

Traces of the Gods: Ancient Astronauts as a Vision of Our Future

Jonas Richter

*Seminar für Religionswissenschaft, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
Platz der Göttinger Sieben 2, 37073 Göttingen, Germany
jrichte1@gwdg.de*

Abstract

Ancient astronaut speculation (also called paleo-SETI), often labeled pseudoscience or modern myth, still awaits in-depth research. Focusing on Erich von Däniken and reconstructing his views on god and cosmology from scattered statements throughout his books, this article analyzes his attitudes toward science and religion as well as his concepts of god and creation. In this regard, his pantheistic combination of the big bang theory with a model of god as supercomputer is of special interest. Analogous to *interpretatio Romana*, Däniken utilizes what I call an *interpretatio technologica*, explaining myths by converting them into technological language. Building on the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Jean E. Charon, the Swiss writer also develops the vision of a cosmic tendency towards increasing knowledge and information. A short comparison with Raël demonstrates that similar ancient astronaut myths can lead to different applications or worldviews.

Keywords

ancient astronauts, paleo-SETI, Erich von Däniken, creationism, technological myths, cosmology

Introduction

While astronomers detect more and more exoplanets and SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) research is continuing — though no longer publicly funded — a considerable part of the population is not only convinced that intelligent alien life exists, but that it has already made contact.¹ These speculations cover a wide range of topics including

¹ Cf. several contributions to Harrold and Eve 1995.

channeled messages from benevolent space commanders and frightening narratives of being abducted by mysterious Grey aliens. The alternative archaeology sometimes called paleo-SETI is another ET-inspired topic. Its most influential figure is the Swiss writer Erich von Däniken. His hypothesis is usually summarized as follows: Alien beings came to Earth in prehistoric times and created humankind from the early, ape-like hominids. They were revered as gods by their creation. Traces of these “ancient astronauts” and their cultural influence on humankind supposedly survive in ancient remains (such as ruins, artifacts), scripture and mythological texts. Däniken tries to bolster his claims with proofs drawn from countless sources around the world. He was not the first proponent of ancient astronauts, but he is the best known writer on this topic.

It has been pointed out that ancient astronauts essentially are a new myth (cf., e.g., Andersson 2007; Jüdt 2003; Grünschloß 2007), and Däniken’s writing constitutes myth-making by reinterpreting older traditions in technological language. The myth tries to explain our origins as well as our destiny. But Däniken’s worldview is not only heterodox but also heterogeneous. Why did the aliens come here in the first place, and how long did they stay? How often did they visit Earth? What was the motivation behind their efforts? He offers various answers to such questions, sometimes mutually exclusive. This heterogeneity makes Däniken’s speculations flexible and less vulnerable to critique. It also shows that his focus is not primarily on the factual details (the when and how of ancient astronaut intervention), but more on the general fact (that ancient astronauts play an important part in our history). The ancient astronaut myth offers a simple, satisfying model of human history and a theory of religion. Of course, it has been refuted time and again (e.g., Castle and Thiering 1972; Story 1976; Pössel 2002; Fritze 2009).

What are Däniken’s attitudes toward science? How does his belief in god fit in with his negative outlook on religion? What eschatological ideas surface in his books? Before pursuing these questions, I will offer a short historical overview on the paleo-SETI topic and introduce Däniken. At the end of the paper, I will briefly contrast him with Raël, highlighting differences between these two proponents of the ancient astronaut hypothesis.

In the following discussion I will mostly focus on Däniken’s books, ignoring social and other aspects of ancient astronaut speculations. He

is a prolific writer, but not a very systematic one. Usually, his statements on a particular topic are spread over several titles. This often makes reconstructing his views difficult. Scholars treat his books as absurd and bizarre, even stupid. Yet *Däniken* is only part of a larger tradition of speculation that, in turn, has roots not only in our intellectual history and literature, but also relates to the success and influence of science and technology which pervades our lives today. Dismissing it as “fringe” would be misleading, since ancient astronauts are a phenomenon of popular culture, part of the mass market.

Sources: Fiction and Non-fiction

While speculation on extraterrestrial life has a long tradition in Western philosophy and theology, it has focused mainly on the question of whether there indeed exists life on worlds beyond planet Earth (hence the term “plurality of worlds”), what this life would be like, and how it could relate to the Christian God (Dick 1982; Crowe 1986). Often, extraterrestrial life was imagined as superior to humankind, especially on a spiritual level (Benz 1978). In the absence of proof, speculation continues, gathering contributions from very different academic disciplines as well as the general public (Dick 1998).

Science-fiction literature in the nineteenth century often had beings from other planets come to earth, but this fictional contact with aliens was always staged in modern times or in the future. Pössel (2005) claims that the first text proposing the idea of *prehistoric* extraterrestrial visits to Earth (much later called paleo-visits or paleo-contact by some people) and their remaining traces is the novel *Edison's Conquest of Mars* by Garrett P. Serviss, published in 1898. The novel plays on the idea that the Egyptian pyramids were built by Martians. The pyramids have inspired awe and imagination in people for millennia, including rather fanciful speculations on their origin and purpose that are several centuries old.² Since Serviss' novel, extraterrestrials have become a frequent motif in pyramidology.

²) E.g., Al-Maqrizi (1364–1422 C.E.), an Egyptian historian who collected a number of older tales for his work *Khitat*, which contains a chapter on pyramids that is still popular with ancient astronaut theorists today.

Another common hypothesis in today's ancient astronaut discourse is the idea that the aliens, because of their superior technology, were taken for divine beings with supernatural powers. This topic of asymmetrical cultural contact entered science-fiction literature about the same time as the idea of paleo-visits, e.g., in a 1897 novel by Kurd Lasswitz (Pössel 2005). Concepts like these have since been combined many times in fictional works, resulting in fictional versions of the ancient astronaut myth. A few notable examples include H.P. Lovecraft's horror stories about Cthulhu and other ancient monstrous beings from space (1920s and 1930s), Perry Rhodan (a German science fiction series running since 1961), and the *Stargate* movie and TV series. Today, ancient astronauts have starred not only in literature and on screen, but also in computer games and comics.

But ancient astronauts also have a longstanding non-fictional tradition. Charles Hoy Fort was the first to publicly consider paleo-visits a reality. In *The Book of the Damned* (1919), his influential collection of "damned data," as he called them (since they were excluded and neglected by established science and religion), he thought of the visitors as exploring, colonizing, trading, mining, and experimenting on Earth. According to Fort's speculations, humankind was probably simply the "property" of these superior people, merely "interesting" and "useful" for them (Fort 1974:143, 162, 163). Fort was also the first to propose that religious, demonic, or psychic "appearances" all were in fact extra-terrestrial in nature: "Some day I shall publish the 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" (Fort 1974:419f.). This argument prefigures the materialist tendencies³ of the discourse: Traditional theological, spiritual, or psychic explanations of phenomena are replaced by profoundly physical, material explanations: changing angels into aliens.

The topic was not restricted to the English-speaking part of the world. During the first half of the twentieth century, several visionary promoters of rocketry and space travel also speculated on paleo-contacts,

³ Zeller 2010:38. Partridge (2003:21) speaks of "physicalism" instead.

among them the Soviet teacher Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Nikolai A. Rynin, an engineer and professor at St. Petersburg, and Yacov Perelman (cf. Tomas 1992 and Benzin 2006:13f.).

It was not only the above-mentioned H.P. Lovecraft who had read Fort's work (Colavito 2005: 47), but also the British writer Desmond Leslie. Together with American contactee George Adamski he coauthored *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953), an influential book that appeared in the early years of the flying saucer craze and the beginnings of the contactee movement. Leslie wrote historical and philosophical chapters on the flying saucer phenomenon, while Adamski supplied the narrative of his personal sightings, photographs, and contact experience. Leslie drew on Fort's collection of historical sightings (Hoare 2001). Other protagonists of UFO discourse also looked for analogies in past writings, especially in sacred scriptures, myths, and religious traditions. Ellwood (1976) provides a short overview of the early literature on UFOs and the Bible. But the general idea had been mentioned earlier by Fort: Religious appearances could be interpreted technologically. Numerous authors used this concept of *interpretatio technologica* (as I refer to it, see below) in their writings, and of course it was not only applied to biblical texts, but to other scriptures as well.

The 1950s were a formative time for UFO discourse. The beginning of the UFO era is usually dated to 1947, the year of Kenneth Arnold's famous sighting near Mount Rainier on the 24th of June, and of the media hype and wave of "saucer" sightings that followed. Soon after Arnold's sighting, extraterrestrials and their spacecraft were the most common explanation for mysterious sightings in the sky by the general public (leaving out all the voices which claimed that there was nothing to be seen in the first place). Compared to Charles Fort's view, our alleged relationship with beings from other worlds is seen in rather positive terms: The early contactees mostly described the visitors as well-meaning, friendly, and concerned for spiritual progress and peace on Earth.

Theosophical ideas of Ascended Masters (and possibly other concepts of numinous beings, e.g., angelology) influenced these narratives of beings from other planets, and the extraterrestrial messages that contactees received resembled Theosophical lore (Partridge 2003:7–21). Ancient astronaut speculation shares more concepts with Theosophy than just the intervention of otherworldly beings. Stoczkowski

(1999:181–219) finds several parallels, such as the conviction that myths contain historical truths, a primordial unity of religion and material culture, cyclical time, archaeological places of special interest (e.g., Mayan ruins, Easter island, Egypt, or India) and their recurring characteristics (gargantuan building, perfect execution, similarity across continents). Sometimes there is similarity even in difference: While Blavatsky imagines an evolution of the soul into a higher, spiritual sphere, Däniken expects a physical ascension into the sky and space.

During the 1960s paleo-SETI expanded and assembled its array of classic topics and evidence. The French duo Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier wrote *The Morning of the Magicians*⁴ which covered a wide range of esoteric and occult topics (including ancient astronauts) and served as a manifesto for countercultural “fantastic realism.” Another French writer, also internationally successful, was Robert Charroux. It is likely that Däniken knew their books before he grabbed the world’s attention with his first bestselling book *Chariots of the Gods*. Regarding Charroux, Däniken was even accused of plagiarism.

Erich von Däniken and the AAS

Ancient astronaut discourse is specifically linked with the Swiss-born Erich von Däniken (b. 1935). A hotelier by profession, he had collected various ideas and circumstantial evidence for extraterrestrial interventions in history. *Chariots of the Gods?*⁵ was not Däniken’s first publication on the subject. Between 1964 and 1966 he wrote about twenty short articles, mostly published in *Neues Europa*, a bimonthly paper devoted to prognostics (predicting social and political changes), UFOs, and, broadly, esotericism. It was, however, his first book that made him famous. *Chariots* and the following books sold millions of copies throughout the world. The documentary movie based on the first book was nominated for an Academy Award. Däniken toured the globe, lecturing and visiting archaeological sites. Within a decade, his books

⁴ *Le Matin des Magiciens*, Paris 1960. German and English editions appeared 1962 and 1963 respectively.

⁵ *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft*, originally published in German in 1968. Its catchy title literally translates as *Memories of the Future*.

had sold about forty million copies in thirty languages. A second movie appeared, as well as audiobooks and comics based on Däniken's claims. Several more writers joined the field. Debunkers were also busy, but they could not compete with the fascination Däniken aroused. A lawsuit against Däniken in 1969–1970 added to his notoriety (Mauz 1970; Rocholl and Roggersdorf 1970).

In 1973 Gene M. Phillips, a US lawyer, founded the Ancient Astronaut Society (AAS), which held several conventions (mostly in Europe and North America) and published a bimonthly journal called *Ancient Skies*. A German edition soon sprung up and developed as well. The “Dänikenitis” calmed down a bit during the 1980s; sales numbers were not as high as in the 1970s, and Däniken's new books were no longer translated into English. During the 1990s, interest surged again. Däniken produced a twenty-five-part German TV series in 1993. Planning and preparation for an ancient astronaut theme park commenced in 1995, and the author produced more TV documentaries. During the late 1990s, Däniken returned to the English book market. Translations of his recent books appeared alongside reprints of older titles.

The Ancient Astronaut Society dissolved with the retirement of Gene Phillips in 1998, but was immediately refounded as a Swiss GmbH (i.e., Ltd./Inc.) with an American counterpart, both using a new name (“Archaeology, Astronautics and SETI Research Association,” AAS RA) amounting to the same acronym as their predecessor. Today, during the annual AAS meetings in the German-speaking countries, about three to four hundred people gather. (By comparison, UFO conventions in Germany only draw about fifty participants.) The journal was renamed *Legendary Times*. While the black-and-white US quarterly has trouble keeping step with targeted publishing intervals and is currently several issues behind schedule, the German edition regularly appears in six color issues per year (according to the editorial office, current circulation amounts to 4,700 copies). The AAS and Däniken ultimately take part in the centuries-old debate concerning the plurality of worlds and extraterrestrial life. Dick (1998:256f.) would call them proponents of biophysical cosmology, the worldview of a universe filled with life.

As a recent example of Däniken's ambition and influence, in 2003 the “Mystery Park” at Interlaken, Switzerland, opened its doors. It cost about 86 million Swiss Francs (\$62 million) to build. The theme park

staged the usual major topics (and the usual mysterious cultures) common to the paleo-SETI hypothesis in movie or laser shows and exhibited objects (Powell 2004; Däniken and Däniken 2005). Due to financial problems, the park closed in November 2006. Mostly consisting of documentary shows and small exhibitions, it lacked interactivity, and had the misfortune to suffer from a flood in the area that kept tourists away. During its three-and-a-half years, however, the park had had one million visitors. New investors reopened the park for the summer season beginning in 2009 and renamed it “Jungfrau Park” (after the nearby Jungfrau mountain peak), but it still focuses on mysteries of the world, with Däniken giving lectures regularly. The park is aimed at teaching its guests “the meaning of astonishment”⁶ by presenting “world mysteries” such as megalithic monuments, Nazca geoglyphs, so-called *vimanas* in ancient Indian scripture, pyramid mysteries, or the visions of Ezekiel. Although the whole park leans heavily toward the ancient astronaut hypothesis, Däniken claims that no definitive answer is given in the park: “everything ends in question marks” (Mai and Däniken 2003:128).

Today, the total circulation of books by Däniken alone amounts to an impressive 65 million copies. The success of the History Channel documentary series *Ancient Aliens* (currently in its fourth season) testifies to the present interest in the United States. Naturally, Däniken and the AAS are supporting the series, supplying consultation and interviews. At least in popular culture this alternative archaeology is not pushed to the fringe, but embraced as entertainment. This does not mean, of course, that Däniken has millions of believers. But it reminds us that many of his arguments are widely known.

As already mentioned, the scholarly view on ancient astronaut speculation has been unequivocally negative. Paleo-SETI proponents, on the other hand, have a much more complex attitude towards science. What are the attitudes to science, scientific methods, and technology implied in Däniken’s and the AAS’s endeavors?

⁶ Park brochure 2006.

Attitude towards Science

The people engaged in the AAS and its meetings come from a variety of backgrounds. But the benevolent inclination towards “technology” and “hard sciences” is decisive in the whole endeavor (sometimes displaying a strong reservation against disciplines of the humanities on the other side). For example, on the homepage of the AAS journal *Legendary Times*, one can read the following “mission” statement: “The A.A.S. R.A. is determined to prove, using scientific research methods, but in ‘layman’s terms,’ as to whether or not extraterrestrials visited Earth in the remote past. If the ‘visitors-from-space,’ or Paleo-SETI, hypothesis will be eventually proven and accepted by the larger scientific community, we will not only have assisted in bringing this research to the general public but will continue to help incorporate it into our daily lives.”⁷

The AAS mission, therefore, implies the use of “scientific” research methods and tools, but obviously not in an academically established and controlled way, but rather through an alternative, layperson’s approach. This amalgamation is characteristic of the whole discourse, and despite the lay approach the AAS still hopes to disseminate the various findings until the scientific community at large will finally accept their innovative research. Ancient astronaut proponents therefore like to view themselves as a progressive spearhead of modern, even visionary, frontier science.

As has been pointed out by Grünschloß, the formative idea behind this twofold recourse to scientific investigation *and* a laypeople’s perspective can best be illustrated with the reverence for Heinrich Schliemann: a famous layperson who believed in the truth of the ancient Homeric myths, and who then, because of his innovative attempt at research, was able to rediscover Troy. Robert Charroux and Erich von Däniken have both alluded to Schliemann as an ideal image of an alternative lay researcher, who finally surfaced with fascinating results (Grünschloß 2007:210f.). Likewise, ancient astronaut actors place emphasis on the idea that progress in knowledge is very often triggered

⁷ The quotation can be found on their homepage (<http://www.legendarytimes.com>) under the menu item “A.A.S.R.A.” (<http://www.legendarytimes.com/index.php?menu=about&op=page&cid=1>); accessed 13 December 2011.

by alternative and academically unbiased investigators — sometimes non-professionals in the proper scientific fields.

Despite this optimistic recourse to an innovative non-professional approach, the apparent lack of a truly scientific grounding is felt in the paleo-SETI community. Johannes Fiebag, a geologist and planetologist, is usually designated the “most scientific” among the many German writers in the AAS.⁸ His efforts include editing (together with his brother Peter) a volume of essays on ancient astronauts that was perceived as especially scientific (Fiebag and Fiebag 1985), and the attempt to establish a second German journal alongside the AAS magazine *Ancient Skies*, called *Scientific Ancient Skies*, in the mid-1990s. The journal had to be cancelled after two issues, due to lack of substantial contributions. Another example of attempting a higher level of scientificity is André Kukuk’s dissertation (2006). It was published by a print-on-demand publishing house specializing in doctoral theses, but closer examination found that it had been accepted for a degree by a diploma mill. Portions of text had been copied from Däniken’s books, with only minor alterations (Richter 2008).

In personal communications, AAS members often express the desire that the scientific community would stop ridiculing or ignoring the ancient astronaut hypothesis and rather start taking it seriously and joining in their research. The ambivalent attitude of both attacking science for its stubborn orthodoxy while at the same time striving for scientific legitimacy is deeply rooted in the discourses of so-called “fringe science.” The pervading strength and influence of science in modern societies is felt, leading to the wish to participate, grasp control, and make sense of a world full of irritating and threatening complexity (Grünschloß 2007:216).

On the other hand, ancient astronaut protagonists like to point to examples of serious errors, blunders, mistakes, misjudgments, and cases of scientific fraud in academic publications. They request that the wider public give up its blind trust in science. In the end they try to attract new open minds, advertizing their alternative histories and worldviews. Implicitly or explicitly, they see their own case as a parallel to recent or

⁸ Cf., e.g., the exuberant essay commemorating the tenth anniversary of Fiebag’s death (Knörr 2009).

historical examples of misjudgments on the side of the scientific establishment, with their hasty rejection of new theories and ridiculing of outsiders.

Sometimes this topic can grow into a book-length publication, displaying a strong distrust in the scientific community at large. Luc Bürgin, an author who includes ancient astronaut theories in his spectrum of mysterious, occult, and paranormal theories and phenomena, has written a book called *Irrtümer der Wissenschaft* (“Errors of Science,” 1997), with several examples of scientific blunders and the hardships that innovative researchers and inventors have to face until (if ever) their discoveries are accepted by the scientific mainstream. Another paleo-SETI author, Erdogan Ercivan, in his book *Gefälschte Wissenschaft* (“Fake Science,” 2006) focuses more on recent examples of fraud and data manipulation in (mostly) medical research in Germany. Sometimes he borders on conspiracy-theorizing. The books by Bürgin and Ercivan, both well known in the German ancient astronaut community, elaborate on a well-established topic in the ancient astronaut discourse, drawing on rhetorics used multiple times by other authors as well in most (if not all) books on ancient astronauts. Above and beyond that, the two books show the short distance between the ancient astronaut hypothesis and other alternative discourses: alternative medicine, cancer cures, and conspiracy theories — but also the close relationship between these so-called “pseudoscientific” discourses and a legitimate, well-grounded critique of scientism and weaknesses of the scientific establishment in our societies.

To summarize, the attitude towards science oscillates between a certain reverence, sometimes outright scientism, and a strong reservation about the academic mainstream milieu with its established doctrines and institutional powers of discourse. (This distrust very much breathes the air of Charles Hoy Fort.) Therefore, the emphasis in the end is more on modern technologies. When the AAS “mission” explicitly includes recourse to “scientific research methods,” one has to think for instance of measuring radiation or magnetic fields, or of aerodynamic investigations into ancient artifacts, but certainly not of philological, archaeological, or hermeneutical methods in a traditional academic sense.

The main thrust of the argument is this: Ancient religions, texts, and relics can be understood with reference to modern technologies.

Ezekiel's vision of the throne-chariot or certain descriptions of ancient Vedic *vimanas* can thus be viewed as stories about flying machines, and the creation story in the Bible can be interpreted as a remote memory of an alien intervention on Earth with terraforming and genetic engineering. Modern technological achievements are projected back into a distant past, they are projected upon the surface of ancient texts and artifacts — but with no critical evaluation of the context or deep structures related to these topics. The ancient gods were nothing but great engineers and creative scientists from a distant region of the universe. Because of their “celestial” origins and far advanced powers, earthly humans could only understand them as superhuman “gods” from their “primitive” perspective. Even the creation of humankind is boiled down to a feat of technical prowess. Is this euhemeristic disenchantment of the gods knit together with any spiritual or religious ideas?

The Gods of Erich von Däniken

One important, if not the central, point in Däniken's thinking is that the alleged gods of myth and scripture do not meet his idea of the one true God. For Däniken, the true God is removed from our planet, exerting no influence on our history.

I am — and I keep repeating it in every one of my books — a god-believing and pious man. I pray, too. Every day. My poor brain is incapable of defining God — brighter ones have tried that — but still for me God is something very special and surely unique. I agree with the great world religions: There can only be one God. And what we call God has to be without error, timeless, omnipresent and omnipotent. These are the irreducible attributes that we have to grant God, in deep respect. But it will never be possible to describe God, or to pinpoint God anywhere in our timeline. (Däniken 2003:15f.)

When Däniken attended a Catholic boarding school in his childhood, he had to translate biblical texts. He frequently refers to this as an important trigger in the development of his theory. God in the Old Testament did not seem to know everything, and used some kind of chariot as means of transport. Obviously, this had to be somebody different from the omniscient, omnipotent God Däniken believes in. Ancient astronauts were his answer to this incongruity, and henceforth

they constitute the interpretative frame for every myth in which the gods do not live up to Däniken's theological ideals. He wants to correct this central misconception of the religious traditions of the world; his mission is (in a sense) educational and reformatory and reminds one of the goals of the Enlightenment. But Däniken insists on a materialist reading of scripture and scorns psychological or symbolic interpretations. He explains strange and powerful objects in the texts as misunderstood technology. The ark of the covenant, the chariot described by Ezekiel, and the devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah all feature as examples of advanced technology in our past.

This hermeneutical principal calls to mind the *interpretatio Romana* — Romans identifying the gods of foreign pantheons with their own deities. The term goes back to Tacitus, whose *Germania* provides some examples (Lund 2007). Rothstein noticed the *interpretatio* mechanism at work in UFO religions. He sees “UFOs as a guiding hermeneutical principle, or as a matrix for reinterpretation of traditional myth” (2003:257). However, in ancient astronaut speculation the focus is not on UFOs alone. Däniken's frame of reference — his pantheon, so to speak — is the world of technology and science fiction. Therefore I term this way of attributing meaning, e.g., turning celestial serpents into space shuttles, *interpretatio technologica*. It is a common feature of ancient astronaut speculation, but is also found in the genre concerned with lost civilizations.

Däniken possibly would not acknowledge any interpretive act at all. Jüdt (2003) analyzes his arguments, referring to Geertz's concept of common sense. Geertz describes common sense as a cultural system, a “relatively organized body of considered thought,” although common sense understands itself as “immediate deliverances of experiences, not deliberated reflections upon it” (Geertz 1975:7). Likewise Däniken claims that his insights are immediately accessing the truth of his evidence. To him, there actually is no hermeneutics involved. Things are exactly as they seem to be, “if you only observe unprejudiced, even naively” (Däniken 1968:149). This is what Geertz calls the naturalness and thinness of common sense. According to commonsense thinking, truth is not subtle or complicated. You do not need to be an expert (Geertz 1975:18–20, 22f.). Jüdt is right to ascribe the discrepancy between self-perception of ancient astronaut protagonists and how they are perceived by others to the commonsense qualities of their arguments

(Jüdt 2003:168). There is a method to it, but no need for methodology is felt.

By means of *interpretatio technologica*, many phenomena mentioned in myth or scripture can be explained as technical gadgets. However, if these gadgets were not divine but extraterrestrial, as Däniken claims, then the “gods” he speaks of so frequently, and who feature in many of his book titles, are of course the alien visitors. Because of their power and superior technology, the ancient humans could not help but see them as divine beings, descended to earth to rule, teach, or destroy according to an incomprehensible agenda. Out of this misconception were born all our religions. Däniken wants to reveal the truth behind this ancient misunderstanding, but for convenience he keeps referring to the astronauts as gods or also, more specifically, “astronaut gods.”⁹⁾ These extraterrestrial gods are credited with creating humankind by way of genetic manipulation, teaching us astronomy, medicine, architecture, etc., and assisting several cultures with the building of huge monuments or megalithic structures. Traces of these supposed acts of the gods form the corpus of evidence that proponents of the ancient astronaut hypothesis refer to in order to bolster their claims.

The objection that his sources are only myths that have to be understood symbolically provokes an interesting response: “Which pedigree tree are we to climb up, then, if the mythology of our ancestors only contains symbolism?” (Däniken 2003:11). Däniken is concerned with our human origins. Neither symbolism nor evolution satisfies him.

Designs of Creation

According to Däniken, the biblical creation story has to be read as a distorted memory of some kind of primordial genetic engineering. Regarding this issue, paleo-SETI converges remarkably with creationism and Intelligent Design. They all deny the full applicability of evolutionary theory because of some decisive intelligent impact upon the development of species on our planet.

⁹⁾ The German terms *Götter-Astronauten* and *Astronautengötter* are both emic terms coined by Däniken and his fellow writers.

If our intelligence has not evolved on its own, but rather was designed by ancient astronauts, then how did our designers themselves become intelligent? Sure enough, a different species of aliens had genetically improved them in their respective prehistory, and these creators in turn were engineered themselves, and so on. But Däniken is not content with this mythical chain of creations. If every civilization in the universe was created by visitors from other planets, what is the role of God? Däniken tries to reconcile his version of the creation myth with his belief in God: If our alien creators have themselves been created by other aliens, and these aliens too were created, and so on through aeons, then somewhere, sometime we reach the end of the chain, where there is true creation. This idea is best expressed in one of Däniken's novels for younger readers: "At some time the relay race began. And at that moment, finally, with all respect and in agreement with every religion, we have to state: Here we have the incomparable and grand creation. [...] Here is the origin, that is, what humans and probably any other intelligent life form in the whole universe call by the same name: The unique little word GOD!" (Däniken 1997:213)¹⁰

Unfortunately, Däniken never expounds on this topic. We can only guess that here, as in the origin of humankind, Däniken rejects an evolutionist explanation because it is too inapprehensible and nondescript for him. Evolutionary theory does not really help you imagine how human intelligence came to be, for instance. His creationist argument gives a clear-cut reason and is accessible. In fact, evolution and creation receive multiple explanations: After an intelligent life was created by God, these beings seek to carry life on, to colonize the galaxy. Däniken refers to the concept of panspermia:¹¹ the civilization sent out probes with life seeds. Only a few reached places where that life could actually prosper. According to Däniken, there might be a few circumstantial factors, but the general direction of evolution would be predetermined by the genetics of the life seeds, even if they were only germs — not

¹⁰ This quote constitutes the final words of this novel, and they are spoken by Däniken's *alter ego* character in the book. Similar quotes can be found in his nonfiction, e.g., 1978:19; 1999:192, 196; and 2009:192. Däniken also gives the gist of this idea in some of his lectures.

¹¹ Svante Arrhenius introduced the idea and the term (Dick 1998:170, 179–186).

only the growth of the individual, but also the evolution of all the later species. Inevitably, a humanoid species will develop.

But panspermia is not sufficient for Däniken. Alien astronauts visiting the planet will create intelligent humans from the hominids, either by genetic engineering (n.d. [1971]:51f.) or by having sex with them (1968:28). (Both ideas are repeated in several of his books.) They will teach them and help them build a society. Thus, a break in cultural continuity happens. Däniken and other ancient astronaut authors like to point out the (allegedly) “sudden” instances of high civilization without prior gradual development as evidence for this outside influence.¹²

Däniken constructs paleo-contact in terms of a “cargo cult:” The hominids are awed by the arriving astronauts and their technology which they can only understand in terms of supernatural powers. So the aliens are revered as gods — with imitative acts to follow in pious practice. Of course they will explain that they are not divine — but knowing that this misconception will persevere and develop into a religion after they travel on, they leave traces behind that will outlast the millennia (Däniken 1968:28f.). Thus, when the planet’s civilization reaches maturity, devising space technology of their own, they will discover the ancient traces of their “gods,” suddenly realizing their origin. Of course, this is what is happening now, according to Däniken.

These three models of our relationship with the ancient aliens are not easily harmonized. If panspermia starts a predetermined evolution, there is no need for later genetic engineering. Intelligence will emerge by itself. But if intelligence is inseminated artificially into humankind, there would be a marked cultural break. No cargo cult would survive that. Still, Däniken usually imagines the cargo cult developing shortly after the landing of the astronauts. Also, if the aliens intentionally left behind traces to be recognized in a later age (“time capsules”), why should they bother to again make the long journey themselves in our time? Däniken is convinced that ET are visiting us again, watching us (Däniken and Mai 2003:14f.). Apart from that, he states that eschatological expectations of parousia in all religions are based on the promise of the ancient aliens to return someday. Of course he does not decide whether the

¹²⁾ Avalos (2002:51, 53, 55f.) comments on this with regard to Zecharia Sitchin and Sumerian culture.

current UFO phenomenon actually is the second coming of our “gods,” or if it is a mere coincidence without meaning, or a preparation for us to better cope with the imminent cultural shock of meeting our creators.

In a similar vein, Däniken does not propose a coherent timeline of alien intervention, nor does he stay with a single model of the extraterrestrial motivation behind their behavior. Throughout his books, he offers different speculations regarding motifs and reasons for the alien visitors. In one of his theories he speculates that an interstellar war forced a group of aliens to flee their home, hiding on the third planet (Earth) of our solar system. But their enemies, who tried to hunt them down, were tricked into thinking that they had taken refuge on the fifth planet, which was completely destroyed, leaving behind only the asteroid belt we know today. The alien fugitives survived, and began to create humans “in their image” (cf. Däniken n.d. [1974]:246–250). Another model proposes that on their way across the universe, the aliens had to stop to replenish their supplies, using prehistoric human beings as their workforce, genetically advancing humans or just interbreeding out of lust or simply boredom. The alien scientists also genetically engineered monsters and hybrids that have haunted human imagination ever since (Däniken 1991:79–86). Often there is a motivational weakness or even a gap in these scenarios. Mutually-exclusive models coexist. The stories that Däniken tells do not unfold according to their own inner logic. Instead they are bent and deformed by the mythological evidence that the author tries to integrate and explain. For instance, it remains at least dubious why an extraterrestrial civilization should bother to manipulate human genes. What use is terrestrial intelligence to them? Däniken ignores this question — yet under close scrutiny his books may yield an answer.

Information: God as a Computer on a Quest for Experience

If religious stories on Earth do not speak of the one true God, but of alien interventions and culture heroes that humans mistook for deities, what can Däniken tell us about the God he still firmly believes in, and who ultimately lies at the root of his euhemerist explanation of mythology? There is not very much information regarding this question in his books. Apart from the absolute qualities mentioned in the above quote (God has to be perfect, beyond time, omnipresent, and omnipotent),

Däniken offers his readers a technological creation story modeled on the Big Bang theory. He uses this story (with slight variations) in three of his books (n.d. [1974]:267–273; 1974:217–220; and 2003:79–83). Searching for the primordial force of creation, he states that it has to be neuter, “IT” (German *ES*). He proposes a computer as a model for IT, and elaborates that this thinking machine, despite its gigantic capacities and all-encompassing knowledge, nevertheless lacks something: experience. To gain experience, the supercomputer allocates every bit of itself with a number, marking everything in the right order. The computer then causes its own explosion: the Big Bang. But the future is already programmed. Every particle of the thinking machine will return someday to the center of the explosion, and the computer will be able to rebuild itself from its numbered parts. Then it will have gained the experience of trillions of particles.

It is typical of Erich von Däniken that this narration is highly technological in its concepts. It is equally typical that the author makes no attempt to harmonize this model with his understanding of the perfect God, the “grand spirit of the universe” (Däniken 2003:152), or with his concept of a chain of creations: astronaut gods changing primitive ape-men into intelligent, space-faring people, who in turn visit distant worlds to pass on the gift of intelligence. Those who began this string of creations, according to Däniken, were themselves created by God. Yet the computer model in no way explains how this happened after the big bang of IT, and why every other civilization needed the scientific and technological help from alien visitors.

Though never explained at length, information and experience play an important part conceptually in the ancient astronaut myth and its background fabric. Däniken combines ideas of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Jean Emile Charon to create a vision of accumulating knowledge. The French Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin spoke of “point Omega” as a destination toward which the universe evolves. Point Omega is a state of maximal complexity and consciousness. To Teilhard, evolution is the advancement of consciousness, and the universe is its collector and preserver (1959:235, 254).¹³ Charon, a French

¹³) It is possible that Däniken’s computerized model of God absorbs Hegel’s idea of the Absolute Mind/Spirit (*absoluter Geist*), transmitted through Teilhard.

nuclear physicist, was influenced by Teilhard and developed what he called a neognostic cosmology. He proposed that the mind resides in electrons or “eons,” as he likes to call them (Charon 1992:194). Each electron, according to Charon, is a thinking entity by itself. They preserve the knowledge of each and every individual of which they have been part. Their goal is increasing spiritual order (1992:76–93).

Däniken delights in Charon’s matter-of-fact physics language and in his (supposed) proof of the mind-matter connection in the electron (Däniken n.d. [1983]:127–145). He explains Charon’s view: “When electrons exchange black photons — it’s proven they do — the level of information within an electron constantly increases. The consequence is enormous! The electron was present since the universe was created. Whatever stages it has gone through, information accumulated all the time.” That way, “knowledge and experience become immortal” (n.d. [1983]:135f.). Charon provides Däniken with an explanation for his conviction that flashes of insight can come from distant times or places — by way of an electron stimulating its current “owner” (n.d. [1983]:137). Charon also uses the expression “grand spirit in the universe” to describe god (1992: 189). Däniken refers to god with a surprisingly similar term (see above).

Asking who we humans are, Däniken answers: “We are — as all matter — vehicles and parking space for the electron, destined to collect and store information and experiences so that the eternal electron can relay them through the eons” (n.d. [1983]:138). This purpose remains vague, and Däniken never elaborates on it. Of course, it fits his Big Bang computer model rather well. Almost thirty years later, he writes: “The goal of the universe consists in filling the whole cosmos with intelligence” (2009:26). Vague as it is, it goes well with both the model of increasing information and the concept of an astronaut civilization using panspermia, direct genetic intervention, or other means to spread intelligence. As before, the motivation remains sparse. All we have is the model of IT, the neuter computer spirit looking for experience — essentially a numinous being beyond comprehension, while at the same time a metaphor for the whole universe.¹⁴

¹⁴) Note that Däniken argues that the universe might be a living organism (2009: 25–27).

Although Däniken disperses the jigsaw pieces of this “information ideology” over publications spanning more than four decades, I suggest that this concept of accumulating intelligence forms an important (and as far as I can tell, completely overlooked) part of his ancient astronaut speculation. While the heterogeneous details of creation leave the impression of a certain indifference, this ideology of information seems to be the backbone of Däniken’s worldview, the tapestry on which his ancient astronaut myth unfolds. The almost parenthetical reverence for information implied in this overarching myth is in accordance with the scientism inherent in the discourse. However, I want to make it clear that this model of increasing intelligence is not necessarily part of the ancient astronaut discourse. It is not immediately obvious in Däniken’s books, and I have not yet encountered it in conversation with or in publications by other participants in the discourse. It nonetheless is fundamental for the eschatology inherent in Däniken’s writing.

Values of Today, and the History of Our Future

I have already mentioned that Däniken expects the “gods” to return. What future, according to him, lies ahead? What message does his ancient astronaut myth convey? Voss, referring to folklore but including modern unorthodox science, reminds us that “folklore concerning the past often expresses the dominant cultural values and concerns of the present” (Voss 1987:86). What, then, are the values expressed in Däniken’s writing? Voss distinguishes different functions: “The folklore may variously serve to establish a cultural heritage, reinforce values and norms, and distinguish a way of life from others” (1987:88). In Däniken’s reinterpretation, on the one hand, the myths state that our technological society has ancestry not only on prehistoric earth, but also on distant stars. On the other hand, despite this close relationship across the ages, humans in antiquity could not build their society on their own, but depended on help from outside. This basic structure allows for multiple inferences. First of all, humanity is not the result of chance evolution, but has a purpose. We are here for a reason. Däniken gives no clear-cut answer as to what purpose or reason that may be; the fact that we have meaning seems to be more important than what exactly it may be. Ultimately we are part of the cosmic development towards more information and increasing intelligence in the universe.

From Däniken's perspective, our pervasive technology (often criticized for its possible dangers) receives a foundation and justification in the past, as well as an important function in our destiny. Jüdt even characterizes Däniken's reasoning as "technocratic ideology in a hi-tech age" (2003:178). Certainly, Däniken's overconfidence in science and technology (e.g., 1978:26–39) is mirrored by his distrust of the humanities and hermeneutics. Another message of the ancient astronaut myth is, then, to distrust authorities, especially the scientific establishment. Science, nonetheless, is our destiny, as is outer space. We will repeat history, create a civilization somewhere in the cosmos, and become their culture heroes, remembered (and probably obscured as gods) for millennia. Däniken only hints at this kind of apotheosis (1968:26f.; 2003:264f.), but the cyclical understanding of time is fundamental for his ancient astronaut speculations.

The myth also assures us that we are not alone. Humankind has an extraterrestrial family, so to speak, and we will be reunited before long. Our current global problems will be overcome, we are reassured. An ambiguity remains whether humankind has now come of age, met its challenges by itself, and can take its place among its cosmic peers; or whether we are just ready to receive our creators again, in need of their guidance and help. In any case Däniken envisions a golden age triggered by the return of the ancient astronauts (cf. Däniken 1998: 185–187). "We're marching straightaway into a time of wonders and awakening. Human history is not even remotely at an end" (2007:78). That contact with ETs will usher in many important advancements is a widespread contention common not only to ancient astronaut and UFO speculation, but also to scientific and skeptical writers such as Carl Sagan and Frank Drake (Crowe 1986:558f.; Dick 1998:242).¹⁵

Däniken is convinced that part of this bright future is a universal religion. In the same way that he boils down the complexities of evolution to a uniform origin and mythic history, Däniken presents us with a uniform destiny and religion: "With the Space Age, the *spiritual* Judgment Day approaches. [...] With the decisive step into the cosmos we will have to acknowledge that there are not two million gods, not twenty thousand cults or ten large religions, but only one." (1968:83,

¹⁵ For a short but interesting look at Sagan's "new religious habitus," see Hauser 2004:53f.

italics in the original). According to Däniken, the present suffers from misunderstanding its own roots. This is especially true for the world's religions. Each of them ultimately claims to be the only faith in possession of absolute truth. But “religious dogmatism and the knowledge of the extraterrestrials don't harmonize” (2009:201). Religions not only constrain progress, but also cause wars (n.d. [1974]:271). Convinced that the extraterrestrials will return as they promised, he predicts an emerging cosmic consciousness and the downfall of religions (1998:244f.).¹⁶ Of the new, universal religion Däniken writes: “Should we blow up temples, raze churches? Never. Where humans gather and praise the creator, they feel a beneficial invigorating community. [...] Temples and churches are places of contemplation, places of communal praise for the Undefinable, for It, which we provisionally learned to call god. These places of assembly are necessary. The rest is dispensable” (n.d. [1974]:273). Put differently, Däniken wants to abolish religions and let only a cosmic spirituality remain.

The aliens will teach us, initiating a paradise on earth: “When space opens its door for us, a truly heavenly age will begin” (Däniken 1998:187). Of course, this is also meant literally: Humankind will travel to outer space and spread intelligence, becoming the creators of another civilization. History will repeat itself, and we ourselves will become astronaut gods.

Ancient Astronaut Religion? A Comparison with Raël

Däniken is only one among hundreds of writers (albeit the most prominent one) speculating on ancient astronauts. A comparison with another writer to highlight some specific differences is illuminating. Raël (Claude Vorilhon) provides a useful contrast. His version of human history clearly reminds one of Erich von Däniken.¹⁷ The main difference is, however, that Raël/Vorilhon is a UFO contactee. Once a French *chanson* singer and journalist for an auto sports magazine, in 1974 Claude Vorilhon published *The Book Which Tells the Truth*. It recounts

¹⁶ Recently, Däniken refers to the theory of “memes” (R. Dawkins, S. Blackmore) to explain this imminent change in consciousness (2009:27, 192–195).

¹⁷ Raël may of course have relied on other writers such as Jean Senny.

how he met the occupant of a flying saucer. The ET called Jahweh, a member of the highly advanced Elohim, held Bible lessons with Vorilhon, explaining that Scripture tells the truth, but has been misconstrued. Vorilhon was instructed to teach humankind its true origin and prepare the planet for the return of the Elohim. Thus he became the prophet Raël. Today, the Raélians form the world's largest UFO religion (or "ET-Inspired" religion, cf. Thomas 2010) with an estimated seventy thousand members.

The Raëlian *interpretatio technologica* of the Bible indeed calls to mind ancient astronaut speculations like those published by Däniken and others. I want to point out two differences. First, Raël presents a homogeneous creation myth, a definitive version. Däniken, as we have seen, offers many alternatives, a piecemeal collection of arguments and explanations. Secondly, the Raëlian movement prides itself in being a scientific and atheist religion (Raël 1998:160, 191, 217; Palmer 2004: 199–203). It is true, of course, that Däniken shares with Raël the strong inclination towards science and technology. Yet he makes a point of his belief in God on the one hand and his disdain for religion on the other. To Däniken, ancient astronaut theory should never be treated as religion, much less consider itself to be one.

There are, of course, many more differences. Both believe in a return of the extraterrestrials, but frame it differently. Raël expects the Elohim to land in 2035 and wants to have an embassy built by then (Palmer 2004:98). Däniken cautiously speculates that the completed "long count" cycle of the Maya calendar on December 23, 2012, might mark the return of the ancients, but remains non-committal (Däniken 2009:155–158). The AAS is very different from the Raëlian movement with its hierarchical structure of bishops and guides and its body of rituals. The Raëlian concept of Elohimization looks similar to Däniken's expectation of humankind becoming astronaut gods themselves (Palmer 2004:102f., 194). Also, Däniken's theory of increasing intelligence and information calls to mind Raël's concept of geniocracy, a political system relying entirely on intelligence. Obviously there remain many details distinguishing their respective teachings.

Interestingly, Raël seems to have visited the Swiss writer twice. Däniken tells how he was contacted sometime in the 1970s, and a second time around the millennium. But Raël understands himself as a prophet.

Däniken's self-image runs counter to this. To him, his writing comprises research, not revelation. He wants to explain religion instead of starting a new one. That is why he disapproved of Raël: "What you're doing is religion. I don't want to have anything to do with that" (Mai and Däniken 2003:345–356).

Although neither his writing nor the AAS community comprise a full-blown religious movement, Däniken still has something to do with religion. On the one hand, he actively addresses religions, trying to explain their origin and criticizing their dogmatism. On the other hand, he proposes a creation myth as well as theological and eschatological concepts. He shares with Teilhard, Charon, Raël, and many others the desire to reconcile science and religion (Grünschloß 2007:217). Däniken has managed to produce a mix of both that a considerable part of society finds agreeable, as his publishing success shows. Science, according to Däniken, is our origin, and if we acknowledge that, we are remembering the future.¹⁸ However, we should not forget the religious aspects inherent in his speculation. Debunking Däniken's arguments or dismissing the whole discourse as "pseudoscience" does not help us understand the different motivations and worldviews of its proponents and believers.

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¹⁸ Cf. the German title of Däniken's first book *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft*, i.e., *Memories of the Future* (1968).

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