

Representing Ancient Egypt in *The Fifth Element* (1997): Pith Helmets, Hieroglyphs, and Sarcophagi

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Abstract

Luc Besson's 1997 movie *The Fifth Element* is mostly remembered for its bright and flamboyant vision of the 23rd century, and of course Leeloo Dallas and her Multi Pass. However, the 11-minute opening scene takes place in an Egyptian temple in 1914, and touches on virtually all of Hollywood's Egyptian tropes from pyramids to camels to ancient secrets hidden in hieroglyphic inscriptions. Here a European professor and his American draughtsman study the remote desert temple's hieroglyphic inscriptions, trying to decipher its ancient secrets warning of great evil and instructing how to save the universe. The set for the temple interior was created at Pinewood Studios, with the art department clearly inspired by Egypt monumental sculpture – many of which anachronistic for the period the temple was supposedly built. This essay investigates how the hieroglyphic inscriptions of these monuments have been used and adapted to create a vision of Egypt for the audience, and how other hieroglyphic motifs were completely fabricated to fit the movie's narrative.

Keywords

Luc Besson; *The Fifth Element*; science; fiction; hieroglyphs; temple; Orientalism; Egyptology; mummy.

The 1997 film *The Fifth Element*, directed by Luc Besson and written by Besson and Robert Mark Kamen, opens on a scene of the exploration of an Egyptian temple in 1914. We see Professor Pacoli (John Plunthal) deciphering the temple's inscriptions, aided by his draughtsman Billy (Luke Perry) and a group of local boys including Aziz (Said Talidi), who is responsible for reflecting light for the professor to work by. The professor's decipherment provides the audience with story-setting exposition that every 5,000 years a great evil will appear, and that it can be stopped by gathering the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water around a fifth element.

The professor's decipherment is interrupted by the arrival of a spaceship and its alien crew (a species known as the Mondoshawan), who enter the temple and open a secret chamber containing the five elements. The Mondoshawan explain that with the First World War approaching the five elements are no longer safe on Earth, and that they will restore them to their rightful place in 300 years when the evil returns.



Fig. 1: A Mondoshawan approaches hieroglyphic carved wall in the Egyptian temple.
© Gaumont.

The film then cuts to the year 2263 and the arrival of a giant fireball, which priest Vito Cornelius (Ian Holm) advises the president is the great evil and that the only weapon against it is in the hands of the Mondoshawan. However, as the Mondoshawan are returning to Earth they are attacked by agents of the great evil, destroying their spaceship. A severed hand is recovered from the wreckage, which is used by the Earth government to reanimate a humanoid woman, Leeloo (Milla Jovovich).

Leeloo escapes from the government facility, crashing through the roof of a flying taxi operated by former special forces soldier Korben Dallas (Bruce Willis). Dallas takes Leeloo to Cornelius, who realises that Leeloo is the Fifth Element. The film then charts the journey of Leeloo and Dallas as they evade Gary Oldman's character—Jean-Baptiste Emanuel Zorg—who is acting as the great evil's agent, to recover the remaining four element stones and battle their way to the Egyptian temple to ultimately destroy the great evil.

Scholarly discussion of *The Fifth Element* has focused on particular aspects of the film, predominantly the tension between the film's futurism and its reflection of the culture of the 1990s, specifically the film's imagined twenty-third-century architecture, and the relationship between the film's vision of the future and the identity politics of the filmmakers' and original audience's present moment.¹ *The Fifth Element* was carefully crafted using the input of a visionary all-French creative team, with fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier designing the extravagant and often ostentatious costumes worn by the actors, concept art drawn by Jean-Claude Mézières and Jean Giraud (better known as Moebius), and Dan Weili

¹ Coddington, "Architecture as a Vessel"; Ott and Aoki, "Counter-Imagination".

as production designer.² The vision of the future this team conjures up is so rich and vibrant that it is easy to forget that the film begins in 1914 pre-war Egypt. But the 11-minute opening scene outlined above demonstrates how the science fiction genre is not just interested in the future and draws on Hollywood's plentiful Egyptian tropes, ranging from colonial Egyptologists in pith helmets and "secrets" hidden in hieroglyphic inscriptions to the (unfortunately cinematically ubiquitous) ancient aliens (Fig. 1). This article thus adds to existing critical discussion of *The Fifth Element's* understanding of the future and present by turning to its depiction of the past, providing an Egyptological insight into the use of Egyptian symbolism and its adaptation and incorporation into both the set design and also in thematic elements of *The Fifth Element's* story. Drawing on the film itself with support from both the novelisation and concept art publication, and paying attention to possible audience expectations of Egyptological material, how the film plays to these tropes, and how it subtly challenges certain ideas and expectations, such a reading exposes interesting examples of both a genuine pharaonic iconography and symbolism adapted and reused to fit to the narrative of the story, along with a critique of the colonial appropriation of Egypt's past. In doing so, I propose that we read *The Fifth Element* not just as a science-fiction film intent on probing Orientalist tropes and playing creatively with Egyptian iconography, but a film whose earliest scene invites us to interpret its subsequent events hundreds of years later as a futuristic mummy narrative.

Colonial Era Egyptology

To illustrate the colonial era in which the opening scene is set, we see a linen-clad European professor and his American draughtsman studying the temple's hieroglyphic inscriptions—with requisite pith helmets hung from their chairs (Fig. 2).

There is a clear delineation between the local Egyptians' and the Westerners' understandings of, and interest in, the temple. The boys appear to care little about the work of the European and American team and are content to either sleep on the job or play outside. The novelisation of the film even states that the boys see the hieroglyphic inscriptions as nothing more than "graffiti" and "scratchings".³ In this way, both sources demonstrate a deep-rooted, insidious colonial view of

² IMDb, "The Fifth Element (1997): Full Cast & Crew"; Besson, *The Story of the Fifth Element*.

³ Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*, 3–4.



Fig. 2: Local Egyptian boy watches from the shadows as the European professor translates the outer temples wall's hieroglyphic inscriptions. © Gaumont.

modern Egyptians as stereotypically lazy and uninterested in their history, except when it comes to robbing tombs of their gold and silver.⁴ Only the (unnamed) water-boy shows an interest in the Egyptologists, but he is relegated to watching from the shadows (Fig. 2). Through the careful framing of this shot the audience adopts the view of the excluded Egyptian boy, only able to observe the Western investigation into the past and not actively able to participate. In the audience's positioning as aligned with the water-boy, we are primed to see Egyptological insights as esoteric, and the sources these specialists scrutinise as beyond our own limited understanding.

The idea of erudite European explorers discovering the secrets of Egypt whilst lazy Egyptians care only for loot was, by 1997, by no means new. This laziness trope stems from nineteenth-century colonialism.⁵ The publisher of one of the most popular tourist guidebooks of the time, Karl Baedeker, stated that "Orientals" were apathetic, duplicitous, and indolent, in strong contrast to Europeans.^{6 7} Even when European excavators attempted to demonstrate their respect for the knowledge and expertise of local people, this was often undercut in a way that reveals Orientalist biases. Nineteenth-century Egyptologists such as Flinders Petrie, for instance, benefitted from close working relationships with Egyptians.⁸

⁴ Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*, 2.

⁵ Price, *Golden Mummies*, 27; Riggs, *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt*, 42.

⁶ Baedeker, *Egypt: Handbook for Travellers*, 48, 49, 223.

⁷ Recently, however, these depictions have begun to be challenged, with examples such as the 2022 Disney production *Moon Knight* countering some of these ideas by featuring both an Egyptian archaeologist (although he was promptly killed off), and also an Egyptian superhero in the form of a female avatar for an ancient Egyptian god.

⁸ James, *The Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, 2.



Fig. 3: Exterior of the Egyptian Temple. © Gaumont.

Ali Suefi, who oversaw excavations for more than 30 years, was described by Petrie as his “best lad” and has not only been credited with numerous finds but was also responsible for training Egyptian excavators for Petrie.⁹ Petrie’s comment though complimentary does, however, suggest a kind of infantilisation of Suefi, the term “lad” at once affectionate and diminutive. It calls to mind Edward W. Said’s influential conceptualisation of the Orient in the Western imaginary; “the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike”, while the Occidental is the opposite.¹⁰ While the scenario with which *The Fifth Element* opens indeed draws upon some of these Orientalist tropes, our alignment with the water boy implies we look on the scene that unfolds with childlike interest and wonder ourselves, subtly destabilising this binary.

The Egyptian Temple: Alienising Ancient Egypt

The original concept art for the temple was a partially buried stone building with the exterior covered in typical ancient Egyptian iconography and hieroglyphs.¹¹ The ultimate vision of the temple changed, however, and what we see onscreen is very different to extant Egyptian monuments. From the outside, the temple does not bear similarity to what most people would consider an “Egyptian temple”: there are no columns, hieroglyphs, or use of stone blocks on the exterior, and it does not bear any resemblance to Egyptian temples such as those at Edfu, Karnak,

⁹ Garnett, “Revealing the Characters”; Quirke, *Hidden Hands*.

¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

¹¹ Besson, *The Story of the Fifth Element*, 164.



Fig. 4: Stylised sarcophagus containing the Fifth Element. © Gaumont.

or Luxor. There is a slight resemblance to the Western Deffufa at the Nubian site of Kerma, however, as this is a now ruined mudbrick construction and the temple design in *The Fifth Element* is a natural rock formation this visual comparison may just be coincidental. The exterior shot (Fig. 3) was taken in the northwest African country of Mauritania,¹² using a set based on the first century CE Qasr al Farid tomb in Saudi Arabia, and the internal shots were all taken on soundstages at Pinewood Studios in the UK.¹³ It is possible that the design was changed to this non-Egyptian style to depict something ‘other’ and ‘alien’ to perhaps unsettle the audience’s perceived image of an Egyptian temple—with the opening almost appearing as the entrance to a cave. This ‘alien’ exterior serves to make the more familiar Egyptianising elements of the temple’s interior feel somehow less familiar, something also reflected in the use of non-Egyptian hieroglyphs and iconography which are depicted inside the temple (and which will be discussed in further detail in subsequent sections of this article).

The temple comprises three distinct sections: a colonnade leading to an apparent dead-end chamber with a wall of hieroglyphic inscriptions, behind which is a hidden pyramid-shaped chamber containing the titular Fifth Element in the form of a stylised sarcophagus (Figs. 4 & 5) along with the other four element “stones”.

There is a very clear visual distinction between the hidden, pyramidal, five-element chamber (Fig. 5) and the outer colonnade (Fig. 6). The inner chamber is spartan in its decoration, with niches containing horse statues and raised geometric borders (Fig. 7), almost reminiscent of a Tatooine settlement in *Star Wars* (1977). This may be a deliberate choice to reflect the “galaxy far, far away”,

¹² “*The Fifth Element* (1997): Filming and Production”.

¹³ “*The Fifth Element* (1997): Filming and Production”.

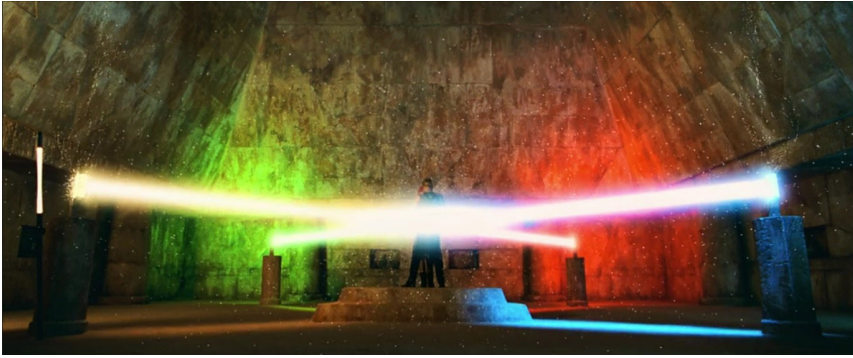


Fig. 5: The temple's pyramidal inner chamber, with the four elements activating.
© Gaumont.



Fig. 6: Colonnade in the temple's outer chamber. © Gaumont.

as there are other possible *Star Wars* allusions in *The Fifth Element*. Examples of these include Vito Cornelius' robes being extremely reminiscent of the *Jedi* robes in *Star Wars*, the name of the warlike mercenary alien race—the Mangalore—being phonetically similar to the *Star Wars* universe's world of Mandalor and its equally warlike mercenary Mandalorian inhabitants, along with a briefly seen character who wears a similar “cinnamon bun” hairstyle to Carrie Fisher's Princess Leia character in *Star Wars* (1977). These connections were not lost on *The Fifth Element*'s cast; the film was reportedly described as being “like *Star Wars* on acid” by Gary Oldman.¹⁴

The outer chamber is very stereotypically Egyptian, with the entrance opening onto a carved stone colonnade leading to a wall of hieroglyphic and figurative

¹⁴ Collin, “Has there ever been a sci-fi movie”.



Fig. 7: The temple's pyramidal inner chamber, with the horse statue in niche. © Gaumont.

inscriptions, which is also the door to the secret inner chamber. The novelisation also differentiates between inner and outer chambers, with the inner chamber being smooth, bright marble-like stone and the outer being a reddish stone.¹⁵

While not made explicit in the film or its novelisation, the implication is that the temple was created by the extra-terrestrial Mondoshawan species. The novelisation mentions that the priests had not entered the chamber prior to its 1914 unsealing, implying that this chamber was prohibited for the human caretakers and only intended for the Mondoshawan. This idea is reminiscent of the secrecy of Egyptian temples which were usually only accessible for the priests and elites of society and not for use by the general population.¹⁶ There is a further parallel in that the operation of temples was also shrouded in secrecy, just as the human characters are unaware of exactly how to operate the five element stones.

This idea of extra-terrestrial monument building follows one of Hollywood's favourite tropes for depicting ancient Egypt: that of ancient aliens. The pseudo-scientific ancient alien theory states that impressive monumental building in the ancient world was completed, or at least directed, by extra-terrestrial visitors with superior technology, as the indigenous populations of the time would have been unable to complete this building with their own tools and technologies. This idea can be charted back to works of fiction in the late nineteenth century,¹⁷ and entered non-fiction writing as a speculative hypothesis in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁸ However, it was not until Swiss author Erich von Däniken's 1968 publi-

¹⁵ Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*, 14.

¹⁶ Riggs, *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt*, 153–185.

¹⁷ Nielsen, *Egyptomaniacs*, 145–147; Dobson, *Victorian Alchemy*, 90–98.

¹⁸ Nielsen, *Egyptomaniacs*, 147–148.

cation *Chariots of the Gods?* that ancient alien theory truly entered the popular consciousness.¹⁹ From there the ideas took root and grew in momentum with contributions by other authors,²⁰ and even the creation of television “documentary” series, including, most recently, the History Channel’s *Ancient Aliens* (2009–present).

These theories are usually applied to non-European civilisations, with Egypt being a particularly common target, and hinge on the concept that ancient peoples were not capable of such impressive building work and therefore it could only have been created with an outside influence.²¹ Whilst ancient alien theory has been branded racist²² and baseless,²³ these theories have unfortunately gained significant traction with Hollywood and in popular culture, leading many to believe that “mainstream” archaeological and Egyptological communities are acting as gatekeepers to this knowledge, deliberately hiding evidence from the general public.²⁴

The Fifth Element only features one temple, which is shown in a remote desert location and not a part of a larger site, therefore it is only this temple which is linked with extra-terrestrial input and not the wider Egyptian monumental building. The significant difference in visual culture of the inside and outside of the hidden chamber, and the very non-Egyptian style of the exterior of the temple, implies that the director and art department sought to separate ancient Egyptian culture from that of the Mondoshawan. However, it should be noted that there is clearly an alien influence on the hieroglyphic inscriptions, to which I turn in this article’s following sections. If the external temple design was changed from a more conventional pharaonic Egyptian structure to make it seem less familiar and more alien, then this would imply that the production team perceived the visual culture of pharaonic Egypt as being too familiar to audiences and that differentiation was required for this primarily Mondoshawan structure to underscore its distinctness.

Egyptomania essentially separates the ancient and the modern; this process then leads to the predominant portrayal of ancient Egypt through a romanticised

19 Colavito, *The Cult of Alien Gods*; Nielsen, *Egyptomaniacs*, 148.

20 Nielsen, *Egyptomaniacs*, 148–150.

21 Nielsen, *Egyptomaniacs*, 149.

22 For example, Halmhofer, “Did Aliens Build the Pyramids?”; Killgrove, “What Archaeologists Really Think About Ancient Aliens”; Wade, “Believe in Atlantis?”.

23 Sheaffer, “Erich von Daniken’s ‘Chariots of the Gods’”.

24 Halmhofer, “Did Aliens Build the Pyramids?”; Killgrove, “What Archaeologists Really Think About Ancient Aliens”.

and orientalised lens as being mystical and somehow “other”.²⁵ This abstraction of ancient Egypt has been represented in countless films (such as the entire genre of mummy films), television programmes (such as *Stargate SG-1*), and other forms of popular culture. These ideas, divorcing the ancient from the modern Egypt, are now taught from an early age.²⁶ Ancient Egypt—or, rather, a stereotypical view of ancient Egypt—is thus well known in the Western popular consciousness, and cinema-going audiences at the time of *The Fifth Element*’s premiere and subsequently would have a basic idea of what an ancient Egyptian temple looks like. Therefore, if *The Fifth Element* production team wanted to create something of extra-terrestrial construction, without fully subscribing to ancient alien theory and attributing all Egyptian monumental construction to aliens, it would need to be notably different to the audience’s expectation of pharaonic Egyptian construction. This is perhaps the reason that the design of the exterior of the temple draws on historical parallels but does not reflect stereotypical pharaonic imagery—in contrast to the concept artwork. This may be an example of the filmmakers breaking with conventional stereotypes and not using ancient Egyptian iconography alone to denote something “alien” or “other”, instead adding in something which can be perceived by the audience as being clearly further removed from their expectations of “alien” iconography. Perhaps this is due to even non-specialist audiences having, or being perceived to have, an understanding and recognition of ancient Egyptian visual culture, and so Egypt itself can no longer evoke “otherness” without augmentation.

The Temple Colonnade: Inscribing Karnak on the Big Screen

The interior, however, is a different matter. Perhaps playing to the audience expectation of what architectural features an Egyptian temple should contain, the temple opens into a colonnade. The columns of the colonnade are decorated with hieroglyphs and other Egyptian iconography. It is unusual for film production art departments to invent hieroglyphic inscriptions outright; instead, it is easier to borrow from actual Egyptian sculpture and monumental structures, as can be seen in various mummy films and in television programmes such as *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007). The team who created the temple set for *The Fifth Element* was no

²⁵ Nielsen, *Egyptomaniacs*, 174–175.

²⁶ For example, with children’s books aimed at teaching young audiences, including Deary, Hepplewhite, and Brown, *Awesome Egyptians*; Deary and Brown, *Awful Egyptians*.



Fig. 8: Rameses IV cartouches on column in the temple colonnade. © Gaumont.

exception, and by comparing the carving of the columns to Egyptological source material it is possible to find the original reference used.

The columns in the colonnade feature a fan of papyrus underneath the *rekhyt* rebus which are flanked by a large cartouche of 20th Dynasty king Rameses IV's nomen topped with an atef crown, itself flanked by cobras with ankhs hanging from them (Figs. 8 & 9). This combination helps to identify exactly which source the art department used for set design: Karnak temple. Karnak temple's hypostyle hall not only features over 1000 *rekhyt* rebuses,²⁷ but also some instances of the exact same combination of *rekhyt*, papyrus, and large atef-crowned cobra-flanked cartouches (Fig. 9).

Referencing Karnak temple has almost itself become a film trope in movies drawing upon ancient Egyptian iconography. It has featured in other films and television programmes, both as an actual shooting location,²⁸ and mentioned and represented in other films such as *The Mummy Returns* (2001). Agatha Christie named the steamer in *Death on the Nile* (1937) the *Karnak*, and Christopher Lee's Kharis character in *The Mummy* (1959) was said to be a high priest of Karnak.²⁹

This is not to say that hieroglyphs are used in *The Fifth Element* simply as a kind of evocative set dressing. While it is clear that there are particular reference points in real temple inscriptions, these have been adapted, rewarding a careful consideration of their symbolism in this new, fantastical context. A different cartouche can be seen as the pseudo-sarcophagus containing the Fifth Element

²⁷ Griffin, "Images of the Rekhyt from Ancient Egypt", 46.

²⁸ IMDb, "Filming Location matching 'Karnak+Temple,+Luxor,+Egypt' (Sorted by Popularity Ascending)".

²⁹ However, it should be noted that in this instance Karnak was the name given to a fictitious god and was not in reference to the temple itself.



Fig. 9: Column in the Hypostyle Hall of Karnak Temple. © Dr Ken Griffin.

is removed from the temple by the Mondoshawan (Fig. 10). This appears to be based on 12th Dynasty king Senwosret I's prenomen cartouche, which can also be found on columns in Karnak temple. It has been modified, however, to change the sun-disc to a lunar disc and to append a modified version of the leopard head, F9 in the Gardiner hieroglyphic sign list,³⁰ with unusually large ears—not unlike those of the Mangalore. By adding a lunar disc to the cartouche, we are changing sun to moon and echoing the film's over-arching themes of polar opposites and the struggle between good and evil.

We are told that a planetary alignment allows evil to return every 5000 years.³¹ The later part of the film is set in 2263 CE, which means that the previous

³⁰ Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 544–548.

³¹ Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*, 6.



Fig. 10: Modified Senwosret I cartouche on column in the temple colonnade. © Gaumont.

alignment would have been during pharaonic Egypt's 2nd Dynastic period in 2737 BCE. Very little is known of this period, and it would be difficult for Egyptologists to recreate a 2nd Dynasty temple, especially as it is typically accepted that the 3rd Dynastic period saw the emergence of the use of stone for monumental construction. However, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that any such temple that survived would depict elements of later Dynasties, as Egyptian architecture was not static and was instead used, reused, adapted, co-opted, and changed over its period of use, including later rulers adding their names to the inscriptions.³² The temple colonnade is based on the hypostyle hall at Karnak temple, which itself was changed and adapted over time with new kings adding their names to the walls and new sections being added to the original structure.³³ Thus 12th Dynasty elements are not anachronistic in this space. While some aspects of the temple derive from genuine ancient Egyptian sources, this timeline also offers some explanation as to why the temple exterior was designed to look so unfamiliar to the film's audience.

Hieroglyphic Use, Reuse, and Adaptation

One aspect of the Egyptian iconography represented on the base of the temple columns is the *rekhyt* bird rebus (Fig. 11). This rebus (Fig. 12) is translated as “all

³² Bryan, “The 18th Dynasty”, 249; Strudwick and Strudwick, *Thebes in Egypt*, 67–71.

³³ Bryan, “The 18th Dynasty”, 249; Strudwick and Strudwick, *Thebes in Egypt*, 67–71.



Fig. 11: *Rekhyt* rebus on column in the temple colonnade. © Gaumont.



Fig. 12: Standard *rekhyt* rebus.

of the *Rekhyt* people worship N”, where N is the name of a king whose cartouche is placed adjacent to the rebus.³⁴

The term *Rekhyt* people is typically understood as being a social class description to represent the “common people” of Egypt. However, the use of term is complicated and is likely to have changed and evolved over time from their initial representation in the Protodynastic period though to the Roman period, and the term *Rekhyt* people may have represented mythical beings, a tribe, followers of the god Seth, people from the Delta region of Egypt, rebellious foreigners, lower-class citizens, or worshippers par-excellence who participated in festivals.³⁵

³⁴ Griffin, “Images of the *Rekhyt* from Ancient Egypt”, 47.

³⁵ Griffin, *All the Rekhyt-people Adore*.

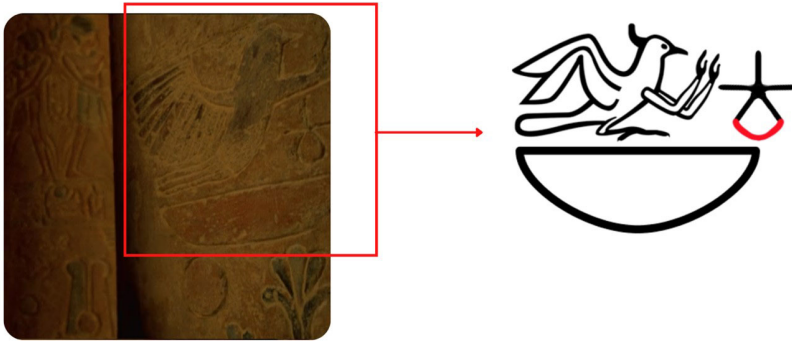


Fig. 13: Modified *rekhyt* rebus on temple colonnade column. © Gaumont.

The traditional *rekhyt* rebus (Fig. 12) features a five-pointed star (Gardiner N14), meaning “worship”, in front of a *rekhyt* (lapwing) bird on top of the basket hieroglyph, meaning “all”. The bird itself is also depicted with upraised human-style arms to effect the act of worshipping. It is noteworthy that the five-pointed star symbol in the *rekhyt* rebus has been replaced with an inverted *ankh* sign by joining the two lower points with a semicircle (Fig. 13). The ankh is quite possibly the best-known Egyptian hieroglyph, and even many non-Egyptophiles will be aware of its meaning as the symbol of life. If the ankh is inverted then the symbol for life itself has been upended, and thus this variant could take on the opposite meaning for perceptive modern viewers and be interpreted a symbol for death. This is not unlike many horror films where, since the 1960s, an inverted cross is used to represent the occult and demonic practice.³⁶

This inversion may be an interesting artistic play on the story idea where the outcome is decided on whether good (the Fifth Element) or bad (the malevolent entity) stand in the temple. Vito Cornelius explains that if evil stands in the temple, then “white turns to black, light to dark, life to death”;³⁷ the inverted ankh may foreshadow this. This would ultimately mean that rather than saying “all the *Rekhyt* people worship the king”, the rebus could perhaps now be interpreted as “all the *Rekhyt* people die”, the very action Cornelius outlines as the result of evil standing in the temple.

The temple’s large hieroglyphic wall is never clearly seen on camera in its entirety, with only close-up shots of sections or a full but distant view being used. However, these shots do show us enough to see that there are sections of

³⁶ “Upside Down Cross Meaning”, *Symbols and Meanings*.

³⁷ Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*, 38.

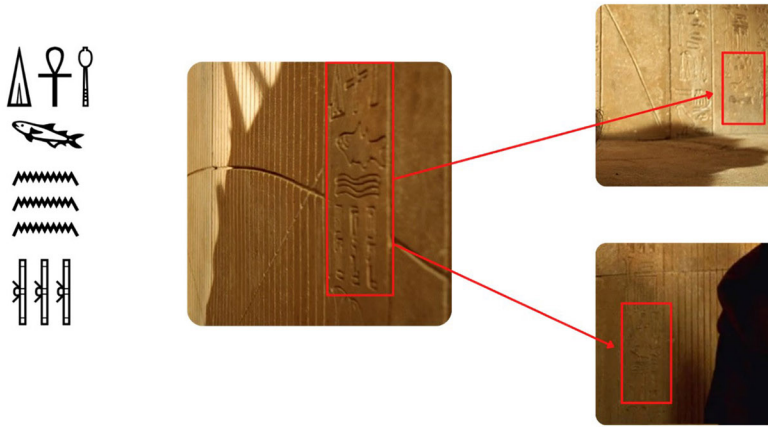


Fig. 14: Repeating groups of hieroglyphs on temple wall. © Gaumont.

hieroglyphs written both horizontally and vertically, figures, and the three main registers that the professor translates to provide the narrative exposition. Though not named in the film, I refer to these three registers for convenience as the leftmost “Five Elements Register”, the central “People Register”, and the rightmost “Snake Register”. There are also non-Egyptian motifs such as chevrons, and semi-circular and vertical lines, very reminiscent of the iconography of *Stargate* (1994), another film heavily reliant on the ancient aliens trope, and which benefitted from the specialist Egyptological insights of Stuart Tyson Smith, who relates his experiences in an essay in this special issue.

By comparing the different close-up shots, we can see that there are repeating patterns of hieroglyphs (Fig. 14) and that they do not follow the expected orientation rules (Fig. 15); in certain sections of the inscriptions the reading direction changes randomly with bird hieroglyphs facing each other rather than oriented in a uniform direction. This is not uncommon for film production; a section of hieroglyphs will be taken from an original object or building and then decontextualised to be used as nothing more than a “copy and paste” pattern to fill space. This is an expedient way to make something feel Egyptian, with the vast majority of the audience unable to recognise that the hieroglyphs are meaningless, and so they serve as background detail with the audience’s main focus being on the actors. It is interesting, however, to note that the water sign has been changed from the “zig-zag” style used by the Egyptians to that of a wavy line which matches wavy designs seen on the element stones (Fig. 14). The human figures are not shown clearly, but it would be safe to assume that they



Fig. 15: Hieroglyphic inscriptions in the outer temple, which do not follow orientation rules.
© Gaumont.

too are taken out of their original context—most likely from Egyptian funerary inscriptions on monumental sculpture.

We do not see the three registers clearly together in a single frame, and instead the director shows them in close-up panning shots. The professor translates the Snake Register (Fig. 16), with the camera panning down it as he traces it with a brush. The first symbol at the top of the register is a geometric design which we are told represents the planetary alignment that allows the great evil to enter our universe. This is not an Egyptian astrological symbol and is purely a construct for the film, later used to segue from the opening scene to 349 years into the future.

The main part of the register is a large snake emerging from the sky hieroglyph (Gardiner N1), with the snake itself appearing to be a stylised merging of genuine hieroglyphs (Gardiner I14 and I15), which has then been rotated through 90 degrees (Fig. 17). The ultimate symbol of snake and sky is very reminiscent of the Egyptian determinative for “night” (Gardiner N2), which fits with the professor’s narration of a great evil coming through a doorway-like blackhole and bringing darkness and death. Snakes play a noteworthy role in Egyptian mythology, with Apep (sometimes called by the Greek name Apophis) being the nightly antagonist for Ra on his solar barque as can be seen in funerary texts such as the *Amduat* (also referred to as the Book of the Hidden Chamber) and the Book of Gates.³⁸ The seventh hour of The *Amduat* depicts Apep halting Ra’s barque, and being subdued with magic, cut with knives, and bound in chains (Fig. 18). Below the snake there are figures representing the dead, using the Gardiner

³⁸ Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*, 27-54, 55-77.

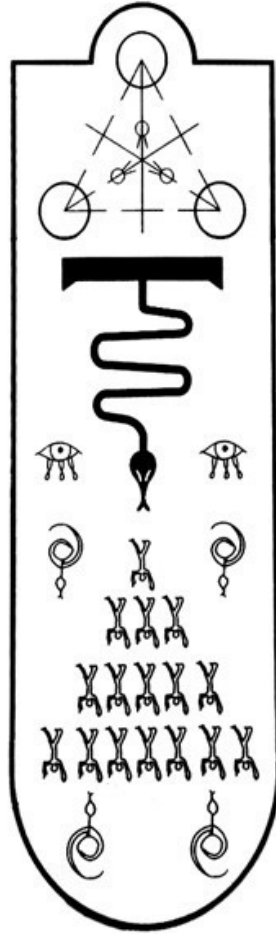


Fig. 16: The “Snake Register”.

A29 man upside down hieroglyph (Fig. 19). Traditionally the dead, or conquered enemies, would be shown with the falling man determinative (Gardiner A15) or the bound captive (Gardiner A13), and texts such as the *Book of Caverns* depicts conquered enemies upside down.³⁹ So perhaps this is derived from those funerary texts; alternatively, the inversion may be the same artistic story-telling device as the inverted ankh seen on the columns of the colonnade. Here if we invert the

³⁹ Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*, 86.

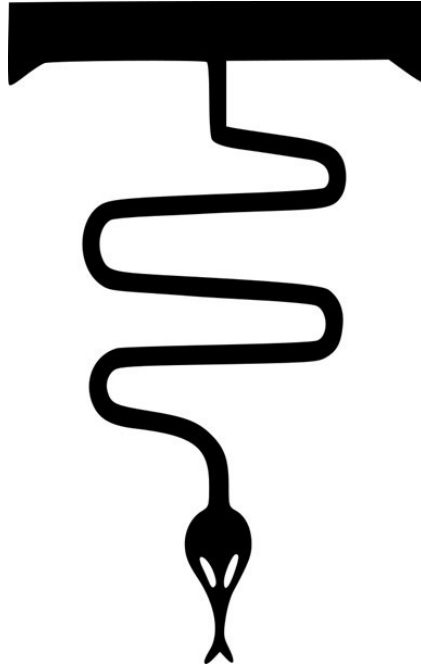


Fig. 17: Snake emerging from the hieroglyphic representation of the sky.



Fig. 18: Section of the seventh hour of the *Amduat* showing Apep being bound and stabbed, digitally drawn from the papyrus of Nesmin.

rejoicing person (Gardiner A28) then perhaps they become a despairing person, which would fit with the narrative of the great evil spreading chaos and death.

The Snake Register features two crying eyes, using modified Gardiner D9 hieroglyphs, which would also fit with the idea of despair. There are also four coiled snakes which are not based on conventional hieroglyphs (Fig. 19), two above and two below the group of people (Fig. 16); however, they are not discussed or explained in either the film or its novelisation and, as they are not based on Egyptian symbology, it is difficult to interpret what meaning the art department may have ascribed them.⁴⁰ Perhaps these four additional snakes

⁴⁰ Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*.

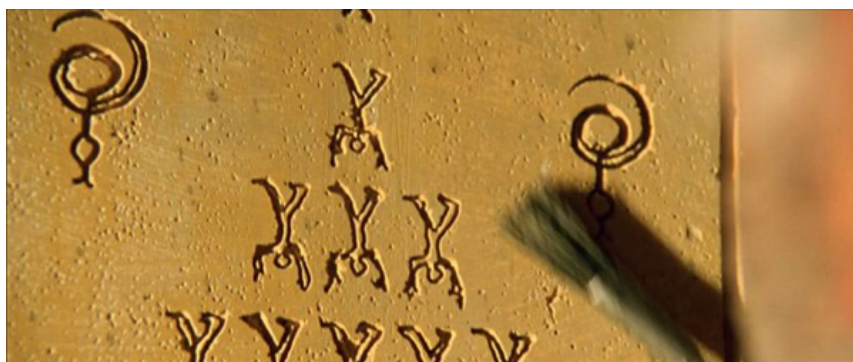


Fig. 19: Inverted figures on the 'Snake Register'. © Gaumont.

reinforce the concept of the larger snake and the surrounding of people with evil and chaos. It also fits with the titular concept and continued use of the number five (for example Dallas' licence has five points on it, the bomb stops its countdown with five seconds to go, and the four element stones each have five lines on them). The professor also tells his draughtsman that the inscriptions contain the numbers for five and one, to calculate the 5000-year span between the planetary alignment. Yet, the Snake Register does not appear to include any signs that readily suggest themselves as numerals, perhaps indicating that this was an additional plot element added after the design of the register.

Narratively, the People Register and the Five Elements Register are conflated and are not translated by the professor separately; however, we do see that they are physically separate from the wider shots (Fig. 15). The People Register, we are told, shows different peoples gathering the four elements together. These people and the elements are represented by a kneeling figure (possibly a modified male Gardiner A7 and female B2 hieroglyph) either side of a standing figure (a modified Gardiner A28 rejoicing figure changed to have the arms by the sides), flanked by various animals such as fish (Gardiner K1), water and plants (Gardiner M8), hares (Gardiner E34), and some distinctively non-Egyptian hieroglyphs (Fig. 20). Perhaps the central figure on each row of the People Register represents one of the four different elements, with the kneeling figures being the people the professor tells us are gathering them together, and the outer symbols are to illustrate each element, such as hares for earth and fish for water (Fig. 20).

The Five Elements register is essentially in two halves, with the upper half showing the four elements gathered around a central figure (a Gardiner A28 arms raised rejoicing man), and the lower half a collection of people (Gardiner A1 and B1), animals (Gardiner F4 and G26), and non-Egyptian hieroglyphs either side of



Fig. 20: Central standing figures flanked by kneeling people, standard Egyptian hieroglyphs, and non-Egyptian symbols on the “People Register”. © Gaumont.

a central papyrus hieroglyphs (Gardiner M16) (Fig. 21). Underneath the figures there are vertical stripes, in one group of 5 lines and one group of 3 lines, and underneath those there is a much smaller version of the main snake seen on the Snake Register without the sky hieroglyph (Fig. 21).

The professor states that there is a “divine light” emanating from the Fifth Element. This “divine light” has a hieroglyphic representation stylistically reminiscent of a pair of 18th Dynasty Akhetaten (Amarna) style hands around a sun disc (Fig. 22). The close-up of this “divine light” hieroglyph also gives us an insight into how the relief was created: we can see polishing scratches on the surface and the deeply carved channels show signs of what appear to be saw or possibly chisel cuts (Fig. 22). Perhaps this means that the design was sawn out and the individual pieces applied to the wall and painted to appear to be stone. Interestingly, the art department also chose to make the wall heavily pitted, presumably to indicate its age; however, as this is a closed section inside a structure it is very unlikely that the stone would have weathered this way.

The use of Egyptian hieroglyphs in the creation of these three registers reveals that the production team had knowledge of ancient Egyptian culture and a firm grasp of hieroglyphs and the meaning of determinative and other symbology, perhaps with assistance from an uncredited Egyptologist,⁴¹ and used this to create a semi-accurate narrative for the visual culture used in the set design. For example, the snake descending from the sky, said to be spreading darkness in a variant of the “night” determinative not only looks visually appealing onscreen but it also shows an informed understanding of the meaning behind

41 “The Fifth Element (1997) Full Cast & Crew”.



Fig. 21: The three registers translated by the professor. © Gaumont.

the different Egyptian cultural motifs. It attests to the desire of the art department to create something which has roots in Egyptian culture but still tells the story for the director—even if the majority of the audience will not understand that this symbolism is faithful to Egyptian culture.⁴² This shows the interesting dichotomy between the “copy and paste” hieroglyphic sections of most of the wall and the time and attention invested in creating the three registers that would be shown prominently onscreen.

***The Fifth Element* as a Mummy Movie**

The Egyptological representation in *The Fifth Element* is not just limited to the architectural elements of the temple colonnade and hieroglyphic inscriptions; we also see the representation of a mummy and corresponding ancient Egyptian beliefs and mythology. Mummies are perhaps only rivalled by pyramids (Fig. 5) as one of ancient Egypt’s most enduring symbols in popular culture. Consequently, mummies feature prominently in many of cinema’s representations of Egypt. These representations typically show mummies being reanimated in the modern era through the reading of some form of ritual text, such as in *The Mummy* (1932, 1959, and 1999), either deliberately or accidentally—one must always be careful which books to read aloud. The concept of using spoken words to activate and

⁴² The idea of including potentially (largely) unappreciated accurate Egyptological detail is not unique to *The Fifth Element*, with a similar example being Stuart Tyson Smith teaching accurate vocalisation of the ancient Egyptian language to the actors whilst working as an advisor on *Stargate* (1994). See [Stuart Tyson Smith’s contribution to this issue](#).



Fig. 22: Amarna style sun disc, representing “Divine Light”, on the “Five Elements” register.
© Gaumont.

reanimate the deceased has its roots in ancient Egyptian belief with rituals such as the “Opening of the Mouth” and the provision of reanimation spells in funerary ritual practice.⁴³

Whilst there is no conventional representation of a mummy in *The Fifth Element*, we do see the body of the Fifth Element contained within a pseudo-sarcophagus (Figs. 4, 10, 23), to which the novelisation refers simply as a “sarcophagus” that the Mondoshawan look upon “reverently”.⁴⁴ Whilst heavily stylised, appearing almost Art Deco, this pseudo-sarcophagus emulates the linen-wrapped shrouded figure style of pharaonic Egyptian coffins and sarcophagi. The object of pharaonic Egyptian mumification ritual was more than simple preservation and was instead intended to transform the body of the deceased into a being to last for eternity, which was referred to as a “sah” in Egyptian texts.⁴⁵ This process used the deifying and purifying properties of the linen to wrap and hide the body, which ultimately produced the shrouded and divinised form of a sah.⁴⁶ Egyptological literature typically refers to coffins and sarcophagi in this shape simply as “anthropoid” or “mummiform”, however, it would be more accurate to describe these as emulating the divine sah form of the gods (perhaps “sahform” would be a more context-appropriate term for describing this style).⁴⁷ When the professor translates the temple inscription, he describes the Fifth Element as emanating a

⁴³ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 34–38.

⁴⁴ Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*, 14.

⁴⁵ Price, *Golden Mummies*, 124.

⁴⁶ Riggs, *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt*, 109–151.

⁴⁷ Price, *Golden Mummies*, 129.

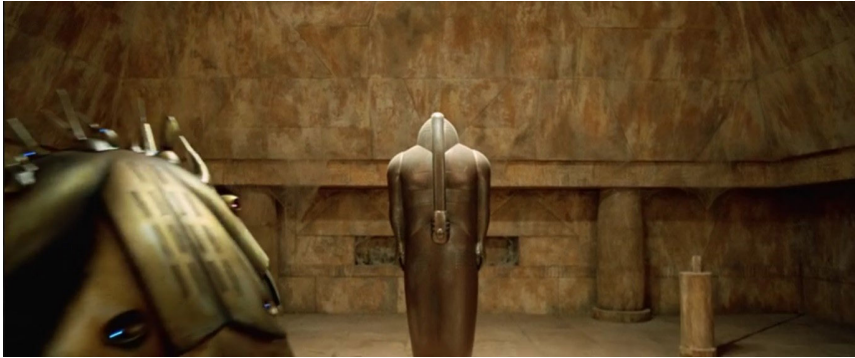


Fig. 23: Pseudo-sarcophagus containing the Fifth Element. © Gaumont.

“divine light”;⁴⁸ if this idea is combined with the suggestion that the Fifth Element is thousands of years old and potentially needed for all eternity, and that the Fifth Element is described as the “perfect being”, then it does not seem unreasonable that it would be contained in the eternal image of a sah.⁴⁹

As with many other “mummy movies”, we also see themes of regeneration and reanimation in the film’s futuristic setting. However, consistent with the science-fiction theme of most of the film, this reanimation is undertaken through a scientific process using a “reactor” rather than arcane ritual.⁵⁰ Again, this representation of the reunification of fragmented parts into a greater whole aligns with the descriptions of mummification symbolism found in Egyptian texts such as the Book of the Dead.⁵¹

Once reanimated, Leeloo undertakes a mission to recover the four element stones and avenge the deaths of the Mondoshawan at the hands of the Mangalore mercenaries. This is not unlike the eponymous mummy in the 1959 Hammer Horror production *The Mummy*, who, once re-awoken, takes revenge on the archaeologists who desecrated the tomb of Princess Ananka. This idea of the avenging mummy has been used, and re-used, in the majority of mummy films from the classic Hammer Studios and Universal Pictures productions through to recent cinematic portrayals such as Universal Studios’ 2017 iteration of *The Mummy*.⁵² We also see Leeloo being assisted by priest Vito Cornelius, who can

48 Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*, 11.

49 Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*, 10.

50 Bisson, Besson, and Kamen, *The Fifth Element*, 248.

51 Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 31–38; Price, *Golden Mummies*, 124.

52 Day, *The Mummy’s Curse*, 64–93.

speak the ancient language and communicate with Leeloo, again as is common in classic mummy films.

Whether intentionally or not, *The Fifth Element* displays a number of thematic devices with parallels in ancient Egyptian mythology and belief. For instance, we see Leeloo being destroyed by agents of chaos and evil, just as Set destroyed Osiris, only to be reconstituted from a single remaining piece, similar to the Egyptian belief that the part represents and embodies the whole (just as in the Egyptian wedjat eye motif). It is even possible to make comparison with the reconstituted Leeloo having a seemingly insatiable appetite and with the food offerings made by the ancient Egyptians to sate the appetites of the ka spirit of the deceased. The provision of nourishment for the ka is mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, and a concept which continues through Dynastic funerary culture.⁵³ The offering formula made to the deceased often included ducks, and an ostrakon excavated at Deir el-Medina contained a letter to the dead hoping for provision of “food and feathered game”. It is therefore another interesting comparison that Leeloo is seen enjoying eating chicken.⁵⁴

Popular culture typically depicts mummies in either one of two ways: with fascination but also horror and revulsion,⁵⁵ or in contrast as a love-object.⁵⁶ *The Fifth Element* follows the second convention and, once reanimated, Leeloo serves as the romantic interest for the male lead. The first glimpse of the reanimated Leeloo is that of a naked 19-year-old woman, who is described as being “perfect”. She is then scantily covered in what could be interpreted as a “sexy” version of bandages, perhaps as a variant of the traditional mummy wrappings. These bandages also resemble the wide horizontal and vertical bands which are wrapped on top of Egyptian mummy shrouds, and also depicted on certain types of coffin, and sometimes used for inscriptions, for example the 50 mm x 570 mm inscribed strip of linen mummy wrappings now accessioned as M11459 in the Liverpool World Museum collection.

With earlier mummy media in mind, the temple itself could also be viewed through a lens of sexualisation. The natural formation of the temple’s exterior makes its entrance appear cave-like. As the temple also houses the Fifth Element sarcophagus, it could therefore also be thought of as a tomb which has been carved into the rock. Barbara Creed has ascertained the symbolic analogy between

⁵³ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 62.

⁵⁴ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 162.

⁵⁵ As outlined in Day, *Mummy’s Curse*; Price, *Golden Mummies*; Riggs, *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt*.

⁵⁶ Earliest examples including Théophile Gautier’s 1840 short story “Le pied de momie”.

caves and vaginas,⁵⁷ and there has also been a longstanding literary and cinematic tradition depicting Egyptian tombs as virtual vaginas able (and sometimes even willing) to be penetrated by (male) archaeologists in an act of either seduction or rape.⁵⁸ The mummy film genre has used this concept heavily; for example, the temple in *The Mummy* (1959) is also constructed inside the mouth of the cave, and this may have inspired the production team to create a tomb inside a cave inviting penetration.

Conclusion

Audiences have certain expectations when it comes to the representation of Egypt, namely the standard tropes of pyramids, mummies, and pith-helmeted European archaeologists translating hieroglyphic secrets. *The Fifth Element* plays to these stereotypes—perhaps not to do so would induce the ire of the majority of the audience—but it also adds to these tropes with some interesting uses and adaptations of Egyptian iconography to help tell the film’s story.

The Egyptian elements of *The Fifth Element* have heretofore been largely academically neglected, despite the film’s interest in Egypt and in Egyptology explicit in its opening scene and in the significance of the Egyptian temple. Further examination of the motifs used in its production show clear Egyptological influence. The production team use hieroglyphs to create a visual narrative mirroring the story of the film. This creative use of inscriptions contrasts the standard “copy and paste” hieroglyphic usage to fill out the walls and columns, which feature for very little time onscreen and whose repetition (almost) no-one will notice as the vast majority of the cinemagoing audience have minimal knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs. However, even if the hieroglyphs are duplicated and out of context, they still provide a much more authentic feeling of an Egyptian temple than if the production team were to completely invent a nonsensical hieroglyphic system themselves—as we see in certain other films featuring Egypt.⁵⁹ If one is watching the film and paying attention to the actors and the story, it is difficult to spot the repetition, but it is comparatively easy to tell if non-Egyptian hieroglyphic symbols are used. Film production is a balance with often harsh time constraints, and the hieroglyphic “copy and paste” of background sets is an expedient way to make

⁵⁷ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 106.

⁵⁸ Day, *The Mummy’s Curse*, 79.

⁵⁹ Price, “A Review of ‘The Mummy’”.

a set look Egyptian and allow a production team more time to work creatively on the sections that will appear in closeup. As we have seen, the art department clearly use both genuine and invented hieroglyphs, playing with iconography to suggest literal inversion at times, and rewarding those viewers who do pore over these inscriptions. The art team add a degree of authenticity to their new hieroglyphs by situating them alongside otherwise genuine inscriptions, while also calling attention to their difference—their alienness—even to non-expert audience members.

The Fifth Element also emulates aspects of ancient Egyptian mythology and belief, for example the reconstruction of the whole from a single part. This representation of the reunification of fragmented parts into a greater whole aligns with the descriptions of mummification symbolism found in Egyptian texts such as the Book of the Dead. These parallels may be unintentional, or they might point to the work of an Egyptological advisor (or advisors) adding elements to the story which may be overlooked by the majority of the audience.

An Egyptological influence is also seen in this futuristic setting through the film's Art Deco evocations, particularly in Leeloo's sarcophagus. Leeloo's interment in a sarcophagus inside an Egyptian temple encourages an understanding of Leeloo as a form of mummy. In this way, *The Fifth Element* uses its Egyptian interpretation and adaption to reimagine the mummy movie genre. Scholarly discussions of the representation of mummies in popular culture do not typically include *The Fifth Element*; however, this article suggests that this may be an oversight. Her body removed from an Egyptian temple, replete with creative and symbolic hieroglyphs adapted to warn of a great evil from space, her revived form perfect and (partially) bandaged, when we are attentive to the Egyptian qualities of *The Fifth Element*, Leeloo seems just as important in these discussions as representations in Universal Pictures or Hammer Studios productions.

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