

## CONTRIBUTOR BIO

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KEVIN MCLAREN is pursuing his B.A. in History at Cal Poly. He holds two A.A. degrees from Cuesta College in both History and International Studies. Kevin hopes to one day be a history professor or work in a museum. He also enjoys reading, writing, and making music. As a history student, Kevin has a particular interest in Ancient Egyptian history, which was the inspiration for the topic of his paper.

## THE MARRIAGE OF SCIENCE FICTION AND EGYPTOLOGY

*Kevin McLaren*

The unique mysteries of Ancient Egypt have been a subject of study by Westerners since the ancient Greeks and Romans.<sup>1</sup> Since ancient times, researchers have been enthralled by the mysterious nature of Ancient Egypt and have devised theories addressing Ancient Egypt's seemingly-impossible engineering feats, enigmatic pantheon of gods, and excellent craftsmanship. The study of Ancient Egyptian culture by Westerners became dormant after the fall of the Roman Empire, but was again resurrected in the early 19th century when Napoleon arrived in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars consider 1822 to be the official foundation date for the scholarly field known as "Egyptology," which can be defined broadly as the "systematic exploration of Egypt."<sup>3</sup> Since 1822, Egyptology has undergone a series of major popular breakthroughs. The French occupation of Egypt and especially the translation of the Rosetta Stone resulted in a late 19th century boom of Egyptology. Later, in the 1920s, the discovery of Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb started a second wave of Egyptological

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (London: The British Museum Press, 1995), 91.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

popularity. By the the late 20th century, Egyptology founded itself as a true academic discipline and social science grounding itself in history, anthropology, and sociology. Since the beginning of Egyptology, attempts to understand the origin, purpose, and history of Ancient Egypt have kept the field highly debatable (a primary example being the still-argued purpose of the pyramid complex at Giza—were they tombs built for kings like Richard Lepsius argued in the 19th century<sup>4</sup>, or were they for some greater and older spiritual/technological/symbolic purpose like Graham Hancock currently suggests<sup>5</sup>). Mysteries and questions revolving around Ancient Egypt, as well as mainstream popularity among Westerners, have triggered many creative works of fiction to be written on the subject in the form of science fiction.

Because the field of Egyptology has always been subject to speculation, contemplation and opinions, Egyptology and Ancient Egypt have been recurring themes in science fiction. Science fiction since its advent has been a literature revolving around ideas, understanding, abstraction and hypothesizing. Because science fiction serves as such an efficient medium for conceptualizing speculative ideas, science fiction authors have written stories which often attempt fill the gaps of information that is missing or misunderstood by Egyptological scholars about Ancient Egypt or the exploration of Egypt. Egyptology's study of Ancient Egypt's abstruse nature and its timeline of breakthroughs have provoked science fiction authors to try to build on the speculation of Egyptologists and solve Egyptian mysteries through works of fiction. Writers have positioned themselves in Egyptological debates by writing stories that correlate with Egyptological theories, sometimes in direct response to the Egyptological theories of the author's time period.

Egyptology and science fiction have had an important impact on each other, and science fiction written about Egypt has evolved simultaneously with the field of Egyptology. Science fiction stories/authors have continuously speculated and theorized potential answers to the questions regarding the mysterious nature, origin, and feats of Ancient Egypt, and those theories have perpetually correlated with actual scholarly theories. Egyptology has been essential to science fiction because Egyptology has been a forefront for historical, anthropological and

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Lepsius, *Discoveries in Egypt, Ethiopia and the Peninsula of Sinai* (London: Richard Bentley, 1852), 159.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Hancock, *Fingerprints of the Gods* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 273-349.

sociological studies which provide the basis for “soft science fiction.” Arguably, Egyptology is one of the primary reasons that the social sciences were brought into science fiction. The simultaneous evolution of Egyptology and science fiction occurred because science fiction authors have continuously built upon new discoveries and breakthroughs in Egyptological studies which have been situated in intermediate expansions of information since 1822. An example of Egyptological science fiction correlation is the connection between the science fiction movie *Stargate* and the non-fiction theoretical book *The Orion Mystery*. *Stargate* suggests that Ancient Egyptians had access to a portal in which they could travel through a wormhole to another planet.<sup>6</sup> The movie was released in October of 1994, mere months after the release of Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert’s *The Orion Mystery*, which suggests that the Giza plateau was intended to be a “gateway to the stars,” an Ancient Egyptian beacon to Osiris (the constellation Orion) in the sky.<sup>7</sup> Though science fiction has benefitted from Egyptology, the reverse is also true, because scholarly Egyptological theories have formed, been refined, or improved based on the fictional works of science fiction authors. Once again using Robert Bauval’s “Orion Correlation Theory” (also originally presented in *The Orion Mystery* in 1994) as an example, Bauval began to better refine his theories after the release of *Stargate* by which Bauval began to use the term “stargate” to describe the connection between Giza plateau and the constellation Orion in his scholarly lectures.<sup>8</sup> Though the “Orion correlation theory” and *Stargate* are more recent late-20th century examples of the correlation between Egyptology and science fiction, the connection between the two has been evident since the late 19th century.

Europeans in the 19th century rushed for information on Ancient Egypt, and pushed hard to excavate artifacts in Egypt to bring back to Europe. “The discoveries that were made...gave rise to a passion for all things Egyptian throughout Europe.”<sup>9</sup> Rivalry between the major countries of Europe to gather artifacts and transfer those artifacts to Europe for private and public collections

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin, *Stargate*, DVD, directed by Roland Emmerich (Santa Monica, California: Artisan Entertainment Inc., 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert, *The Orion Mystery: Unlocking the Secrets of the Great Pyramids* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994), 114-137

<sup>8</sup> Graham Hancock and Robert Bauval, *Monuments to Life*, DVD, lecture (London: UFO TV, 1995)

<sup>9</sup> Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin, *Ancient Egypt* (New York: Anness Publishing Limited, 2003), 32.

led to a reckless and unsystematic method of dealing with the exploration and excavation of Egypt, which in turn left a great number of mysteries and an absence of catalogued information. “Scientific expeditions unfortunately took place against a background of looting and collecting,”<sup>10</sup> and many artifacts were brought back to Europe with a complete lack of context, information and historiographical records. The deficiency of historical information sparked wide scholarly speculation around the significance and historical importance of Ancient Egyptian culture. The equivocal characteristics of the seemingly endless amounts of Egyptian statues, scrolls, stelae, and sarcophagi brought to Europe were a marvel to scholars, and simultaneously, were also a marvel to authors that discussed through means of literature the purpose and significance of Ancient Egyptian culture. The mystery-solving intentions and curious outlook on Egyptian culture among scholars as well as fictional authors in the 19th century birthed a relationship between Egyptologists and science fiction authors that could arguably be the most important contribution to the invention of “soft science fiction,” which is a form of science fiction that concentrates on the social sciences (such as history, political science, anthropology, psychology, etc.) rather than the “hard sciences” (such as mathematics, astronomy, biology, etc.).

The 1890s marked an important time in which scholars and explorers formed theories and wrote grand narratives on their interpretations of the significance/purpose of Ancient Egyptian ways of life. At the same time, science fiction authors built upon the academic Egyptological theories, or formed their own theories on Ancient Egyptian matters. For example, the scholarly book made for the British Museum by Sir E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Dwellers on the Nile*, published 1893 contains a chapter called, “Illustrations of the Pentateuch and Bible Passages From the Egyptian Monuments,”<sup>11</sup> in which Budge attempted to present the Egyptian side of the story of *Exodus*, and questioned those that “argue[d] that the manners of the Egyptians must have been savage and barbaric.” Budge wrote why a “nation with a history that numbered thousands of years,” and “that had shed the light of civilization” became “steeped in barbarism and ignorance,”<sup>12</sup> which Budge argued started with the unkind treatment of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, 91.

<sup>11</sup> E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Dwellers on the Nile* (Cambridge, UK: The Religious Tract Society, 1893), 80.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

Jews, which in turn led to a domino effect of poor foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

In a seemingly direct response to *The Dwellers on the Nile*, Ellsworth Douglass wrote the story *Pharaoh's Broker* in 1899, just a few years after the circulation of Budge's *The Dwellers on the Nile*. *Pharaoh's Broker* is a science fiction story in which the main characters take an explorational excursion to Mars (carried out much like the archaeological explorers of Egypt), during which they find a civilization on Mars that replicates what was once Egyptian civilization on Earth. After a sequence of events that lead them to meet the pharaoh of the Egypt-like planet, the main characters come to the realization that they are living and contributing to the story of *Exodus*, only on Mars instead of Earth. The characters come to the conclusion that "The Creator has given all the habitable planets the same great problem of life to work out. Every one of His worlds in its time passes through the same general history,"<sup>14</sup> and realize that the reason that Mars' evolution is slower in social history is because of its slower revolutions around the sun.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, Ellsworth's response to Budge dismissed Budge's attempt to understand the Ancient Egyptian perspective, and rather, through science fiction, conservatively implied that the Judeo-Christian God's will was the entire cause of Egyptian motives and the eventual fate of Ancient Egypt, rather than any decisions made on behalf of the Egyptians themselves like Budge suggested. Though *Pharaoh's Broker* contains elements of "hard" science fiction (such as how the main characters get to Mars), its overall message is grounded in the social sciences by presenting Douglass' interpretation and understanding of the evolution of the Egyptian social structure, culture and decisions. Therefore, *Pharaoh's Broker* can be regarded as 19th century "soft" science fiction that benefitted from Egyptological theories (such as Budge) and potentially sparked new debates in the Egyptological field—a relationship cycle important to both science fiction and Egyptology.

Perhaps not as easily detectable as the relationship between *Pharaoh's Broker* and *The Dwellers on the Nile*, *The Conquest of the Moon* by Andre Laurie is another example of a science fiction author that was influenced by Egyptology. The story consists of a group of scholarly explorers that bring the moon closer to Earth in order to explore and better understand it. Although *The Conquest of the Moon* is not specifically about Egyptology, the methods in which they

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 80-98

<sup>14</sup> Ellsworth Douglass, *Pharaoh's Broker* (London: C. Arthur Pearson Limited, 1899), 89.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

explore the moon is strikingly similar to the methods of Egyptian exploration earlier in the century (such as Arabic assistants, European rivalries and attempts made to bring things back to Europe). Throughout the course of the story, Egypt, the Red Sea, and other areas around the Nile Delta are settings in the story (aside from the moon), perhaps to coax the reader into seeing the parallels between Laurie's methods of moon exploration and Egyptological exploration. The way in which the characters explore the moon is identical to the way in which Karl Richard Lepsius, a mid-19th century explorer of Egypt, explored Egypt and documented it in his book *Discoveries in Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Peninsula of Sinai*. Laurie borrows from the field of Egyptology to invest ideas into exploration beyond the Earth and throughout the course of his novel makes suggestions as to what Egyptological methods could potentially evolve into. Egyptological methods of study would in fact evolve and become a more systematic and efficient field by the 1920s.

Howard Carter discovered King Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, which started a new wave of Egyptological popularity and pushed the field of Egyptology even further toward becoming a mainstream phenomenon. Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb was "the first great media event in the history of Egyptology, capturing the imaginations of subsequent generations."<sup>16</sup> Carter wrote of Egyptology after the discovery, "...now all of a sudden we find the world takes an interest in us, an interest so intense and so avid for details that special correspondents at large salaries have to be sent to interview us, report our every movement, and hide round corners to surprise a secret out of us."<sup>17</sup> The discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb inspired a new wave of Egyptologists that were fascinated with treasure, tombs, mummies, and wondered what more could remain. The advanced craftsmanship, creativity, artistry and scientific advancement of Tutankhamun's artifacts sparked new ideas about the origins, technology and motives of Ancient Egyptian culture, among both scholars and authors. The complex aspects of Tutankhamun's tomb caused new questions to emerge, such as how a previously-thought primitive ancient people could make things of such grandeur, and what kind of society was capable and willing to make objects of utterly fantastic craftsmanship.

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<sup>16</sup> Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Howard Carter, *The Tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amen* (1923, reprint, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 141.

Science fiction authors in the 1920s–1930s endeavored to write stories to introduce conceptual ideas about the unbelievable feats of the Ancient Egyptians, and presented that the Egyptians were perhaps affected by an out-of-this-world source. *Beyond Pluto* was written by John Scott Campbell in 1932, a science fiction novel that was early to suggest that the Ancient Egyptians had access to space travel, time travel and knowledge from advanced outer-space civilizations. The characters in the novel are Egyptologists that have set out to find a lost city, and rather, stumble upon an advanced technological society capable of space travel that takes the characters “Beyond Pluto.” Campbell promotes the idea throughout the storyline of his novel that the Ancient Egyptians were much more sophisticated and misunderstood than what was generally accepted by scholars. Campbell’s ideas would become a huge portion of Egyptological debates that remain today. Campbell’s questioning of how technologically, scientifically and culturally advanced the Egyptians were was likely originally evoked by the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb and Campbell’s ideas on Egyptian sophistication would also contribute to the field of Egyptology.

John Scott Campbell’s ideas formed prototypical theories on the possibility that an out-of-this-world influence may have helped form Egyptian culture. Perhaps unknown to Campbell, his ideas forced Egyptologists to finally approach and theorize on the origin and formation of Ancient Egyptian culture, whereas the majority of scholarly emphasis was before placed on the height of pharaonic culture. E.A. Wallis Budge, who by this time was the archetype of the Western Egyptologist, addressed Campbell’s ideas and formed a thesis about the origin of Egyptian culture, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (1934). Budge candidly argued against any unearthly influences on Egypt, and rather, argued that Egyptian culture was shaped mostly by tribal animist cults that slowly unified because of commonalities among tribes such as survival techniques, animal worship, and the belief in spiritual imbueement of the natural world (which Budge calls “fetishism”<sup>18</sup>).<sup>19</sup> Budge’s work on predynastic Egypt would set a conservative standard for Western understanding of the development and creation of Ancient Egypt and push aside any science-fiction-like notions of alien or out-of-this-world influence on the formation of Ancient Egypt.

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<sup>18</sup> E.A. Wallis Budge, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (1934, reprint, Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), 57.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-112.

Perhaps a reaction to both *Beyond Pluto* and *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* was John Wyndham's (under the name John Beynon) *The Secret People*, published in 1935. *The Secret People* portrays an opposite representation of Egyptian origins compared to Campbell, and pushes Budge's ideas to the extreme. Similar to *Beyond Pluto*, the characters are explorers, this time exploring an artificial sea that was placed in the Sahara Desert by humankind. Upon exploring the sea, the main characters come across an ancient civilization, seemingly descendants of Ancient Egyptians. Unlike Campbell's portrayal of an advanced race, Wyndham's civilization is that of a backwards, underground, tribal pygmy culture that worships Egyptian gods merely because they are animals and doesn't understand the most "trivial explanations" of concepts revolving around human nature.<sup>20</sup> Wyndham, like Campbell, could have been addressing the same questions of who the Egyptians were and how advanced their civilization was, but took an opposite stance in which Wyndham felt that the Ancient Egyptians were an archaic and unintelligent civilization. Wyndham's conceptual ideas on who the Egyptians were are definitely extreme reflections of Budge's theories, in which Wyndham's representation of Ancient Egypt is marked with animal worship, archaic survival techniques, and tribes. Wyndham's portrayal is shaped by the same elements that Budge discusses in his thesis, but to Wyndham, those elements formed a barbaric and boorish culture. Though Wyndham and Campbell's portrayals of the descendants of Ancient Egyptians in their novels are extreme, both viewpoints are contributions to Egyptology in regards to how advanced, cultured and enlightened the Ancient Egyptians truly were, which has remained a central debate in Egyptology since the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and re-emerged as a major debate in the late 20th century.

The late 20th century triggered an interesting series of events. By the time of the late 20th century, Egyptology had founded itself as an official academic field, in which it is regarded as a true social science. At the same time, science fiction and the field of Egyptology have merged, in which many ideas discussed in science fiction have worked their way into the official scholarly debates regarding the history and nature of Ancient Egypt. The integration of "science-fiction-esque" theories into Egyptology has created a sharp divide between Egyptological communities. Erich von Däniken, author of *Chariots of the Gods: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (1968), was one of the first authors

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<sup>20</sup> John Wyndham, *The Secret People* (1935, reprint, London: George Newnes, Ltd., 1987), 134.

to utilize science-fiction-esque ideas to blatantly challenge the foundations of scholarly Egyptological facts set by traditional Egyptologists. Von Däniken argues in *Chariots of the Gods* that aliens were an influence on many ancient cultures, including the Ancient Egyptians, and that clues were left by the Ancient Egyptians that provide proof for extraterrestrial intervention in Ancient Egypt.<sup>21</sup> Though *Chariots of the Gods* presents information that sounds like science fiction, it is presented as a scholarly theoretical work designed to challenge the basis of traditional social science, including Egyptology. Von Däniken's work on *Chariots of the Gods* would provide the basis for a string of challenges toward traditional Egyptology and inspire new types of science fiction.

*Stargate*, a 1995 film written by Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin, presents a late 20th century science fiction work that embraces the merging of science fiction and scholarly Egyptological thought. In the movie, the main character is an Egyptologist who attempts to present broader ideas on Egypt and yet is rejected by his scholar colleagues. The first spoken line in the movie is by the main character, in which he says, "Pharaohs did not build the pyramids."<sup>22</sup> The frustrated scholar tries desperately to convince the other scholars of the notion of an older, more important purpose behind the pyramids, but is humiliated when his colleagues reject his ideas and leave. Throughout the course of the movie, the main character learns that his theories were correct, and to his surprise, the tyrannical alien Ra is responsible for Ancient Egyptian civilization on Earth as well as a parallel Ancient Egyptian-like civilization on another planet across the galaxy that is discovered by the use of a "stargate," which is a portal that allows for quick space travel.

The struggles of the main character in *Stargate* are very similar to the real-life struggles of scholars such as Graham Hancock and Robert Bauval. Both scholars have proposed in their research that Ancient Egypt is much older and advanced than understood by traditional Egyptologists, and both scholars have also been rejected by the mainstream Egyptological community. For example, Robert Bauval and his co-author Thomas Brophy wrote on the prehistoric origins of Ancient Egypt in their book *Black Genesis* (2011) and emphasized the significant impact of Black Africans on pharaonic Egypt, which was widely dismissed by the academic community. Robert Bauval writes on the matter of

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<sup>21</sup> Erich Von Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, translated by Michael Heron, 1969 (reprint, New York: Berkeley Books, 1999), 78-81

<sup>22</sup> Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin, *Stargate*.

scholarly rejection in *Black Genesis*, “In spite of many clues that have been in place in the past few decades, which strongly favor a Black African origin for the pharaohs, many scholars and especially Egyptologists have either ignored them, confused them, or, worst of all, derided or scorned those who entertained them.”<sup>23</sup> The struggle to have accepted theories in Egyptology are parallel between Daniel Jackson (the main character in *Stargate*) and scholars like Robert Bauval, which Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin surely meant to approach in the storyline of their movie.

Aside from the struggles of rejected academics, Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin definitely did their share of research and exploration in order to incorporate non-mainstream theories into *Stargate*. Conspicuously, Daniel Jackson of *Stargate* argues points in the movie before having knowledge of the stargate that are nearly exactly the same arguments that Graham Hancock makes in *Fingerprints of the Gods* (1995, published actually one year after the release of *Stargate*, though Hancock argued his points in controversial lectures prior to 1995, much like Daniel Jackson attempted to do in the movie), such as the idea that the pyramids were not made as tombs, that Egypt is a much older civilization than traditionally believed, and that Ancient Egypt may have been the result of an older mother culture.<sup>24</sup> Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin’s movie *Stargate* presented their position on the matter of such Egyptological struggles and built on the ideas of contemporary controversial Egyptologists. The two used science fiction as a medium to engage the viewers into thinking that perhaps there is a potential for more radical theories in the field of Egyptology.

Perhaps as Emmerich and Devlin intended, the movie *Stargate* did birth new scholarly theories and help reinforce the ones already steeped in controversy and rejection. Though perhaps even more radical than the works of Bauval and Hancock, the television show *Ancient Aliens* which first aired in 2010 on the History Channel presented information by controversial Egyptologists that provided numerous theories on the origins of Ancient Egypt that were very similar to some of the ideas brought to the table in the movie *Stargate*. For example, in *Stargate*, the gods Anubis and Horus were portrayed as servant guards of the alien Ra whose suits and electronic battle garments look like a jackal and hawk and in turn, Anubis and Horus are not actual zoomorphic

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Bauval and Thomas Brophy, *Black Genesis: The Prehistoric Origins of Ancient Egypt* (Rochester, Vermont: Bear & Co., 2011), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Hancock, *Fingerprints of the Gods*, 273-442

entities and rather they are humans wearing technologically advanced space suits that resemble animals. In *Stargate*, because the people of Ancient Egypt had no understanding of superior technology and no words or symbols to represent such technology, Anubis and Horus were depicted in Ancient Egyptian murals as zoomorphic entities as a result.<sup>25</sup> Very similarly, in an episode of *Ancient Aliens* called, “The Mission,” Egyptologists that strongly argued in favor of “ancient astronaut theory” (the idea that humankind has been shaped by intruding aliens from outer space) provided evidence that Egyptian gods may have come from space and that their zoomorphic representations in Ancient Egyptian art may have only been because the Ancient Egyptians did not understand their truly advanced nature of genetic enhancement, space-exploring technology, and superior intellectual capacity.<sup>26</sup> The noticeable similarity between the science fiction storyline of *Stargate* (16 years prior to *Ancient Aliens*) and the theories presented in “The Mission” on *Ancient Aliens* (which, despite its controversy, is intended to be a scholarly presentation of ideas) is a prime example of *Stargate* influencing Egyptology, and the true 20th century merging of science fiction and Egyptology.

The marriage of science fiction and Egyptology has been strong since the beginning of modern Egyptology (1822) and arguably, each has relied on the other ever since. Science fiction and Egyptology have evolved side-by-side with one another and have repeatedly borrowed material from each other as evident in the intertwining of stories and scholarly works such as *Pharaoh's Broker* and *The Dwellers on the Nile*, or *Stargate* and *Ancient Aliens*. Science fiction authors have ever-constantly built upon the discoveries and theories of Egyptologists, and Egyptologists have repeatedly picked up on the ideas brought to light by science fiction authors, and the relationship between the two has been mutually beneficial. Periodic breakthroughs in Egyptological thought have led to strong changes in the science fiction based on Egyptology and vice versa. Egyptology as a social science embedded in solving mysteries was/is an excellent subject for science fiction authors to explore, and therefore was one of the reasons that social sciences were assimilated into science fiction, thus contributing to the creation of soft science fiction. As long as mysteries, debates, and puzzles

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<sup>25</sup> Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin, *Stargate*.

<sup>26</sup> The History Channel, “The Mission,” *Ancient Aliens*, The History Channel website, streaming video, 2010, <http://www.history.com/shows/ancient-aliens/episodes/season-1> (accessed May 28, 2012).

remain for scholars to solve, science fiction authors will do the same, and the marriage of science fiction and Egyptology will endure.

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