When the Egyptian Gods Ruled the (Future) World: Egypt, Science Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Popular Culture

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Abstract

In this essay I present a synthesis of ideas related to examples of contemporary science-fiction and fantasy works that imagine the ancient Egyptian gods as active figures in the development and evolution of past and future worlds. Exploring different examples taken from comics, cinema and literature, including Tim Powers' novel *The Anubis Gates*, the Marvel comic book series *Moon Knight*, Jonathan Hickman's *God is Dead*, Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and *The Wicked + The Divine*, the 'Pyramids of Mars' *Doctor Who* serial, Alex Proyas' film *Gods of Egypt*, *Trilogie Nikopol* by the Serbo-French comic author Enki Bilal and his 2004 film version *Immortel (ad vitam)*, along with other sources, certain tropes come into view across this expanse of media. Thrown into relief is the consistent sense of authority and domination that the Egyptian divinities exercise in worlds beyond their own time and space and in futuristic dystopias.

Keywords

science fiction; fantasy; film; literature; television; gods; religion; mythology.

In his 1995 book *Hollywood Cinema*, Richard Maltby reflects on genre in the following way:

> Genres are flexible, subject to a constant process of change and adaptation. Because different audiences will use a genre in different ways at different times, its boundaries can never be rigidly defined, and at the same time it is susceptible to extensive subdivision.[1]

This statement is pertinent in the case of science fiction and fantasy, whose hybrid formulations, subject to constant mutations, have been highlighted on numerous occasions.[2] In certain science-fiction and fantasy works across different media (cinema, TV, comics, video games, and so on) the flexible boundaries that Maltby observes manifest in the amalgamation of generic conventions more readily associated with adventure, horror, or superheroic epic.

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1 Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 108.
2 See, for instance, Yaszek, "Cultural History", 201–202; Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre", 372; Suvin, "Considering the sense of 'Fantasy'", 209–210.

Less critical attention has been paid to influences derived from the historical genre, however. This article proposes an analysis of a series of literary and filmic examples of contemporary science fiction and fantasy that employ narratives and/or motifs inspired by ancient Egypt. Two fundamental criteria allow the more precise definition of the object of my study. First, among the many recreations of the ancient Egyptian civilization in popular culture, I am interested in those featuring the gods as the main protagonists. Second, the interaction established between the divine and human spheres serves to categorise the ways in which the gods intervene in the world in terms of dominion and control. The latter realises the introduction of the Egyptian gods into temporal and spatial contexts distant from their own, that is, worlds situated beyond Egypt and in a chronological framework subsequent to antiquity, whether in a modern present or in an imagined future. With these premises in mind, in this article I analyse how the gods exert domination and control through a selection of case studies, including the films *Stargate* (1994) and *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016), the episode "Pyramids of Mars" (1975) from the TV-series *Doctor Who*, the short story "The Sentinel" (written 1948; published 1951) by Arthur C. Clarke, the novels *American Gods* (2001) by Neil Gaiman and *The Anubis Gates* (1983) by Tim Powers, as well as the comics *Eternals* (1976–2021), *God is Dead* (2013–16) and the Jeff Lemire's trilogy *Moon Knight: Welcome to New Egypt* (2016), *Reincarnations* (2017) and *Birth and Death* (2017). In their treatment of Egyptianising themes and motifs, these works show the continuation of elements characteristic of the cultural reception of ancient Egypt since at least the nineteenth century (an emphasis on mummies and pyramids as a symbolic shorthand for ancient Egyptian culture, a fascination with the concept of curses, and Egypt as the cradle of magic, to name a few), as well as the introduction of more recent tropes, which I go on to outline. All of this helps to define Egyptian religion (in a broad sense), as depicted in modern popular culture, as something new and different, undoubtedly inspired by elements of the past but reimagined in these authors' minds. I refer to this as "neo-Egyptian religion".

Something Coming from Outer Space

Fictional narratives built around the idea of the arrival of extra-terrestrial intelligence on Earth in the distant past (and specifically in ancient Egypt) have been

commonplace in science fiction since at least the late nineteenth century,[3] these fictions themselves informed by earlier non-fiction works such as Charles Piazzi Smyth's book *The Great Pyramid: Why Was It Built? & Who Built It?* (1859). The idea that the Great Pyramid in particular encoded some kind of otherworldly knowledge—whether divine or alien—took root, though the latter in particular has exploded in the modern cultural consciousness since the mid-twentieth century, subsequent to the publication of *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft: Ungelöste Rätsel der Vergangenheit* (1968) (*Chariots of the Gods?: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* [1969] in its English translation) by Erich von Däniken. The pseudo-scientific character of the ideas put forward by von Däniken in this and later purportedly non-fictional works is beyond doubt,[4] but precisely because of their fantastical implausibility, they exerted a considerable influence on Western popular culture, triggering fringe theories that are often reproduced today.

One of von Däniken's fundamental theses is that extra-terrestrial beings travelled to our planet and subsequently had a decisive influence on the emergence and development of past human civilisations.[5] As technologically superior beings, their identification as gods by the human inhabitants of Earth would therefore be a logical consequence. The same equivalence between aliens and gods often occurs in fantasy and science-fiction literature,[6] which was a key influence in the emergence of the "ancient astronaut hypothesis" in non-fiction writing. This, which would come to be von Däniken's basic premise, is recognisable in a number of earlier works in which, whether through the use of incidental motifs or the insertion of precise narrative plot points, certain elements undeniably refer to the religion and divinities of ancient Egypt.

One notable example is Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Sentinel", published in 1951, which is a direct antecedent to Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).[7] In Clarke's story, a lunar mission inadvertently discovers a strange pyramid-shaped structure on the moon's surface. Given its precise geome-

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3 See Dobson, *Victorian Alchemy*, 89–98.

4 For a refutation of von Däniken's ideas, see Pössel, *Phantastische Wissenschaft*; Story, *The Space-Gods Revealed*.

5 See, for instance, Stuart Tyson Smith's and Matt Szafran's contributions to this special issue, for use of the ancient alien's theme.

6 For example, the creatures often evoked in some of H. P. Lovecraft's works are, in essence, extra-terrestrial beings who came to Earth at the beginning of time. Religious mythology, in such narratives, can be understood to preserve the different stories in which these superior entities are involved.

7 In parallel to writing the screenplay for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Clarke wrote the novel of the same name, which was published in 1968, shortly after the film's *première*. Details of the creative process for both works are recounted in Clarke, *The Lost Worlds of 2001*.

try, the artefact can only have been made by a superior, clearly alien intelligence. According to the protagonist's speculation, this extra-terrestrial species likely established a series of transmitters in the vicinity of worlds whose conditions would be promising for the development of life. The pyramid served as the border marking the outer limits of the Earth; when this marker was passed, the pyramid would stop emitting its signal, hence alerting the beings that had placed it there that the border had been breached and, therefore, that life on Earth had evolved to the point that space travel had become a possibility.[8] Rather than interpreting the alien civilisation who placed the markers as benign watchers, the protagonist-narrator understands them to have more sinister intentions.

In the case of this story, the alien and/or divine intervention occurs *in absentia*; the extra-terrestrials have clearly been to the Earth and its moon in the past, and may return in the future, though they are physically absent for the entirety of Clarke's protagonist's short narrative. In other works, however, an alien species' arrival in our solar system is followed by a more prolonged stay. In Roland Emmerich's *Stargate* (1994), a sinister alien descends to Earth in order to find a body in which to continue its existence.[9] Once the alien has acquired a host, it establishes its despotic power under the name of Ra, ruling over the less advanced human communities of the Nile Valley. A rebellion by the humans sometime later leads to its escape to the planet Abydos. The setting of this film was eventually expanded on in the series *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007), providing further background to the main villain and its fellow aliens. Ra belongs to a race of galactic overlords called the Goa'uld, who control and influence the development of ancient civilisations on different planets throughout the universe. These space lords acquire a divine status in the eyes of their subjects, inspired by the model of pharaonic kingship, royalty being the concept that best characterises the almost limitless power of these characters in fiction.[10] Thus, after the death of Ra at the end of Emmerich's film, the series features the advent of Apep, after whom the villainous Soker or Anubis rule, all becoming important gods as they are understood in ancient Egyptian religion.

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8 In this sense, the pyramid fulfils the function ascribed to the famous monolith in Kubrick's film, that is, monitoring human development on Earth.

9 Huckvale, *Ancient Egypt in the Popular Imagination*, 55, 63. See also Stuart Tyson Smith's essay in this special issue for Egyptological insights into *Stargate*.

10 From an Egyptological point of view, pharaonic kingship was far from plenipotentiary across all periods of Egyptian history. In the case of *Stargate* and *Stargate SG-1* we are rather confronted with the stereotypical concept of unchanging rulership of power in ancient Egypt, likely derived from the depiction of the autocratic pharaoh in the Bible.

A fundamental difference exists between the use of Egyptian tropes in "The Sentinel" and *Stargate*. In the former, the only visible manifestation of the aliens, whose physical appearance and origin are completely unknown to Clarke's characters, takes the shape of a pyramid. Despite the narrator's explicit reference to the ancient Egyptians in his assertion that they might have constructed the monument had they been granted access to the crystalline material from which it was made, Egypt is not, in any case, relevant to the development of the story. We are therefore dealing with the use of the pyramid as a motif that is perceived to be potent and meaningful in its own right, without the need for any detailed reference to any ancient Egyptian historical reality.

The same can be said of the description of the Heechee species in *Heechees Rendez-vous* (1984), the third volume of Frederik Pohl's *Gateway* series (comprising novels and short stories). This alien race once again represents the idea of the existence of an advanced civilisation that controls the development of species on other planets. While humanity has been unable to glean information about these aliens' physical appearance, these beings are not completely unknown to the narrative's humans, who have been able to access some of the alien ships and space stations. One character, Dolly, creates a puppet of a Heechee. Having never encountered one, her depiction of the Heecheee is entirely imagined. It is nevertheless striking that Dolly's puppet is described as having obvious Egyptian features: "Dolly's Heechee had a receding forehead, a beaked nose, a jutting chin, and eyes that tapered back to the ears like an Egyptian wall painting".[11] As in the case of "The Sentinel", the Egyptian aspect is neither contextualised nor does it have any impact on the novel's plot. It is a simple aesthetic choice representing otherness, and an allusion to the alien as much, if not more so, than the Egyptian. In the case of *Stargate*, on the other hand, ancient Egypt is not merely used in an aesthetic sense, but in a more Egyptologically meaningful way: the planet Abydos, for example, named after a real Egyptian city, and the galactic Goa'uld, who themselves become the divinities of the Egyptian pantheon of historical times.

A comparable imagined influence of extra-terrestrial beings on the mythologies of human civilisations is found in the *Doctor Who* episode "Pyramids of Mars".[12] The conflict between the evil Sutekh (that is, Seth) and Horus, and the subsequent imprisonment of the former in a pyramid on the surface of Mars,

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11 Pohl, *Heechees Rendez-vous*, 38.
12 Russell, "Pyramids of Mars".

Fig. 1: Makkari as Osiris in Neil Gaiman and John Romita Jr.'s *Eternals #1: Intelligent Design* (2006)

serves as the episode's starting point.[13] These characters are the last members of the alien race called the Osirians, who inhabited Earth in the distant past and acquired the status of gods in Egypt.

The Marvel comic book series *Eternals* is the final work to which I refer in relation to the use of Egyptian elements in the context of the intervention of superior beings in the evolution of human civilisations. These characters' first appearance in the Marvel Universe was in a series of comics by Jack Kirby published between 1976 and 1978. During this period, the foundations of the series were laid, which can be summarised as follows: the Celestials, all-powerful entities from outer space, visit Earth more than half a million years in the past. They select a species—the hominid apes—on which to carry out different experiments that change the hominids' evolutionary trajectory. These primates consequently became the origin of three species that have populated the Earth ever since: the Eternals, the Deviants, and the Humans. The intervention of the Eternals, who boast supernatural physical and/or mental faculties, in the affairs of humans made possible the development and evolution of the latter, who recognise the Eternals as divinities inhabiting the world.

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13 The famous conflict between Horus and Seth for the throne left vacant by Osiris is described in papyrus Chester Beatty I. For a study of this papyrus, see Broze, *Mythe et roman en Égypte ancienne*.

Although there is no explicit mention of Egyptian culture in Kirby's work, later expansions of the Eternals' universe include Egyptian references. In Neil Gaiman and John Romita Jr.'s 2006 comics, the Eternals contribute essential technological knowledge to humankind, such as that which allows them to innovate agriculture and metalworking, among other fields. Another fundamental cultural contribution is that of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script. This knowledge is imparted by Makkari, one of the Eternals, who is deified in ancient Egypt under the name of Osiris (fig. 1),[14] or, alternatively, as the god Thoth.[15] Some variants are introduced in the 2021 film adaptation, *Eternals*, directed by Chloé Zhao. These characters arrive from outer space and land in ancient Mesopotamia, which, like ancient Egypt, is often described as one of the "cradles of civilisation" (and is also frequently used as an example of an ancient civilisation influenced by alien visitors in pseudoscientific sources), making these cultures somewhat interchangeable.[16] The Eternals advance human civilisation from a primitive state to the development of early farming and herding communities in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.[17] In this adaptation, the reference to ancient Egypt is more subtle: in a room aboard the Dome spaceship, Makkari assembles a collection of artefacts from those places where the Eternals intervened, leading to more rapid evolutionary development. Among these is a golden statue of Anubis (fig. 2) and another of Bastet as a cat (fig. 3), two of the most widely recognised ancient Egyptian deities, making it clear that the Eternals were, in fact, present in Egypt.[18]

In summation, in the comparative analysis of the visual and literary works referred to in this section, we have observed the use of easily recognisable and traditional ancient Egyptian motifs in the science-fiction and fantasy genres from the 1950s onwards. New meanings are ascribed to them, however, as for instance in the case of the pyramid, redefined as a space marker, or as a divine prison

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14 Gaiman and Romita Jr., "Intelligent Design".

15 Gaiman and Romita Jr., "From Genesis to Revelation" corrects the reference to Osiris as the inventor of writing in the number cited above. In Egyptian religion, Thoth is the god of writing. A synthesis of this function of the god can be found, among others, in Budde, *Die Göttin Seschat*, 144–151.

16 Mesopotamia features strongly in the influential pseudoarchaeological work of Zecharia Sitchin. See King, "Ancient Astronauts and Sumerian Aliens".

17 On Mesopotamia as the origin of human civilisation, see Kramer, *History begins at Sumer*. Franco Battiato's 1988 song "Mesopotamia", reiterates this view: "Anch'io a guardarmi bene vivo da millenni / e vengo dritto dalla civiltà più alta dei Sumeri / Dall'arte cuneiforme degli Scribi".

18 This type of decontextualised use of objects is a hallmark of both Egyptomania and pseudoarchaeology. See Humbert, "Egyptomania"; Moshenska, "Alternative Archaeologies".

Fig. 2: Interior of the Dome in Chloé Zhao's *Eternals* (2021), featuring the standing statue of the God Anubis on the right

Fig. 3: Interior of the Dome in Chloé Zhao's *Eternals* (2021), featuring the golden statue of Bastet, the Egyptian cat goddess, on the left, behind the male character

in the context of mythological conflicts. This reinterpretation of motifs, in the context of the Egyptian religion as it is imagined in modern cultural forms, uses the ancient as a source but simultaneously provides a fictionalised vision of Egyptian

civilisation.[19] The following sections provide further examples of "neo-Egyptian religion" in other science-fiction and fantasy sources.

Egyptian Gods on Earth

In the previous examples I have alluded to the fictional primordial contact between superior, quasi-divine extra-terrestrial entities and humans on Earth. In all cases, except for *Eternals*, their coming to our planet is also accompanied by a withdrawal. Sometimes, however, the gods remain on Earth and seek to ensure their continued existence among humans. In this context, Egyptian gods become the protagonists of various narratives, acting either alone or together with other divinities.

In the comic book *God is Dead* by Jonathan Hickman and Mike Costa (2013), the arrival of Zeus at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome in 2015 represents a "second coming", which aims to encourage the revitalisation of ancient religions in the present day and exemplifies the confrontation between the polytheism of the pagan pantheons, with Zeus initially at the head, and Christian monotheism, represented by its main place of worship. To this end, the gods of Norse mythology Odin, Thor and Loki welcome a delegation of Aztec, Hindu, Greek and Egyptian gods to the heavenly sanctuary of Valhalla. Each group is represented by three of its principal divinities—which, in the case of Egypt, are Horus, Bastet and Anubis—to form an assembly of fifteen members. Seated around a table, they proceed to divide the world into areas of influence, using a world map placed in the centre of the table (fig. 4).[20] This introductory passage echoes the Berlin conference of November 1884. In representations of this historical event the envoys of the main European imperialist powers of the nineteenth century focus their attention on the territorial divisions made on a map of the African continent (fig. 5), similar to the depiction of the Valhalla assembly.

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[19] In this vision of fictional Egypt, the idea of evolutionary differences between civilizations plays a fundamental role. In this respect, and although he does not directly address the case of Ancient Egypt, it is worth mentioning some ideas put forward by Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science-Fiction*, 123–155, regarding the description of catastrophes and the transition towards a new postcolonial framework of reference for contemporary science fiction.

[20] Hickman and Costa, *God is Dead* 2. The northern hemisphere of the planet is allocated to the Norse gods, except for the USA, where their influence is shared with the Aztecs. In Europe, beside the Norse gods, the Greek and Hindu gods claim their territorial rights. In Africa, finally, the Egyptians gods rule.

Fig. 4: Jonathan Hickman and Mike Costa's *God is Dead #1* (2013)

The gods then establish theocratic regimes in their territories, essentially based on the submission of their populations, which takes on clear colonialist connotations by reproducing some of the ideas about the alleged inferiority of the populations of the African continent inherent to nineteenth-century European
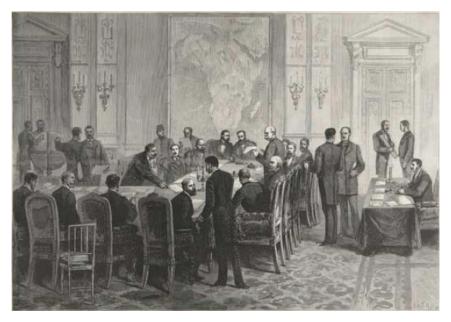
Fig. 5: The division of the African continent by the colonial powers at the Berlin Conference 1884 as depicted in History of the World (1897). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

imperialism. In this respect, Thor exclaims of humans: "They are children. I will break them with my hammer".[21] To this end, the gods make use, firstly, of the marked superiority of their power, which takes on (super)heroic overtones in *God is Dead*. Indeed, Horus, Anubis, Thor, and the other deities not only possess supernatural faculties that clearly distinguish them from humans, but their size is also much greater and their athletic bodies a clear exponent of their colossal superhuman strength.[22] Secondly, the pagan gods impose their rule by means of the cooperation of various groups of human religious extremists, including the "New Ramesside Dynasty", charged with the persecution of all forms of religious dissent in their territory. However, the initial agreements between the gods in Valhalla then give way to discord between the different pantheons, who seek to expand their domains and thus their global power. War thus becomes inevitable and will lead to the gradual disappearance of the pagan gods in direct conflict with each

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21   Hickman and Costa, *God is Dead* 2.
22   This recourse to the "heroization" of the bodies of the Egyptian gods, and the rest of the gods in this comic, is also found in the film *Gods of Egypt* (2016) by Alex Proyas, mainly in the case of Horus, the film's protagonist, and his antagonist, Seth.

other and with new hybrid human-gods created in laboratories by human scientists.

The intervention of the Egyptian gods in human affairs is much more discreet in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001), although it is no less important. In Gaiman's novel, Thoth and Anubis, who take the names Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel in a clear allusion to these gods' theriomorphic characteristics in Egyptian mythology, serve as the owners of a funeral parlour in Cairo, Illinois, a small rural town in the United States. The link between these characters and the participation of both divinities in the funerary practices of the ancient Egyptian religion is immediately recognisable.[23] Other Egyptian gods also appear in *American Gods*, such as Bastet, who takes the form of a domestic cat, and Horus, who appears in his falcon aspect. Alongside these, many other divinities are hidden among humans and intervene in a global conflict of ancient gods and the gods of the contemporary world, such as new technologies, globalisation, and the new media. An essential analogy can be drawn between *American Gods* and *God is Dead*. Both works raise the question of the disappearance of ancient cults, which no longer have believers, in the face of the irruption of new forms of "religiosity" that are less spiritual and more inclined to the achievements of science and the value of the material. In this respect, the presence of "The Collective" in *God is Dead*, a clandestine organisation led by two characters evidently inspired by Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking,[24] is striking. The conflict between science and religion is, as we can see, a frequent *leitmotif* in these works.

The following example of cohabitation between Egyptian gods and humans is taken from Enki Bilal's *La Foire aux immortels* (1980). This graphic novel is set in a futuristic, dystopian Paris over which a flying pyramid suddenly appears. Its occupants are the gods of the Egyptian pantheon, commanded by Anubis and Bastet (fig. 6). In the city, which has become a city-state, its fascist leader demands that the gods grant him immortality in exchange for the fuel needed

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[23] Thoth's participation in the *psychostasis* or weighing of the heart of the deceased, which corresponds to chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead, is found in numerous papyri from the New Kingdom onwards. In this regard, see Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth*, 145–150. As for Anubis and his funerary function, which is well attested in Egyptian sources, see Hollis, "Anubis's Mortuary Functions in *The Tale of Two Brothers*"; Yoyotte, "Le jugement des morts", 45–47. Popular culture sometimes embellishes the link between Anubis and death. Thus, in the episode of comedy-drama *Northern Exposure* entitled "The Mystery of the Old Curio Shop", a statuette of Anubis for sale in an antique shop is described by its seller as a representation of the god who devours the deceased in the afterlife, a function which is reserved in Egyptian mythology to Ammut, the devourer of the dead. See Fresco, "The Mystery of the Old Curio Shop".

[24] Hickman and Costa, *God is Dead* 1.

Fig. 6: The Egyptian gods as crew members of the flying pyramid in Enki Bilal's *La Foire aux immortels* (1980)

to maintain the ship and to facilitate its eventual departure.[25] The demand is rejected, as it would violate the established order and alter the mortal condition of human beings.[26] In the meantime, a conflict arises in the divine world: Horus has abandoned his companions and intends to infiltrate human society in order to overthrow the power of Anubis.[27] To this end, he needs the protagonist of the story, Alcide Nikopol, with whose help he seeks to overthrow the government of Paris. The conflict between Horus and Seth for Osiris' throne is here reinterpreted to introduce a struggle with strong political overtones between Anubis and Horus in the context of the electoral process in the fascist regime in Paris. In Bilal's work, similarly to *God is Dead*, the gods exercise their power over the territory: the story opens with a game of Monopoly in which the gods "occupy" the different streets and districts of Paris.

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[25] The search for fuel and the Egyptian gods' negotiations to obtain it turn them into "capitalist entrepreneurs", as defined by Kawa, "Comics since the Silver Age", 164.

[26] In Egyptian religion even the gods are not immortal. Osiris dies at the hands of his brother Seth, and the sun god Ra dies each night only to be reborn with each sunrise. See Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, 151–165. In Egyptian literature, certain humans, despite the inevitability of their mortal condition, manage, by virtue of their magical knowledge, to prolong their existence beyond the ordinary. Thus, Djedi, a magician in one of the tales included in the Westcar Papyrus, is 110 years old; Grandet, *Contes de l'Egypte ancienne*, 72.

[27] On the interpretation of Anubis in popular culture as a fearsome and ferocious deity, see Wilfong, *Death Dogs*.

In *La Foire aux immortels*, as in other works cited above, the intervention of Egyptian gods on Earth is generally explicitly inspired by contemporary geopolitics (power struggles, totalitarianism, wars, international summits or territorial expansion, and so on). Nevertheless, the following example departs partially from this premise. *Moon Knight: Welcome to New Egypt* (2016), *Reincarnations* (2017) and *Birth and Death* (2017) by Jeff Lemire depict the resurrection of the mercenary Marc Spector from under the statue of the god Khonsu in an ancient tomb in Upper Egypt. Although this character is not originally linked to ancient Egypt in issue #1 (1980),[28] later volumes of the *Moon Knight* comics make explicit reference to Egyptian antiquity.[29] This is in keeping with the lunar character of Khonsu in Egyptian mythology,[30] and with the idea of the regeneration of the moon in its monthly cycle as a metaphor for the death and return to life of the comic's protagonist. The reboot of the series since 2016 sees Spector in a mental institution for treatment of schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder. Numerous situations materialise over the course of the story that reveal the allegedly distorted reality created in Spector's mind: Dr. Emmet is, in reality, the great devourer Ammut with the head of a crocodile and the body of a lioness, and the warders of the asylum are anthropomorphised jackals. Other Egyptianising motifs in the comic trilogy are found in its settings. Outside the limits of the asylum, Manhattan is overrun by desert sands, and in the centre of the island stands the great pyramid of Khonsu (fig. 7). Beyond our reality, a pyramid flying over the liminal realms of the so-called Othervoid is the dwelling place of the gods. Moreover, in Spector's escape from the asylum, the city's subways become corridors filled with hieroglyphic inscriptions where fearsome mummies await his arrival. There is even a passage set in a timeless Egypt where a tyrannical pharaoh performs human sacrifices at the gates of the temple and his soldiers ride through the desert on the backs of flying scarabs. Other Egyptian deities such as Seth and Anubis also appear in the comic; however, Khonsu is the main antagonist.[31] His representation, although based on one of the frequent appearances of the god in

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28 Moench and Sienkiewicz, "The Macabre Moon Knight!".

29 In issue 12 of *Hulk Magazine* (1978), which included a story with Moon Knight as the sole protagonist, we witness the first use of Egyptian motifs in the character's universe: Moon Knight seeks to seize a statuette of Horus whose iconography is clearly inspired by the Tutankhamun mask in the Cairo Museum.

30 For Khonsu as a moon god, see Labrique, "Khonsou et la néomenie, à Karnak"; Altmann-Wendling, *MondSymbolik—MondWissen*, 467–528.

31 See Yoo, "Patterns of Ancient Egyptian Child Deities" for discussion of Khonsu as a bloodthirsty and ferocious deity in ancient Egyptian sources; this conceptualisation of Khonsu is not original to Moon Knight.

Fig. 7: Jeff Lemire's *Moon Knight: Welcome to New Egypt #1* (2016)

Egyptian sources, is clearly in part original: in ancient Egyptian sources Khonsu is anthropomorphic and is sometimes depicted as having the head of a falcon, while in *Moon Knight* he instead wears a gigantic falcon's skull, this new iconographic reinterpretation being one particular example of Khonsu's reimagination in the context of neo-Egyptian religion. Khonsu's motivations in the series, meanwhile, coincide with some of those seen previously: the god intervenes through a human intermediary, Spector himself, in order to dominate the world.

To sum up, the presence of Egyptian gods in the present-day or near-future worlds in the works introduced above generally takes the form of an invasion and occupation of territory. The only exception to this premise is presented in *American Gods*, in which the gods hide among humans in a fully de-sacralised mode of existence, despite the global divine conflict in which they are involved.[32] In the other works of fiction, the violent domination of the gods over humans is grounded in some of the manifestations of their otherness. Thus, in *God is Dead*

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[32] A similar scenario in which deities integrate into modern human life appears in the comic book *The Wicked + The Divine* (2014–19) by Kieron Gillen, in which the goddess Sekhmet, along with other divinities incarnated in teenagers of today's world, is a pop star.

the gods surpass humans in all their faculties: they are faster, taller, and stronger. This has much in common with the characterisation of aliens with Egyptian resonances in the texts "The Sentinel" and *Heechees Rendez-vous* cited above. In these cases, these beings (whose physical qualities remain unknown) represent an otherness that inspires terror based primarily on the certainty of their technological superiority. *La Foire aux immortels* and *Moon Knight* also insist on the hierarchical relationship between gods and humans through, among others, the symbol of the pyramid. In both cases, the recognisably Egyptian structure is erected as a symbol of power over the world, while at the same time establishing a physical barrier that hinders contact between the two spheres: the divine and the human.

However, these deities are not all-powerful and need the cooperation of humans to carry out their plans. *Stargate*'s evil Ra is a parasitic entity in search of a human body to inhabit, just as Khonsu manipulates Spector's mind for the sole purpose of obtaining a physical vessel to support his existence. In this sense, these narratives do not merely represent a divine theatre from which humans are excluded or in which they play a decidedly secondary role. It is rather a matter of establishing a precise dialectic, often vertical and hierarchical, between the two spheres, but in which the conflict is destined to be resolved by the action of the (human) individual.[33] This position is filled by Nikopol in *La Foire aux immortels*, by Marc Spector/Steven Grant/Jake Lockley/Moon Knight in *Welcome to New Egypt*, *Reincarnations* and *Birth and Death*, Shadow in *American Gods* and The Collective in *God is Dead*. In all of these cases, the presence of the Egyptian (and other) gods raises a number of dichotomies. For example, antiquity and the present world (or the near future) stand in opposition as chronological frameworks. Also relevant is the dichotomy established between polytheism and (Judeo-Christian) monotheism,[34] but equally between religion in the broad sense as opposed to faith in science and progress. As an extension of these dualities, some of these works introduce an aspect examined in more detail below: the

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[33] Often a "white saviour" figure. For this, see Glenn and Cunningham, "The Power of Black Magic"; Hughey, *The White Savior Film*. See also Stuart Tyson Smith's contribution to this special issue, for the white saviour in *Stargate*.

[34] The Pontiff's speech in Paris in *La Foire aux immortels* is particularly revealing in this respect: "Dieu saura reconnaître les siens dans l'épreuve de force que tu as dû engager, toi, Jean-Ferdinand Choublanc, gouverneur de la cité autonome de Paris, contre coalition incontrôlée de suppôts de Satan, irrévérencieusement païenne, qui ose, dans sa démesure infernale, se proclamer divine et éternelle". On the salvific (Judeo-Christian) monotheism represented by the West against the superstition and polytheism of the East, an opposition with strong colonialist overtones, see Schroeder, "Ancient Egyptian Religion on the Silver Screen", 2–4.

recreation of a reality divided between good and evil in a complex and changing way, but in which evil is clearly embodied by ancient Egypt and its divinities.

The Latent Threat: Egyptian Gods as Agents of Evil

The traditional conflict of good versus evil in contemporary Western popular culture often has obvious biblical and/or Judeo-Christian resonances. This dichotomy was not, however, alien to the worldview of the ancient Egyptians, as we can find similar conflicts in Egyptian mythology. The fundamental principles of good and evil, embodied in the concepts of Maat and Isfet, operate concomitantly in the world.[35] For instance, the evil serpent Apep/Apophis attacks the boat of the solar god on its nocturnal journey to lead it to a triumphant dawn, which in turn guarantees the continued existence of the world.[36] This mythical combat is repeated eternally, so that the threat of the triumph of evil is never fully eliminated. Another example can be found in various ancient sources that present the goddess Sekhmet as responsible for spreading disease and pestilence during the so-called epagomenal days at the end of the year through her cohort of emissary demons.[37] Thus, as Erik Hornung explains, "the gods of Egypt can be terrifying, dangerous, and unpredictable",[38] and have been frequently recreated as such in popular culture. Examples range from Sutekh in the *Doctor Who* episode "Pyramids of Mars", Ra in *Stargate* and Khonsu in *Moon Knight* to Mumm-Ra in *Thundercats* and Anubis in *The Pyramid* (2014).

In "Pyramids of Mars", Sutekh (whose name is an alternative rendering of that of the god Seth), plans his dominion over Earth from his prison on the red planet, where he was confined after the defeat suffered in his conflict with Horus. He is assisted in this by Dr Cartman and robotic mummies installed in a mansion in the English countryside at the turn of the twentieth century. Aided by

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35 Egyptian cosmogonies, at least until the Greco-Roman period, do not, however, envisage the existence of a primordial confrontation between good and evil, but present a world prior to creation which evil does not pre-exist. Its appearance, therefore, comes only after that of the Maat. See, in this respect, Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne avant le Nouvel Empire*, 225–228.

36 For the nighttime navigation of the sun god in his boat in the so-called *Underworld Books* in the royal tombs of the Valley of the Kings, see Hornung, *Die Nachtfahrt der Sonne*, 111–124; Quirke, *The Cult of Ra*, 47–52.

37 For the goddess Sekhmet and the epagomenal days, see, for instance, Goyon, "Sur une formule des rituels de conjuration des dangers de l'année"; Tillier, "Le lieu de naissance des enfants de Nout", 58–65.

38 Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, 213.

his scientific knowledge, the fourth Doctor has to thwart the evil alien's sinister plans. The choice of Sutekh/Seth in this role may come as no surprise: Egyptian mythology itself often depicts this god as the embodiment of evil and disorder.[39] In keeping with this, Sutekh's hypothetical triumph in the *Doctor Who* episode involves the transformation of our world into a dystopia plagued by darkness and chaos. Sutekh thus represents the quintessential villain, with some of the usual characteristics of such characters in science-fiction and fantasy works, to which are added some ancient Egyptian-inspired specifics.

Like Sutekh, whose mask covers his canine face, Egyptian gods in contemporary media are often characterised by a visual hybridisation. Frederic Krueger defines the representation of the Egyptian gods in *Stargate* and in the extended universe of the series as "(Anti-)Religion Monster(s)", whose actions inspire terror in humans.[40] Crucial to this is their hybrid appearance, simultaneously combining human and animal features.[41] Ra's soldiers in *Stargate*, wearing jackal and falcon helmets, or the ram-headed envoys of Seth in *Gods of Egypt*, are examples of this.

Yet, in order to represent a certain threat, evil, in its different manifestations, also requires the superior power and the ability to impose it. I have already mentioned the explicit physical superiority of the gods as they are recreated in contemporary science fiction and fantasy. At the same time, or as an alternative to the above, we must add their use of magic and the dark arts (or scientific knowledge that appears as magic) to the aspects that set them apart from humans. This identification of ancient Egypt as the cradle of esoteric knowledge, both magical and technological (and the alchemical point of overlap between these categories) has its roots in antiquity and flourished in the genre fiction of the nineteenth century onwards.[42]

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39   According to myth, Seth murdered his brother Osiris, and his antagonistic actions in the subsequent succession conflict with Horus are described in the Late Egyptian text known as *Contendings of Horus and Seth.* Egyptian sources also mention the beneficent work of the god as protector of the solar boat on its nocturnal voyage through the regions of the Netherworld, as he is often represented in the sources mainly from the New Kingdom. A brief synthesis of both aspects of the divinity can be found in Fernández Pichel, "Deconstrucción de un panteón egipcio tardío", 72 (with bibliography).

40   Krueger, *Pyramiden und Sternentore*, 51. This idea of Egyptian gods as monstrous dates back to classical antiquity, as we see in a passage from Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.698-699: "Barking Anubis and monstruous gods of every kind (omnigenumque deum monstra) (i.e. Egyptian gods) / brandish weapons against Neptune, Venus, and Minerva".

41   Krueger, *Pyramiden und Sternentore*, 52–54.

42   Dobson, *Victorian Alchemy*; Gómez Espelosín and Pérez Largacha, *Egiptomanía*, 112, 159–172, 184–187.

The plot of the recent comic *Phantasmagoria* (2021) by El Torres and Joe Bocardo features Egyptian gods as secondary characters (fig. 8). In this work, the magicians Hawkes and Drodd fight against the sinister plans of a brotherhood of ghosts in Victorian England. Their magical knowledge comes from ancient Egypt, where they both lived in the past, the former, under the name of Jannes, using the magic of the god Horus, while the latter, Jambres, practised the occult arts of Seth.[43] Once again, we see the traditional opposition between the two gods: Horus represents the light of the sun and the eyes of the falcon in the service of Jannes, while Jambres uses Seth, who symbolises death and desolation.

Many other contemporary works deal with this relationship between Egyptian characters or elements and magical advancement. Among them are those in which magic is a weapon of domination and destruction in the service of the gods against humanity. Firstly, in Tim Powers' *The Anubis Gates* (1983), an ancient Egyptian magician in early nineteenth-century London pursues the creation of a space-time portal between past and present. To this end, he has two envoys charged with performing a magical invocation of the god Anubis and granting Osiris, Ra, Horus, Khonsu, Seth and Sobek access to our world, which poses a threat to humanity.[44] Significant in this work is the appearance of the Egyptian gods as (possible) contenders in one of the great contemporary conflicts—the European colonisation of the African continent—while at the same time reintroducing the opposition between Christianity and paganism.

To take a final example, the film *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016) by Bryan Singer introduces the evil antagonist En Sabah Nur, a mutant worshipped as a god in the ancient Egypt of this fictional universe as a result of his supernatural powers (fig. 9). His tyrannical and dark rule provokes the opposition of certain subjugated courtiers who carry out an attack against him, after which he is buried inside a pyramid. In twentieth-century Cairo, a sect of believers promotes the new coming of Nur, who, free from his earthly prison, seeks the destruction of the world and the creation of a new reality. To do this, he needs to periodically transfer his consciousness into the bodies of other mutants, whose powers will be absorbed into his person. The progressive increase of these powers makes him a quasi-divine being. At the same time, Nur embodies the paradigm of the false god, in line with Krueger's understanding of "(Anti-)Religion Monster(s)". Contributing to this is the nature of his power: Nur draws on the negative side of the X-Men's

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43   Jannes and Jambres are both magicians mentioned in the Book of Exodus.
44   This initial premise is, however, a "MacGuffin" or plot trigger that drives the actions of the protagonists, but which ultimately proves irrelevant to the novel's denouement.
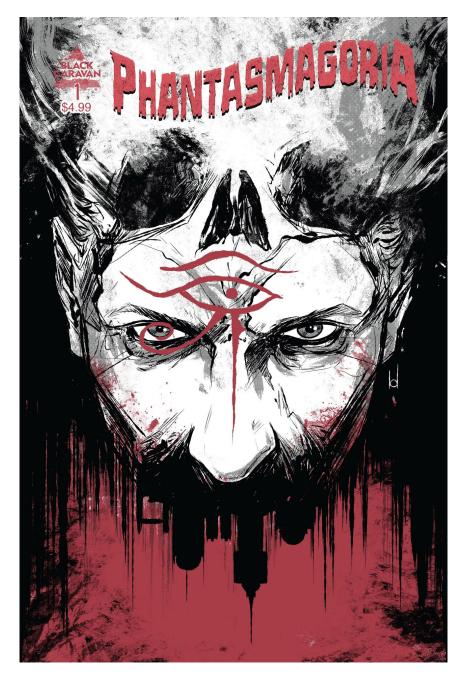
Fig. 8: El Torres and Joe Bocardo's *Phantasmagoria* (2021)

possession of this power, the mutant exercises his superiority to oppress the popu-
lace, eliminate competitors and establish a regime of terror. These issues denote

Fig. 9: Destruction of modern Cairo by El Sabah Nur in Bryan Singer's *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016)

a certain orientalism in the conception of power (that is, oriental despotism), but are also reminiscent of twentieth-century European totalitarianisms and, in an American context, Fascism and the White Supremacy movements in the United States. In historical examples, as in Benito Mussolini's erection of obelisks in Rome,[45] the leader's megalomania often leads to the erection of a monument that makes the magnitude of his greatness visible. Thus, in the final part of the film, Nur destroys the present-day city of Cairo and uses its remains to build an immense pyramid that will serve to house the body of Xavier, the most powerful of the mutants.[46]

In short, in the works analysed, the villains Sutekh and Nur, and even the divine group of *The Anubis Gates*, represent a threat to humanity in the context of the *topos* of the Egyptian as a reflection of evil in numerous works of popular culture. A clear vertical differentiation between gods and humans is once again insisted upon by the narrative, but the interaction between the two is very different to that which we saw in the previous section. The gods are initially kept in a latent position, without intervening in the initial events. Their liberation or reanimation is, in all cases, a process brought about by humans, either through the (minimal) survival of ancient cults in the present or the fortuitous discovery of

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45 Nielsen, *Egyptomaniacs*, 73–74.

46 The building of impressive Egyptian structures (most frequently pyramids or obelisks), often by a workforce lorded over by an evil autocrat, is a widespread conceit. See James Baillie's contribution to this special issue for discussion of another manifestation of such tropes.

the villain's tomb or pyramid,[47] understood in the narrative as temporary prisons. The dialectic established between the latent ancient evil and the future world thus introduces a humanity headed for its own destruction. This end-of-the-world narrative is very much in vogue and takes many forms in contemporary popular culture, whether through the degradation of the planet, the use of weapons of mass destruction or, as in the cases presented here, the unleashing of divine forces characteristic of the "neo-Egyptian religion". This makes humans, or at least a group of them, passively guilty of the subsequent destruction, paralleling the notion of (biblical) original sin or the Greek myth of Pandora.

Conclusions

Alien invasions, galactic empires, mutants, robots, time travel and superheroes are some of the common themes of the works that constitute the textual and visual corpus discussed in this article, all of which might be understood as science fiction and fantasy, and some of which draws upon the specifics of other genres and subgenres including alternate history, epic, dystopia and steampunk. Within these general frameworks, a number of characters, settings and objects explicitly evoke specific aspects of ancient Egyptian religion. In this respect, certain conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the list of divinities evoked comprises some of the most recognisable gods in the Egyptian pantheon, such as Thoth, Seth, Khonsu, Horus, Anubis, Bastet, Sobek and Amon.[48] The grouping of these figures is dominated by antagonisms and conflict, predominantly that of Horus and Seth. As far as their appearances are concerned, deities largely follow the fundamental iconographic conventions of Egyptian art (the falcon Horus, the cat Bastet, the jackal Anubis), with a special predilection, as we can see, for partially or totally theriomorphic gods, which serve to present them as alien in all meanings of the word. Secondly, in terms of the Egyptian elements often depicted or represented, these works draw on popular imaginaries of ancient Egyptian culture. Pyramids, tombs, and mum-

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47 As proposed by Hiscock, "Cinema, Supernatural Archaeology, and the Hidden Human Past", depictions of historical research and archaeological excavations in popular culture often imagine contact with the supernatural.

48 The appearance of Anput, a *parèdre* goddess of Anubis who is hardly documented in Egyptian sources, in *Moon Knight: Birth and Death* is curious. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 398b-c only records 7 attestations of the goddess, all from the Greco-Roman period. The intervention of Bes in *La Foire aux immortels* is equally unusual.

mies are central and conspicuous elements.[49] Other elements are also integrated into the chosen narratives, such as the ka or double of the individual in *The Anubis Gates*, the flying scarabs in *Moon Knight*, or the hieroglyphic inscriptions in *Stargate*.

The use of this Egyptianising compendium by filmmakers, artists, and writers, sometimes allows the creation of complex narratives inspired by ancient Egypt, while in other cases, only certain motifs or allusions are used to complement the description of characters and/or environments. In the preceding pages, I have proposed an analysis of the selected works of fiction in terms of the ways in which the gods intervene in the human world. Evolutionary control, territorial occupation and submission, and, finally, a threat to humankind are the three most common denominators of Egyptian deities in contemporary media. With regards to the idea of evolutionary control, the gods (or quasi-divine alien intelligences) bring about the emergence of the human species on Earth (panspermia) and provide it with the technological advances and knowledge for the development of the ancient historical civilisations. Eventually, this evolution allows humans to move beyond the boundaries of Earth and to begin their exploration of other nearby planets. Through transmitters (in the case of "The Sentinel") or interplanetary gates (as in *Stargate*), the gods monitor humanity's progress in space exploration. The Egyptian gods are used to call to mind colonialist schemes of power, as well as certain characteristics borrowed from the totalitarian regimes of our recent history in the characterisation of a divine and oppressive theocracy on Earth.[50] This issue reinforces the traditional depiction of the Egyptian as the embodiment of a kind of despotic evil in popular culture, perhaps rooted in the biblical figure of "Pharaoh", now attributed to a whole pantheon of alien gods.

In the configuration of the previously mentioned themes, the coexistence of science fiction and fantasy and the Egyptianizing gives rise to a new and continuous re-semanticisation, which gives new meanings to motifs and symbols commonly associated with Egypt. In the case of the pyramid, its funerary function in ancient Egypt is frequently reinterpreted in contemporary popular culture;[51]

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49   For the reiteration of these motifs, see Taterka, "Egyptianizing Motifs in the Products of Popular Culture Addressed to Younger Recipients", 205–221.

50   In this sense, Egypt becomes everything that opposes the Western conception of democracy and social justice. As Caroline T. Schroeder states, "It is, I am sure, no surprise to hear me argue that these films [*Stargate* and *The Mummy*] tell us more about American sensibilities than about ancient Egyptian religion"; see Schroeder, "Ancient Egyptian Religion on the Silver Screen", 4.

51   However, in Jim Starlin's science fiction comic *Gilgamesh II* (1989), Otto, the brother of the main character, is buried after his death in a pyramid in the middle of the city.

in "Pyramids of Mars", Sutekh is imprisoned in a pyramid and the mummiform robots build pyramid-shaped rockets for their interplanetary journey to Mars. Similarly, the spaceship in which the Egyptian gods hover over Paris in *La Foire aux immortels* is a pyramid; the pyramid is Khonsu's centre of power in *Moon Knight*; and in "The Sentinel", a pyramidic object found on the lunar surface is the titular technology used to monitor the development of intelligent life on Earth.

The same can be said of some of the divinities in these works. Certain well-known myths or mythemes from ancient Egyptian sources, such as the conflict between Horus and Seth or the link between the god Anubis and the realm of the dead, are reworked. For instance, "Pyramids of Mars" rewrites the opposition between Horus and Seth as the struggle between the members of the alien race of the Osirians, while in *Phantasmagoria* both gods represent the two sides of ancient Egyptian magic, benign and malignant respectively.[52] In the case of Anubis, numerous funerary papyri show Anubis introducing the deceased into the hall of the weighing of the heart before the tribunal of Osiris.[53] This function—acting as a companion to the divinity—inspires his characterisation in *Moon Knight* as a ferryman, charged with leading the soul of one of the characters through the unfathomable realms of the Othervoid, with clear reminiscences of the figure of Charon in Greek mythology. Another key example of such re-semanticisations in the works studied concerns the transformation of the actors in the dispute between Christianity and pagan cults during late antiquity. In the future worlds evoked in *American Gods* and *God is Dead*, the main threat to ancient pagan religions is represented by science and by new modes of false sacredness in today's world, linked to postmodern ideals of pleasure and materiality.[54] If in all of these cases the historical background is recognisable, in others, the authors create new narratives not attested in the Egyptian (or other historical) sources: in *Moon Knight*, Seth is defeated and locked inside a pyramid by a tyrannical Khonsu, and in *La Foire aux immortels* Horus opposes the leadership of an alliance formed by Anubis and Bastet.

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52 See also King, "A Biblical Prophecy and the Armour of Horus".

53 Seeber, *Untersuchungen zur Darstellung des Totengerichts im Alten Ägypten*, 116, 154–158.

54 The adaptability of contemporary science fiction to new historical circumstances and its ability to address recent political, social, economic and religious issues has been summarised as follows by Bould and Vint, in *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*, 145: "Those seeking to enrol SF into projects such as feminism or environmental activism were less concerned with Campbellian extrapolation than with capacity of SF images, ideas and techniques to articulate urgent political concerns".

Ultimately, this dynamic of re-semanticisation and extension of motifs and narratives inspired by ancient Egyptian religion in science fiction and fantasy articulates what we might productively understand as "neo-Egyptian religion" in the modern cultural consciousness. Through their appearance in these works, the Egyptian gods reproduce some of their essential characteristics and functions in mythology, but they are also reimagined in new scenarios and plots. The diversification of their personalities as part of the process of constant re-creation of fictional characters in contemporary culture is such that modern understanding of the ancient Egyptian pantheon in the popular imagination is one in which they exist both as they were and as they have been reimagined, both gods and aliens, heroes and villains.

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