Stranger in a Strange Land: Intersections of Egyptology and Science Fiction on the Set of *Stargate*

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Abstract

Films like *Stargate* and *The Mummy* reflect deep and long-held Orientalizing notions about the nature of ancient Egyptian civilization. Popular media like films are deliberately designed to appeal to modern audiences, adapting historical contexts and imagery to suit contemporary beliefs and concerns, some of which have a long and fraught history. On the one hand, these films depict alternative views of ancient Egypt that often dip into hyperreality, on the other they could be condemned as distorting the past and reinforcing Egyptological and archaeological stereotypes. Placing them in the context of their production, considering the diversity and deliberate messaging of their directors, producers, crew, and cast, complicates the nature of their reception, in some cases exacerbating and in others mitigating their negative impacts while creatively exploring an alternate reality drawn from ancient Egypt. Moser points out that the ways in which representations of ancient Egypt are incorporated into popular culture shape understandings of ancient worlds like Egypt but are placed in dialog not only with contemporary academic treatments but also previous traditions of reception. This paper will explore this dynamic through a comparison between the reception of ancient Egypt in *Stargate* and *The Mummy,* drawing upon insights from the behind the scenes dynamics of the production of the films to better understand the motivations behind their creation that can help clarify their messaging and popular impacts.

> And she bare him [Moses] a son, and he called his name Gershom:[1]
> for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land.
> Exodus 2:22

There I sat on a hot summer's day in 1993, sand dunes stretching to the horizon. The wind tugged at my hat and scarf. Sweat dripped down my face as I frantically worked on the critical translation that would allow our project to continue. The thermometer topped 120°F. Trying desperately to concentrate, I searched for the right phrase in my hieroglyphic dictionary. Finally I found the words; all was ready just in time for the shout of "Cameras rolling" and "Action"! Of course, I wasn't searching for Nubian pyramids along the Nile in Sudan or, like Indiana

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1   In Hebrew, Gershom means "a stranger there", a reference to Moses's flight from Egypt.

Fig. 1: On the palace set with actor Jaye Davidson (left) and writer director Roland Emmerich (right) in the converted Spruce Goose hanger in Long Beach (publicity still copyright MGM Studios).

Jones, for a pharaoh's buried treasure—as an archaeologist the last thing I want to find is gold; it brings all the wrong kind of attention! Instead, I was in California's Buttercup Dunes, near Yuma, Arizona, on location with the crew filming the science-fiction epic *Stargate*.[2] Little did I know that only two months after earning my Ph.D. in Archaeology, I'd be working on a major motion picture, drawing on my Egyptological training to teach actors how to speak ancient Egyptian, writing dialog, commenting on the script, and assisting with sets and props (Figure 1). Like Robert A. Heinlein's protagonist,[3] also named Smith (and along with Moses before him), I found myself a stranger in a strange land, immersed in a different world where reality and fantasy mixed into the hyperreal.

Like a film script, I will proceed in four acts and an epilogue. Act 1 explores how an Egyptologist (me) came to play such a central role in a big budget film and how my work on *Stargate* helped to create a hyperreal world blending Egyptology and science fiction. Beginning with a post-colonial turn, Act 2 compares

2   Smith, "On the set of Stargate".
3   Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Winner of the 1962 Hugo award, the classic science fiction novel tells the story of a human raised by Martians who returns to Earth and attempts to understand and adapt to human culture.

the theme of ancient astronauts to nineteenth- and twentieth-century diffusionist arguments, most notably William Matthew Flinders Petrie and the Dynastic Race, and the cognitive dissonance of a person of color (writer-producer Dean Devlin) trying to mitigate racism in Hollywood while playing on these themes. Act 3 continues the post-colonial narrative by exploring the idea of the white savior in *Stargate*. Act 4 queers *Stargate*, exploring the themes of transgression, atavism, and ambiguity, tropes that also play a central role in the mummy genre. And in the Epilogue, I return to this essay's title, comparing my journey into a strange land with that of the film's protagonist, Daniel Jackson and actor James Spader, finishing with a consideration of the film's lasting impact.

Act 1: Science Fiction, Emergency Egyptology, and Hyperreality

How did an academic end up working on a major motion picture as a newly minted Ph.D.? Proximity and fate played a role. Based at UCLA's Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, I would field questions from Hollywood productions about ancient Egypt. Normally, these queries did not amount to much, but one day about a month after I filed my Dissertation, I received a call from associate producer Peter Winther wanting the term "Stargate" in hieroglyphs for a teaser trailer to sell the "money people" on a major film, with the promise of a job as a consultant if it all worked out. That was easy enough to do and a bit of fun with my hieroglyphic font, so I designed several ways to phrase and render it and sent it off, not really expecting to hear back. But within a month I was brought onto the pre-production team for the film, consulting with props and set crew and reviewing a copy of the script. Fortunately, a friend of mine, Gordon Smith (no relation), who was in the film industry, offered to negotiate for me—just to help me out and for the fun of it, which was very kind of him and gave me a much needed influx of cash as well as facilitating an amazing experience. One of the best things about working on the film was that everybody called me "Dr. Smith" or "Doc," which was very satisfying and somehow validating after all the hard work writing a dissertation and earning my doctorate.

As an Egyptologist on a movie set, I was in many ways like Moses or Heinlein's Martian-raised human, a stranger in a strange land. I was technically home in California, either in Buttercup Dunes or the old Spruce Goose hangar in

Fig. 2: Dean Devlin and Kurt Russell on set (publicity still copyright MGM Studios).

Long Beach, but at the same time in a very different place.[4] I was there in large part due to writer-producer Dean Devlin and writer-director Roland Emmerich (Figures 1 and 2), who were serious about crafting a science fiction film, and more than a bit fascinated by ancient Egypt as well as von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?*.[5] In spite of the latter, like all good science-fiction writers and filmmakers, they were dedicated to the principle of the suspension of disbelief. As a result, they wanted everything outside of the main ancient-aliens-inspired conceit of the film to be as accurate/plausible as possible—in particular investing a great deal of effort in the reconstruction of spoken ancient Egyptian, which plays a central role in the plot.

In the movie, Egyptologist Daniel Jackson (played by James Spader) travels with a military team led by Colonel O'Neill (played by Kurt Russell) through

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4 Exterior scenes and the indigenous city were shot in Buttercup Dunes, while the set work was done under the large geodesic dome in Long Beach that used to contain the Howard Hughes's massive flying boat troop transport, the *Spruce Goose*. The hangar was converted into a sound stage and used for several films after the aircraft was transferred in 1992 to the Evergreen Aviation and Space Museum in McMinnville, Oregon; see Grobaty, "Spruce Goose dome".

5 Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods?* Von Däniken argues that aliens from outer space were responsible for many impressive ancient technological achievements, like the Nazca Lines, Stonehenge, and the Great Pyramids of Egypt.

the Stargate, a strange alien artifact found near the Great Pyramid in the 1920s.[6] It transports them across the universe to another planet where they encounter an alternative futuristic version of ancient Egypt with a culture of humans who speak a strangely familiar language. Khasuf (played by Eric Avari) leads the local community and the travelers interact with him and his son, Skaare (played by Alexis Cruz) and daughter, Shaʿuri (played by Milli Avital), and a young family friend Nabeh (played by Gianin Loffler). Eventually Jackson realizes that the language is ancient Egyptian—once he figures out the pronunciation with Shaʿuri's help. In a clever turn, the early dialog is not subtitled, but the dialog after Jackson figures out how to understand it is, putting the audience in the place of the protagonist. A few years later another film, *The 13th Warrior*, adopted a similar conceit to simulate the protagonist's gradual understanding of a foreign language.[7] For example, during one of the early, un-subtitled scenes in *Stargate* (Figure 3, film clip 1), Jackson offers local leader Khasuf a candy bar and he says "baní way!". Most Egyptologists would immediately understand "baní way" as *bnr wy* "how sweet!", but it took Jackson a bit longer to comprehend (to be fair he'd just been dragged across the desert and so was not at his best). Reconstructing the vocalization involved taking into account the loss of the final "r", already appearing in Late Egyptian, and inserting vowels and reconstructing accent from what we know about syllabic stress. Eventually, with the help of Jackson's linguistic skills, our heroes encourage and assist a native rebellion against a sinister space alien inhabiting a human body (played by Jaye Davidson) posing as the Sun god Re and his Horus and Anubis themed enforcers (played by Djimon Hounsou and Carlos Lauchu).

Film Clip 1: "Baní way" first encounter scene.
Online resource: http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/#/detail/23788109

Emmerich and writer-producer Devlin cared about the accuracy of everything outside of the film's von Däniken-inspired science-fiction premise, taking every note I gave them, including crafting "Egyptology babble" for Jackson's character. They were especially enthusiastic about the language, even though only a few hundred of the millions who would see the movie could tell the difference between a "made up" language and actual ancient Egyptian. The stars certainly appreciated the fact that they were actually saying something real instead of made-up nonsense words, even though they probably thought that I was a bit of a pain sometimes. All of these lines are vocalized ancient Egyptian—about half

6 Emmerich, *Stargate*.

7 McTiernan, *The 13th Warrior*.

Fig. 3: Khasuf eats the offered candy bar and exclaims *báni way* (publicity still copyright MGM Studios).

the movie's dialog.[8] As a result, the pronunciation has a much more natural feel compared to the clipped way the language is pronounced by most Egyptologists. Ancient Egyptian had appeared in film before, for example in the prologue to the film *Sphinx*,[9] but as far as I know *Stargate* was the first film using reconstructed pronunciations, along with the later *Mummy* films for which I also served as consultant.[10] Apart from translating dialog, coaching actors, general consulting on the script, props, and so on, and a creating a few hieroglyphic inscriptions when necessary, I spent a great deal of time with James Spader, helping not only with his dialog but giving him insights into Egyptology and more broadly the life of an out-of-work, recent Ph.D.—something I could relate to since that was pretty much me at the time (but without the crazy pyramid theories).

As an archaeologist with an anthropological background, I could appreciate the opportunity for some participant observation. A film crew is also its own

8   By "vocalized", I mean translated with reconstructed pronunciation, in particular vowels and stress, as well as dropped and shifting consonants. Most Egyptologists pronounce ancient Egyptian in a kind of clipped, shorthand fashion based upon the consonantal skeletons of words rendered by hieroglyphs, which omit vowels, see below and Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian*.

9   Schaffner, *Sphinx*.

10   Sommers, *The Mummy*; Sommers, *The Mummy Returns*.

sub-culture, one that took me a bit of time to grok over the roughly three months that I was on set (out of a five month shoot). Making a film involves a complex hierarchy and dance of crew and talent coming together, only to break apart and reconfigure for the next project—a kind of nomadic existence. I gained insights into strange practices like sweeping sand to remove footprints and smoking/dusting the set to give a cinematic sense of depth, and there really was a cast of hundreds to about a thousand extras, supplemented by surprisingly convincing scarecrows in the distance dressed to look like the inhabitants (Figure 4). Work on the set was a crazy combination of equilibrium punctuated by frantic episodes of Egyptology in my case. Most of the time, I'd just sit around the set like everyone else who didn't have anything to do at that moment (and raid the "craft services" table with all its yummy but unhealthy snacks—not a good place to lose weight!). Moviemaking is tremendously inefficient—a shot begins with configuring sets and lighting, adding set decoration (props), makeup or touchup when the actors arrive, a quick rehearsal, shoot a scene or part of a scene, and then repeat—each scene gets shot multiple times. For me, with a minute or two to cameras rolling, Spader or someone else would often decide that they needed to say something new or alter a line, and I had to come up with an instant translation and vocalization. It felt like an Emergency Response Egyptology. A couple of times I got calls at 9 or 10 PM from a frantic assistant director (AD) saying the schedule had changed and someone has a line and can I please, please be on the 6 AM plane to Yuma. That's how the movie industry works: either nothing's happening or it's a crisis. For example, at the beginning of the shoot, they said I'd be in Yuma for a day or two and I ended up staying two weeks. I also got a few wild rides on dune buggies to get out to location in the desert and feed the actors a word or two.

Work on the film was an exercise in hyperreality, shifting from the real to simulation in the form of film sets and the Egyptian dialog. I remember walking into the secret military base from the beginning of the film, completely mundane, but the set was so convincing that it became a kind of alternate reality (Figure 5). It was the same with the main street of the city on the distant planet (Figure 4). One of the most dramatic moments was when I first came to the desert location. Dean Devlin walked me through the film's encampment and up the side of a sand dune, saying he wanted to show me something cool. When we crested the dune, there was a full scale Egyptian temple façade buried in the sand and suddenly I was transported to a different time and place (see Figures 6 and 12 below). It immediately brought back the journeys of figures like Burkhardt and Belzoni from the so called "golden age" of Egyptology and archaeology, although it is important to remember it was also the "golden age" of empires, very apropos as I

Fig. 4: Smoke provides a greater sense of depth on the massive Nagada set in Buttercup Dunes (publicity still copyright MGM Studios).

will discuss later. Watching the masked Horus and Anubis actors on that set and elsewhere was also in itself an exercise in hyperreality (Figure 6). The masks were completely animated, except for the CGI effect of them folding up and deploying, and as a result they really seemed alive—that is as long as you didn't look behind the curtain at the crew with an array of joysticks manipulating the head and other features, including glowing eyes! This feature is another point where the film resonates with ancient Egypt, where, as with other African cultures, masked priests commonly played the role of gods in religious rituals and performances.[11]

But I experienced the most profound hyperreality as I coached Eric Avari (as Khasuf) and Milli Avital (as Shaʿuri) in the pivotal scene where Jackson refuses to take advantage of the heroine and her father freaks out thinking she has insulted Re's representative. I remember distinctly having an epiphany as they were shooting the scene. Listening to my vocalized dialog being spoken by actors with emotion and context, ancient Egyptian became a living language to me (Figure 7, Film Clip 2). I could hear the music of it, the rhythms that are lost in the way Egyptologists normally pronounce Egyptian. I was no stranger to vocalized Egyptian, having studied with Antonio Loprieno and students of the

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11   Fairman, *The Triumph of Horus*, 50; Celenko, *Egypt in Africa*, 69–73; Gillam, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, 62–63.

Fig. 5: The military base set with Stargate Coverstones (publicity still copyright MGM Studios). I translated and transcribed the hieroglyphic inscription that runs around the outside.

Fig. 6: Re wears an Akhenaton styled mask, accompanied by falcon and a jackal masked figures in a ceremony of ritual execution of prisoners that echoes ancient Egyptian ceremonies (publicity still copyright MGM Studios).

Fig. 7: Actor Eric Avari as Khasuf in one of a series of scenes set in the village of Nagada. I was often embedded in the set to coach the actors during these scenes and thanks to their efforts, ancient Egyptian came alive to me (publicity still copyright MGM Studios).

late John Calendar, two Egyptologists known for their work on vocalization. But hearing the actors speaking at a normal pace, with emotion, in costume, in the context of a scene, and on an immersive set made it suddenly become real for me. Intellectually, I know it is an approximation, if based on solid evidence, but in a profound way the language ceased to be a simulation of a past reality and became a real living language.

Film Clip 2: Khasuf berates Shaʻuri.
Online resource: http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/#/detail/23788264

Most Egyptologists ignore or downplay vocalization, which is not necessary for translation, but is critical if one is interested in a comparative linguistic approach to the structure of the language.[12] Anyone who has studied Egyptian knows that the glyphs are primarily phonetic, providing a kind of consonantal skeleton of a word, but lacking vowels, complicating the question of pronunciation. Most would take the string of consonants for the name of one of Egypt's most famous Pharaohs (*Rˁ-ms(i)-s(w) mr(y)-Ỉmn*) and pronounce it Rameses Mer-

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12 In particular, I relied upon Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian*; Osing, *Die Nominalbildung des Ägyptischen*; Callender, *Middle Egyptian*.

yamun (Figure 8). Spoken Egyptian is reconstructed using the language's last surviving descendant, Coptic, which was written down using a modified Greek alphabet, so including vowels, starting in the second century CE. Earlier spoken Egyptian is reconstructed by comparing words in Coptic with more limited evidence from around 1450-1200 BCE.[13] At the height of the New Kingdom, diplomatic correspondence transcribed Egyptian names, which are little phrases, into cuneiform—a syllabic script that includes vowels.[14] In the Hittite Archives, Rameses Meryamun appears in cuneiform as ri-a-ma-she-sha ma-a-i a-ma-na, allowing for a relatively precise reconstruction of the pronunciation.[15] After dropping the r from mery for grammatical reasons, we can add the vowels and reconstruct an original pronunciation of Rí-a ma-sé-suw Má-i ja-mán-e, with the accent indicating stress. The pronunciation of Ra is a particularly dramatic example, shifting from an original vocalization of *Rí-ʿuw to *Rí-ʿa by the New Kingdom to Re in Coptic.[16] Ra is just completely wrong, but easier for Egyptologists to turn the 'eyn into an 'a', as was the case with other semivowels like 'w' to 'u' and so on. While vowels are not necessary for translation (as is interestingly the case with the related languages Arabic and Hebrew), for me we lose something important about the fundamental nature of the language through this shorthand. In any case, this dynamic worked well for the conceit of the film. When Jackson points to the Eye of Re disk and says "Ra", as most Egyptologists would, Khasuf just gives him a blank look, because that does not resemble the original pronunciation of Rí-ʿuw.

Almost all of the actors picked up on the language well; the actors playing the young rebels, Skaare (Alexis Cruz) and Nabeh (Gianin Loffler), immediately asked me to give them extra phrases and of course naughty words and were soon chatting in the background and swearing at each other in Egyptian. Erik Avari (Khasuf) and Alexis Cruz also whiled away the time talking in ancient Egyptian based on their dialog and these extra materials and Milli Avital (Shaʿuri) immediately picked up on the pronunciation. Jaye Davidson tried hard with the language but struggled, however, as he was not a trained actor. He did like the idea of doing his dialog in Egyptian and worked hard with me in rehearsal, but in front of the camera had difficulty remembering his lines. I suddenly became the most important person on the entire set as filming ground to an expensive halt.

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13 Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian*. Vocalization is also useful for understanding intertextual references, word plays, and puns.

14 Note that clues for later pronunciation can be traced through transcriptions of names into Persian and Greek.

15 Edel, "Neue Keilschriftliche Umschreibungen"; Osing, *Nominalbildung*.

16 Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian*.

Fig. 8: Cartouche with transcription of the hieroglyphic spelling of Rameses Meryamun, from an unprovenanced stela (04.2.10), ca. 1279-1213 BCE; Akkadian Cuneiform Letter from Asurubalit, king of Assyria, to Akhenaton (24.2.11), ca. 1353-1336 BCE, Amarna, Egypt; and Coptic and Arabic Book of Prayers (19.196.3), ca. 17th-18th century CE, Wadi Natrun, Egypt (all photographs copyright New York Metropolitan Museum of Art). The hieroglyphs provide consonants only, the transcription of names into cuneiform establishes some contemporary vowels, and the vowels from the modified Greek alphabet used for Coptic, the final state of the Egyptian language, provides a baseline starting ca. 200 CE.

The ADs were frantic. At one point I was in a little sound booth feeding lines to Davidson through a micro-receiver in his ear. That didn't work and we finally ended up with cue cards—probably the strangest ever seen in Hollywood with an Anglicized transcription of Egyptian for Davidson, who is from the United Kingdom (Figure 9). As a result, Ra's dialect is a bit eccentric and in the end was overdubbed and distorted for effect—after all, he was a god/alien. The ancient astronauts plot of *Stargate* also allowed for a great degree of creativity in sets, costumes, and so on, which as a result did not have to conform to ancient Egyptian realities, instead adapting Egyptian themes to a science-fiction milieu. I worked particularly closely with the art department and Doug Harlocker, the property master, influencing different aspects of the film's look, particularly in the excavation scene at the beginning, where a simulation of a 1920s project was intended,
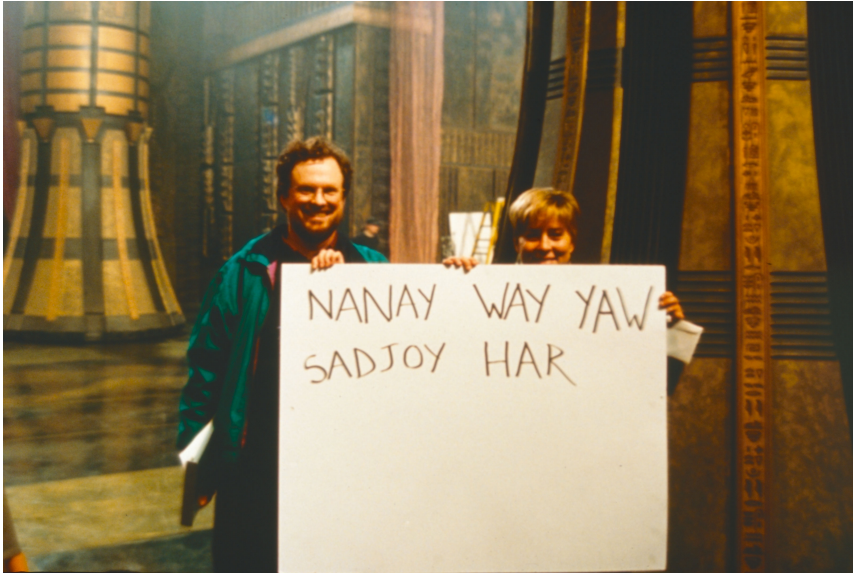
Fig. 9: Cue card from a scene shot on the palace set (photo courtesy of the author).

and the city on the other planet, including both the above ground settings and the underground "catacomb" with its imagery and hieroglyphic inscriptions.[17]

Act 2: Ancient Astronauts: Von Däniken and the Most Radical of Radical Diffusion

One thing I couldn't change was the ancient aliens theme, directly inspired by Erich von Dänken's *Chariots of the Gods?*.[18] Matt Szafran (in this issue) discusses the particular appeal of ancient astronauts to film, and this dynamic definitely played a role in the conception of *Stargate*. Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin were fascinated by both ancient Egypt and the (literally) outlandish theory that ancient astronauts were responsible for the achievements of ancient peoples, in particular monuments like the great pyramids at Giza.[19] This theme easily translates into a science-fiction conceit that allowed for both a clever premise and sumptuous visuals. It also plays on longstanding biases in the West among

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17 The futuristic costumes, glyphs, and sets were developed by the art and wardrobe departments with only a little input from me.
18 Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods?*.
19 Hiscock, "Cinema, Supernatural Archaeology, and the Hidden Human Past".

both scholars and the general public about Egypt and more broadly non-Western societies.[20]

The attempt to disassociate Egypt from its African context goes back to Josiah Nott and George Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* (1854) and more generally the Hamitic hypothesis.[21] For Nott and Gliddon, their so-called "scientific" system of racial ranking could not be maintained with dark skinned Africans creating an ancient civilization like Egypt. So they insisted that a master Caucasoid race must have come from western Asia to create ancient Egyptian civilization and dominate the original Negroid population, a model that conveniently naturalized American slavery. Their views resonated with a newly minted version of the Hamitic myth that removed the older idea of a cursed, dark skinned African race and emphasized the Hamites' Caucasoid origins, thus connecting Egypt and even Nubia to western Asia. In the early twentieth century, Charles Seligman insisted that "the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites"; "pastoral Caucasians—arriving wave after wave—[were] better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes".[22] Sadly, these same attitudes about ancient Egypt's non-African origins remain in an implicit and often explicit Egyptological tendency to divorce Egypt from Africa in favor of connections to western Asia.[23] This unscientific notion has even been taken up uncritically in DNA studies by hard scientists who are apparently oblivious to the dark history of Egyptology's connection to "scientific" racism.[24]

In the end, von Däniken's theory is the most extreme expression of the diffusionist and migrationist models of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like Flinders Petrie's (Figure 10) "Dynastic Race", which served colonial and racist agendas by "explaining" away the accomplishments of peoples that were coming under the control of white European and American empires by explaining cultural innovation through the movement of peoples and ideas rather than indigenous developments.[25] Unlike his successors Walter Emery and Douglas Derry, who were publishing in 1950s and 60s,[26] Petrie's conception was more

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20 Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries*, 196–219.

21 Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*, 411–465; Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis"; Young, "Egypt in America".

22 Seligman, *Races of Africa* (1930), 96, 156.

23 For example, Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 5.

24 Schuenemann et al., "Ancient Egyptian mummy genomes"; critiqued by Gourdine et al., "Ancient Egyptian Genomes".

25 Bond, "Pseudoarchaeology".

26 Derry, "The Dynastic Race in Egypt"; Emery, *Archaic Egypt*. Note that Seligman's work was still being reprinted; Seligman, *Races of Africa* (1968).
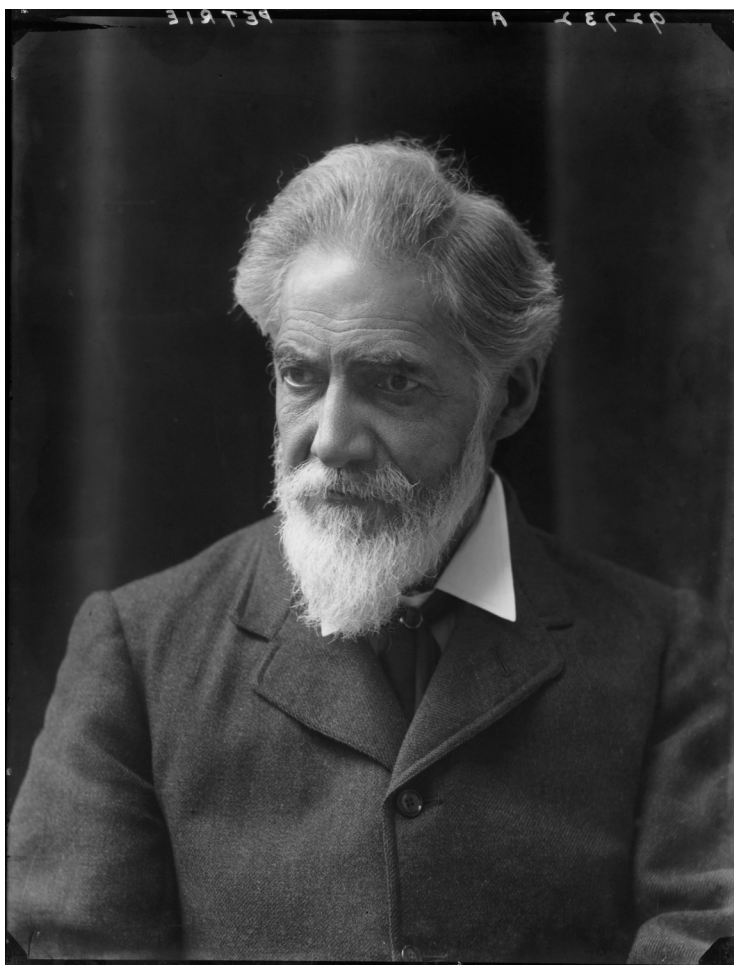
Fig. 10: Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie (by Walter Stoneman, copyright National Portrait Gallery, London).

subtle, if still problematic, explaining culture change at various periods and places through diffusion via migrations and informed by eugenics.[27] Rather than the singular migration of a "master race" ruling over inferior Black Africans, as with Emery's, Derry's, and ultimately Nott and Gliddon's rhetoric, Petrie allows for admixture and explains later changes in Egypt as driven by the arrival of even newer groups. In the end, Petrie's engagement with eugenics still drove him to

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27   Challis, *The Archaeology of Race*.

divide humanity into "high" and "low" races,[28] placing equatorial Africans, but also eastern Europeans and other groups in the "low" category.

In addition to the ways in which these migrationist models supported the colonial enterprise, what they share most in common with the ancient astronauts theme is a pessimism about human creativity.[29] People cannot innovate; instead, change is brought by new, implicitly superior peoples in a kind of package. *Chariots of the Gods?* takes it even farther by invoking ancient astronauts, but the subtext is the same—all non-white, non-Western accomplishments should be attributed to outside forces, although von Däniken briefly alludes to alien origins of some Western places and objects, including the Greek Antikythera mechanism, early Russian art, and Stonehenge.[30] While drawing on older diffusionist tropes, in the end he avoids white supremacist models by not completely ignoring Europe and attributing developments to non-human actors.[31] In contrast, white nationalists draw more on hyperdiffusionist theories like those centered on Atlantis, which provides a white homeland from which "civilization" spread worldwide. For example, Frank Collin, the former coordinator for the American Nazi Party and founder of the National Socialist Party of America, has written several books about Atlantis under the pen name Frank Joseph that continue a line of argument going back to early twentieth-century Nazi beliefs in an Atlantean, Aryan master race.[32] That *Stargate* relies upon the ancient aliens trope means that it carries with it all of this problematic cultural baggage, though unlike the aforementioned sources presents such a scenario as inherently fictional.

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28 Petrie, "Migrations".

29 Ironically, rather than simply calling out hyperdiffusionism as an inherently flawed theoretical framework used to divorce Egypt from Africa (among other things), some Afrocentric scholars argue for Egypt and/or Nubia as the origin point of all African (and sometimes even New World) civilization in an inversion of this colonial, racist methodology, most notably Cheikh Ante Diop and those who follow his approach. See Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*; Van Sertima, *Egypt Revisited*; Bernal, *Black Athena* and especially Bernal, *Black Athena* II. In particular, Bernal blithely ignores the colonial and racist associations of the diffusionist methodology of his "Revised Ancient Model" while rightly calling out the colonial and racist origins of what he characterizes as the "Aryan model", which is itself an example of hyperdiffusionism.

30 Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods?*, 85, 90–93.

31 Bond, "Pseudoarchaeology".

32 Halmhofer, "Did Aliens Build the Pyramids?".

Act 3: Colonial Narratives: Domination, False Consciousness, and the White Savior

Herman Vera and Andrew Gordon place *Stargate* within a larger genre of Hollywood films that glorify a white savior, redeemer of the weak who saves a non-white, primitive and superstitious other from oppression and triumphs in spite of impossible odds against powerful villains.[33] Often an outsider and overwhelmingly male, the white savior is frequently himself recognized as a god or divine representative by the natives, as in *Stargate* and in far early media such as Rudyard Kipling's story of the British Raj, "The Man who would be King" (1888).[34] Indiana Jones served a similar role in *Temple of Doom* (1984).[35] In *Stargate*, Jackson is a mythic hero, facing and overcoming a series of obstacles and transformed in the process, akin to Moses and science-fiction protagonists like Paul Atreides in *Dune* (1965) or Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* (1977).[36]

Vera and Gordon go on to argue that *Stargate* was a thinly disguised imperial metaphor and justification for the first Gulf War, with Re standing in for Saddam Hussein. But here I can say that they miss the mark in ascertaining the filmmakers' motives. The Gulf War never came up in my many conversations with Devlin and Emmerich or anyone else involved with the production. If anything, there is a strong anti-military and even anti-colonial current in the dialog, with Jackson constantly calling out O'Neill's bellicose attitude. Additionally, wresting Kuwait from Saddam Hussein does not make a particularly good parallel. The defeat of Iraqi forces was accomplished through a broad, international coalition and the exercise of massive and overwhelming military power, not a rag-tag group of rebels led by foreigners. Far from aiding insurgents in Iraq, the coalition abandoned them once their goal of liberating Kuwait was met. Unlike Re, Saddam Hussein lived to oppress and fight another day.[37]

One must look farther back in history and in film to find the inspiration for *Stargate*: *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).[38] Devlin is on record as seeing *Stargate* as *Lawrence of Arabia* on another planet (Figure 11).[39] Here we have a white savior that matches the hero's journey of Daniel Jackson, as well as a cinematographic

33 Vera and Gordon, *Screen Saviors*.

34 Kipling, *The Phantom 'Rickshaw*.

35 Spielberg, *Indiana Jones*; Hiscock, "Cinema, Supernatural Archaeology, and the Hidden Human Past".

36 Herbert, *Dune*; Lucas, *Star Wars*.

37 Hiro, *Desert Shield to Desert Storm*.

38 Lean, *Lawrence of Arabia*; Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

39 Sumner, "Stargate".

Fig. 11: James Spader as Daniel Jackson (publicity still copyright MGM Studios) and 1963 publicity poster for Lawrence of Arabia (Wikimedia, public domain). Note the thematic similarity between the two "white saviors", adopting indigenous dress and leading rebellions against colonial powers with a desert backdrop.

spectacle set in the "East" with dramatic desert landscapes, exotic backdrops, and a "cast of thousands". The parallels do not end there. Like Jackson, T. E. Lawrence was a scholar—an accomplished archaeologist and bit of an outsider to the military elite, who, like O'Neill for Jackson in *Stargate*, would doubtless have characterized him as a "dweeb". He had a deep knowledge of the region's history as well as contacts and the linguistic ability to engage with local leaders and ultimately persuade them to mount a coordinated revolt against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Unlike the Gulf War with its massive coalition, Lawrence, like Jackson, operated more or less on his own forging alliances with various local leaders and groups, who bore the main brunt of the rebellion.[40] Both Devlin and Emmerich mentioned their goal of replicating the look and feel of films like *Lawrence* to me throughout the production. In a very deliberate

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40   Brown, *Lawrence of Arabia*.

way, *Stargate* is an amalgam of the *Ten Commandments* (1956)[41] with its ancient Egyptian setting and *Lawrence of Arabia*, a desert rebellion against despotic forces, both involving mythic heroes who fight authoritarian regimes and are strangers in strange lands.

T. E. Lawrence's involvement in the First World War's Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule has itself been criticized through the lens of Orientalism. Notably, Edward Said argues that Lawrence's account of his activities during the war on the one hand celebrates Arab culture and agency, but on the other is critical of his allies and appropriates what should be an Arab narrative: "All the events putatively ascribed to the historical Arab Revolt are reduced finally to Lawrence's experiences on its behalf".[42] In spite of Lawrence's sometimes Orientalist gaze, he nevertheless stood up to imperial forces that would subordinate the interests of his allies, although he was ultimately unsuccessful. A recently rediscovered map drawn up by Lawrence and misfiled in the National Archives at Kew, proposes a very different set of frontiers than the one drawn up in the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement, which Lawrence saw as a betrayal. Instead of rewarding European powers by dividing the region in an arbitrary and ultimately dysfunctional way, his map acknowledged his Arab allies while creating homelands for Kurds and Armenians.[43] He was afterwards highly critical of the imperial administration in the region, publicly condemning British rule in Iraq, for example, concluding in an op-ed in the *Sunday Times*: "How long will we permit millions of pounds, thousands of Imperial troops, and tens of thousands of Arabs to be sacrificed on behalf of colonial administration which can benefit nobody but its administrators?"[44]

Stargate's white savior narrative is complicated in similar ways. Jackson is the catalyst for rebellion, but in the end it's the local people who rise up against Re's authority, rescuing Jackson and the other Americans and saving the day when all seemed to be lost. Rather than a simplistic narrative of superstitious natives, one important subtext of the film's plot is a critique of colonial domina-

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41 DeMille, *The Ten Commandments*. This film had a group of academic luminaries advising, including Labib Habachi (Egyptian Antiquities Service and the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago), William C. Hayes (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), Ralph Marcus (Hebrew Union College and Oriental Institute, University of Chicago), George R. Hughes and Keith C. Seele (both at the Oriental Institute). The site of DeMille's earlier 1923 silent production has itself been the subject of an archaeological project, see Sanchez, "Archaeological Dig".
42 Said, *Orientalism*, 243.
43 Brown, *Lawrence of Arabia*.
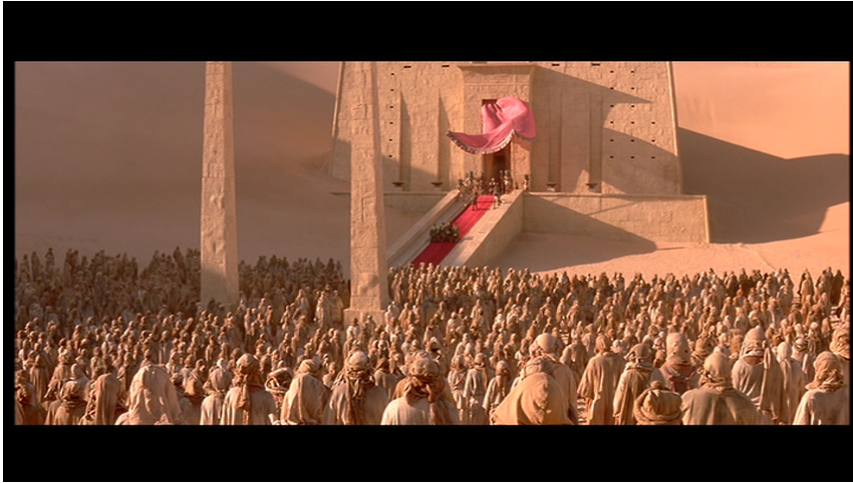44 Lawrence, "A Report on Mesopotamia"; see also Leach, "Lawrence of Arabia"; Brown, *Lawrence*.

Fig. 12: Execution ceremony at the temple façade (screen shot, *Stargate*).

tion and a condemnation of the misuse of religion and technological power to dominate through fear—a kind of Marxian analysis about false consciousness, in this case practiced by alien overlords on humans who have been absorbed into an interstellar, extractive empire, a theme that was clear to me in our discussions about the script. In the end, the locals penetrate the veil of ideology, led by the younger members of their community and eventually joined by their elders. In fact, it's not a bad critique of displays of power by ancient Egyptian kings, who used spectacle, theology, ethnic difference, and the threat of violence to support their rule (Figure 12).[45]

Of course in *Stargate*, the humans dominated are dark skinned "natives", which one might think would align with the "dark continent" theme found in the writing of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial literary figures like H. Rider Haggard and Joseph Conrad. However, as a person of color (of Philippine ancestry), Dean Devlin deliberately pushed for dark skinned actors to play the descendants of ancient Egyptians, resulting in the casting of people of African ancestry like Jaye Davidson and Djimon Honshu, Hispanic ancestry like Alexis Cruz and Carlos Launchu, and south Asian ancestry like Erik Avari. He deliber-

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[45] It has always surprised me how celebratory of authoritarian Pharaonic rule Egyptologists tend to be; for an alternative view see Cooney, *The Good Kings*; Smith, "Ethnicity"; Smith, "Colonial Gatherings". See also my back and forth with Barry Kemp about the audience and purpose of Egyptian ideology, imperial expansion, and temple building in Kemp, "Why Empires Rise"; Smith, "Ancient Egyptian Imperialism".

Fig. 13: Scene from *Exodus, Gods and Kings* showing the film's racialization of social hierarchy in ancient Egypt, similar to arguments from *Types of Mankind* (publicity still copyright Twentieth Century Fox).

ately chose to make both the good and evil Egyptian descendants dark, like north Africans, in part because of the whitewashing of ancient Egypt, but also the lack of decent roles for people of color like him. Of course, the film's white savior plot with its mostly white military team and American protagonists creates a kind of cognitive dissonance that to some extent undermines this empowerment, a tension also apparent in Lawrence's criticisms of Arab leadership, but at the same time the choices in casting subvert the racist message inherent in the casting of other popular films like *Gods of Egypt* (2016) and Ridley Scott's highly problematic *Exodus, Gods and Kings* (2014), which evokes the "master race" theories discussed above through the casting of white actors as the ruling elite (Figure 13).[46] In the same way that choices by Devlin and Emmerich complicated what could have been a racist message through its colonial themes, the casting of Jaye Davidson as the film's villain queered the film in ways that both play into stereotypes but can also be seen as diluting LGBTQ+ prejudice through creating an awareness of difference disordering normative gendered and sexual categories, a theme taken up in Act 4.

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46   Scott, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*; Mendelson, "Why 'Exodus' Didn't Need To Be Whitewashed"; Dennis Jr., "Ridley Scott's Explanation".

Act 4: Queering *Stargate*: Transgressions, Ambiguity, Atavism, and Orientalism

Ancient Egypt has long been the subject of a sexualized and eroticized gaze in Western historical accounts, paintings, novels, popular media, and films like *Stargate*. Egyptian bodies, including mummies, have also been sexualized, but in addition queered, in David M. Halperin's sense of a reordering or disordering of sexuality and gender, and a restructuring of relations of power and desire through the creation of ambiguity.[47] Along these lines, Dominic Montserrat observed that mummies were "an entity whose sexuality is ambiguous and equivocal, and inextricably linked with the somatic status of the mummy itself".[48] As Lynn Meskell points out, the Egyptian body was associated in the Western imagination with death, immortality, sexuality and revivification.[49] *Stargate*'s science-fiction villain Re embodies all of these concepts, an immortal constantly rejuvenated through alien technology who defies normative sexual and gendered categorizations, much like the original Egyptian sun god,[50] who embodied both male and female principles, and in myths like those surrounding the Eye of Re, in which the god transcends genders and sexualities, a topic that I return to later.

Stargate started as a kind of mummy movie, with an aged Re akin to Boris Karloff's Imhotep, kept alive through technology. Jasmine Day's summary of the plot of the mummy genre fits *Stargate*'s story arc well.[51] The discovery of the Stargate reflects mysterious beginnings, including a kind of curse to be deciphered and transgressed, initial excitement in exploring the forbidden, leading to disaster by awakening an evil ancient Egyptian force that had slumbered for millennia. In earlier versions of such stories—Day's "Preclassic" curse plot—the protagonists succumb to the mummy's curse, as in the original ending of Bram Stoker's novel *The Jewel of the Seven Stars* (1903), when the attempt to revive Queen Tera (who also has queer aspects) results in disaster.[52] *Stargate*'s ending is happier, like Day's

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47   Halperin, *Saint Foucault*.

48   Montserrat, *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings*, 162.

49   Meskell, "Consuming Bodies".

50   Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, 170. For the idea of regenerating ancient Egyptian bodies elsewhere in science fiction, see James Baillie's and Matt Szafran's contributions to this issue.

51   Day, *The Mummy's Curse*.

52   Stoker, *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, 178.

characterization of the later "Classic" curse plot, where the evil force is ultimately neutralized and the carnage is more limited.[53]

Stargate was transformed and queered with casting of Jaye Davidson, which happened late in pre-production—in part because of Jaye's notoriety in securing an Oscar nomination for his gender and sexually ambiguous role in *The Crying Game* (1992).[54] This shift was improvised—even when I joined the pre-production crew there was still talk of the withered body of the old god transforming into a youthful one, but in the end Emmerich and Devlin decided to deliberately queer the production via Jaye's androgyny and sexual fluidity, as Meskell points out creating an undercurrent of homoerotic tension between Re and Jackson that along with discomfort generated by Re's scantily clad "harem" of youths makes the overt heterosexual storyline pale by comparison (Figure 14).[55] The queer carnality of Re underlines the alien, exotic and ultimately evil qualities of Re and the aliens. Meskell sees this as the policing of heterosexual boundaries against an invasion of queerness, although she acknowledges that more positive interpretations are possible. Based on my experience working on the film and taking into consideration that Emmerich is openly gay, I would be inclined to argue for Meskell's alternative reading of Re: that

> the profile and visibility of the queer body is a positive iconic image, representing an acknowledgement of difference. If one were to follow Halperin's definition [of queerness], the re-ordering of sexual behaviors, constructions of gender and logics of representation presented in *Stargate* may be construed to be an important step forward for some viewers.[56]

Whatever its final reception, in the end it is the tension between Re and Jackson that drives the film, deliberately centering its queerness.

As Ardel Haefele-Thomas discusses,[57] Haggard's anti-hero Ayesha in the novel *She* (1886-7) reflects a similar queer otherness rooted in late nineteenth-century fears of the monstrous things that lurked at the edges of empire, what many scholars have characterized as the "Victorian" or "imperial Gothic". At once white

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53 A feature shared with *The Fifth Element* (1997); see Matt Szafran's contribution to this issue.

54 Jordan, *The Crying Game*.

55 Meskell, "Consuming Bodies".

56 Meskell, "Consuming Bodies", 74.

57 Haefele-Thomas, *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic*.

Fig. 14: Jaye Davidson as Re, surrounded by children (publicity still copyright MGM Studios).

and the other, Ayesha is an amalgam of late Victorian racial and sexual anxiety that refuses easy containment. Like Re, she crosses the boundaries between life and death, in her case disordering gendered stereotypes through her superior intellectual and physical strength and ruthless domination of the local society through fear and mystical power. Haggard's use of the uncanny in *She* destabilizes categories of race, gender, and sexuality through an ultimately anti-imperial and queer subtext, which suggests other ways of doing and being.[58]

Haggard's vision also reflects a late Victorian atavistic anxiety of an imperial periphery rebounding upon the core, contributing to its degeneration. There is also an element of guilt that reflects the imperial Gothic's uneasiness with the inevitable transgressions of empire and the threats to the core that arise through encounters with otherness.[59] Describing Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Judith Wilt put it this way: "There, at the bottommost inmost station of the advancing western empire, the imperialist meets a force long ignored, then rashly penetrated, which, in its counterattack, utterly defeats the west".[60] Mehmet Bey in Hammer's 1959 *The Mummy* plays upon these imperial anxieties, in a remarkably

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58 Chwala, "Emerging Transgothic Ecologies".
59 Brantlinger, "Imperial Gothic".
60 Wilt, "The Imperial Mouth", 618.

honest moment in popular media explicitly calling out the British archaeologist: "You are an intruder. You force your way in… Does this not trouble you at times, your conscience perhaps?" Later on he warns: "Profanity, blasphemy, religious desecration—all these you are guilty of, but the powers with which you have meddled do not rest easy. I think you shall not go unpunished".[61]

In many ways, Re is reminiscent of Haggard's antihero. The eternal queen is liminal in a classic Orientalist fashion: she is at once sensual, described as reptilian in her movements, sexually attractive, violent, and ruthless. Haggard's portrayal surely draws upon Roman accounts of Cleopatra VII, which played an important role as a central theme in Victorian Orientalism. This trope is embodied by the famous 1887 painting by Alexandre Cabanel of Cleopatra testing poisons (Figure 15).[62] On the one hand, the queen is sensual, sumptuously dressed and surrounded by luxury, reclining on her diwan. Ruthless, she watches dispassionately as the prisoners die, her latent power signaled by the lion and tiger skins that she lies upon and the live panther that sits next to her. In *Stargate*, Re adopts a similar languid and sensual guise with violence implied by his muscular enforcers and the alien technology always in the background. Like Ayesha and Cleopatra, he defies gendered and sexual stereotypes. His movements are sinuous like Haggard's description of an undulating, reptilian "She". Challenged in many ways as an actor, I have to say that Davidson did a superb job conveying this uncanny sensuality and ambivalence, perhaps leveraging his experience as a model. On set I would look over and be struck by just how well he embodied this trope through movement and pose.

Meskell sees these features as a feminization of Re.[63] In a similar way, one could argue that Ayesha was masculinized, creating a kind of feminist subtext in *She*.[64] However Re's court costume is really an elaborate and colorful high-tech version of an Egyptian king, specifically Akhenaton (Figure 16), who in parallel to the sun god himself embodies a degree of sexual and gendered ambiguity, likely already in antiquity but definitely shifting through various interpretations in modern times.[65] I would argue that the costume with the horned sun disk, evoking the goddess Hathor, along with his Victorian bustier-like court costume, were a part of a deliberate creation of gender and sexual fluidity and ambiguity. While the costume designer was doubtless intentionally evoking a bustier for the modern

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61 Glynn, *The Mummy on Screen*, 153–154; Fisher, *The Mummy*.
62 Meskell, "Consuming Bodies", 66–67.
63 Meskell, "Consuming Bodies".
64 Haefele-Thomas, *Victorian Gothic*.
65 Montserrat, *Akhenaten*.

Fig. 15: Alexandre Cabanel, "Cléopatre essayant des poisons sur des condamnés à mort" (1887, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, 1505, Wikimedia, public domain).

audience, the costume itself also resonates with corselets shown in militarized representations of kings and deities—adapted here by Kushites for their lion god Apedemak (Figures 16, 6)—further undermining gendered binaries. In a similar way, the Hathoric horned crown in turn resonates with the myth of the Eye of Re, and so is quite apropos and consistent with Re's own ambiguous nature (Figures 17 and 18). This connection is intentionally or serendipitously signaled in the atmospheric scene shown here, when a Hathoric Re appears directly below the Eye of Re disk. Although one often thinks of Sakhmet, Hathor is the deity most strongly associated as the Eye of Re, and it is this goddess who must be convinced to abandon the destruction of humanity and later to return to Egypt and make Re whole after wandering into Nubia.[66] Of course the Eye is also Re's enforcer in leonine aspect, manifest as Hathor, Sakhmet, Mut, and so on, quite fitting for the plot and again complicating notions of fixed gendered roles.

Re's final queering is in the alien who literally inhabits his body, creating what Meskell terms a kind of cyborg.[67] This plot device was also an afterthought, added in post-production based on reactions to test screenings, surprisingly given how central it is to the various TV series and spinoffs of the film. Emmerich and Devlin decided on the subplot of alien possession, glowing eyes, and a distorted and overlayed voice in order to make Re more menacing (a voice actor repeated

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66 Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 289–292.
67 Meskell, "Consuming Bodies".

Fig. 16: Apedemak wearing a corselet on the Lion Temple at Naga (photo by author); Jaye Davidson in his "bustier" costume. Jaye's glowing eyes were added in a post-production plot change to make him more alien/menacing (screen shot, *Stargate*).

Fig. 17: Palace scene showing Jaye Davidson as Re wearing a horned crown, further queering his character but resonating with the ancient Egyptian myth of the Eye of Re, which appears symbolically above him (publicity still copyright MGM Studios).

the lines, which were then blended with Jaye's original performance). This shift also explains why the subtitles sometimes don't match the actual Egyptian spoken during scenes involving Re. In the original and the shooting script, he was just the willing (co-opted) tool of the aliens, oppressing his own people with an alien ideology, iconography, and technology in exchange for the luxuries and immortality that the aliens could give him—an interesting subtext that remains to some extent but would have been stronger had Jaye been able to pull off the

performance. Making him into a cyborg creation was the only way Jaye/Re could appear sufficiently credible as a powerful threat, which says something about gendered and sexual stereotypes within American and Western society. In any case, adding the Alien possession makes Re even more strongly the Other, but also a kind of hybrid—occupying a Bhaba-esque in-between space that disrupts classifications and thus enhances his queer-ness.[68]

Epilogue: Strangers in Strange Lands

> *We are all strangers in a strange land, longing for home, but not quite knowing what or where home is. We glimpse it sometimes in our dreams, or as we turn a corner, and suddenly there is a strange, sweet familiarity that vanishes almost as soon as it comes...*
> Madeleine L'Engle, 1993[69]

Both the real Egyptologist (me) and the fictional one (Daniel Jackson) were strangers in strange lands. My journey was into a strange (to me) and hyperreal place, on the often astonishing sets of a major motion picture with its distinctive subculture, coaching actors like Jaye Davidson in vocalized ancient Egyptian (Figure 18). Moses's characterization of himself also resonates with the film's protagonist and his journey through the Stargate. In this respect (and others), he is far removed from the classical archaeological movie archetype, Indiana Jones, who is more a man of action than academic and returns triumphally to America after his adventures. Daniel Jackson also has a greater sense of ethics compared to the kind of shady dealings in which Jones was entangled. Vera and Gordon soften their critique by noting that in contrast to the usual trope, *Stargate*'s narrative is not simply a matter of the protagonist's whiteness triumphing and saving his darker allies. In contrast to the typical white outsider who swoops in and returns home, Jackson is himself transformed by the experience and finds a new home and family with his friends and partners, where he is finally not a stranger. Even O'Neill banishes his demons and becomes a more humane person.[70]

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68 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*; Halperin, *Saint Foucault*. In the case of *Stargate*, and many other films, the script was constantly changing, so this kind of adjustment was not unusual. In the days of print, each major set of changes was photocopied on a different colored paper, so my final shooting script looked a bit like a rainbow!

69 L'Engle, *The Rock that is Higher*.

70 Vera and Gordon, *Screen Saviors*, 35–36.

Fig. 18: Coaching Jaye Davidson, wearing the Hathoric costume, in vocalized Egyptian (publicity still copyright MGM Studios).

James Spader, an indie actor used to playing quirky characters, can also be seen as a stranger in a strange land (Figure 19). No stranger to a film set, he was nonetheless thrust onto the set of a big budget action adventure, science-fiction epic. James kept saying he would never work in Hollywood again and was only doing it to cover the cost of a hand crafted yacht, the *Flying Dream*, based on a 1914 America's Cup design. He showed me the half hull, which had elegant lines, and apparently was responsible for what has become a major revival in Northeast artisanal boatbuilding.[71] Fortunately, his prediction turned out quite the opposite, and he brought a certain quirkiness to his portrayal of an academic that I think made it one of the more convincing in film. I worked with him intensively on both the language and his character, who he made his own, being fully engaged in his craft in adjusting his dialog, performance, and aspects of the plot.

I was able to get a few Egyptological "easter eggs" into the film. When Jackson re-translates the cover stones inscription, he asks who the original translator was and suggests that "Must have used Budge, I don't know why they keep reprinting his books" (Film Clip 3). This was a reference to the ubiquitous reprints of Budge's books, which being a hundred years or more old have long been off

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71   Mayher, "The Buzzards Bay 25".

Fig. 19: Sitting in Re's throne with James Spader on set (photo courtesy of the author).

copyright and so are cheap to reprint but woefully out of date. He almost cut the line during a rehearsal of the scene, so I was relieved when he delivered it perfectly and it made it into the film. I also am in the film, in the audience in the early lecture scene where Jackson is heckled by colleagues, which I helped Dean Devlin write, in particular adding the comment asking if Jackson thought that the pyramids were built by "men from Atlantis". Any time Daniel Jackson's dialog had Egyptological content, I would work with Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich on the lines. They would give me the topic and I would provide an initial draft, which they would edit for length and content and then run past me again. But my favorite contribution is the scene where Sha'uri teaches Jackson how to pronounce Egyptian, which I wrote to convey the basic dynamics of vocalization (Film Clip 4), successfully since it got me a complement from Antonio Loprieno.

Film Clip 3: Jackson's complaint about Budge.
Online resource: http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/#/detail/23788265

Film Clips 4: Jackson and Sha'uri translation scene.
Online resource: http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/#/detail/23788266

Above all, *Stargate* is an exercise in hyperreality, where the distinction between real and simulation, real and reel, disappears,[72] in this case translating ancient Egypt directly into the realm of science fiction. In this sense, the film operates like the Victorian focus on rich, visual reconstructions, like the vivid paintings of Alma-Tadema[73] that, as Stephanie Moser has observed, transported "the viewer to antiquity, seductively using archaeological details to convince audiences that his visions could have been real".[74] *Stargate* created a similar sense of immersion translating ancient Egypt into film through the rich visual complexity and Egyptological detail produced by a combination of my input, Emmerich and Devlin's good instincts and their dedication to the suspension of disbelief, and other key members of the crew, especially from the cinematography, art, costumes, and props departments. My own work with the actors on the film in recreating vocalized Egyptian enhances the feeling of an alternate reality and contributes something novel (Figure 20). In a very real way language and scholarship plays a central role in the film's plot, which adds to its enduring appeal. Kurt Russell came up to me on a particularly hot day in the desert and complained that what I was doing didn't matter and they would screw up the language in the final version, so it was just wasted effort. But in the end he was wrong, thanks to the support of the other actors and Emmerich and Devlin, who brought me in at every stage of production, including looping (dubbing dialog to compensate for poor sound quality). I even coached the "loop groups" on background chatter and translated a song that appears as background music at several points in the film. Lynn Meskell commented that Egyptologists were horrified by the film,[75] but in my experience has been the opposite—it's become a kind of Egyptological cult classic with a clever, if wildly inaccurate, science-fiction premise with equally clever futuristic Egyptian imagery, and an opportunity to hear actors speaking a real approximation of ancient Egyptian.

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72 "Hyperreality is seen as a condition in which what is real and what is fiction are seamlessly blended together so that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins"; Bharathi and Ajit, "Hyperreality". See also Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

73 Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema was one of the most popular Victorian painters, famous for his vibrant and meticulously reconstructed scenes of life in ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt; see Prettejohn and Trippi, *Lawrence Alma-Tadema*. His work has inspired a number of films, from the silent era to *Gladiator* (2000), most notably Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 lush technicolor production of *The Ten Commandments*, which, as noted above, provided some of the inspiration for *Stargate*.

74 Moser, "Reconstructing Ancient Worlds", 1302.

75 Meskell, "Consuming Bodies", 70.

Fig. 20: On set with actors Milli Avital, Gianin Loffler, and Alexis Cruz (photo courtesy of the author).

This does raise a more serious question: have I lent credibility to misconceptions about ancient Egypt by contributing to a film with a *Chariots of the Gods?*-inspired premise that ancient astronauts were responsible for the pyramids? While as I noted above, the ancient aliens theme is in some ways the most extreme diffusionist model, invoking intervention from beyond earth and playing on tropes that deny the accomplishments of non-Western civilizations, their arguments do at least minimally extend to European, and even Classical accomplishments. The theme of aliens also has less appeal to white supremacist narratives by omitting the "master race" framing of earlier diffusionist models. As a result, the hyperdiffusionist trope of Atlantis has a greater appeal to these groups because it can be used to create an Aryan homeland that spread civilization worldwide. For me the main consideration is that, whatever the interests of its creators, *Stargate* is above all a science-fiction film, without the docudrama framing of films like *Exodus, Gods and Kings*, or pseudo archaeological arguments of von Däniken himself and television series like *Ancient Aliens* (2009-present). I

doubt that anyone would seriously believe based upon the film's influence that the pyramids of Giza were landing pads for alien spacecraft (Figure 21).[76]

Moser points out that the ways in which representations of ancient Egypt are incorporated into popular culture shape understandings of ancient worlds like Egypt but are placed in dialog not only with contemporary academic treatments but also previous traditions of reception.[77] Films like *Stargate* reflect deep and long-held Orientalizing notions about the nature of ancient Egyptian civilization. As is the case for science fiction in general, in film and the other media discussed in this issue, futuristic ideas adapt historical contexts and imagery to suit contemporary beliefs and concerns, some of which have a long history. Popular media like films are deliberately designed to appeal to modern audiences; in the case of film, tweaked and re-edited based on audience reactions to pre-screenings, as was the case with *Stargate*. Within that context, Devlin and Emmerich complicated the often racist subtext of the ancient aliens trope through choices in casting that represented ancient Egyptians as dark skinned, and the Orientalizing framing of Re and his court by queering the plot, fronting Re's androgyny and the sexual tension with Jackson. While the audience reception might not be completely unproblematic, their choices contrast dramatically with recent films like *Exodus, Gods and Kings* (2014), *Gods of Egypt* (2016), and the *Mummy* remake (2017), which whitewash and view Egypt with an Orientalizing gaze, and for the last in particular making no attempt to complicate gender or sexual identity.[78] Emmerich plays on these with Re and the court, but at the same time queers the film in a way that highlights gendered and sexual difference. We should not expect them to adhere to an academic standard, whether in Sun Ra's Egypto-futuristic music (see Rita Lucarelli's contribution to this issue) or in *Stargate*. The degree of accuracy in the film, in particular the way the language and its pronunciation drives the plot and James Spader's convincing performance as an academic, set it apart from films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), which pay little attention to archaeological

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76 This, like so many of *Stargate*'s tropes, can be charted back to nineteenth-century fiction. See Dobson, *Victorian Alchemy*.

77 Moser, "Reconstructing Ancient Worlds".

78 An uncredited adaption of Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, *The Mummy* (2017), like the novel, plays on the same tropes of the imperial Gothic described above, for which see Corriou, "The Return of the Victorian Mummy". A more forward-thinking production could have given a more feminist cast to Stoker's story of the wronged Queen Tera, who was inspired by the famous 18th Dynasty queen who ruled as king, Hatshepsut, but as Corriou points out Kurtzman's female mummy is remarkably weak compared to her male counterparts and is ultimately punished for her transgressions against male hegemony. For critiques of the other films see Dennis, "Ridley Scott's Explanation"; Mendelson, "Why 'Exodus' Didn't Need To Be Whitewashed"; Hoffman, "Gods of Egypt review".

Fig. 21: CGI moons, pyramid, and spacecraft overlayed on the temple façade set in Buttercup Dunes (screen shot, *Stargate*).

and historical realities.[79] Was the film's impact on balance positive or negative? I am inclined for the former, but regardless, we should place these ancient Egypt-themed science-fiction creations in their cultural and historical context—in the end, they tell us more about the individuals and societies that created them than the civilization that inspired them.

Acknowledgements

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79 Spielberg, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. This is a film with which archaeologists have a love-hate relationship—if nothing else, a sounding board for beginning a discussion of how real archaeology is different from Spielberg's cinematic version, which has inspired generations of students to pursue the field (as have *Stargate* and the first two *Mummy* films, directed by Stephen Sommers, for Egyptologists).

I would also like to thank my friend Gordon Smith for representing me, Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich for their dedication to making *Stargate* as accurate as possible outside of the ancient aliens conceit, and last but not least the cast and crew of the film, who made the whole experience a remarkable and pleasant one: in particular, James Spader, Eric Avari, Alexis Cruz, Milli Avital, Djimon Hounsou, Gianin Loffler, Carlos Lauchu, and Jaye Davidson, who brought the ancient Egyptian language to life for me and others who have watched the film.

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