

»Ancient Astronaut« Narrations

A Popular Discourse on Our Religious Past¹

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Abstract:

In their typical *explanatory* and *unveiling gesture*, the narrations about *Ancient Astronauts* have become a popular myth about our religious past. Nowadays, these narrations are often contained in a specific genre of literature on the alternative bookshelves, and a gigantic theme park in Interlaken (“Mystery Park”) is staging some of its basic ideas. This *Ancient Astronaut* discourse owes much to Swiss-born Erich von Däniken, to be sure, but it can be traced back to the earlier impact of Charles Fort and his iconoclastic books about “damned data” – anomalistic sightings and findings which an ignorant science deliberately seemed to “exclude”. Since then, the “Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence in Ancient Times” (Paleo-SETI or PSETI) has become a popular “research” subject, leading not only to various publications in many languages of the world, but also to lay-research organizations and conventions. – The paper tries to identify the major themes, motivations and argumentative strategies in the *Ancient Astronauts* discourse, as well as its typical oscillation between an ‘alternative science’ and manifest esotericism. With its ‘neo-mythic’ activity (ufological Euhemerism, re-enchantment of heaven, foundation myth for modernity, etc.), it resembles a secular and ‘ufological’ parallel to creationism, displaying a strong belief in the ‘hidden’ truth of the religious traditions. This ‘broken’ myth with its technological explanations of religion has influenced many New Age or ‘esoteric’ strands – especially UFO-religions like the “Raëlian Religion”. The *Ancient Astronaut* narrations knit together our specific late-modern mode of being-in-the-world with a lay people’s attempt at a new search for the fundamental truth of the myth: The protagonists still “want to believe”, and they find it plausible that a pre-astronautic “truth is somewhere out there”: But in the end, the seemingly self-evident technological possibilities of our age are projected back into a remote past, on the surface of ancient texts and artifacts, – and *the result is nothing but a shining mirror of us, and of our time.*

Erzählungen über antike „Astronautengötter“ sind längst zu einem populären Mythos avanciert, der die Wahrheit über unsere religiöse Vergangenheit ‚aufdecken‘ und ‚erklären‘ soll. Hierzu findet

¹ A printed version of this paper is supposed to appear in *FABULA – Journal of Folktale Studies* (presumably in 2006), together with other contributions to the conference on “Narratives, Roles and Beliefs in the New Age Era: *Homo narrans – homo ludens – homo religiosus*” which took place in Amsterdam at the Meertens Institute, February 2005. An earlier draft was already presented during a convention of the *Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionsgeschichte* in Leipzig (2001).

man mittlerweile ein spezifisches Genre im alternativen Büchermarkt, und in Interlaken wirbt sogar ein großes Erlebniszentrum „Mystery Park“ für die Plausibilität der diesbezüglichen Grundideen und „Indizien“ Obwohl der prägende Einfluss des Schweizers Erich von Däniken nicht unterschätzen ist, lassen sich viele Elemente dieses Diskurses bis zu Charles Fort und seinen ikonoklastischen Büchern über die sog. „verdammten Daten“ zurückführen – anomalistische Befunde, die seiner Meinung nach von einer ignoranten Wissenschaft „exkludiert“ wurden. Mittlerweile wurde die „Suche nach Extraterrestrischer Intelligenz in der Vergangenheit“ (Paleo-SETI oder PSETI) ein populäres „Forschungs“-Thema, das nicht nur zu einer Vielzahl entsprechender Publikationen in vielen Sprachen der Welt führte, sondern auch zur Formierung von Laien-Forschungsgemeinschaften und entsprechenden Tagungen. – Der Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit den Hauptthemen, Motivationshintergründen und Argumentationsstrategien des Astronautengötter-Diskurses, aber auch mit der typischen Oszillation der „Prä-Astronautik“ zwischen einer ‚alternativen Wissenschaft‘ und manifest esoterischer Religiosität. Mit seinem neo-mythischen Gestus (ufologischer Euhemerismus, Wiederverzauberung des Himmels, Begründungsmythos für die Moderne, usw.) erscheint dieser Diskurs auf weiten Strecken wie ein säkulares oder ‚ufologisches‘ Pendant zum Kreationismus, was v.a. in dem starken Glauben an die ‚verborgene‘ Wahrheit der religiösen Überlieferungen zum Ausdruck kommt. Dieser ‚gebrochene‘ Mythos mit seinen technologischen Erklärungen von Religion hat zudem viele Traditionen des New Age und der Esoterik beeinflusst – v.a. UFO-Glaubensbewegungen wie die „Raelistische Religion“. Die präastronautischen Narrationen vereinen unsere spezifisch spätmoderne Weise des In-der-Welt-Seins mit der laienhaften Suche nach der eigentlichen Grundwahrheit des Mythos: Ihre Protagonisten „wollen glauben“, und sie halten es für plausibel, dass es eine *präastronautische* „Wahrheit irgendwo da draußen“ gibt. Aber letztlich werden die selbstverständlichen scheinenden technologischen Möglichkeiten unseres Zeitalters nur in eine weit entfernte Vergangenheit, auf die Oberfläche antiker Texte und Artefakte, zurückprojiziert – und am Ende entdeckt man auf diese Weise doch wieder nur einen leuchtenden Spiegel von uns selbst und unserer Gegenwart.

In 1994, Roland Emmerich’s well-made Science Fiction movie *Stargate* (not to be confused with the shallow follow-up TV-series) came up with a paradigmatic core-story: During excavations in Egypt a strange artifact, which appears like a grand circular door, is unearthed. Later, it is discovered by the story’s hero Egyptologist to be actually a “star gate” to another planet. So it becomes clear that the ancient Egypt gods were originally nothing but “Ancient Astronauts”² with

² “Ancient Astronauts“, “Astronaut Gods“ or “Astronautengötter“ (in German) are emic names and characterizations used to identify a central aspect of the discourse in question here. In his first public statement in that direction (at least, to my knowledge), just one year before the publication of his famous first book, Erich von Däniken formulated a summarized thesis at the end of his contribution to a German congress of UFO-researchers in Mainz (1967): „Die Götter unseres Altertums waren fremde Astronauten. – Weiter nichts!“ (‘Our ancient Gods were nothing but alien astronauts’). Cf. E.v.Däniken, „Erhielten unsere Vorfahren Besuch aus dem Weltall?“ In: Dokumentarbericht – 7.

access to a highly advanced technology. In a key scene on this other planet, the hero scientist, standing among a scared group of the planet's human inhabitants, finally takes away the intimidating mythic disguise from a defeated "alien God" and reveals the original human face behind the 'helmet' – saying: "Have a look at your 'Gods'".

This *explanatory* and *unveiling gesture*, interpreting and displaying the so-called mythic 'Gods' as mere humans, or – in most cases, at least – as *humanoid* beings, is the core motif of a specific discourse which is heavily linked with the name of Swiss-born Erich von Däniken (born 1935).³ Since 1968, when his first book *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft* (English version: *Chariots of the Gods*) was published and immediately turned into a best-seller, von Däniken has become an internationally successful author with more than 60 Mio books published in all major languages world-wide. In the same year, by the way, Stanley Kubrick's *A Space Odyssey* – also enriched with *Ancient Astronaut* portents⁴ – came into the cinemas.

Von Däniken was not – and did not stay – alone: A whole troop of *Ancient Astronaut* companions and epigenous writers arose. Some of them also even managed to make a living from the income of their *Ancient Astronaut* books. Looking on its main players and protagonists, this discourse and genre is, though not solely, but to a large extent, a German discourse, counting among its authors people like Walter-Jörg Langbein, Johannes Fiebag, Erich Dopatka, Peter Krassa and Lars A. Fischinger (and many others). In order to promote and discuss the *Ancient Astronaut* ideas, a so-called "*Ancient Astronaut Society (AAS)*" was formally established in 1973 – nowadays relabeled "*Archaeology, Astronautics and SETI⁵ Research Association (AAS RA)*". On their website⁶ one can browse through a "meeting point" section on active membership: interestingly, we find (April 2006) over 467 members from Germany, 88 from Switzerland and 48 from Austria – adding up to a total of 603 German speaking members (!) compared to 76 from all other European countries (internationally, there are some 62 US-American plus 13 Canadian members, numbers from the rest of the world are below significance).⁷ Despite its international success, the *Ancient Astronaut* discourse therefore still appears strongly linked to German actors.

Internationaler Weltkongreß der UFO-Forscher in Mainz 1967, Wiesbaden 1968, 94–97 (here 97). – Cf. already A.Grünschloß, "UFO faith and 'ufological' discourses in Germany" in: Chris Partridge (ed.), *UFO Religions*. London 2003, 179–193.

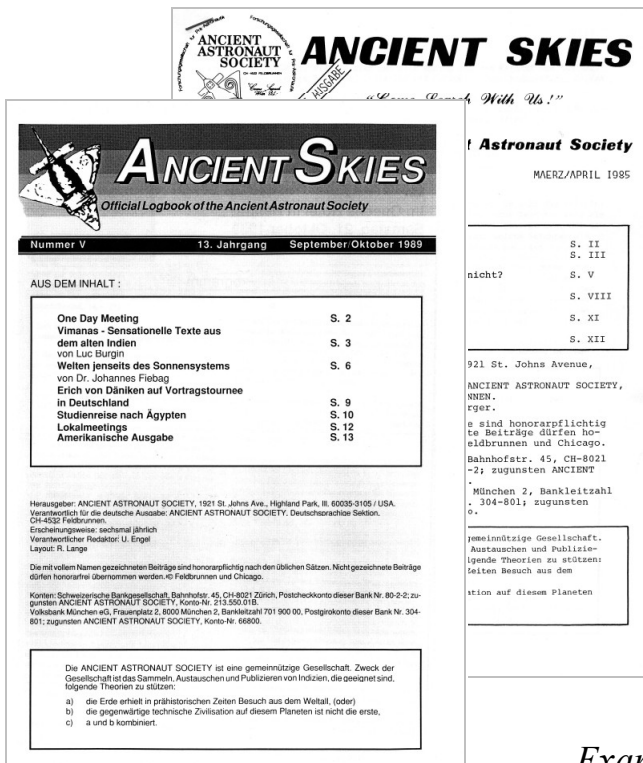
³ Cf. the quote of his statement from 1967 in the footnote above.

⁴ Cf. especially the opening scene, where a horde of apes is somehow 'induced' by a mysterious giant monolith to develop 'tools', which implies a clear hint to an alien intervention and (artificial) 'triggering' of intelligence.

⁵ SETI is the acronym for "Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence" (cf. further below).

⁶ www.legendarytimes.com, or (in German) www.sagenhaftezeiten.com.

⁷ During the last year, I observed a numerical increase of registered German-speaking members from 544 (March 2005) to 603 (April 2006). I speculate that this has to do with the recent impact of the "World Mysteries" center in Interlaken (see below).



Examples of some AAS-Journals

The AAS (RA) explicitly wants to serve as a platform for international exchange on *Ancient Astronaut* questions: “The AAS RA is determined to prove, using scientific research methods, but in ‘layman’s terms’, as to whether or not extraterrestrials have visited Earth in the remote past.”⁸ – As in ‘real’ academic organizations, *research journals* were therefore developed and published: originally under the label *Ancient Skies*, then *Legendary Times* or, in the German equivalent, *Sagenhafte Zeiten*. Analogously, the creation of AAS-research awards for distinguished contributions to the field imitates the established practice of scientific networks. Finally, a gigantic prestige project surfaced near Interlaken in the year 2003: the 86 Mio SFr theme park about “World Mysteries”, now called “Mystery Park”, where all the ‘classic’ themes and topics of the *Ancient Astronaut* discourse are displayed and intensely ‘staged’ with advanced technological means and media. The same is true, by the way, for 70 year old Erich von Däniken himself, who still travels a lot giving public *Ancient Astronaut* lectures all over Europe, where he performs as a great

⁸ The URL is <http://www.legendarytimes.com>; parallel to it, the German website with the URL <http://www.sagenhaftezeiten.com> states the agenda in the following way: „Das Ziel der A.A.S. [...] ist es, einen anerkannten Beweis für ehemalige Besuche von Außerirdischen auf unserer Erde zu erbringen. Dabei wollen wir den Grundregeln des wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnisgewinns folgen, uns aber nicht von bestehenden Dogmen oder Paradigmen eingrenzen lassen. Wird ein derartiger Beweis von uns oder anderen Forschern gefunden, sehen wir unsere Aufgabe darin, Verbindungen zwischen der Wissenschaft und der Öffentlichkeit herzustellen.“

professional narrator and entertainer accompanied by impressive computer-based animations, slides and films.⁹

When the first preparations for this theme park, this gigantic ‘brainchild’ of Erich von Däniken, started to make it into the press around the turn of the century, many people (including myself) were still doubtful whether he would really be able to convince all relevant Swiss authorities – or, even more importantly, enough well-to-do sponsors who would actually take the risk to fund this expensive project (with costs increasing from an amount originally estimated at around 50 Mio to 86 Mio SFr).¹⁰ – But nowadays, von Däniken’s “dream”¹¹ has indeed come true: the Mystery Park is well received and seems to have made it, also due to very professional public relations and commercials, and despite the relatively high entrance fees. The mere fact that von Däniken’s endeavor is now presenting human history from a quite different angle, but staging it in a very convincing and highly entertaining ‘mediatized’ form, presents a real challenge to all traditional academic archeology, anthropology, history and religious studies, as well as to its popular communication in conventional museum fashion. – But where did this particular *Ancient Astronaut* discourse come from? Where did it all begin?

1. Charles Hoy Fort – the ‘invention’ of the discourse and its genre

It was the US-American journalist and innovative writer Charles Hoy Fort (1874–1932), who laid down the most influential modern ‘foundation stone’ for the idea of space alien interventions on Earth. His classic *Book of the Damned* appeared in 1919, followed up by three analogous volumes in the years until 1932.¹² In his four books, Fort concentrated on all kinds of strange sightings: empirical data, which he collected from magazines, books, journals, newspapers (etc.), and which had been ‘ignored’ by modern science. Fort wanted to display, as he stated in the famous opening lines of his book: “A procession of the damned. By the damned, I mean the excluded. We shall have a procession of data that Science has excluded.”¹³

⁹ An impression of this performance can be obtained through video-releases by Erich von Däniken; cf. for example his VHS cassette “Erich von Däniken: Die großen Rätsel der Welt (Vortrag 2001)”, Beatenberg 2001.

¹⁰ The process was always documented in “real time” on the Mystery Park’s old Internet-homepage (now closed).

¹¹ Cf. the documentation by Swiss television: „Erich von Dänikens Traum: Ein Rätselpark für die Außerirdischen“ (Schweizer Fernsehen 2000).

¹² Charles Hoy Fort, *The Book of the Damned*, New York 1919 (Boni & Liveright); the following volumes are: *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932). – There are several Hypertext editions of the books available on the Internet today: e.g. www.sacred-texts.com/fort (only book 1 and 2), or www.resologist.net/ (damnei.htm, ladsei.htm, loei.htm and talentei.htm), run by a „Fortean“ student; cf. also www.sacredspiral.com/books/damned.pdf for a PDF-version of *The Book of the Damned* (1919). – A good work-historical introduction can be found in Ulrich Magin, *Der Ritt auf dem Kometen. Über Charles Hoy Fort*. Frankfurt/M. 1997.

¹³ I have used the paperback edition, New York 1972 (Ace Books), here 18 (= page 7 in the 1931 edition on

Fort therefore appears as a critical iconoclast, humorously destroying the discourse-surface of an all-too nice and self-sufficient science, which (as he put it) does not deserve the name “science” since it is ideologically ‘framed’ by dogmatic and traditional perspectives, “excluding” everything, which does not fit into a predetermined picture of the world. Thus, “theologians and scientists”, or traditional religion and science (Fort speaks of “Dogmatic Science” in capitals in his opening paragraph) are lined up side-by-side in their ignorance and narrow-mindedness towards ‘different’ or ‘anomalous’ facts. Because of the pre-judgmental and “exclusionist” attitude of academic scholarship, all the “positive assurances of the sciences” should be seen critically as nothing but “islands of seeming stability in a cosmic jelly”, as one of his famous quips from *New Lands* goes.¹⁴ Fort’s books inspired many writers in the Science Fiction and fantasy genres – most prominently H.P. Lovecraft. One of Fort’s basic conclusions is that obviously “*we’re property*” – “property” of some alien extraterrestrial force (whatever it might be), a force which colonized earth a long time ago, and therefore we still do find anomalous data, remnants of their interventions today:

“I think we’re property. I should say we belong to something: That once upon a time, this earth was No-man’s Land, that other worlds explored and colonized here, and fought among themselves for possession, but that now it’s owned by something: That something owns this earth – all others warned off. Nothing in our own times – perhaps – because I am thinking of certain notes I have – has ever appeared upon this earth, from somewhere else, so openly as Columbus landed upon San Salvador, or as Hudson sailed up his river. But as to surreptitious visits to this earth, in recent times, or as to emissaries, perhaps, from other worlds, or voyagers who have shown every indication of intent to evade and avoid, we shall have data as convincing as our data of oil or coal-burning aerial super-constructions.”¹⁵

Several times in his books, Fort expresses the idea that a hidden knowledge about the existence of such forces seems to be handed down only via “esoteric ones” (who once had been in actual “communication”) and some secret “societies” or esoteric fraternities – a topic which later was to

www.resologist.net/damnei.htm).

¹⁴ From chapter I,4 of *New Lands* (New York 1923), 31.

¹⁵ *The Book of the Damned*, New York 1972, 191f. – Fort goes on to write (192f): “I suspect that, after all, we’re useful – that among contesting claimants, adjustment has occurred, or that something now has a legal right to us, by force, or by having paid out analogues of beads for us to former, more primitive, owners of us– all others warned off – that all this has been known, perhaps for ages, to certain ones upon this earth, a cult or order, members of which function like bellwethers to the rest of us, or as superior slaves or overseers, directing us in accordance with instructions received – from Somewhere else – in our mysterious usefulness. – But I accept that, in the past, before proprietorship was established, inhabitants of a host of other worlds have – dropped here, hopped here, wafted, sailed, flown, motored – walked here, for all I know – been pulled here, been pushed; have come singly, have come in enormous numbers; have visited occasionally, have visited periodically for hunting, trading, replenishing harems, mining; have been unable to stay here, have established colonies here, have been lost here; far-advanced peoples, or things, and primitive peoples or whatever they were: white ones, black ones, yellow ones [...]”

become a strong Lovecraft motif¹⁶, and which could be traced back to some core elements of the theosophic “Secret Science” narrations in Helena P. Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*.

Charles Fort’s iconoclasm consists in a thrust against a stubborn exclusionist science, which only allows those data that ‘fit’ the preconceived ideas into the ruling discourse. This unveiling narrative gesture which posits the author and his anomalistic findings as the spearhead of ‘true science’, plays a constitutive role for the *Ancient Astronaut* narrations and similar genres in the ‘fantastic documentary’ area (cf. Robert Charroux, David H. Childress, Zecharia Sitchin and many others). Therefore, one cannot read von Däniken without seeing Forts narrative styles popping out of the pages everywhere.¹⁷ Von Däniken and other *Ancient Astronaut* authors cultivate the same sidekicks against established scientific discourses: A new, alternative and truly comprehensive science is being sought, a science which does allow unconventional ideas, ‘unthinkable’ global correlations between seemingly unrelated data – leaving behind the old paths of compartmentalized research. – Interestingly, some ‘material’ facets of the modern (post-World War II) “contactee” version of UFO faith are also prefigured in Fort, when he writes about the sightings of giant “cigar-shaped” space vessels, which appeared like a “torpedo” or “super-Zeppelin” – or about abductions, teleportation and animal mutilations.¹⁸

To be sure, Erich von Däniken’s ideas were not at all new, but it was him who took up these ideas of an *Ancient Astronaut* past in the history of humankind and made it the core focus in his books from 1968 until now. But French-born Robert Charroux, for example, who published his own books *Betrayed Mysteries* (French original 1963) and *Fantastic Past* (1965) only a few years before von Däniken’s best-seller, and apparently not without influence upon the latter, has come up with quite similar theories about extraterrestrial visitors on earth, atomic wars in ancient Vedic India or biblical Ezekiel reporting ancient space ship sightings (etc.). He also interprets mankind’s prehistory in the style of *Ancient Astronaut* narrations. Ancient high cultures, for example, must have had some access to a highly advanced E.T. technology – and, according to Charroux’ summary in *Fantastic Past*, there must have been a conspiracy, a secret society of the initiated with a mission – a mission to hold back this fantastic adventure of their ancestors: a conspiracy, 6.000 years old, probably with leading esoteric figures in all major religions.

¹⁶ Cf., for example, Lovecraft’s *The Shadow out of Time* (among many others).

¹⁷ Erich von Däniken’s book *Beweise: Lokaltermin in fünf Kontinenten* (Düsseldorf/Wien 1977) is an extremely good example for this, since it is written in a very ‘Fortean’ gesture.

¹⁸ Cf. already Ch. 25 (and 14) in Fort’s *The Book of the Damned*. Fort continues with – what we would nowadays call – ‘UFO sightings’, ‘abductions’ and ‘animal mutilations’ in the second and third book (*New Lands, Lo!*) extensively, whereas the fourth volume (*Wild Talents*) is dedicated to issues involving some sort of ‘paranormal faculties’. But even these latter issues have been taken up by Erich von Däniken, when he speaks of a “wild’ thought” (“wilder’ Gedanke”) in his discussion of telepathic phenomena in Chapter 11 of *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft*. – The “cigar shaped” UFOs have become prominent through the disclosures by famous contactee George Adamsky during the early fifties (cf. www.gafintl-adamski.com).

In 1923, Charles Fort already formulated some kind of a promise in his second book *New Lands*:

“Some day I shall publish data that lead me to suspect that many appearances upon this earth that were once upon a time interpreted by theologians and demonologists, but are now supposed to be the subject-matter of psychic research, were beings and objects that visited this earth, not from a spiritual existence, but from outer space. [...] I take the position that perhaps there were appearances in the sky, and perhaps they were revelations of, or mirages from, unknown regions and conditions of outer space, and spectacles of relatively nearby inhabited lands, and of space-travellers, but that all reports upon them were products of the assimilating of the unknown with figures and figments of the nearest familiar similarities. Another position of mine that will be found well-taken is that, no matter what my own interpretations or acceptances may be, they will compare favorably, so far as rationality is concerned, with orthodox explanations.”¹⁹

This exactly has become the programmatic effort – almost in a direct ‘continuation’ of Fort’s endeavor and ‘legacy’ – of the modern *Ancient Astronaut* discourse and genre, according to the self-understanding of its protagonists: a new contribution, which unfortunately is still belittled and laughed at by notorious ‘exclusionist doubters’ in arrogant science – the collaborative collection and publication of all those ‘data’, including those from religious traditions, which contain at least impressive hints and evidences (as long as a definite “proof” still has to come) towards an *Ancient Astronaut* intervention on this Earth’s past. In their opinion, it was always the ‘outsiders’ or ‘lay researchers’, those with queer ideas, who brought progress, fresh thinking and new revelation into the scientific discourse – like famous lay researcher Heinrich Schliemann, who indeed took the ancient myths about Troy for real, and finally ended up with impressive archaeological findings.

2. “Paleo-SETI” – Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence in Ancient Times

Such a link to lay researcher Schliemann is decisive, and it can be encountered in many *Ancient Astronaut* publications or sample contributions to web-based discussion lists. Already back in 1965, Robert Charroux wrote, for example:

"Schliemann ist davon ausgegangen, daß die Bücher Homers nicht bloß Fabeln enthielten, sondern Berichte von historischen Ereignissen. Und er hat Troja entdeckt." ('Schliemann started with the presumption that the books of Homer did not simply contain fairy tales, but reports of historical facts, and he discovered Troy').²⁰

¹⁹ *New Lands*. New York 1923, 123f (chapter II,6)

²⁰ I had only access to a German edition of the Charroux text (French original: *Histoire inconnue des hommes depuis cent mille ans*), but from the German version the connection to Erich von Däniken becomes even more evident

Interestingly, this German edition of Charroux' *Phantastische Vergangenheit* ('Fantastic Past') appeared in 1966, and one year later, Erich von Däniken came up with an almost completely identical statement, which he boldly proclaimed at the end of his paper to the convention of UFO-researchers in Mainz:

“Schliemann ging davon aus, daß die Bücher Homers nicht bloß Märchen und Fabeln enthielten, sondern Berichte von historischen Ereignissen. Und so hat er Troja entdeckt. Die Götter unseres Altertums waren fremde Astronauten. – Weiter nichts! – Damit habe ich gesprochen.“

(‘Schliemann started with the presumption, that the books of Homer did not simply contain fairy tales and legends. And so he discovered Troy.

The Gods of antiquity were ancient astronauts. – Nothing else! – Thus I have spoken’.)

Similar to Heinrich Schliemann, both Robert Charroux and Erich von Däniken started with a *strong faith* into the truth of the ancient myths – although in a specific *Ancient Astronaut* sense. The basic idea of *Ancient Astronauts* can therefore be seen in full congruence with the so-called “euhemeristic”²¹ theory of religion: Ancient gods have never been supernatural, numinous beings, but originally, they were nothing but important, highly esteemed humans (kings, rulers etc.) who gradually became ‘deified’ in the collective memory and, finally, worshipped as “Gods” by people of later times (apotheosis). The history of this gradual development then became forgotten. The *Ancient Astronaut* discourse, therefore, can be labeled a “‘ufological’ Euhemerism” (or “‘pre-astronautic’ Euhemerism”), as becomes evident in the last sentences of von Däniken’s paper quoted above: Humans everywhere in the world have recollected and systematized their collective memories to some strange humanoid interventions on earth, interventions of some alien ancient astronauts who gradually became deified, revered as true gods, and, thus, entered the religious and mythic heritage of our species. Typologically, all our earthly religions, myths and rituals seem to operate in a “Cargo Cult”-like fashion: they imitate and restage memories of ancient contacts with technologically superior alien visitors from space – a process which takes place in various mythic, ritual and architectural forms.

As a result, the main thrust of the *Ancient Astronaut* endeavor is an ‘archaeological’ one: to ‘dig’ for traces, remnants and hints in all layers of human culture, which can, could or should be interpreted

(compare the next quote); R. Charroux, *Phantastische Vergangenheit*, Berlin 1966, here 137. – Cf. also Charroux’ *Le livre des maitres du monde*, Paris 1967, which appeared in 1972 in German (‘Die Meister der Welt’), and contained similar references to Schliemann, especially concerning Atlantis (which was a topic in itself in his work on ‘lost worlds’: *Le livre des mondes oublies*, Paris 1971).

²¹ Labeled after Euhemeros of Messana, who exposed the idea in an ‘utopian’ novel (*Hiera anagraphê*), that the old humanoid gods had originally been some human kings or rulers; Euhemeros nevertheless cannot be seen as the sole founder or inventor of this idea, which has several predecessors and parallels in Greek antiquity.

in the light of the *Ancient Astronaut* theory – all in all, a true “*Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence in Ancient Times*”. In direct allusion to established scientific, so-called “SETI”-projects (“Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence”) – with giant radio-telescopes, for example – the name “Paleo-SETI” has been adopted as an ‘emic’ term and self-description for the *Ancient Astronaut* hypothesis. “*Paleo-SETI*” (in German: “Paläo-SETI”) – or sometimes simply “*PSETI*”, in short – is used to emphasize the ‘scientific’ intention of the endeavor, whereas the German term “Prä-Astronautik” (‘pre-astronautics’) could be seen as the mere ‘popular’ side of it. Many protagonists of the discourse, therefore, tend to prefer the name “Paleo-SETI”, which was introduced in 1989 by Vladimir Avinsky and then propagated by Johannes Fiebag, against the older names “Prä-Astronautik” or “Ancient Astronauts”, especially when they claim seriousness and ‘academic’ standards for their ‘research’. This shift can also be detected in the relabeling of the “Ancient Astronaut Society (AAS)” already introduced above, where the very name “Ancient Astronaut” was removed in favor of the more ‘sober’ expression “Archaeology, Astronautics and SETI” and further flanked by the additional term “Research Association” (AAS RA). – What are the findings? What are the ‘data’ already uncovered and discussed in this endeavor? What are the ‘results’ after roughly 35 years of ‘research’?

3. The ‘material’ side of the *Ancient Astronaut* discourse

There is a characteristic set of typical issues in the PSETI discourse – or a row of paradigmatic topics, which reappear from the nineteen-sixties until today’s “Mystery Park”. Erich von Däniken’s first book, *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft* of 1968, has proved to be a basic corner stone here – despite early critiques²². Probably his most famous example back then (and until today) was the *Nazca* plateau with its mysterious lines, symbols and figures, which he interpreted as an (allusion to an) “airport” or welcome area for alien space navigation: “To us, the *Nazca* plateau with its 60 kilometers in length clearly invokes the idea of an airport – when observed from the air, from above.”²³ Accordingly, a virtual flight over the *Nazca* plateau has become one of the *Mystery Park*’s highlights today. Another prominent example is the burial plate of the ruler *Pakal* in *Palenque*’s Maya “Temple of Inscriptions”. Erich von Däniken interpreted the depiction on the surface of this plate as the image of an ancient space pilot: “... a human being is sitting there, the chest slightly bent over, in the position of a racing pilot; and every child today would identify his vehicle as a rocket.”²⁴ At that time, the Maya script had not yet been deciphered; but even nowadays, after the

²² Among the early critiques are: Gerhard Gadow, *Erinnerungen an die Wirklichkeit*. Erich von Däniken und seine Quellen. Frankfurt/M. 1971, Clifford Wilson, *Gods in Chariots ... and Other Fantasies*. San Diego 1975, Ronald Story, *The Space-Gods Revealed*. London 1976.

²³ „Uns vermittelt die 60 km lange Ebene von *Nazca* – aus der Luft betrachtet – eindeutig die Idee eines Flugplatzes”; quoted from the 1986 edition of Erich von Däniken, *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft*. Ungelöste Rätsel der Vergangenheit, Stuttgart 1986 (Düsseldorf 1969), 42.

²⁴ „Es bedarf keiner überhitzten Phantasie, auch den letzten Skeptiker zum Nachdenken zu zwingen, wenn man nur

translation of all Maya glyphs and pictographic elements on this plate, and with the indisputable identification of the depicted person as emperor Pakal, von Däniken still continues to see a space pilot.²⁵ Palenque's "Temple of Inscriptions" is also decisive, by the way, in so far as it is standing on a pyramid containing a human burial: Paleo-SETI discourses have always tried to link Mesoamerican pyramids with Egypt's pyramids in the style of 'diffusionist' ideas. Or, did the ancient *Egyptians*, for example, have access to some sort of a superior "technology" in building the – architecturally highly demanding – pyramids? Were they able to use electricity, as some alleged depictions of "light bulbs" seem to indicate?²⁶ In a very 'Fortean' manner, Erich von Däniken is always very keen to make fun of the 'exclusionist' and diverging "scientific" explanations and interpretations of Egyptologists, archaeologists or researchers into ancient Mesoamerica. Another prominent area, already present in von Däniken or Charroux, is the search for biblical witnesses to ancient space alien interventions, which are found foremost in *Ezekiel's visions* of the "throne wagon" – which, of course, has to be identified as an alien flying machine.²⁷ But even more fundamental is the interpretation of the biblical account of *creation*, which is explained as a Space Alien experiment in genetic engineering; much emphasis lies on the Hebrew Plural 'Gods' in "Elohim", which is interpreted as a hint towards a group of actors instead of one numinous being. During a documentary on television, Erich von Däniken himself summarized his PSETI interpretation of the biblical book Genesis in the following way:

"The genealogical tree of our ancestors is growing: with different off-springs like Gorillas, Orang utans (etc.). But only one single species of this tree has developed intelligence, and with this: culture – in contrast to animals. From the perspective of anthropology this was mere coincidence: mutation, selection, adaptation (etc.), a vulnerable thesis, since there are older animals, which did not develop intelligence.

Erich von Däniken says: Hold it, this was not simply a matter of chance, this was a deliberate artificial mutation, or, as the Bible has it: 'God – or *the Gods* – created humans according to their own image'. Proto-man, was already there, as Darwin teaches, but at some point in time

ganz unvoreingenommen, ja naiv diese Steinzeichnung betrachtet: Da sitzt ein menschliches Wesen, mit dem Oberkörper vorgeneigt, in Rennfahrerpose vor uns; sein Fahrzeug wird heute jedes Kind als Rakete identifizieren" (Erinnerungen an die Zukunft, 1986, 170).

²⁵ Erich von Däniken, *Auf den Spuren der Allmächtigen*, München 1993, 142f.

²⁶ There exists a thorough discussion and analysis of von Däniken's enquiry into Egypt's early access to electricity by the Physicist Markus Poessel, *Phantastische Wissenschaft. Über Erich von Däniken and Johannes von Buttlar*. Reinbek 2000.

²⁷ Famous in PSETI discourses is the attempt at a reconstruction of the Ezekiel's 'original' spacecraft by former NASA engineer Josef F. Blumrich, *Da tat sich der Himmel auf. Die Raumschiffe des Propheten Ezechiel und ihre Bestätigung durch moderne Technik*. Düsseldorf/Wien 1973. His analysis found additional support in Hans H. Beier, *Kronzeuge Ezechiel. Sein Bericht – sein Tempel – seine Raumschiffe*. München 1985, since the latter's reconstruction of Ezekiel's temple unveiled its identity as the craft's "service station". Cf. the representation of these 'findings' in von Däniken's *Auf den Spuren der Allmächtigen*, München 1993, 144–157 (with many illustrations).

a cell was taken from our predecessors, the genetic sequence was altered (as genetic engineers do it every day), cultivated and then brought back into a female's womb: *artificial fertilization*. Then a new child is born, with the genealogical tree, but also with additional genetic information. But for a new population to grow out of this, one would need two individuals, a male and a female, and here we arrive at the legend of Adam and Eve – not an act of creation, but a manipulation from outside.”²⁸

Several post-Däniken PSETI authors have concentrated on such a ‘Bible-SETI’ perspectives²⁹, as they could be called. Analogous interpretations of other sacred scriptures are, for example, dealing with mysterious weaponry, high technology and space flights in ancient India, especially the Vedic “*vimanas*” (chariots of the Vedic gods).³⁰ Other topics concern amazing astronomic knowledge in, for example, the *Maya calendar* or in traditional religions as in the African Dogon mythology. With respect to other planets, an alleged “*Face on Mars*”³¹ has been a topic of strong discussions with pro and contra arguments in the PSETI discourse, and concerning our own planet, ‘*lost worlds*’ like *Atlantis* and *Mu* – or the mysterious ‘Bermuda triangle’ – have also triggered several PSETI speculations.

As already described above, these “evidences” (in German, the term “Indizien” is widely used in the discourse) are nowadays staged with stunning technological efforts, to make them appear more realistic, convincing and plausible – both by von Däniken himself during his lecture tours, as well as in the new Mystery Park. Already back in 1995–97, a first *interactive Computer-CD* was released under the name *Contact with the Universe*,³² containing an interactive encyclopedia of Paleo-SETI which today might already seem a little bit ‘antique’, but this computerized ‘narration’ nevertheless gives a good impression of all the major themes and topics in the discourse – from Palenque and Ezekiel up to the Face on Mars, all displayed and staged in short films.

Apart from this ‘mediatized’ form of narration, there have been already several editions of the *Ancient Astronaut* ideas in the mode of a comprehensive printed “encyclopedia”,³³ edited by

²⁸ „Erich von Dänikens Traum“ (Swiss Television 2000).

²⁹ Recent examples of such a ‘Bible-SETI’ in book size are Lars A. Fischinger, *Götter der Sterne: Bibel, Mythen und kosmische Besucher*. Weilersbach 1997, or Peter Krassa, *Gott kam von den Sternen. Die phantastische Lösung der biblischen Rätsel*. Rottenburg 2002. A critique from an apologetic Christian perspective is offered by Michael Kotsch, *UFOs und die Bibel? Die Irrtümer des Erich von Däniken*. Lage 2001.

³⁰ Cf. chapter 4 of Erich von Däniken’s book *Beweise: Lokaltermin in fünf Kontinenten* (Düsseldorf/Wien 1977), and in book-length Lutz Gentes, *Die Wirklichkeit der Götter. Raumfahrt im frühen Indien*. Essen 1996, 2001.

³¹ One of the mountains on Mars is said to appear as a giant face, which then might be a deliberate trace of the Ancient Astronauts, which they left behind for us humans today.

³² Ulrich Dopatka, *Kontakt mit dem Universum. Das offizielle Lexikon der Ancient Astronaut Society* (CD-ROM). Taufkirchen 1995, 1997.

³³ Ulrich Dopatka, *Die große Erich von Däniken-Enzyklopädie. Das einzigartige Nachschlagewerk zur Prä-Astronautik*. Düsseldorf 1997, 2004.

epigenous writer Ulrich Dopatka from Switzerland. Erich von Däniken notes in the foreword to the 1997 edition, that the mere appearance of such an encyclopedia should be counted as a hint to the fact that initial stages of research are left behind, and that a consolidation of knowledge must have taken place: a critical collection and reevaluation of all clues and issues.³⁴ This is being said from the perspective of the PSETI insider and protagonist. But from the perspective of an academic researcher in religious studies (or an ethnographer, Egyptologist or archeologist) nothing really has changed in the style and genre of presentation, discussion and ‘research’: *Ancient Astronaut* speculations are still being projected onto the surface of religious myths and traditions, without ever rigorously attempting a critical hermeneutics, an attempt at falsification and especially a critical correlation with the original contextual data.

When questioning PSETI protagonists, “Do you know of any truly ‘scientific’ or self-critical attempts in reconstructing the discourse?”, I found only a few people who were really open and committed to that. The German Internet site www.mysteria3000.de is one of a few places where people can and do participate in both strongly assertive and critical modes. Another German-speaking web-based discussion-forum, however, had to be closed down after two years at the beginning of this new century because of too heavy insults between protagonists and critics (“Forum der Forschungsgesellschaft für Archäologie, Astronautik und SETI“). An earlier attempt to found a critical and deliberately scientifically oriented journal with the programmatic name *Scientific Ancient Skies* (parallel to the existing AAS-journal *Ancient Skies*) led only to two initial issues, and was then abandoned because it could not gather enough substantial contributions.

Despite the expressed intention to “use scientific means” (cf. the introduction on the AAS RA homepage), *Ancient Astronaut* discourses remain rather ‘traditional’, if not to say, normatively within the classic path à la Fort and von Däniken: in most cases, one classic ‘issue of evidence’ after another are reintroduced together, but mostly without a ‘thick description’ of relevant aspects and contextual details. In a revealing editorial to the German edition of *Legendary Times*, Dopatka stated that the PSETI endeavor cannot abandon even the seemingly deconstructed ideas and issues.³⁵ The reason given is that maybe one day these things may have to be revived at a later stage of ‘research’. – And this is exactly the impression every outside observer gets when reading through PSETI materials: it is rather a constant merry-go-round than really leading to new shores. If such an old issue like Pakal’s burial plate in Palenque – despite the final translation of Mayan glyphs³⁶ – is still being defended as the possible depiction of an astronaut in a spacecraft³⁷, then it really implies giving away what “research” and critical “progress” of knowledge denote and entail in the academic

³⁴ Ibid., „Zum Geleit“ [5].

³⁵ Cf. the journal *Sagenhafte Zeiten* 2001:2, 2.

³⁶ Cf., for example, Linda Schele and David Freidel, *Die unbekannte Welt der Maya. Das Geheimnis ihrer Kultur entschlüsselt*, München 1990, 1999.

³⁷ Cf. e.g. Erich von Däniken, *Auf den Spuren der Allmächtigen*, München 1993, 142f.

discourses of science.³⁸

One only needs to look at a few random examples from the “Erich von Däniken-Encyclopedia” mentioned above in order to be able to grasp the shallowness of the argumentation, which is so typical for most *Ancient Astronaut* narrations – or “Paleo-SETI research”, as they would prefer to call it. A quotation from the short entry on “Stupa” might serve as an illustrative example:

“Stupa: [...] a bell-shaped figure, sometimes with Buddha himself sitting inside. An impressive example is the temple of Borobodur [...]. In India, originally, it served as a vehicle to the Gods (see also UFOs, historical). Is it a matter of mere coincidence that similar shapes can be found in other parts of the world? The same stylistic element is found on the burial plate of Palenque,”³⁹

To any person with at least some basic knowledge about Buddhist material culture, such an entry must sound entirely absurd: A Buddhist stupa, originally a shrine for Buddha-relics, provides no evidence whatsoever for any spacecraft, the small bell-shape is far from typical, and the proposed relation to Palenque is entirely fictitious and absolutely implausible. – If this were true, then what is the ‘power’ behind the discourse? What motivation gets the *Ancient Astronaut* narrations going? What is the fascination of the Paleo-SETI endeavor?

4. Motivations and fascinations ‘behind’ the discourse

Historically, as well as in terms of contemporary manifestations, the basic motifs of the *Ancient Astronaut* narrations or *Paleo-SETI* endeavors can be located in popular post-modern discourses concerned with so-called mysteries or, to frame it in ‘Fortean’ fashion, with “anomalous” and “mysterious data”. There is a specific genre for these endeavors, which could be named the *Unknown–Mysterious–Fantastic*-genre, according to a very typical title of a German Charroux-book: *Unbekannt – Geheimnisvoll – Phantastisch*.⁴⁰ This genre follows narrative lines from Fort to Charroux and von Däniken, and up to television documentaries like “Terra X”, ‘Magic Worlds’ (“Magische Welten”) and others. Further, there are many links from this “fantastic science” to playful fantasy literature and Science Fiction on one hand, and to manifest esotericism and religion on the other. As basic threads in motivation and fascination I would identify the following points:

³⁸ Dopatka states, however, that “mainly younger scientists”, and especially those from technical professions and hard sciences backgrounds, are “open-minded” to PSETI issues today (Ibid.).

³⁹ Ulrich Dopatka, *Die große Erich von Däniken-Enzyklopädie*, 364.

⁴⁰ Robert Charroux, *Unbekannt – Geheimnisvoll – Phantastisch. Auf den Spuren des Unerklärlichen*. Düsseldorf/München 1970, 1979 (French original: *Le livre du Mysterieux inconnu*, 1969).

1) *The fascination of the mysterious*. – Mythological and architectural riddles, astronomic puzzles, astounding achievements in former times (etc.), they all can be a source of amazement and fascination in themselves. But maybe they also tell a hidden story, which might prove even more captivating: the story of some *Ancient Astronauts* and their veiled intervention on planet Earth. The revelation of this story could be "the last great adventure of mankind", as one member put it on the former AAS-forum on the Internet.

2) *A lay-people's revolt against the academic establishment*. – Following the ubiquitous reverence to Schliemann, the Paleo-SETI endeavors are attempts to participate in academic discourses as emancipated lay individuals, who are frustrated by the compartmentalized specialization and the arrogant self-certainty of established academic discourses and who want to be heard in their new attempt at re-evaluating "damned" data.

3) *Efforts into basic reductions of complexity*. – These re-evaluations have to do with an attempt at bridging various disciplines, an effort to come up with new explanatory answers, which, after all, have to be understandable and simple: Since all 'true' science has to do with simplicity, there must be a few simple solutions to the mysterious riddles in our past.

4) *Technological explanation and Euhemeristic disenchantment of religion*. – In continuity with the famous X-Files slogans "I want to believe" and "The truth is somewhere out there", the Ancient Astronaut theories operate with disenchanting, this-worldly 'explanations' of religion: a) Gods and goddesses are explained in Euhemeristic fashion as humanoid astronauts, and b) myths, revelations, sacred scriptures have to be understood in 'technical' terms of the modern scientific world view and space age (the quest for a 'provable' revelation).

5) *A new synthesis between technology and religion*. – The 'explanatory' gesture of PSETI is clearly obliged to similar modern and post-modern attempts at linking the gap between the scientific-technological world-view and religion/spirituality. As in esoteric versions of UFO faith, the solution may be found a) in technological explanations of religion or b) in religious re-enchantments of technology – or c) in mixtures of both. The traditional PSETI endeavor is mainly dedicated to the first option (a), but there are also many tendencies to move on into (b) forms of manifest esotericism and/or UFO faith.

5. "Everything is only a question of technology" (E. von Däniken)

The basic methods and results found in the *Ancient Astronaut* discourse or *Paleo-SETI* endeavor can be characterized as follows:

(1) The 'will to believe', the attempt at taking myths 'seriously' (in a quasi-Schliemann way) in the search for the 'true' hidden meaning of religious traditions and artifacts is wed together with the modern dream of scientific miracles, of hitherto unknown possibilities in science and technology, which have become thinkable in the late modern space age: possibilities, which space alien astronauts must clearly have had in their hands. – This typical oscillation between a critical modern science and the interest in religious traditions and artifacts can then be further developed a) into 'real' critical science or b) into manifest esotericism and UFO faith, into 'real' religion, so to speak.

As a matter of observation, PSETI protagonists have often taken either of the following choices: there are those who went into science or sober academic prose after their juvenile contact with the *Ancient Astronaut* discourse or others who went on to propose additional esoteric interpretations of religion, sometimes in connection to the ‘Contactee’ versions of UFO faith. In fact, the *Ancient Astronaut* discourse has always served as a strong impulse into the modern strands of esotericism and UFO-faith, although its faithful adherents remained loyal to this ‘middle path’ between the two extremes.

(2) The working methods in the *Paleo-SETI* endeavor are basically *technological projections* onto the surface of ancient religious texts and artifacts – projections from a scientific space age era into a remote religious and cultural past. Interestingly, the focus here is always on ‘hard’ sciences and technology, or as Erich von Däniken himself has put it once: “Everything is only a question of technology”⁴¹, since for modern man the ancient religions “have to be interpreted in modern ways and made technologically intelligible”.⁴² Modern technological and ‘hard’ scientific interpretations serve as the true meaning of sacred scriptures, myths or pictorial and architectural representations. For the participant, such interpretations appear plausible and intelligible, because they are framed in the language games of the modern world-view. To the outside observer, these projections must appear as a grand reflection or echo of the modern technological world-view in a deliberately distorted mirror called ‘ancient times’. – But technological projections are also important at the other end of the discourse: in the propagation and ‘staging’ of the *Ancient Astronaut* narrations by means of advanced technological media. The more sophisticated and ‘realistic’ the media can be, the more credible and ‘effective’ are the contents of the mediated discourse.

(3) *Hermeneutically*, the *Paleo-SETI* endeavor uses uncritical hermeneutics of technological self-reassurance: It is heavily based on a modern world-view which reconstructs man – from primordial times onward – almost exclusively as ‘technological man’, as *homo technologicus*. And here, one does find many family resemblances to ideological or religious rhetoric, because the Ancient Alien Astronauts appear as ‘culture heroes’ for Modernity, so to speak. As in traditional creation or foundation myths, these space alien ‘culture heroes’ also came to initiate culture, new technology and ‘progress. In this light, all the incredible technological achievements in former times, or the religious reverence to far-advanced so-called ‘gods’ (etc.) – all these instances are indeed appearing as nothing but “memories to the future” (in allusion to the brilliant original title of von Däniken’s first book) – memories from a remote past to our own space age present time and future. To the student of mankind’s religious history, the *Ancient Astronaut* narrations must therefore be seen as *a truly mythic* – or ‘*neo-mythic*’ – activity: They present a new mythic foundation for modern man and his scientific and technological mode of being in the world.

Here lies one of the imminent ‘traps’ in field research. A major problem of interrelating PSETI and science(s) is: PSETI is not simply a subject matter, an object of study – but they do claim that they

⁴¹ Erich von Däniken, *Auf den Spuren der Allmächtigen*. München 1993, here 151 („Alles ist nur eine Frage der jeweiligen Technologie“).

⁴² *Ibid.*, „Nachwort“ [189]: „... modern interpretiert und technisch verständlich gemacht“.

are using scientific methods as well, that they should even be considered a real ‘spearhead’ of modern science. One of the field traps for a cultural studies researcher is to take the self-description “we are doing research” all too seriously and then gradually be drawn into a conflict. The discussion with members of some New Religious Movement might be easier to control, because one does not share their religious outlook. But with PSETI adherents it is different, since they always claim to share an academic agenda, yet in a different (i.e. better, more comprehensive) style. Furthermore, they do not want to be perceived as an object of ‘religious studies’ inquiry, to be sure – since they, the true forefront of enlightenment, are not related to any esoteric or spiritual agenda. Interestingly enough, esoteric contactee versions of UFO faith or UFO-related New Religious Movements are in most cases perceived as targets of severe criticism from the perspective of *Paleo-SETI* discourses, even when incorporating *Ancient Astronaut* narrations in their cosmology and mythology.⁴³ From an academic research perspective, it is hard to accept the PSETI style of lay-‘research’: they prefer to jump from “evidence” to “evidence” issue with all playful lightness, whereas academic research is usually going deeper into one subject, one local culture, one piece of archeology (within one given context). Discussions are difficult, because both, the academic and the PSETI discourses, appear as self-stabilizing and, thus, mutually ‘exclusive’ – without much room for constructive interchange. Therefore, the PSETI protagonists perceives themselves as fundamentally “right” in those cases when defenders of science start to belittle their “research”: this is what we always knew – science is stubborn and “exclusionist” in attitude, they don’t want to look over the rim of their compartmentalized knowledge, and therefore they do not pay attention to our “data”. – Some German PSETI protagonists have come together to form a “Giordano Bruno-Society”⁴⁴, taking refuge in this older protagonist of alternative thinking and post-dogmatic enlightenment: he was then punished and ignored, and, so the arguments runs, that is exactly what is happening to us today.

Sometimes, the Paleo-SETI actors speak of themselves as protagonists of a “fantastic science” (or “Phantastische Wissenschaft” in German) – a term which was used as a catch-phrase on the Mystery Park’s Internet-site⁴⁵ during its initial phase of construction, and which was also adopted by outsiders to describe the endeavor. The term “fantastic science” is indeed a very good coinage to capture many facets of this discourse: the fascination of ancient puzzles, mysterious solutions to unsolved questions, the employment of a ‘hard’ scientific language and argumentations – and at the same time a very close relation to neighboring fantasy genres.

⁴³ A good example is the book *UFO-Sekten*. Rastatt 1999, by Lars A Fischinger and Roland M. Horn. Based on a relatively solid collection and recapitulation of primary sources, it finally aims at a critical debunking of such UFO-related “sects”, because they are perceived to to distort and publicly ridicule ‘serious’ PSETI endeavors.

⁴⁴ Their Internet-URL is: <http://www.giordano-bruno-gesellschaft.de/>.

⁴⁵ The Mystery Park’s Internet-URL is: <http://www.mysterypark.ch/>; the catch-phrase „Phantastische Wissenschaft“ has been used (2001) on the old site www.worldmysteries.ch.

6. Paleo-SETI Philosophy or secular Exo-Theology?

According to the analysis given above, the *Paleo-SETI* endeavor with its aim towards a new ‘fantastic science’ can be perceived as a ‘neo-mythic’ activity. With its construction of a ‘pre-astronautic protology’ where ancient alien astronauts – instead of gods – ‘created’ man via genetic engineering, it actually serves as a foundation for modern anthropology. Modern ‘technological man’ and his recent access to genetic sciences and the cloning technology can be seen as re-constructing him/herself with primordial technological origins. In so far, and with the ‘will to believe’ in some historicity of the ancient myths, the whole PSETI endeavor can be interpreted as a *secular and ufological parallel to creationism*. – The Euhemeristic interpretation of ancient gods in the *Ancient Astronaut* sense also formulates a kind of secular ‘Exo-Theology’, so to speak, and PSETI authors often reflect upon the hidden motives of these ancient “Astronaut Gods”: What was their purpose here on Earth? Why did they manipulate animals and humans. Was Earth some kind of a ‘laboratory’ for them (and still is)? Are they going to return at some point in time – even in the near future, is there any perceivable “ethics” in their behavior (etc.)? When *Paleo-SETI* authors go into the analysis of the ancient astronauts’ behavior more intensely, the more it appears correct to label their endeavor as some kind of a secular or Euhemerist Exo-Theology: narrations about the humanoid Astronaut ‘Gods’. – Here lies the main connection to UFO-related New Religious Movements or similar strands in New Age and Esotericism, which are open to an incorporation of *Ancient Astronaut* myths, or even a “secular” Exo-Theology. The most prominent case here is clearly the “Raëlian Religion” with their contactee version of an apocalyptic return of the ancient Astronaut Gods and the alleged successful cloning endeavors of its prestige project “Clonaid” (cf. below). The first New Age Movement with a strong *Ancient Astronaut* mythology in the vein of von Däniken was the Californian “Sunburst” community or “Brotherhood of the Sun”, led by Norman Paulsen (later renamed “Solar Logos Foundation”).⁴⁶ But the arcane mythic foundations of Scientology, for example, also incorporate ideas in the *Ancient Astronaut* style: Here, a fierce intergalactic ruler is said to have brought earthly souls into this corner of the universe millions of years ago.⁴⁷ The reception of the *Ancient Astronaut* mythology is far-reaching in modern alternative strands of religion and spirituality, be it in the context of organized groups or in individual reconstructions of faith and practice – even groups like the Chinese spiritual movement “Falun gong” are affected by these ideas.

⁴⁶ Cf. Gary Trompf, *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements*, Berlin/New York 1990, here 35–94 (“The Cargo and the Millennium on both sides of the Pacific”), as well as my own contribution to James Lewis (ed.), *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO religions*, New York 2003, 17–42 (“‘When we enter into my father’s spacecraft’: Cargoistic hopes and Millenarian Cosmologies in New Religious UFO Movements”), here 19–21.

⁴⁷ Cf. Andreas Grünshloß, entry “Scientology” in: James Lewis (ed.), *UFOs and Popular Culture: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Myth*, Santa Barbara/CA 2000, 266–268; idem., *Wenn die Götter landen ... Religiöse Dimensionen des UFO-Glaubens*. (EZW-Texte 153) Berlin 2000 (here 31ff: “‘Space Opera’ und ‘Religious Technology’ bei Hubbard und Scientology“).

It would demand a separate essay to analyze Erich von Däniken's own spiritual background and involvement behind his *Ancient Astronaut* narrations. In his early books one can still find many references to H. P. Blavatsky, for example, and it is clearly not wrong to count him among the *technological strand of modern esotericism*. In some publications he developed ideas about telepathic communication with the Ancient Astronauts – foremost in his book *Erscheinungen* ('appearances' or 'manifestations', in the sense of paranormal "visions" and experiences). It provides the amazed reader with an anthropological foundation for the *Paleo-SETI* hypothesis:

"All the extrasensory perceptions [...] are nothing new. What we attempt to rediscover today, with great energy and big material effort, aiming at its use and control, is originally a pre-programmed possibility of every human brain – pre-programmed in primordial times during that deliberate artificial mutation. [...] With this manipulation, grafting their own species and character traits upon the hominids, the extraterrestrial cosmonauts also transferred their highly developed, supersensory faculties of perception – faithful to 'their own image'."⁴⁸

Von Däniken provides us here with a *secular esoteric theory* of the human brain: "Extraterrestrial impulses make our brains produce visions. The vision itself is not extraterrestrial: it reveals the wishful thinking of the seer"; and this person is, therefore, "always reproducing the religious frames of the preceding education."⁴⁹ – Accordingly, all visions, auditions and similar extrasensory perceptions are no "religious privilege" at all; finally, even disclosures in the 'hard sciences' must be seen as nothing but "memories" from pre-programmed pictures in our unconscious⁵⁰. – *Erscheinungen* is von Däniken's most 'esoteric' book; and he never took up this line of thinking in his later publications but kept very much to his 'middle path' of a 'fantastic science' – between the extremes of esoteric religiosity and true science.

As already indicated, other authors made more explicit connections to contemporary UFO investigations or to "contactee" versions of UFO faith. Walter-Jörg Langbein for example, a former theology-student and a well-established German author in the *Paleo-SETI* genre, does make such references to contemporary UFO sightings. In the "postscript" to his early book, *Astronautengötter* ('Astronaut Gods'), which came out in several editions following its first publication in 1973, he stresses the point that "the 'Astronaut-Gods' of primordial times have always promised to come back from space at some point in time, in order to visit planet Earth again. Much can be said in favor of the thesis that they have actually returned, in our century – yes, in our times, in the present time."⁵¹ The question therefore is: "What do we have to expect from the Space-Aliens?" ... and,

⁴⁸ Erich von Däniken, *Erscheinungen. Phänomene, die die Welt erregen*. Düsseldorf/Wien 1974, 272f. – In this book, von Däniken also deals with the Christian traditions about 'paranormal' experiences of his own Catholic background.

⁴⁹ Von Däniken, *Erscheinungen*, 281.

⁵⁰ Von Däniken, *Erscheinungen*, 279–281.

⁵¹ Walter-Jörg Langbein, *Astronautengötter – Die Chronik unserer phantastischen Vergangenheit*. Frankfurt/M. 1995 (1973), „Nachwort“ (216–218), here 216f.

since they have already watched us for a long time: “How will they treat us?”⁵² The renewed Space Alien interest in human experiments (e.g. abductions) and animal mutilations makes their strictly positive, even ‘angelic’ interpretation by adherents of esoteric UFO faith highly questionable, according to Langbein.⁵³

As indicated earlier, there are also some critical voices from within PSETI, especially among younger participants (often students, now in their twenties). By the way, *Paleo-SETI* is not only a predominantly ‘Germanic’ discourse but also a male-dominated one. I know of a regional activist who is currently trying to work on a better philosophical foundation, to deal with the academic principle of falsification, and to contemplate whether argumentations in favor of the *Paleo-SETI* hypothesis should be stressed in the vein of a ‘scientific’ argument, or should not rather be developed in the style of a rationally coherent “world-view”, based on a “metaphysical hypothesis” (is the *Paleo-SETI* hypothesis at all accessible to strict ‘empirical’ testing?). These are interesting recent developments, but it is hard to tell if they will be accepted by mainstream protagonists of the discourse. At the moment, most *Paleo-SETI* protagonists share the typical quasi-historical ‘middle path’ in the vein of von Däniken, but some tend towards UFO-related esotericism, and still others favor a ‘real’ critical scientific endeavor.⁵⁴

Interestingly, despite the inherited iconoclasm of Charles Fort, the *Ancient Astronaut* narrations in the *Paleo-SETI* discourse form in themselves another good example of a self-perpetuating and “exclusionist” discursive strength, violating the findings and artifacts in the light of a preconceived argument in favor of the ubiquitous Ancient Astronauts. Discursive *self-immunization* is therefore quite an issue in the *Paleo-SETI* realm. Surely it is not a “religious” activity in itself, not religion in any fuller sense. But there are religious portents in the discourse (as shown above), there are elements and undercurrents, which “load” on a religious factor, so to speak. And it is this recourse to a technologically and scientifically verifiable “truth somewhere out there” (X-files), which is so typical for many – post-religious and post-scientific – discourses. The *Paleo-SETI* endeavor mostly proceeds in the style of a quasi-historical argumentation, whereas other individuals and groups take the *Ancient Astronaut* narrations and go deeper into a normative construction of reality with religious and ritual aspects (Sunburst Community, Scientology, Raëlian religion etc.).

Another prominent reception of these narrations is their playful restaging in fantasy novels and Science Fiction movies. As in “Stargate” (mentioned above), several *Ancient Astronaut* topics and

⁵² Langbein, *Astronautengötter*, 217.

⁵³ Langbein, *Astronautengötter*, 217; cf. from the same author: *Götter aus dem Kosmos*. Rastatt 1998, here 257–260.

⁵⁴ I know of a private, sub-academic survey conducted within and among PSETI adherents a few years ago aiming to find out (among other things) more about the influence of PSETI on world-view or religious orientation; and at least the trends seem trustworthy and indicative: 49% of this sample pointed out that the involvement with PSETI did indeed change their world-view, with 31% saying that they actually gave up their former church affiliation and 19% agreeing that their criticism towards science was further induced by PSETI.

motifs of the *Paleo-Seti* genre have found their way into the popular cinema. The alleged “Face on Mars”, for example, has inspired a full movie called *Mission to Mars* (released in the year 2000), which developed a grand and typical *Ancient Astronaut* narration: A human space crew finds the remnants of an old Alien race on Mars, located under a hill shaped in the form of a humanoid face. After entering this Space Alien construction, the astronauts from Earth are introduced (via high-tech holographic media) into the ‘true’ history of their planet: It was the Aliens, having once lived on Mars, who then ‘created’ the earthly animals and humans with the help of their genetic engineering. They left the “Face on Mars” as a ‘time capsule’ to be later detected by their artificial ‘children’. – Or, to cite another example, in the movie *Alien vs. Predator* (2005), archeologists detect some remnants of Alien interventions on Earth, which suddenly shed light on their former self-staging as Mesoamerican ‘Gods’.

What can be observed in these movies, simply in the form of an entertaining Science Fiction story, appears fully developed as a whole-hearted foundation-mythology in the “Raëlian Religion”. But it should be kept in mind: the *Ancient Astronaut* myth is always a ‘broken’ myth – it is a mythic narration which is typical of the fantastic literary genres of modernity: narratives where the “supernatural” is always “explained” – explained away in rational terms.⁵⁵ In the same style of modern fantasy literature’s *rational, immanent explanations* of mysterious places, ghosts and ‘paranormal’ events, the *Ancient Astronaut* narrations always come up with a rational, immanent (though Space Alien) and “technological” explanation of mysterious architecture, alleged ‘gods’, sacred scriptures and visions. – How, then, does a socially organized new religion cope with such a modern ‘broken’ myth?

7. The paradigmatic case of the “Raëlian Religion”

The “Raëlian Religion” (*Religion Raëlienne*) can be addressed as *the* missing link between hard-core versions of Contactee UFO-religions and the quasi-historical *Paleo-SETI* discourse. In 1973, French-born Claude Vorilhon aka “Raël” experienced the ‘living proof’, so to speak, of the *Ancient Astronaut* narrations of Charroux and von Däniken (whom he had read before). In his first revelation, *The Book which Tells the Truth* (“Le livre qui dit la vérité”, 1974)⁵⁶, he narrates the exciting contact with an Ancient Space Alien named “Jahwe” (!): During a hike in the hills of Clermont Ferrand, he allegedly encountered the landing of a UFO with a greenish Alien of 1,2 meters in size, descending and providing him with a crash course on the interventions of ancient alien astronauts in the Bible (‘Bible-SETI’). All the typical Charroux and von Däniken topics

⁵⁵ Marco Frenschkowski, „Religionswissenschaftliche Prolegomena zu einer Theorie der Phantastik“, in: W.Freund, J.Lachinger, Cl.Ruthner (Hg), *Der Demiurg ist ein Zwitter*, München 1998, 37–57.

⁵⁶ Nowadays, his first two publications are reprinted together under the title “Le vrai visage de Dieu” (‘The True Face of God’, ‘Das wahre Gesicht Gottes’) by the Raëlian Organization. The characterizations following above are taken from this edition.

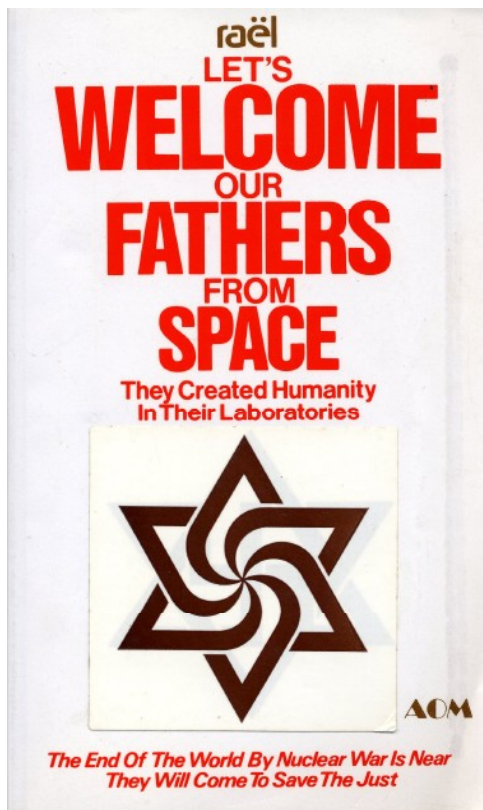
reappear in his narration: Originally, the biblical "Elohim" had been extraterrestrial space pilots, engaging themselves in a huge terra-forming project on earth, implying genetic engineering and a grand 'creation' and manipulation of the human race (etc.). Claude Vorilhon receives the call as "prophet" Raël, because he is a simple man and therefore he would not overcomplicate the revelations given to him (as a proper scientist would probably do). Humankind, constantly watched by their older 'creators', is about to enter a new phase, the "age of the apocalypse", when humans are finally able to reproduce technically – and manipulate – themselves as they want, to move out into outer space and to colonize and cultivate other planets in analogy to their own primordial extraterrestrial creator-heroes. Ideals of breeding individuals at will, of governing mankind by an oligarchy of chosen intellectuals ("geniocracy") are combined with the idea of a "*scientific reincarnation*", where genetic engineering will serve as a mode of 'apotheosis', of getting access to *eternal life* by the "cloning" of a new body including a transfer or "download" of the individual consciousness. If the whole process of 'creation' was nothing but an incident of (Space Alien) genetic engineering, or if man, then, is nothing but a self-programming "biological computer", why should humans refrain from laying hands at their own DNA-sequence, to 'update', re-produce and re-create new forms of themselves 'in their own image' (including deficient biological service-robots).⁵⁷

The "Raëlian Religion" describes itself correctly as an "atheistic" religion,⁵⁸ since it is based on the typical *Ancient Astronaut* idea of humanoid Space Alien 'creators'. It therefore develops a fully secular 'theology' – in correlation to a secular, if not to say 'technical' anthropology. Accordingly, this "religion" does not have much room for rituals any more. The only significant ritual is the so-called "Transmission of the Cellular Code", provided by one of the „Guides“ (a regional leader) via telepathic contact to the Space Alien computer on a space craft – a process which is a prerequisite for the "scientific reincarnation" process awaiting faithful members after their death. – I cannot go into details of Raëlian faith now,⁵⁹ but what we can study in this case is the example of a community, which is at the same time 'post-religious' and 'post-scientific'. With the secular framework of the 'fantastic science' in the style of the *Ancient Astronaut* narration it provides its members with a post-religious orientation based on a 'verifiable' immanent truth of the religious traditions and scriptures, which nevertheless re-enchants heavenly spheres with a benevolent space crew waiting to be officially received on Earth in an international "Space Embassy" (which still awaits its establishment), and which includes new "prophets", the hope for "eternal life" (via cloning and "scientific reincarnation") and even a hedonistic "paradise" for chosen ones on the Elohim's planet.

⁵⁷ These thoughts are fully developed in Raël's book *Sensual Meditation* ('Méditation sensuelle'); I have used the German edition: *Die sinnliche Meditation*, Genf 1994.

⁵⁸ Important Internet-sites are: www.rael.org and www.clonaid.com.

⁵⁹ But see Susan Palmer, *UFOs adored. Rael's UFO religion*. Piscataway/NJ 2004.



Raël-Publication from the year 1992 (1986), containing a pictorial representation of the “Transmission of the Cellular Plan” (p.29)

To the student of religion, such an apotheosis of man and the idea of cultivating other worlds (the ability to create and lead other worlds in a ‘God’-like manner) does not appear strange within the flux of modern religious soteriologies (the “Mormons” are a striking early example in our religious history). But the anthropology here, the image of man, is reconstructed in the mode of a secular mythic foundation. Man is – and has never been anything else but – a technical product of genetic engineering. Why should he hesitate to modify, to “update” this “biological computer”, and to reproduce or alter it in whatever mode possible: he/she is simply a ‘tool’ in his/her hands. But this ‘immanentistic’ and technical interpretation of the human condition is a direct result of an *Ancient Astronaut* foundation-myth having gained fully normative and performative status within a world-view. – Scientology and its arcane Science Fiction myths behind the public appearance would be another prominent example for such a “religious technology” (an emic Scientology-term) or ‘technological religion’, which is based on an *Ancient Astronaut* narration as core myth. But, unfortunately, this is another story, which has to be told some other time.

8. Towards a Conclusion

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.”
(Albert Einstein)

The Swedish archeologist Pia Andersson is probably right in saying that conventional narrations in archeology – and I would add: in religious studies, in ethnography and history – are nowadays “up for a challenge” by the *Paleo-SETI* endeavor and especially its high-tech restaging of *Ancient Astronaut* narrations in the Swiss “Mystery Park”.⁶⁰ We in academia, are indeed challenged to present our findings in better ways and in a more understandable manner, since we cannot leave the terrain to these overtly ‘fantastic’ reconstructions. But one thing is clear: the struggle about the right interpretation of so-called “damned data” cannot be settled merely by rational arguments. People are always in search of the mysterious, the hidden and the conspiracy behind the overt scene. Surely, to play with the fantasy genre⁶¹ is often more entertaining and inspiring than a straight report of sober academic facts and theories. The famous Einstein sentence quoted above, therefore, also seems well chosen as a chapter’s motto in one of Erich von Däniken’s books.⁶²

To many of our contemporaries, at least, the mysterious conspiracy story about the “Ancient Astronaut Gods” seems to appear more plausible and understandable than traditional religious interpretations of the texts – and much more plausible and understandable than straightforward academic scientific interpretations. The *Ancient Astronaut* narrations knit together our specific late-modern mode of being-in-the-world with a lay-people’s attempt at a new search for the fundamental truth of the myth: They still “want to believe”, and they find it plausible that a pre-astronautic “truth is somewhere out there”, yet to be discovered by mainstream society. The self-evident technological possibilities of our age (and much more beyond that) are projected back into a remote past, and *the result is a shining mirror of us, and of our time.* – *Paleo-SETI* adherents can thus be seen as the latter-days-prophets of a space age past, providing us with a mythic foundation for modern ‘technological man’ in the space age and genetic engineering era. But this new interpretative ‘unity of reality’ is gained with a great loss: The original contexts of the data are fully neglected and neutralized, and all the puzzling great achievements of our human ancestors all over the world are diminished and ‘explained away’ in a new ‘exclusionist’ manner when ubiquitous Ancient Astronaut Gods seem to lurk behind every mysterious or unexplainable corner of history. Let me close with Charles Fort’s famous words, formulating the interrelated dynamics of change between religion and science – a coinage which lies at the very heart of *Paleo-SETI*’s self-understanding as a

⁶⁰ Pia Andersson, entry “Ancient Astronauts” in: James R. Lewis (ed.), *UFOs and Popular Culture: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Myth*. Santa Barbara/CA 2000, 20–25; here 24.

⁶¹ The publisher had to urge von Däniken, however, to rework the manuscript of his first book into a form of more ‘sober’ prose; cf. P. Krassa, *Däniken intim. Das Bild einer schillernden Persönlichkeit*, Freiburg i.Br. 1976 (here 122ff).

⁶² Erich von Däniken, *Der Götterschock*. Feldbrunnen/CH 1992; heading to chapter 4.

true spearhead of a future all-encompassing science:

“The science of today – the superstition of tomorrow. Science of tomorrow – the superstition of today.”⁶³

But – as we have seen – it remains extremely questionable whether the current “superstition” of *Paleo-SETI* with its *Ancient Astronaut* narrations can ever make it into a “science of tomorrow”.

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⁶³ This quotation is taken from chapter 12 of *The Book of the Damned*; here 193 (in my 1973 edition).