Do Ancient Egyptians Dream of Electric Sheep?: The Reception of Ancient Egypt in Science Fiction

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Abstract

This introductory essay uses Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* as a springboard for an exploration of the interrelationship between ancient Egypt as rendered in the popular imagination and the science fiction genre, from the time of Shelley's pioneering text through to other more recent points of overlap including Roland Emmerich's film *Stargate*. We discuss how science fiction often portrays ancient Egypt as both scientifically and technologically advanced and culturally alien, tropes which stretch back to Western antiquity: the former to understandings of Egypt as the birthplace of alchemy and the latter chiming with Orientalist othering typical of Western renderings of Egypt. Finally, we briefly explore the interplay between the interpretive work that the heart of Egyptology as an academic discipline and the imaginative exercise of science fiction, with both seemingly useful and influential reference points for the other.

Keywords

science fiction; Mary Shelley; *Frankenstein*; mummy; Orientalism; alchemy; ancient aliens; Roland Emmerich; *Stargate*.

Introduction

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818; 1831)—an integral text in the history of science fiction—the eponymous scientist is horrified when the creature he has assembled from assorted body parts is successfully brought to life. "A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch", Victor Frankenstein relates.[1] This comparison—between a figure who represents the potentially disastrous consequences of cutting-edge scientific enquiry and the preserved bodies of the dead—is one that recurs later in the novel. Having dispatched his creator, the creature's "vast hand" is described as "in colour and apparent texture like that of a mummy".[2] Shelley's text, for which the author provides the alternative title of *A Modern Prometheus*, is evidently interested in the tension between modernity and the past, albeit one that flags classical mythology—specifically the name of a Greek Titan god—rather than ancient Egyptian culture on

1 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 38.
2 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 168.

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its title page.[3] Nonetheless, references to mummified human remains, which most readily call to mind ancient Egyptian bodies, suggest an Orientalising reference on Shelley's part.

Indeed, across the novel more broadly, Victor Frankenstein's pursuit of knowledge is coded as Eastern, which others him just as his creation is othered. We learn that Frankenstein's friend and fellow student, Henry Clerval, is studying "oriental languages" at university, "turn[ing] his eye towards the East", and Victor Frankenstein is persuaded by his friend "to enter on the same studies".[4] Frankenstein outlines how he "found not only instruction but consolation in the works of the orientalists": "How different from the manly and heroical poetry of Greece and Rome", he relates.[5] That the revelation of Frankenstein's Orientalist pursuits comes in the chapter subsequent to the creature's revival—and that Frankenstein himself recognises the appeal of Eastern writing as contrasting the idealised masculinity connoted by the classical world—marks him out as having Orientalist sympathies; indeed it is another aspect of his Orientalist education—namely, alchemical study—that sets him on the path to bringing something with the appearance of a mummy to life.[6] "[I]n what desert land have you lived, where no one was kind enough to inform you that these fancies, which you have so greedily imbibed, are a thousand years old and as musty as they are ancient?" one of Frankenstein's professors chides.[7] While a thousand years from the time in which the novel is set stretches back not to Egyptian antiquity but rather the Middle Ages, the desert metaphor, which underscores the fruitlessness of Frankenstein's alchemical endeavours (or so the professor supposes), evokes the land in which alchemy is said to have originated, Egypt's ancient name "Kemet" frequently proposed as one possible root of the word "alchemy" itself.[8]

3 Rogers and Stevens, "Classical Receptions", 127—128; Rogers and Stevens, "Introduction", 1.

4 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 190. This passage derives from the 1831 third edition of *Frankenstein*, which Shelley revised. This version of the text saw, among various other changes, an elaboration as to Clerval's Orientalist studies.

5 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 46.

6 Edward W. Said famously explores how nineteenth-century writers crafted an othering vision of the Orient through sensual feminisation in his 1978 monograph *Orientalism*; see Said, *Orientalism,* 111—197. Along these lines, R. B. Parkinson also notes how, for instance, the "sensuous dangers of the ancient East" are embodied in the queer-coded and feminised villain Antony Ferrara in Sax Rohmer's novel 1918 *Brood of the Witch Queen*; see Parkinson, "Use of Old Objects", 202. On the opportunities for the performance of fluid gender identities afforded by Egyptology in the nineteenth century and beyond, see Dobson, "Cross-Dressing Scholars".

7 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 28.

8 Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 21.

Similarly, when Frankenstein's creature overhears the De Lacey family (on whose property he hides after his creator rejects him) reading aloud the Orientalist Constantin François Volney's *Les Ruines* (1791), a work on the fall of ancient civilisations, he reports that these "wonderful narrations inspired me with strange feelings".[9] While the creature does not mention Egypt in his account of his emotive response to what he learns from his eavesdropping, Volney refers to Egypt throughout *Les Ruines*. Volney was also the author of *Voyage en Egypte et en Syrie* (1787), having spent over half a year in Egypt. As Wessel Krul points out, *Les Ruines* "makes use of the same type of imagery" as Mary Shelley's husband Percy Shelley's famous sonnet "Ozymandias" (1818), inspired by a fragment of an ancient Egyptian statue of the pharaoh Ramesses II: "all power will turn to dust".[10] In short, ancient Egypt in *Frankenstein* is certainly there for those who go looking for it, and since the publication of Shelley's trailblazing text, its presence in science fiction has only become more emphatic.

Science fiction has undeniably contributed to modern ideas of ancient Egypt in powerful ways, and yet is only starting to be addressed in scholarship. Just as Shelley's novel has garnered recent attention from scholars of classical reception—most notably in Jesse Weiner, Benjamin Eldon Stevens and Brett M. Rogers' volume *Frankenstein and Its Classics: The Modern Prometheus from Antiquity to Science Fiction* (2018)—the manifestation of ancient Greek and Roman elements in science fiction has resulted in a rich seam of academic work.[11] Darko Suvin's foundational *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979), in which the author identifies that "SF is always also a certain type of imaginative historical tale", refers to classical mythology as an inspirational starting point for science fiction narratives, though Suvin cautions against the identification of narrative origins as an end point to the critic's work in and of itself.[12] Representations of ancient Egypt, in comparison, have largely avoided scrutiny in this context, with various analyses of Roland Emmerich's *Stargate* (1994) suggesting this film as an exception and therefore a useful entry point for a broader consideration of ancient Egypt's place in science fiction subsequent to Shelley's celebrated novel nearly two centuries prior.[13]

9 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 86.

10 Krul, "Volney, *Frankenstein*, and the Lessons of History", 27.

11 Key examples include: Clare, *Ancient Greece and Rome*; Rogers and Stevens, *Classical Traditions*; Rogers and Stevens, *Once and Future Antiquities*; Kleu, *Antikenrezeption in der Science Fiction*.

12 Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 35—36, 84.

13 See, for instance, Meskell, "Consuming Bodies"; Malamud, "Pyramids in Las Vegas"; Krueger, "The Stargate Simulacrum".

Indeed, while Shelley uses the ancient Egyptian body to represent a kind of antique horror that contrasts the cutting-edge nature of Victor Frankenstein's scientific achievements, based as they are on the older work of the alchemists, *Stargate* appears to have made a particularly impactful cultural mark because of the way in which bodies are made both futuristic and recognisably ancient in this film: alien entities acquire human forms in order to extend their lifespans, donning mechanical armour which gives them the appearance of part-anthropomorphic part-theriomorphic Egyptian deities, while sarcophagi are reimagined as regeneration chambers. For Lynn Meskell, *Stargate*'s aliens—particularly Jaye Davidson's Ra, with his "techno-cyborg" voice—are simultaneously erotic and threatening.[14] Science's potential to genetically revive the ancient Egyptian body has also emerged as of key interest to Egyptian science fiction that draws upon the country's ancient past; as Emad El-Din Aysha observes, such concerns manifest in Kadria Said and Muhammad Naguib Matter's novel *Adam without Eve* (2020), which features the cloning of ancient Egyptians, and Muhammad Ahmed Al-Naghi's short story "Eugenics", whose "heroine, […] is the spitting image of Nefertiti, with resurrected ancient Egyptian genes".[15] Certainly, a fascination with ancient Egyptian bodies and their interaction with modern technologies—transforming them into figures at once ancient and futuristic—permeates the science fiction media considered in this special issue: from Roger Zelazny's novel *Creatures of Light and Darkness* (1969), which opens with a scene in which Anubis assimilates mechanical components into the body of the god Set, essentially rendering him a cyborg, through to the hip hop artist Nas, his face digitally integrated into Tutankhamun's famous funerary mask, rapping in a levitating pyramid craft in the music video for the Black Eyed Peas' "BACK 2 HIPHOP" (2018).

Ancient Egypt is and has been "othered" in the Western tradition since antiquity, and is used—in multiple senses of the word—to connote "alienness" (both bodily and otherwise) in many of the works considered in the articles that make up this journal issue. While this is also true of science fiction representations of ancient Greece and Rome—in these sources, too, "[t]he gods […] [a]re almost always aliens"[16]—there is certainly more of a sense that classical civilisation is used to represent the self in Western media, while ancient Egypt operates on the border between selfhood and otherness. Science fiction in which ancient Egypt

14 Meskell, "Consuming Bodies", 63, 72.
15 Aysha, "Egypt as a Test Case for Gender".
16 Clare, *Ancient Greece and Rome*, 221.

plays a part often has an ambivalent relationship with Orientalism as defined by Edward Said, whereby ancient Egypt does not necessarily—or exclusively—represent an "Oriental backwardness" over which "European superiority" might be asserted, but often a kind of technological advancement.[17] This is not to say that other aspects of Orientalism do not persist in such media; indeed, since the nineteenth century ancient Egyptians in science fiction have been presented as master scientists who are nonetheless marked out as otherwise degenerate by shortcomings that are moral rather than intellectual, while other mainstays of Orientalism—of a feminised, eroticised, mystical culture—are also prevalent.[18] Nevertheless, a common thread in science fiction since the nineteenth century takes ancient Egypt's reputation for scientific advancement (an idea which itself dates back to antiquity) and reimagines this on an exaggerated scale. When Kevin McLaren asserts the influence of *Stargate* on the long-running pseudoscientific docuseries *Ancient Aliens* (2009—present), for instance, precursors to both exist in nineteenth-century texts in which ancient Egyptians are either removed from Earth by an extraterrestrial species or are space-faring civilization themselves.[19] This "alien" aspect of ancient Egypt in science fiction has become, as Frederic Krueger points out, "normalized as an element of popular culture", more so with regards to Egypt than any other ancient civilisation.[20] And, as Krueger also identifies with regards to *Stargate*, its inheritance of Orientalist ideas of Egyptian wisdom via ancient aliens discourse derives much from nineteenth-century "esoteric currents, particularly Theosophy" via weird science fiction by the likes of H. P. Lovecraft.[21]

That the emergence of Egyptian-themed science fiction tropes and the professionalisation of Egyptology occurred across the nineteenth century does not in and of itself imply an intimate link between the two, tempting though it may be to read one there.[22] What is clear, however, is that Egyptologists have at various times entertained beliefs that are now considered the mainstay of pseudoarchaeology and which often underpin modern science fiction tropes (one notable example being Grafton Elliot Smith's hyperdiffusionist theories), and, further, that science fiction and Egyptology have long been mutually inspirational.[23] McLaren posits

17 Said, *Orientalism*, 6, 7.
18 Dobson, *Victorian Alchemy*, 95, 213, 222—224.
19 McLaren, "Science Fiction and Egyptology", 90—98.
20 Krueger, "The Stargate Simulacrum", 53.
21 Krueger, "The Stargate Simulacrum".
22 McLaren, "Science Fiction and Egyptology", 23.
23 Dobson, *Victorian Alchemy*, 81.

Ellsworth Douglass's science fiction novel *Pharaoh's Broker* (1899) as having been a "direct response" to the Egyptologist E. A. Wallis Budge's *The Dwellers on the Nile* (1893), for instance.[24] Eleanor Dobson likewise suggests that Fred T. Jane's and Garrett P. Serviss's fictions—*To Venus in Five Seconds: An Account of the Strange Disappearance of Thomas Plummer, Pillmaker* (1897) and *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (1898)—were "born of the space devoted in popular scientific works to imaginative speculations about the fate of the Egyptian monuments thousands of years into the future".[25] The archaeoastronomer Norman Lockyer recounted in 1894 that as "in all freshly-opened tombs there are no traces whatever of any kind of combustion having taken place" he had jokingly speculated with a companion whether "the electric light was known to the ancient Egyptians".[26] This light-hearted anecdote is occasionally referenced to support the fringe hypothesis that the ancient Egyptians had electric light technologies, with reliefs at the temple of Hathor at Dendera often cited as iconographic evidence that such apparatus existed; that Erich von Däniken referred to Lockyer in his *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft: Ungelöste Rätsel der Vergangenheit* (1968) (translated into English as *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* the following year) cemented this in the cultural imagination.[27]

If Egyptological writing provided an inspirational launchpad for science fiction writers, so too has science fiction suggested itself as a useful reference point for Egyptologists.[28] McLaren credits Budge with responding to theories as to the possibilities of any extraterrestrial element to the development of ancient Egyptian culture in his book *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (1934), spurred on by the recent publication of John Scott Campbell's science fiction novella *Beyond Pluto* (1932).[29] Other allusions to science fiction pepper Egyptological writings of the twentieth century. Musing on the sensations conjured up by the remote Egyptian valleys, the Egyptologist Arthur Weigall reported in his accessible book

24 McLaren, "Science Fiction and Egyptology", 25.
25 Dobson, *Victorian Alchemy*, 87.
26 Lockyer, *The Dawn of Astronomy*, 180.
27 Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries*, 194; Dobson, *Victorian Alchemy*, 236. Suvin identifies that "the 'novelty' of […] von Däniken's supermortals is a pseudo-novelty, old meat rehashed with a new sauce"; Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 83.
28 Science fiction is just one of many genres where an often symbiotic (but sometimes more hostile) relationship between Egyptological writing and fiction exists; for a broader exploration of the relationship between fiction and Egyptology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Dobson, *Writing the Sphinx*.
29 McLaren, "Science Fiction and Egyptology", 27. The idea of extraterrestrial ancient Egyptians has a longer history, stretching back to, at least, Fred T. Jane's *To Venus in Five Seconds: An Account of the Strange Disappearance of Thomas Plummer, Pillmaker* (1897).

Tutankhamen and Other Essays (1923) "feeling more than ever like Mr. H. G. Wells' men in the moon".[30] Likewise, the folklorist and antiquities caretaker Omm Sety (born Dorothy Eady) reported that "To pass through the great Central Doorway and enter into the Temple of Sety I is like entering a 'Time Machine' of science fiction", evoking a generic convention that also stretches back to Wells' pioneering work.[31] In these examples, it is noteworthy that both Weigall and Omm Sety refer to science fiction as a way of expressing their personal emotional experiences of place; these are conveyed in such a way as to suggest extraordinary encounters whereby fiction—rather than, say, previous lived experience—becomes the most readily available point of reference. Science fiction has thus offered itself up as a cultural shorthand for denoting unfamiliarity, in terms of both landscapes and architectures.

Scott Trafton observes that "for the level of cultural capital it has been able to maintain[,] professional Egyptology owes as much to what it considers that fantastic tradition as it does to its more controlled rhythm of decades of slow excavation punctuated by periodic Eurekas".[32] Similarly, Julia Budka and Florian Ebeling highlight that "Egyptology can […] be understood as part of the history of reception, although under fundamentally different conditions".[33] Both Egyptology and the creation of popular (including science fiction) media inspired by ancient Egypt are imaginative pursuits, both working with source material as a starting point to which is applied "cognitive logic" (to paraphrase Suvin).[34] Science fiction specifically is "methodologically developed against the background of already existing cognitions", just as the "*sciences humaines* or historical-cultural sciences […] are equally based on such scientific methods".[35] Whether grounded in historical reality or the seemingly indelible cultural myths to which Aidan Dodson

30 Weigall, *Tutankhamen and Other Essays*, 194.
31 Sety and El Zeini, *Abydos*, 71.
32 Trafton, *Egypt Land*, 31.
33 Budka and Ebeling, "Editorial Note", 2.
34 Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 63. A particularly noteworthy example of an Egyptological publication that foregrounds Egyptology's imaginative and narrative creativity is Szpakowska, *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt*, which reconstructs daily life at an ancient settlement by means of an imaginary girl called Hedjerit. At the beginning of each chapter, Szpakowska includes a short, invented paragraph about Hedjerit's life, written in ancient Egyptian style. Other instances include 3D reconstructions of architecture. Such approximations necessarily each provide a "created object" that offers "just one among many possible pasts"; see "3D reconstructions".
35 Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 66, 67. As a result of this parallel, Suvin proposes that the "'soft sciences' can therefore most probably better serves as a basis for SF than the 'hard' natural sciences; and they *have* in fact been the basis of all better works in SF"; Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 68.

refers as "historical zombies", such hypothesising seeks to reconstruct a version of the past, albeit one that will always be an approximation, such reconstructions necessarily mediated by our own subjectivities. It goes without saying that the essays herein deconstruct the various Egypts that we read across these media; many of the scholars whose work makes up this special issue are themselves Egyptologists, their disciplinary training and expertise providing them particular insights into the most up-to-date approximations of ancient Egypt as it actually existed, at least according to the available evidence, bringing these insights to bear on the ancient Egypt of "fiction" or "distorted through the lens of Hollywood" to use Dodson's phrase.

Thus, this volume seeks to provide a foundational starting point in terms of academic investigation into ancient Egypt's place in science fiction and in science fiction-adjacent media. As science and magic were indistinguishable in ancient Egyptian culture, the division between these concepts is hazy in certain modern responses, which perhaps sit more comfortably in the territory of fantasy or speculative fiction.[36] Nonetheless, the various essays that make up this special issue paint a rich and varied picture of the uses of ancient Egyptian culture in works that range from celebrated science fiction franchises such as *Star Wars* to Jodi Picoult's recent novel *The Book of Two Ways* (2020), its protagonist's rekindling of her Egyptological passions (both personal and professional) manifesting in an alternate timeline in a parallel universe. The scholars whose work makes up this project tackle novels, comics, film, television, music and tabletop gaming to demonstrate the rich transmedial manifestations of ancient Egypt in modern culture.

This special issue has its roots in an online conference entitled "Do Ancient Egyptians Dream of Electric Sheep?: The Reception of Ancient Egypt in Science Fiction", which we hosted on 9 and 10 July 2021. We originally envisaged this to be a single-day event at the University of Birmingham (UK), but received so much interest that we expanded the proceedings to run virtually over two days. Hosted live by the Digital Hammurabi team on their YouTube channel, the conference was a truly global affair, with speakers hailing from Beijing, São Paulo, Lisbon, Berlin and, of course, Cairo, with performance art by Kofi Oduro (Illest Preacha) and Mohamed Tarqui Jalloh (Ramblin Intellect) to round off the events of the first day, who joined us from Canada and Sierra Leone, respectively. All of the essays in this special issue originated in the papers showcased at the conference,

36 For the overlap between magic and medicine, for instance, see Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*.

including Stuart Tyson Smith's keynote lecture, based on his experiences as an Egyptological consultant working on *Stargate*. We are delighted that the event itself spurred interest among scholars, leading to further work on the subject. We are grateful, finally, to the editors of *Aegyptiaca*, Julia Budka and Florian Ebeling, for the opportunity to present this work in this venue: it is truly exciting that these essays are hosted open-access online in this field-defining journal.

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