulacrum has left the domain of AA narratives and seems to be naturally at home even in a non-subversive vision of Egypt.

7. An Ancient Astronaut Religion?

Von Däniken himself has vehemently denied that his tenets possess religious qualities, because the AAD lacks defining elements such as promises beyond

¹⁰⁰ Tera Pruitt, “Addressing Invented Heritage: The Case of the Bosnian Pyramids” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge 2007), 42.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 47 (italics mine).

¹⁰² Ibid., 51.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁴ I have identified a few in Krueger, *Pyramiden und Sternentore*, 96–101.

death or a house of worship¹⁰⁵ - a defense that relies on a vaguely modern, Christian sense of what constitutes a ‘religion,’ and that cannot satisfy recent standards set by religious studies. In the following, some key elements of the AAD’s ‘religiosity’ will be proposed:

The development of the AAD out of Western esotericism, as well as its interdependency with popular culture which I have outlined above demonstrate that the AAD is a child of ‘occulture’ as defined by Christopher Partridge. Max Weber’s theory that the West has reached a near-total state of disenchantment and secularization has been increasingly doubted by scholars;¹⁰⁶ Partridge points out that while the institutional forms of the traditional world religions are in decline, new religious movements are on the rise which “emerge from an essentially non-Christian religio-cultural milieu, a milieu that both resources and is resourced by popular culture - the ‘occult milieu,’ what I refer to as ‘occulture.’”¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, Ingberdt Jüdt has pointed out that, parallel to the results of Horst Stenger’s *Soziologie des New Age* (1993), the AAD too aims at providing “the establishing of *weltanschauliche* certitude” as a response to the fracturing of society that followed the Weberian disenchantment of the world. By entering into an esoteric lifestyle, an individual immediately acquires the ability to discover his inner self and the freedom of meaningful action and definition “without the requirement of overcoming cultural obstacles of access (in this case: to the sciences relevant for historical research).”¹⁰⁸

One might say that technology itself, rather than its alien carriers, is the principal deity of the AAD. Ingberdt Jüdt explains how this desire to find modern technology in antiquity in order to legitimize it in the present turns AA narratives into a neo-myth (*italics in original*):

¹⁰⁵ Von Däniken, “Vorwort”, in von Däniken, *Fremde aus dem All*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ For a summary, see Kenneth Granholm, “Post-Secular Esotericism? Some Reflections on the Transformation of Esotericism,” in *Western Esotericism*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck (Åbo and Stockholm: Equinox Publishing, 2008), 50–67, 59.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, vol. 1 (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 4; see further Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary”, in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Kenneth Granholm and Egil Asprem (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 113–33; Partridge, “Introduction”, in Partridge, *The Occult World*, 1–14, 10f.

¹⁰⁸ Ingberdt Jüdt, “Paläo-SETI zwischen Mythos und Wissenschaft”, *Zeitschrift für Anomalistik* 3 (2003), 166–204, 187–89., available online under (<http://www.anomalistik.de/juedt.pdf>).

With regard to Däniken's mythical sources, we can say: through this substitution, Preastronautics do not analyze myth, they reconstitute it. They preserve the plot of the myth, its performances, by retrospectively inscribing into it a new working principle which is compatible with our time, i.e., technology. However, in doing so, they are themselves transformed into a mythical narration which, accordingly, assumes mythical functions for a hi-tech present.¹⁰⁹

This 'cult' of technological progress goes hand in hand with a reliance on the ideal of 'common sense' that is fundamental for the AAD's approach to history, as Jüdt has shown.¹¹⁰ It boils down to the notion that 'any child can see that this alleged god is wearing an astronaut's helmet,' simply because *it may look like that* to someone who is familiar with astronaut helmets *from his or her own time and culture* (the space race of the 1960s). As a modern myth, Preastronautics aim for an absolute transparency of the ancient sources, and any remaining 'strangeness' (*Fremdheit*, Jüdt's term) in the sources is abhorred - different cultures are forbidden to be different from us. Jonas Richter dubs this tactic *interpretatio technologica*,¹¹¹ while Jüdt speaks of a "Midas touch" that turns everything not into gold, but into a spaceship.¹¹² He summarizes this anti-hermeneutical strategy as "the trap of a historical objectivism which gainsays the historicity of one's own vantage point."¹¹³

The conflict with orthodox historiography is, with regard to the special place occupied by Egypt in the cultural memory of the West, most archetypal in the case of Egyptology. As Egyptologist Dominic Montserrat remarked, "some of us are engaged in the deconstruction, destabilisation, demythologisation and deideologisation of western-produced knowledge of the past."¹¹⁴ The AAD seeks to replace both religious dogma *and* orthodox historiography, presenting instead a unifying myth that re-enchants the world.¹¹⁵ According to Jüdt, these modern myths 'colonize' contested space within the cultural memory - in this case, "the growing gap between Egyptomania and Egyptology" - which Jan

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 182.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 168. The term is a nod to Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System", *The Antioch Review* 33.1 (1975), 5–26.

¹¹¹ Richter, "Palão-SETI", 353.

¹¹² Jüdt, "Palão-SETI", 182.

¹¹³ Ibid., 180

¹¹⁴ Dominic Montserrat, *Akhenaten: History, Fantasy, and Ancient Egypt* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

¹¹⁵ Jüdt, "Aliens", 87.

Assmann appropriately termed “a no man’s land of mutual incomprehension.”¹¹⁶ Within this space, Jüdt diagnoses a project of “re-mythification of history” via “a technocratic ideology rooted in the principle of *common sense*.”¹¹⁷ He concludes:

It seems to me that we can ascribe the success of pre-astronautics to a...widespread culture-historical interest turning back to the worlds existing before and besides our own civilization, which is taking place outside the ‘jurisdiction’ of the relevant scientific institutions...Accordingly, we can perceive in the rise of Paleo-SETI literature a form of subcultural, ‘wild’ colonization of those idle provinces of meaning which have so far not been bindingly appropriated by the cultural memory of Western civilization and which, like its religious and philosophical tradition itself, have been disenchanting by the rise of the modern sciences.¹¹⁸

Finally, the religious dimensions - despite the absence of theistic concerns, per its euhemerism - of the AAD are most evident in its anti-evolutionism. According to von Däniken (and especially Sitchin, whom Colavito calls a “prophet” of a kind of “extraterrestrial genesis” cult following),¹¹⁹ the human race, Egyptian civilization, the pyramids, etc. did not develop through complex processes, but are created by the ‘gods’ - a view scholars have recognized to be a variant of creationism.¹²⁰ As Carole Cusack has pointed out, the AAD caters to an anthropological constant that is at the heart of all religion: The desire for a monocausal narrative of *agency*, which by its definition implies *meaning*:

The cognitive science approach has demonstrated that religion is a successful factor in evolutionary biology and that religious explanations (narratives attributing agency) are readily accepted as plausible...Pseudoscientific theories are perennially popular...because there is a willingness to accept explanations such as “aliens created homo sapiens” (rather than the Darwinian theory of evolution) or “all culture had its origins in ancient

¹¹⁶ Assmann, *Moses*, 22.

¹¹⁷ Jüdt, “Paläo-SETI”, 195, 166, respectively.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹¹⁹ Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*, 264.

¹²⁰ Andreas Grünshloß, “‘Ancient Astronaut’ Narrations: A Popular Discourse on Our Religious Past” *Marburg Journal of Religion* 11.1 (2006), 1–25, 18, available online under (<https://www.uni-marburg.de/fb03/ivk/mjr/pdfs/2006/articles/gruenschloss2006.pdf>); Jonas Richter, “Traces of the Gods: Ancient Astronauts as a Vision of Our Future”, *Numen* 59 (2012), 222–48, 235f.

Egypt” (rather than complicated theories about independent invention), because these explanations attribute cultural phenomena to specific agents, and are thus functionally equivalent to religious explanations.¹²¹

8. Conclusions: Ritual Liminality and Virtual Reality

It is no coincidence that the fictional Stargate device has come to lead an existence within AAD independent of the eponymous film franchise. The giant portal from the sands of Egypt, with its wormhole resembling a vertical glowing wall of water which the hero Egyptologist approaches, slowly and awestruck, until he finally immerses (one is tempted: baptizes) himself in the ‘water,’ exudes the liminality of a ritual. The gate is a threshold whose crossing signifies transformation and the end of one life before the beginning of another. (Indeed, the gate demolecularizes a person - a kind of death - hurls them across the universe and reassembles them in an Egyptian temple.) In a way, the Stargate is the twenty-first century equivalent of the ‘portal of the gods’ that adepts crossed in the pseudo-Egyptian rituals of the Freemasons.¹²² Its eager incorporation into a self-declared scientific discourse, despite its obvious fictional nature, indicates that the gate fulfils a specific need. The gate - at once a mystical ‘portal of the gods’ *and* technology - is an ideal focal point for the holistic techno-religiosity of the Preastronautic worldview summarized above, and it certainly accommodates twenty-first century notions of astrophysics and space travel better than von Däniken’s and Sitchin’s gods’ awkward dependence on 1960s rocketships and landing strips. Its specific function and intense dramaturgical presentation serve as a powerful visualization of belonging to a select elite, initiated into sacred mysteries about humanity’s origins and destiny, thus gaining religious satisfaction while claiming the status of actual (even ‘superior’) science. All things considered, it appears that, in synthesizing all these aspects in one elegant circle, the Stargate was simply too good to not be true, and that Roland Emmerich suffered the same fate as H. P. Lovecraft, who inadvertently helped inspire the founding fathers of the modern AAD through his sci-fi stories that cynically mimicked the mythology of Theosophy for sheer effect, “did his job too well, and as a result new generations became exposed to Blavatsky’s interplanetary

¹²¹ Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 24. See also eadem, “New Religions and the Science of Archaeology: Mormons, the Goddess, and Atlantis”, in Lewis and Hammer, *Handbook*, 765–96, 65.

¹²² Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt*, 120.

nonsense through the much more convincing versions Lovecraft produced as *fiction*.”¹²³

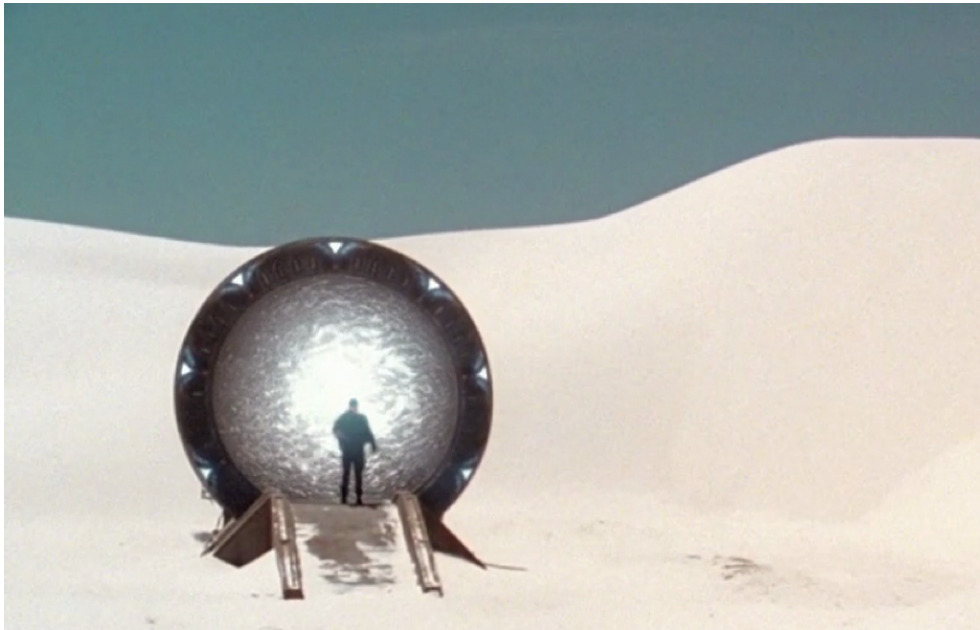


Fig. 1: A Stargate on a desert planet
(*Stargate Universe*, season 1, episodes 1–3 “Air Parts 1–3” [Extended Cut], USA/CA 2009, 1h 33m 12s [close-up])



Fig. 2: The stone circle through which Horus travels to the solar barque of Ra
(*Gods of Egypt*, USA/AU 2016, 40m 16s)

¹²³ Colavito, *Theosophy on Ancient Astronauts*, xv, italics in original. This statement needs to be corrected insofar as the extraterrestrial interpretation of mankind’s heavenly visitors was not typical of Blavatsky, but of the second generation of Theosophists as discussed earlier.