

Archaeological representations in the media: the dominance of pseudo–Archeology

ALEXANDRE SCHIELE¹, BERNARD SCHIELE²

¹Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Israel
alexandre.schiele@mail.huji.ac.il

²University of Quebec at Montreal
Canada
schiele.bernard@uqam.ca

ABSTRACT

*Contrary to a prevalent impression within the research community, pseudo–science is far from a marginal phenomenon, far from being a mere epiphenomenon in the mediascape. As this article shows, it constitutes a dominant trend since the 2010s, especially in historical and archaeological television documentaries. These documentaries enjoy high ratings, which partly explains why producers continue to make them. Thus, omnipresent in the mediascape and beyond, they outcompete the scientific consensus and the worldview it projects, regardless of the debunking efforts of researchers and journalists. Furthermore, pseudoscience publications enjoy sales volumes that even the most renown researchers can only dream of. This omnipresence of pseudoscientific discourses in the social sphere transforms representations, increases beliefs in the paranormal and encourages conspiratorial mindsets. The comparative analysis of two documentaries: *Lost World of the Maya* (National Geographic) (NG) and *Ancient Aliens©: Secret of the Maya* (AA), has revealed a great number of similarities. Their format is identical, with the same number of segments, separated by synchronous commercial breaks of equal lengths (give or take a few seconds). If they somewhat differ in terms of treatment (AA proposes to uncover a conspiracy, and NG to solve an enigma) and the structure of the argumentation (AA: narration, assertion, speculation; NG: description, question, interpretation), they both show the same archetypal images of the Maya culture and mobilize the same enunciative modalities: a voice–over commentary ensures coherence throughout, interspaced with snippets from specifically invited “experts”*

whose task is to illustrate, specify, justify... the overarching narrative. And yet, although many appear on screen, their speaking time is unequally distributed, with one (NG) or two (AA) speaking the most, and the others barely a minute each in total. Thus, their similarity is such that it is accurate to speak of variations within a media format. More precisely, we can only reaffirm Marshall McLuhan's observation that "the medium is the message", as, beyond the scientific or pseudoscientific narrative, the very dynamic of the media predominates, blurring the distinction between the two.

KEYWORDS

Science, pseudoscience, expert, media, television, media format

RÉSUMÉ

*Contrairement à un sentiment largement répandu parmi les chercheurs, les pseudosciences ne sont pas un phénomène marginal, un épiphénomène dans l'univers des médias. Bien au contraire, comme le montre cet article, elles forment un courant dominant dans le paysage médiatique depuis les années 2010 et sont particulièrement présentes dans les émissions historiques et archéologiques. Elles recueillent une large audience, ce qui explique en partie le choix des producteurs de réaliser ce type d'émissions. Ainsi, circulant largement dans le champ médiatique et s'étendant bien au-delà, elles concurrencent le discours scientifique et la vision du monde qu'il promeut et cherche à diffuser, quels que soient les efforts de démythification déployés par les chercheurs et les journalistes. Qui plus est, les publications pseudoscientifiques connaissent un succès que même les chercheurs les plus célèbres ne peuvent espérer. Cette présence des pseudosciences dans les discours en circulation dans le champ social contribue à infléchir les représentations, augmenter la croyance au paranormal du public et alimenter la pensée conspirationniste. L'analyse comparative de deux documentaires *Lost World of the Maya* (National Geographic) (NG) et *Ancient Aliens®: Secret of the Maya* (AA) a montré que ces deux émissions sont similaires à plusieurs égards. Leur format médiatique est identique par leur découpage en segments, entrecoupés de plages publicitaires présentées au même moment et de même durée à quelques secondes près. Si elles se distinguent par leur thème central (AA se propose dévoiler une conspiration et NG de résoudre une énigme) et la structuration de leur propos (AA : narration, assertion, spéculation, NG : description, question, interprétation), elles présentent les mêmes images archétypales de la culture maya et recourent aux mêmes modalités énonciatives : un commentaire, en voix off, sert de fil conducteur du début à la fin et assure la cohérence d'ensemble de l'argumentation, entrecoupé*

de propos d'« experts » spécialement convoqués par l'émission qui interviennent pour illustrer, préciser, justifier... le propos principal. Toutefois, bien que plusieurs experts apparaissent à l'écran, le temps de parole inégalement réparti revient surtout à l'un (NG) ou à deux (AA) d'entre eux, les autres n'intervenant que très brièvement. Ainsi, les deux émissions présentent de telles similarités que l'on peut les qualifier de variations médiatiques d'un même format, ou, dans l'esprit de Marshall McLuhan, constater que le médium est le message, pour réaffirmer, au-delà du propos pseudoscientifique ou scientifique recherché, que c'est d'abord la logique du champ médiatique qui s'impose, brouillant ainsi la distinction entre les deux ordres de discours.

MOTS-CLÉS

Science, pseudoscience, expert, média, télévision, format médiatique

INTRODUCTION

“The past is a foreign country”! No one would deny the fundamental truth of the first line of L. P. Hartley's 1953 *The Go-Between*. Yet, in the past two centuries, our knowledge of the past, as all fields of human enquiry, has grown by leaps and bounds. And as all fields, it has become professionalized, credentialed, systematic and technoscientific. Our knowledge and understanding of past societies is probably both more comprehensive and more detailed than theirs of their own. And, even in these somber Covid times, 2021 was a very fruitful year for archeology.

Among the most significant discoveries: a lost Egyptian city dating back to the New Kingdom (1550 B.C.E. – 1290 B.C.E.) (Blakemore, 2021); the oldest life-size three dimensional representations of animals (camels and donkeys) dated to the sixth millennium B.C.E. (Saudi Arabia) (Gershon, 2021a); the oldest human footprints found in America dated at 23 000 B.C.E. (Larson, 2021); the oldest representation of an animal (warty pig) dated at 43 500 B.C.E. at the earliest (Indonesia) (Wei-Haas, 2021); the world's oldest suspected use of symbols dated to 120 000 B.C.E. (Israel) (Davis-Marks, 2021a); the world's oldest rock art dated to between 167 000 B.C.E. and 223 000 B.C.E. (Tibet) (Davis-Marks, 2021b). Especially, the use of modern technologies has revealed a massive geoglyph covering an area of 0.2 km² in India dated to the mid-19th century, potentially the world's largest (Ferreira, 2021); the traces of Norse presence in North America as early as 1021 (BBC, 2021); and a whole hidden neighborhood in Tikal (Guatemala) dated to the 3rd century (Brown University, 2021). Still more impressive, the reanalysis of old discoveries originally dismissed as less than significant, often with new technologies, changes our understanding: the oldest representation of a ghost

dated to 1500 B.C.E. (Babylonian tablet) (Alberge, 2021); and Europe's suspected oldest map dated to the Bronze Age (3300 B.C.E. – 1200 B.C.E.) (France) (Gershon, 2021b). And most impressive of all, new technologies made it possible to sequence the oldest complete DNA to date, from the tooth of a 1 000 000-year-old mammoth preserved in permafrost (Russia) (Greshko, 2021).

And yet Kenneth Feder, an archeologist specialized in pre-Colombian America, laments that today, while our knowledge is not merely extensive but increases daily, very few in Saint Louis, Missouri, know that just outside the city limits are the monumental ruins of the Native-American city of Cahokia which, a thousand years ago, was the heart of the far-reaching Mississippian Culture – one of the many different cultures collectively known as the *Mound Builders* who have built such monuments for millennia in what is today the Eastern United States. He likens it to inhabitants of Cairo having no knowledge of the Pyramids while living in their shadow (2017, p. 133). But when these monumental traces of Native American ingenuity are brought up in popular books and television documentaries, and they are, it is more often than not to prop up hyper-diffusionist claims¹, with their implicit denial of Native-American agency. Case in point: Graham Hancock's 2019 *America Before: The Key to Earth's Lost Civilization*.

The reader, reading this issue on archeology in the era of scientific mediation, might wonder why we stress the significance of this book, uninformed claims of this sort being a dime a dozen, or, worse, why we are giving undeserved publicity to some *crank* he probably never heard of? Both complaints would be valid... if it were not for the fact that they are not the mere rantings of a random crank. At the time of writing this paper, *America Before* ranks 5th on Amazon.com's 'Bestsellers in Prehistory'. We doubt many archeologists or communicators would be able to claim such an achievement. And if only it were the one book: it is the sequel of sort to his 2015 *Magician of Gods: The Forgotten Wisdom of Earth's Lost Civilization*, ranking 12th on the same list, and especially his 1995 *Fingerprint of the Gods: The Evidence of Earth's Lost Civilization*, ranking 1st. Yes, dear reader, you read correctly: two out of the top 5 bestsellers in Prehistory not only argue for Atlantis, they were penned by the same author.

Archeologists are growing alarmed at the prospects, to the point that the U.S.-based *Society for American Archeology* not only dedicated the November 2019 issue (Rodning, 2019) of its journal, the *SA Archeological Records*, to the topic, it made it available for free. Thus started its editorial:

Archeologists are not the only people who think about the past, they are not the only people who write about the past, and they are not the only people with an interest in applying knowledge about the past toward our knowledge about our world and our sense of reality in the present. This past year has

¹ Hyper-diffusionism holds that all civilizations are derived from a single mother civilization.

witnessed the publication of another book by Graham Hancock, the writer and former journalist whose books – 10 since 1992 – have sold millions of copies. His literary record makes him one of the major writers in the genre of pseudoarcheology. It is important for archeologists to think carefully and critically about what Hancock and similar writers are saying, how they are saying it, and why there is widespread public interest and fascination with it (p. 2).

But in all truth, how can specialists, educators and communicators compete when their audiences are smaller and debunking neither their tasks, nor easy, nor gratifying? And what of committed and tactful debunkers, small in numbers, when debunking is not a sustainable source of income, when they do not have access to the same diffusion capacities, when it is redundant to debunk over and over again the same claims while they themselves can be restated *ad infinitum* with enough tweaking to give the semblance of novelty and originality, and when only a fraction of their public will actually look up to verify the claims. And when they do look them up – online –, they are not only more likely to encounter materials confirming them but to be drawn further into rabbit holes and echo chambers of unsubstantiated claims and conspiracy theories. And the effect can be far from harmless.

Three cases in point, in growing political importance.

First, the so-called *America's Stonehenge*, a private tourist site in New Hampshire long promoted as a pre-Columbian Old World pagan complex where human sacrifice took place but probably of 19th century origin with a more innocuous function, was vandalized in October 2019 by someone who was convinced by History channel's *America Unearthed* documentary series (2012–2015; 2019) that it was in fact the case (Peiser, 2021).

Second, Jovan Hutton Pulitzer, a recurrent guest on History's *The Curse of Oak Island* (2014–) searching for the *Ark of the Covenant* on the small Nova Scotia island (Canada) and claiming to have discovered proof of Roman occupation in the process, also voicefully claimed to have invented a system proving that the 2020 U.S. Presidential election had been stolen, landing him a job with Arizona Senate Republicans to conduct the audit of the election in Arizona (MacDonald–Evoy, 2021).

Third, a Pentagon office was created in late November 2021 with two main missions: 1) monitor and assess the threat posed by UFOs, and 2) propose organizational and doctrinal changes to better respond to it (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021), after months of intense anticipatory media coverage (Colavito, 2021a) of an inconclusive Pentagon report (Barnes & Cooper, 2021) itself prompted by the growing alarm of elected officials at two uncritical New York Times front page stories written by pro-UFO journalists (Cooper, Kean, & Blumenthal 2017a, 2017b) and pushed by pro-UFO

Defense department officials in December 2017 (Kloor, 2020). Mere weeks later, in December 2021, a motion passed by both chambers of a Congress usually self-paralyzed by the partisan divide has created a separate Pentagon UFO office with an additional task: reverse-engineer, with the employ of contracted ‘outside experts’, UFO technology from footage, crashes, historical artifacts and legends (Colavito, 2021b). And if only now the profession as a whole is starting to recognize the significance and danger of pseudo-archeological discourses, lone individuals have long understood its seriousness and sought to raise the awareness of both the profession and the public. Yet, their labor has been arduous, thankless and without much recognition until very recently.

THE RECURRING STRUGGLE AGAINST PSEUDO-ARCHEOLOGY

When Kenneth Feder, then a doctoral candidate in Anthropology, started teaching archeology at Central Connecticut State College in the fall of 1977 (archeology is often a subfield of anthropology in the United States), one of his assigned introductory classes basically gave him a free hand. Yet, not knowing what to teach specifically and how to do it, he quizzed his students, then barely younger than him, on their specific interests. After a short, embarrassed silence, students voiced their suggestions: “‘Atlantis’. ‘Egypt’. ‘Bigfoot’. [...] ‘Stonehenge’. ‘The Lost Tribes of Israel’. ‘The Maya’. ‘Noah’s Flood’” (Feder 2017, p. xiv). Surprised, though only mildly, as he himself acknowledges his prior interests, opted to teach the epistemology of archeology – “how you know what you know” in his own words (Feder 2017, p. 16) – through the systematic analysis, deconstruction and debunking of the pseudo-archeological claims then in vogue during the 1970s – notably the actualized hyper-diffusionism of the *Ancient Astronaut Theory* popularized by the books of Erich von Däniken – especially his 1968 *Erinnerungen and die Zukunft*, and even more so its 1969 English translation *Chariots of the Gods* – and the film and television documentaries inspired by them.

A first which is still far from standard in the teaching of archeology. Nevertheless, out of this course, Feder developed an undergraduate teaching manual: *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries – Science and Pseudoscience in Archeology*. However, he could not find a publisher– even when dealt seriously, pseudo-archeology is not deemed a serious subject – until 1990. However, Feder is first and foremost a specialist of pre-Colombian America, a dynamic field which unfortunately remains largely unknown to the general public, and has written a number of popular archeology books on the topic, including his 2017 *Ancient America: Fifty Archeological Sites to See for Yourself* – a guidebook of sorts for the layperson. And it was because he had published popular archeology books on pre-Colombian America that a television producer, unaware of his debunking of sensationalist pseudo-archeology, contacted him.

The exchange did not go as planned for both. Feder suggested covering some of the fifty sites he had discussed, and, according to Feder, the television producer “only [had] two questions [...] ‘So, do any of these sites have, you know mysteries? And is there treasure?’” (Feder 2017, p. 289). Feder, dazzled, answered that “the fifty sites [were] incredibly beautiful and impressive. Lots of great visuals, amazing stories about of the archeology of these places, and the most important part; its’s *real*, not *fake*” (Idem, p. 290, our emphasis). The television producer candidly retorted that “What’s big now in cable are mysteries and treasure. I’m looking for a show idea that incorporates mystery and treasure” (Idem, p. 290). Feder matter–of–factly responded that “the mystery [he focused] on in [his] fifty sites book [was] how could so many people in America be unaware of the Amazing Native American history of our continent” (Idem, p. 290). Needless to say, the television producer never got back to him.

Thus, forty years after the beginning of his academic career, after forty years of historical and archeological development, in a time when Americans are more educated than ever (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), in a time when knowledge is nearly universally accessible, not only is pseudo–archeology still strong, television producers are actually looking to put out sensationalist content, thereby taking a lead role in the pervasiveness of pseudo–scientific beliefs in the general public. We can now understand why, as of 2022, his *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries–Science and Pseudoscience in Archeology*, is in its tenth edition, published by a major publisher –Oxford University Press–, and on the reading list in many archeological departments: the fight against pseudo–science and pseudo–history is more pressing than ever.

But to what extent does the mass media sustains and strengthens pseudo–archeological beliefs?

THE 2010s: WHEN PSEUDO–ARCHEOLOGY BECAME MAINSTREAM

In 2016, the U.S.–based Chapman University surveyed Americans on their beliefs. We shall not comment all the beliefs surveyed, limiting ourselves to the two pseudo–archeological beliefs: 1) Ancient, advanced civilizations, such as Atlantis, once existed; and 2) Aliens have visited Earth in our ancient past. Nearly 40% of respondents expressed a belief in the first and 27% in the second. In other words, just below half the U.S. public professed belief in one form or another of a specific version of hyper–diffusionism – the idea that all civilizations derived not simply from a single mother civilization, but from a highly technological mother civilization in the time before history whose traces have all but disappeared with the exception of monumental structures found all over the world and especially in the Third World, now reused by the later populations who found them. All in all, 64% embraced one or more paranormal beliefs.

In the wake of his original prompt in 1977, Feder started systematically surveying his first-year students from 1983 onward on these two same topics. The results were not only in line with those of the 2016 Chapman University survey, they remained relatively stable over the 20+ years (Feder, 2017, p. 5). In short, first-year archeology students are not all that dissimilar from the general public. And although he remains silent on the question, one must hope that graduating archeology students have long shed their unsubstantiated beliefs. Similarly, the University renewed the survey the two following years (Chapman University, 2018), however the results were far from stable: all beliefs grew fast, with increases of over 17% for the belief in Atlantis (total nearly 57%) and over 14% for the belief in Ancient Astronauts (total over 41%). What is significant is that of all the beliefs surveyed, the two pseudo-archeological ones grew the fastest. If it were only that: the proportion of Americans who believed in at least one paranormal belief grew to 76% (Table 1).

TABLE 1

Prevalence and rise in paranormal and conspiracy beliefs in the latter half of the 2010s in the USA: beliefs in Atlantis, ancient aliens and the paranormal (Chapman University 2018); in conspiracies (Chapman University 2016); and UFOs (Saad 2021)

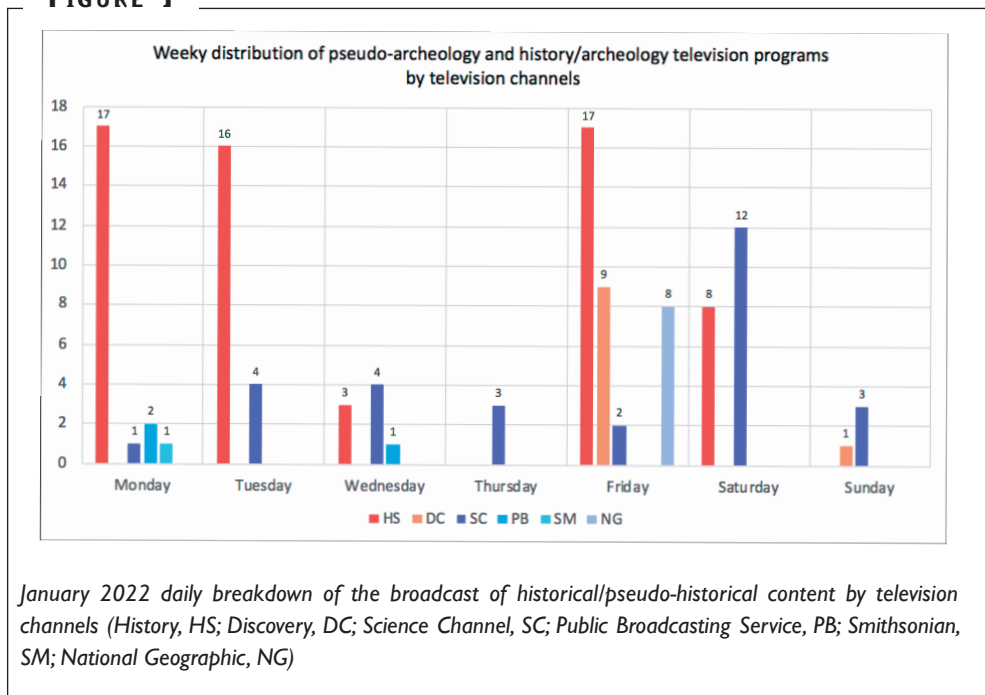
Beliefs	2016	2018	2019	2021
Atlantis	40%	57%		
Ancient aliens	27%	41%		
UFOs			33%	41%
Paranormal	64%	76%		
Multiple conspiracies	63%			

Tangentially, Gallup polls have also identified the rapid rise in the belief that “some” unidentified flying objects (UFOs) are in fact “alien spacecraft” from 33% to 41% between 2019 and 2021 (Saad, 2021). However, if the belief in UFOs was originally its own bubble, since the 1980s it has been closely associated with the belief in government cover-ups (Barkun, 2013, pp. 80–99). Similarly, pseudo-archeological beliefs, when on the fringe, are the manifestations of the lure of “stigmatized knowledge”, with the associated belief in an academic cover-up at their very heart (Barkun, 2013, pp. 26–29). Thus, not only is there an overlap between the embrace of pseudo-archeological beliefs and conspiracy theories, they are manifestations of a conspiratorial mindset. This is why, Chapman University did not limit itself to paranormal beliefs in 2016, but

also surveyed conspiracy theories: only 26% embraced none, and nearly 63% embracing more than one. Those embracing 2 and 3 accounted for over 10% each, as did those who embraced 9 or more, because believing in a conspiracy in one situation makes you more prone to accept it in others.

If this latter group could be dismissed as the lunatic fringe, the rapid increase in of beliefs in both paranormal beliefs and conspiracy theories over the past decade, and especially the past few years, are indicative of the spread and strengthening of conspiratorial mindsets among the U.S. public. In other words, the divorce between specialists and the public not merely remains, it increases and increases fast, attesting to the relative failure of educators, communicators, and debunkers. In all truth, how can they truly compete with television producers pushing for shows covering archeological “mysteries”? Jason Colavito, one of the most esteemed debunkers of pseudo-archeological claims, estimated in 2015 (p. 2) that U.S. television audiences were exposed the preceding year to well over a hundred hours of pseudo-scientific content a week – excluding fictional content.

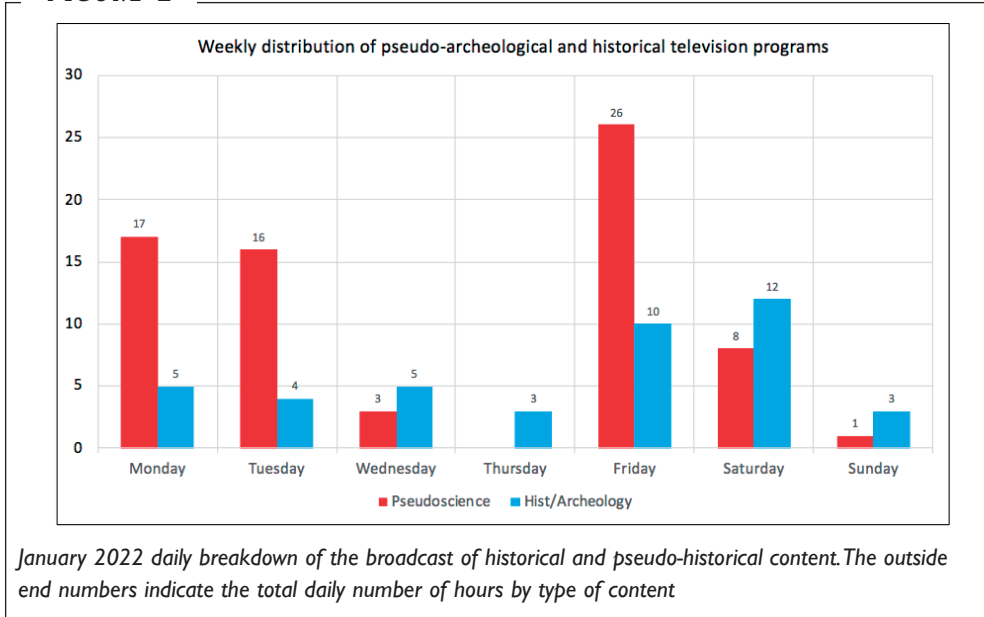
FIGURE 1



Fast forward to early January 2022. Of all the channels, only six broadcast documentaries with subject matters falling under the category of history and archaeology: Discovery, History, National Geographic, PBS, the Science Channel, and Smithsonian, and in the third week of January. They collectively broadcast 112 hours historical contents, which,

when compared to the total number of hours broadcast on television that very week, is little (Figure 1). And if we focus on the content of those 112 hours, a handful are original, most are reruns, shown one after another for long stretches of time. And if it were only that: this number includes all types of historical contents, regardless of accuracy. When broken down between historical and pseudo-historical content, the balance is clearly skewed towards the latter (71 hours) and this number does not even scratch the surface of the total number of hours of pseudo-scientific contents.

FIGURE 2



But what are the actual audience ratings for such pseudo-archeological series?

A SIGNIFICANT AND DEDICATED SHARE OF THE PUBLIC

In 2021, nearly 3 million viewers (TheTVratingsguide, 2022) still tune in to watch each new episode of History's *The Curse of Oak Island* (2014–), a tv-reality series then in its seventh season following treasure hunters seeking a legendary treasure on the small Nova Scotia island, with 'experts' increasingly and contradictorily opining on its origin without a hint of skepticism – the very existence of the treasure having yet to be proven. The viewership of History's *Ancient Aliens*, running continuously since 2010 with over 200 episodes with the sole aim of asserting that aliens visited the earth in remote antiquity and seeded human civilization *without contradiction*, consistently remained above 1 million for most of the decade (TheTVratingsguide, 2019). It is

one of the longest still running U.S. documentary series, the 340th most popular contemporary television show and the 562nd most popular U.S. television show of all time (YougovAmerica, 2021). And if PBS' *Nova* (1974–), the longest running flagship documentary series, consistently draws a viewership approaching 2 million, with some episodes drawing close to 5 million, it is the exception: no documentary series can compete. Thus, television producers push for pseudo–archeological contents because there is a sustainable audience for them, and will continue to do so as long as the audience remains. And, if the viewership of *Ancient Aliens* over the last decade is any indication, a dedicated and numerous enough core of viewers can potentially indefinitely sustain a television series. It truly became History's flagship program, with its first and only tie-in book to date (2016), and it even started promoting *Ancient Aliens* as a lifestyle (Kurutz, 2018). However, the most interesting, and distressing, development is at the point where new media, old media and capitalism merge together: Gaia.com.

Gaia is a subscriber–only streaming service created in 2011, analogous to Netflix, but broadcasting only purposely produced “alternative” health, science, history and politics documentary content. In its own words: “Gaia produces dozens of exclusive, original series on topics you won't find in the mainstream media – the nature of the universe, ancient wisdom, the unexplained, alternative healing and more” (Gaia, 2021a). And more specifically related to our object, it specifically asserts: “What we have been taught about the earliest days of human civilization is under dispute as new evidence is uncovered. *Gain a new perspective of who built the first civilizations from the experts who have dared to defy the narratives imposed by mainstream archaeology*” (Gaia, 2021b, our emphasis). The reader, having probably never heard of this streaming service, might again be tempted to dismiss Gaia as little more than an insignificant fringe website. If it were only so. It charges USD 14.99 monthly for a basic package, or USD 125 yearly (3 months free), and USD 399 for a premium subscription which grants exclusive participation to livestream events, access to the recordings of past events and the privilege to chat with other event participants and, especially, speakers. And during the pandemic its revenues have significantly grown (22% for the first 9 months of 2021, from USD 48.2 million to USD 58.7 million) (GlobeNewsWire, 2021), while its number of subscribers has soared by 23% from late April to late June alone, from 625 000 to 770 200 (High, 2021). Gaia is undoubtedly an echo chamber with little to no outside scrutiny, but of a size approaching the average viewership of pseudo–historical television documentary programs, with members eager to pay significant sums to be a part of it.

At this point, the reader might be annoyed by this insistence on the United States, and think the authors stuck in their own sociocentrism. Far from it, though this insistence is deliberate: not only is what is happening in the USA of global consequence,

the USA is one of the major global sources of film and television content (Crane, 2014), but also, more importantly for us, of pseudo–archeological film and television contents. This situation is the result of exclusive distribution agreements, the globalization of U.S. broadcasting companies such as A&E – the parent company of History which broadcasts both *Ancient Aliens* and *The Curse of Oak Island* –, and the leasing of broadcasting rights, which not only significantly lowers the running cost of smaller and foreign broadcasting companies, but is actually the major source of revenues for productions companies such as *Prometheus Entertainment* – the producer of both *Ancient Aliens* and *The Curse of Oak Island*. And as the television producer candidly admitted to Feder: “What’s big now in cable are mysteries and treasure” (Quoted in Feder 2017, p. 290).

But how did it become so?

THE COMPLEX GENEALOGY OF PSEUDO–ARCHEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES

Let us go back to the two most preeminent pseudo–archeological beliefs: 1) Atlantis, and 2) Ancient Aliens, for short. If Atlantis has long been associated with Plato’s dialogues (the *Timaeus* and especially the *Critias*), its renewed popularity has been at the heart of the so–called ‘Alternative Archeology’ of the 1990s, with Graham Hancock – a Scot born in 1950 – as its most famous representative. In contrast, the ‘Ancient Astronaut Theory’ first emerged in the second half of the 20th century, with Erich von Däniken – a Swiss–German born in 1935 – as its face. Both are not only examples of Hyper–Diffusionism, they are variations on the same theme, with Atlantis and Ancient Aliens as interchangeable highly technological agents now lost to history. They are interchangeable because the so–called evidence for either, from Egyptian and Mesoamerican pyramids to ancient maps and legends, are the same as even the most cursory look at *Chariots of the Gods* (1968) and *Fingerprint of the Gods* (1995) makes apparent.

Yet, their most successful promoters are not historians or archeologists – and never have claimed to be – but communicators, and highly efficient ones at that (Schiele, 2020). Hancock is a former correspondent for *The Economist*, and *Fingerprint of the Gods* received positive coverage from fellow journalists (Colavito, 2005, p. 227). While von Däniken’s original manuscript for *Chariot of the Gods* was completely redrafted by a professional journalist, Wilhelm Utermann – under the pseudonym Wilhelm Roggersdorf – at the request of the publishing house Econ–Verlag (Stoczkowski, 1999, p. 45). And shortly after publication, it was serialized in the Swiss magazine *Die Weltwoche*, greatly contributing to its success (Von Däniken, 2018, p. ix). However, they have little scruples and readily plagiarize others and themselves. Thus, when *Chariots of the Gods* was to be translated in French, lawyers for Louis Pauwels’ (1920–1997) and Jacques Bergier’s (1912–1978), and their editor, secured with legal threats that their

1960 magnum opus *Le Matin des magiciens* (The Morning of the Magicians) be mentioned in the bibliography of all future editions, as well as Robert Charroux's (1909–1978) works (Anonymous, 1969). And, far from discrediting the whole of pseudo-archeology in the eyes of the public, it actually consolidated its appeal since from then on their promoters could freely refer and quote each other, and they tend to be prolific, giving to the layperson's eyes all the appearances of a progressive research program. Hancock's works in particular have all the exterior signs of serious non-fiction, with an abundance of notes and bibliographical references.

And yet, his *Fingerprints of the Gods* is merely an actualization of Ignatius Donnelly (1831–1901)'s 1882 *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, the first work to argue in favor of Atlantis as a prehistoric highly-technological civilization – on par with Victorian England. In contrast, as first independently recognized by Wiktor Stoczkowski (1999) and Colavito (2004), the 'Ancient Astronaut Theory' finds its origin in H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937)'s science fiction horror – most notably *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) and *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936). Horror writers have long drawn from lore, myths, the occult and pseudo-history, and imbued their stories with an aura of verisimilitude – 'What if?' Yet, what distinguishes Lovecraft from his peers, in addition to his creative genius, was the crafting of his stories as dispassionate accounts that the character, with whom the reader identifies, reads years, if not decades, after the story actually took place. Accounts which, the more the stories progress, the more they become *fantastique* – the reader (both real and fictional) hesitating as to whether the account can find a rational explanation or not (Todorov, 1970), with their (fictional) authors, always portrayed as materialist academics and therefore as credible witnesses, clearly struggling to keep their composure, and sanity. If it were only that: Lovecraft had knitted a close circle of fantasy and horror writers who deliberately inserted similarly named entities and similar settings in their stories, thus giving the impression that they had unconsciously touched upon some forgotten knowledge (Colavito, 2005, pp. 83–106).

And Pauwels and Bergier, (1960, p. 479) who first encountered Lovecraft's stories after the arrival of U.S. forces on European soil at the end of the Second World War, made it one of the main theses of their *Morning of the Magicians*: fiction can be the vehicle for truths that even their authors are unaware of. Such an idea was already central in the works of Helena Blavatsky (1888), the founder of Theosophy who not only claimed from the study of world religions and philosophies to have rediscovered the true history – the spiritual history – and wisdom of mankind, in which lost prehistoric terrestrial and extraterrestrial civilizations played a central role, but who also readily incorporated archetypes born out fiction – such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1871 novel *Vril, the Power of the Coming Race*, the first mention of a subterranean technologically advanced civilization which predated human civilization. And if pseudo-archeological

writers have never shied away from misunderstanding or deliberately misrepresenting evidence, they have also, on occasion, disingenuously presented works of fiction as academic publications – such as Italian journalist Peter Kolosimo (1922–1984) in his 1968 *Non è terrestre (Not of this World)* (Fitzpatrick–Matthews, 2012).

Thus, if it would be a mistake to dismiss pseudo–archeology as mere fiction, and even more so as fantasy fiction, pseudo–archeology and fantasy fiction nevertheless actively feed each other. For a more recent example: in the 1981 film *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the Ark of the Covenant is specifically referred to as “a radio for speaking to God”, while in the English version of *Chariot of the Gods*, von Däniken (1969) described it in these terms:

Undoubtedly the Ark was electrically charged! If we reconstruct it today according to the instructions handed down by Moses, a voltage of several hundred volts is produced. The condenser is formed by the gold plates, one of which is positively, the other negatively, charged. If, in addition, one of the two cherubim on the mercy seat acted as a magnet, the loudspeaker – perhaps even a kind of set for communication between Moses and the space–ship – was perfect. The details of the construction of the Ark of the Covenant can be read in the Bible in their entirety. Without actually consulting Exodus, I seem to remember that the Ark was often surrounded by flashing sparks and that Moses made use of this ‘transmitter’ whenever he needed help and advice. Moses heard the voice of his Lord, but he never saw him face to face (pp. 49–50).

If only it were the only link! The success of the movie, and the *Indiana Jones* franchise as a whole, spawned a whole cottage industry of pseudo–archeological writings focused on the *Ark of the Covenant* – a subject which had remained marginal as the crucifixion of Jesus had superseded the previous covenant – alongside the Holy Grail and Templar Knights which had been central to the plot of the 1989 film *Indiana Jones’s and the Last Crusade*.

The most successful of these non–fiction works is none other than Hancock’s 1992 *The Sign and the Seal: The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant*, in which he not only argues that the Templars searched for and found both the Ark and the Holy Grail – with a direct reference to the *Indiana Jones* franchise as its inspiration (Hancock 1992/1993, pp. 7–8), but that the Ark was a technological remnant of a civilization which predated our own (Hancock, 1992/1993, pp. 316–323). A *Los Angeles Times* review dismissed the book in the following terms: “It’s part travelogue, part true–adventure, part mystery–thriller. But mostly it’s a whacking big dose of amateur scholarship alloyed with a fervid imagination and the kind of narrative that comes in handy when telling ghost stories around a campfire” (Kirsch, 1992). However, it was probably the root of its success, which led Hancock (1995) to write his magnum opus: *Fingerprints of the Gods*.

But sales number are misleading: between 1978 and 2016, the proportion of Americans who read at least one book the preceding year fell from 92% to 73%, while the average number of books read each year per capita fell from 17 in 1999 to 12.6 in 2021, a number inflated by the minority of avid readers as the median is 5: i.e., 50% read 5 four books or less a year (Jones, 2022). And even if by 2009, 5 million copies of Hancock’s books (“Biography, Graham Hancock” in *Graham Hancock*, 2021, our emphasis) had been sold, it is the global sales volume: we are a far cry from the 57% of Americans who believe in Atlantis.

Thus, we must look at other media to account for the rapid increase in beliefs of all sorts during the last decade, and not only pseudo–archeological beliefs.

PSEUDOARCHEOLOGY IN MASS MEDIA

The 1970s popularity of the Ancient Astronaut Theory is largely attributable to one Academy–Award nominated German documentary film adapted from von Däniken’s *Chariots of the Gods* and bearing its German name. But the story has a twist: NBC – one of the only three major channels at the time – secured the broadcasting rights, reformatted it for U.S television audiences, hired Rod Serling whose distinctive voice was closely associated with *The Twilight Zone* science fiction/supernatural series (1959–1964), and broadcast it in primetime under the title *In Search of Ancient Astronauts*. Success was immediate, and *Chariots of the Gods* and its sequel, *Gods from Outer Space* (1972), sold in the aftermath more than 6 million copies in the U.S. (Colavito 2005, p. 142). If it were only that: the success led NBC to directly produce two additional documentaries: *In Search of Ancient Mysteries* (1974) and *The Outer Space Connection* (1975) singularly focused on the Ancient Astronaut Theory, before creating a whole television documentary series dedicated to “stigmatized knowledge” and “mysteries”: *In Search Of...* (1977–1982) presented by Leonard Nimoy, the iconic actor who played Spock on the original *Star Trek*. Its opening narration was explicit: “This series presents information based in part on theory and conjecture. The producer’s purpose is to suggest some possible explanations, but not necessarily the only ones, to the mysteries we will examine”. And even if the *Fairness Doctrine* compelled the producers to present both sides of a controversial debate², and thus to allow for a rebuttal from recognized experts, the effect was to blur fiction and reality.

Twenty years after *In Search of Ancient Astronauts*, in 1993, NBC again played a lead role in the popularization of “Alternative Archeology” with the broadcast in primetime of the *Mystery of the Sphinx*, presented by the celebrated actor Charlton Heston, which argued, because the Sphinx showed water weathering (now disproved) when Egypt had

2 CBS v. Democratic Nat’l Committee, 412 U.S. 94 (1973).

not had a wet climate since the eighth millennium B.C.E., that the Sphinx could only have been originally carved at this time at the earliest, if not at the end of the last Ice Age. Again, it was a success with 33 million watchers (Colavito, 2005, p. 212), earning it, over the protestation of Egyptologists, a *News & Documentary Emmy Award* in the category “Outstanding Individual Achievement in a Craft: Researchers” (Blake & Christie, 1994a) as well as being nominated for the “Special Classification for Outstanding News and Documentary Program Achievement” (Blake & Christie, 1994b). And most channel followed suite. Three years later, NBC reiterated with *The Mysterious Origins of Man*, again hosted by Charlton Heston, which directly challenged the scientific and historical consensus view, and in which Hancock, who had published his *Fingerprints of the Gods* the year before, was prominently featured.

More of the same? Yes, and no because the mid-1990s were not the mid-1970s: 1) distrust towards established authorities of all stripes had been growing since the 1970s (House of Lords, 2000; The Royal Society, 1985); 2) the *Fairness Doctrine* was ruled anti-constitutional in 1987³, dispensing content producers from presenting contradictory information; and 3) the transition to *cable* made it possible to multiple the number of channels catering to niches of viewership, with parent companies usually owning more than one. Thus, the History channel was born in 1995 to, as its very name implies, provide historical content to the public. Yet, in a highly competitive commercial media system, as its ‘drift’ from historical to pseudo-historical content over the last decade attests to, offer is driven by demand.

And, as channels now interchangeably show historical and pseudo-historical documentaries produced by the same production companies, it is legitimate to ask to which extent they truly differ.

CASE STUDY OF ARCHEOLOGICAL AND PSEUDO-ARCHEOLOGICAL TELEVISION DOCUMENTARIES

For this comparison, we have chosen two television documentaries broadcast in 2019 with the same topic: the Maya. For the archeological one, we have chosen National Geographic’s *Lost World of the Maya* (precise broadcast date unknown; hereafter referred to as NG) and for the pseudo-archeological one, History’s *Ancient Aliens: Secrets of the Maya* (Season 14, Episode 6; broadcast date: 5 July 2019; hereafter referred to as AA). This comparison will proceed in two steps: first, we will analyse their format, and second, the structure of the argumentation – in general terms, as we are limited by space.

3 In re: Complaint of Syracuse Peach Council against Television Station WTVH Syracuse, New York, 2 FCC Rcd 5043 (1987).

Format

In terms of format, the two documentaries (Table 2) are of comparable lengths: 44 minutes and 9 seconds (NG – with an additional 15 minutes 51 seconds of advertisements) and 43 minutes (AA – with an additional 17 minutes of advertisements). Both documentaries open with a title sequence (43 seconds for NG; 1 minute 23 seconds for AA), with the distinction that AA introduces both the series title and the episode title. In both documentaries, the title sequence is followed by 6 segments of diminishing lengths, interspaced by 5 commercial breaks of 3 minutes 30 seconds on average. The first segment is the longest with 11 minutes 11 seconds for NG and 9 minutes 44 seconds, for AA. For both, the following three segments are of nearly equal duration (7 minutes), with the final fifth segment of a little over 5 minutes, including the end credits. In short, the placement of title, segments, and end credit as well as commercial breaks are nearly synchronized. And although all segments are inscribed within a logical chain, individual segment constitutes single units with their own internal coherence.

Immediately following the commercial break, each new segment begins with a recapitulation of the title, a voice-over summary of the topic and of preceding segments, and the recapitulation of the name and distinctive achievement of guest speakers (academic title, institution and/or significant book authored) as they reappear on screen, ensuring that new viewers can start watching after any commercial break. Furthermore, each segment ends with a preview of future segments to ensure that viewers continue to watch after the commercial break. In fact, the commercial breaks are the main structuring elements in both documentaries. And to ensure that the viewer continues to watch after each new commercial break, the preview is also a teaser taking the form of a ‘narrative cliffhanger’ for NG (e.g. at 33’29”, the narrator ends with: “... but along with this portrait of a prosperous society, Bey’s colleagues Bill Ringel and Tomas Gaierda *are finding evidence of a disturbing political trend on the rise.*” – our italics), and of a ‘shocking revelation’ for AA (e.g. at 33’22”, Giorgios Tsoukalos opines “*It would not surprise me if these texts did make it back to Vatican*”, immediately followed at 33’29” by Lynn Picknett who asserts: “*People often say the Vatican just destroys stuff. What they do is they hide it.*” – our italics).

Even this surface comparison shows that both share the same pattern, a pattern imposed by the televisual media apparatus itself. Producers are subjected to three constraints: 1) a fix number of commercial breaks at precise timestamps, 2) the need to ensure that viewers continue to watch, especially following a commercial break, and 3) the need to ensure that new viewers can start watching at any point, especially after a commercial break.

TABLE 2

Breakdown of both documentaries with timestamps and main feature of each segment

Secrets of the Maya		Lost world of the Maya	
Lead	00:00 <i>The destruction of an ancient culture may have erased evidence of extraterrestrial contacts, evidence which the Vatican may be hiding.</i>	00:00	<i>Modern technology reveals a civilization full of mysteries, hidden for centuries by the jungle, changing our understanding.</i>
[01:03]		00:43	Title (Documentary)
	01:21 Title (Series)		
	01:23 Title (Episode)		
Seg 1	<i>The Spanish destroyed the Mayan culture, the last in a long line of cultures going back 3000 years. Their legends relate that they were guided to Mexico by the "Sky Peoples". And 3000-year old Olmec art appear to show a diversity of worldwide peoples, who may have come to ancient Mexico in flying machines.</i>		<i>New technologies such as LIDAR revealed in 2018 a much wider and complex Maya civilization. The northern site of Kiuc, discovered in the 2000s, reveals layers of civilization dating back 200 years earlier than expected. A religious site hidden deep within a cave is even more mysterious.</i>
[10:27]	[09:44]	[11:11]	
	[Coming up]		
	10:52 Teaser (shocking revelation)	11:30	Teaser (narrative cliffhanger)
	11:07 Ad break	11:54	Ad break
			[Title card reshown]
Seg 2	<i>In San Agustín (Colombia), 5000 year old art shows not only identity with Olmec art, but also even greater similarity with Hindu art from India and South-East Asia. Some appear to show divine beings said to have flown in spaceships, divine beings who may have founded settlements in the Americas.</i>		<i>The art within the cave is clearly Maya, but not only does it date back to the very beginning of Maya civilization, it is distinct. At Kiuc, a king built in the 8th century a pyramid atop the 5th century royal residence of his ancestor. New discoveries indicate a vast network of Maya towns as old and as complex as Southern Maya society, yet distinct.</i>
[07:39]	[08:09]	[07:10]	
	[Coming up]		
	19:01 Teaser (shocking revelation)	19:00	Teaser (narrative cliffhanger)
	19:16 Ad break	19:04	Ad break
			[Title card reshown]
Seg 3	<i>Similar Hindu gods such as the Nagas and Mayan gods such as the Plumed Serpent are proofs of ancient spaceflight. So are the depictions of Vimanas in Indian Myths and the quimbaya figures in Colombia. The Hindu god Maya departed India, and may have come to the Americas, with the Mayas honoring his name.</i>		<i>A massive northern Maya society on par with the Southern has now been identified. Kiuc was one of its mid-size towns of 3-4000 inhabitants whose extent, though hidden by the jungle, has been revealed with LIDAR. A now in ruin sprawling staircase once led to a massive residential structure, one of many such, homes of large plantation owners who had a vegetable and legume-rich diet.</i>
[06:46]	[06:44]	[06:48]	
	[Coming up]		
	25:46 Teaser (shocking revelation)	25:05	Teaser (narrative cliffhanger)
	26:00 Ad break	25:52	Ad break
			[Title card reshown]
Seg 4	<i>San Agustín is very similar to Triveni Sangam in India, and could only have been identified from the air. A statue which could be a spaceman mirrors statues in India showing a god mining for gold. A resource which is crucial to the gods/extraterrestrials, and found in abundance in San Agustín.</i>		<i>The Northern Maya society was prosperous and wealth accrued by the nobility, who built larger and larger palaces, spread to an intermediary class of craftsmen who could live in stone houses, a rarity, and even, perhaps, acquire land. The region around Kiuc is very lush and fertile, yet the only water comes from rain. They developed structures to channel and collect rain water without which the sustaining of the Northern Maya society would have been impossible.</i>
[06:59]	[06:36]	[07:23]	

TABLE 2

	[Coming up]		
	32:21 Teaser (shocking revelation)	33:04 Teaser (narrative cliffhanger)	
	32:36 Ad break	33:15 Ad break	
Seg 5	<i>The Cham civilization emerged in parallel to the Olmecs, and were a sea-faring civilization. They may have settled the Americas, but the records were destroyed by the Spanish. However, the Catholic Church may have actually preserved and hidden part of them in the Vatican Secret Archives, because they may prove the Maya civilization's otherworldly origin.</i>	[Title card reshown] <i>In the 800s, a new unofficial cult spread all across the north, with secret initiatory rituals. Local rulers, both great and small, were initiated. Strife between the old and the new ideologies increased. At the same time, construction projects suddenly halted even in Kiuc, then at its height.</i>	
[05:34] [05:56]		[05:13]	
	38:32 Ad break	38:25 Teaser (narrative cliffhanger)	
Seg 6	<i>The archeological record points not only to similarities between South East Asia and the Mayan, but to the possibility of transoceanic and even extraterrestrial contact. Definite proof would threaten the Catholic Church, making it necessary to suppress and hide it.</i>	[Title card reshown] <i>While war seemed the most likely explanation, no signs of organized violence have been uncovered. Along period of drought, for which the water reserves were insufficient, was probably the cause of the abandonment. An abandonment that was to be temporary, the inhabitants fully expecting to come back with the first rains. However, the political strife caused by the rise of the Plumed Serpent cult catalyzed the systemic failure of the Maya civilization.</i>	
[05:11] [04:28]		[05:55]	
Closing remarks	38:35 <i>The Aliens may have ceased to come and pulled back their technologies, but technological developments here on Earth reveal every day forgotten ruins which may hold this definite proof.</i>	43:35 <i>Long hidden by the jungle, only now technology reveals the extent of the ruins of the Maya. However, they are a reminder that even great civilizations fall and become forgotten.</i>	
	42:43 Credits	43:39 Credits	
	43:00 End	44:09 End	
Advert. [17:00]		[15:51]	

Content

Although the documentary genre is traditionally categorized as both non-fiction and educational, both documentaries continually draw upon educational and fictional devices. Fictional devices are none more apparent than in *dramatized re-enactments*, and both documentaries make use of them. However, NG makes greater use of them (32), than AA (21). And both promise the uncovering of mysteries (confirming Feder’s report). The enigma of the rise, extent, and sudden fall of the long-lost Maya civilization for NG, with the voice-over announcing from the very first second: “Hidden beneath the vast canopy is a lost world of the ancient Maya. [...] centuries-old cities riddled with mysteries, but today lasers in the sky are helping to expose these secrets”. The centuries-old conspiracy (intentionality) to cover up the Maya’s knowledge of alien contact for AA, with the voice-over asserting: “the mass destruction of an ancient culture” (0’02”), “Lost texts that could have offered evidence of extraterrestrial contact

from across the globe” (0’12”), before asking: “Could the Vatican still be hiding proof of Mankind’s ancient alien origins?” (0’37”).

With a significant distinction nonetheless (Table 3): NG begins with the introduction of an enigma, promising to gradually unveil the solution; while in AA, the answer is given from the very title sequence with the assertion of the existence of a conspiracy, the conspiracy itself becoming not only the general *ad hoc* explanation but also its own explanation – circular reasoning is characteristic of conspiracism, and of alien visitation: “We are not alone. We have never been alone” (spoken at 1’21” as the series title is shown), with the episode itself merely illustrating these assertions.

This being said, in both documentaries, the narrative – as neither truly builds a demonstration nor argumentation – is the guiding thread tying in all autonomous segments, and in both this narrative is mostly carried forward by the voice-over (even if in AA, it often takes the form of questions: “Is it possible that the ancestors of the Olmec people had come to South America from far across the ocean?” (10’31”), ensuring control over images – similar images in both (recurring views of archetypal Maya structures and artefacts), with original and stock shots, often in rapid succession, especially in AA, but with a preference for longer shots in NG. But not only: control is also exercised over the speech of guest speakers, largely reduced to dozen seconds-long snippets edited to illustrate, if not to reaffirm, rather than inform, the guiding narrative (in both), with most guest speakers (8 for NG; 11 for AA) barely having one minute of total screen time (Figures 3 and 4).

We use the generic expression ‘guest speaker’ rather than ‘expert’ for the very reason that, especially for NG, they are largely unknown to the public, while in AA it is their recurrence on the series which is at the origin of their celebrity. And neither the public – the target (presumed unfamiliar with the content) of this educational enterprise, nor the production company – who (although presumed to have neither contributed to the elaboration of the source material, nor an in-depth understanding of it) adapts it to better reach the target, can decide with certainty who is the better expert between two, especially between two expressing conflicting views. It therefore follows that the status of ‘expert’ in the media is constructed by the media apparatus itself, which takes great pains to display all the signs establishing the authority of their guest speakers, – i.e., a media artifact. In other words, guest speakers are instrumentalized by the media apparatus to lend the narrative credibility at the very least, an apparatus with which they are most likely not familiar with in NG, but on which recurring guests strive in AA.

TABLE 3

General outline of each documentary

	Secrets of the Maya	Lost World of the Maya
Core theme	Conspiracy to unveil The Vatican's hidden proof of Mankind's ancient alien origins ...	Enigma to solve Secrets of centuries-old Maya cities
Mode	Storytelling and speculation	Description and interpretation
Method	Rhetorical, analogical reasoning	Technology-assisted (LIDAR) scientific research
Structure	Succession of assertions and speculations	Succession of questions raised by findings
Initial question	00:37 "Could the Vatican still be hiding proof of mankind's ancient alien origins?"	02: 47 "... so what happened? How could such a great society fall?" 02:51 "Could it have been war, religious cults... drought?"
Initial assertion	00:26 "Literally, people were coming from all over the world to Mexico at this time."	
Setting	Archeological park San Agustín (Colombia)	Dig sites and archeological park Kiucic area (Yucatan) Cave (location kept secret) New towns discovered (outside Mirada city, Yucatan)
Outline of the documentary	Yucatán peninsula [images in quick succession]. Exactions by Catholic priests against the Maya [1562] 04:22 "+B21... the Catholic priests ... executed and auto-da-fé or 'act of faith'. 04:47 "... also a day that reportedly saw the destruction of all the Maya sacred scrolls..." Tres Zapotes (Olmec archeological site, Mexico) [images in quick succession]. Discovery of a giant head [1937] 07:34 "The Olmecs people came into existence probably about 1400 B.C. 'Where did they come from?'" 07:58 "... many ... carved statues and stelae seemed to show African men ... Chinese, Vietnamese ..." 10:31 "Is it possible that the ancestors of the Olmec people had come ... from far across the ocean?"	Kiucic narrative (Puuc region, Yucatán) [first excavation site]. Archeological excavations of a pyramid: discovery of older foundations. 08:22 "... was someone already occupying Kiucic...?" 17:26 "... why would the king of Kiucic build a pyramid on top of a palace?" Cave (near Kiucic, location kept secret). Traces of religious rituals : broken vessels, paintings. 13:06 "... their unusual style suggests that whoever painted them was no part of the Maya civilization of the South." 13:55 "... so who painted these murals?"

TABLE 3

<p>San Agustín (archeological park, Colombia). Exchange between D. Childress and P. Mohan about the statues.</p> <p>14:29 "That is so Hindu ... This is typical of South Indian Architecture."</p> <p>16:36 "An eagle holding a snake in its beak ... this is classic Hindu iconography. This is Garuda holding the Naga."</p> <p>17:50 "So the Garuda is in some ways a symbol of the airships, the spaceships ... Ancient Hindus? Traveling across the Pacific Ocean in flying aircraft?"</p> <p>20:54 "... as far as many ancient astronaut theorists are concerned ... god Kukulkan ... are not merely depictions of a flying serpent ... but of a spaceman."</p> <p>24:02 "Maya is a Hindu word. It means ... god of illusion."</p> <p>24:42 "Maya actually traveled out of India, and he might have gone to Mexico."</p> <p>30:54 "Is it possible... that an ancient race ... traveled to from Asia to South America in pursuit of a metal [gold] considered not just essential [fuel for flying machines] but sacred?"</p> <p>35:48 "If mass migration ... has been taking place centuries ago with the help of extraterrestrial technology, then why has no evidence been found ... ?"</p>	<p>New Maya towns discovered by chance (outside Mirada city, Yucatan) .</p> <p>14:23 "... 190 new Maya towns ... and counting ... a lot more happening here ... at a much earlier date than we ever imagined ... "</p> <p>19:23 "... who were these lost Maya and why were they forgotten?"</p> <p>Kiuc [second excavation site dubbed "stairway to heaven"]. Hilltop estate with a massive staircase revealed by LIDAR mapping.</p> <p>21:43 "... who would have been rich enough and audacious enough to build such over the top real estate?"</p> <p>Underground cavern (next to stairway to heaven): used to collect and manage rain water in a fertile but dry region)</p> <p>Uxmal city (20 miles from Kiuc) [archeological park]. Capital of the region displaying symbols of Quetzalcoatl cult.</p> <p>Kiuc [third excavation site]. No arrowheads nor spear points found, but clues that construction halted.</p> <p>38:25 "... what brought Kiuc boom times to a screeching halt?"</p> <p>40:05 "... what could have caused this carefully abandonment of stairway and the abrupt work stoppage...?"</p>
<p>Conclusion</p> <p>36:00 "... the destruction of the Maya's written history ... was not as thorough as we were made to believe.</p> <p>36:58 "... the Vatican [don't] just destroy stuff... they hide it."</p> <p>37:17 "... this knowledge ... can benefit the Catholic Church in the future and that's what they thought."</p>	<p>40:37 "... a series of [long] droughts..." and</p> <p>42:29 "[a] political establishment ... falling into disarray distracted by the cult of the feathered serpent,"</p>

Both documentaries devote significant time (sequences 2 and 3 for AA; 6 in NG), to the in-situ exploration of an archeological site (San Agustín, Colombia in AA; Kiuc, Mexico in NG) and it is the occasion for didactic communication: an interviewer (an

‘expert’ himself), granted by far the longest screen time in NG (George Bey in NG – 7 minutes and 46 seconds; see figure 3) and the second longest in AA (David Childress – 6 minutes 36 seconds), interacts with ‘experts’ (various in NG; one in AA – with the longest screen time at 7 minutes and 29 seconds; see figure 4). However, he does not ask expert questions but questions that the public itself should be asking if it could; while the interviewee – by explaining, showing, highlighting, demonstrating, etc. – does not direct his answers to the interviewer per se, but to the public.

FIGURE 3

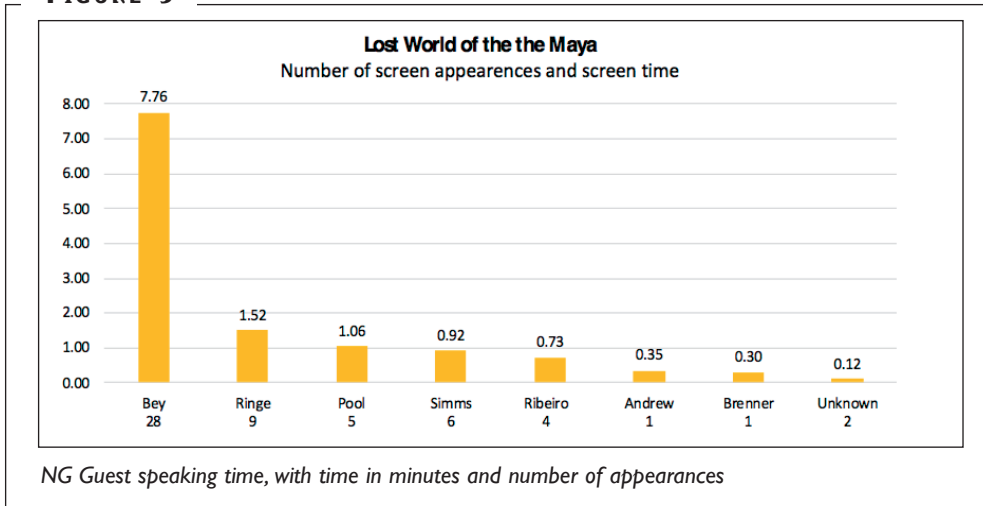
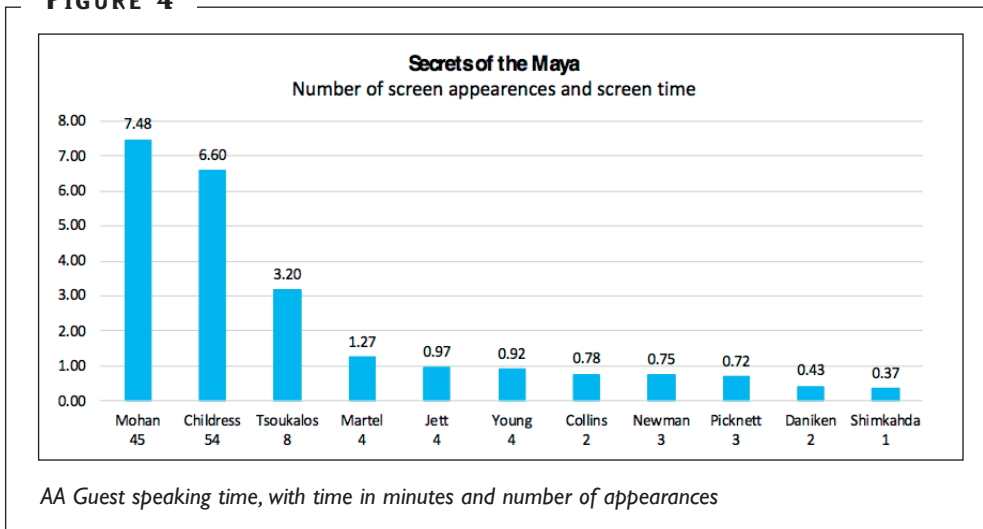


FIGURE 4



And although AA relies mainly on surface comparisons and analogies more typical of pre-scientific epistemes, it is the most didactic of the two documentaries. And yet, what is significant is that both documentaries not merely eschew jargon, which is understandable for educational purposes, but deliberately use simple words and expressions, metaphors, commonplaces, and clichés which in the end allude much but tell very little⁴.

CONCLUSION

This comparison has, of course, revealed differences between archeological and pseudo-archeological documentaries. But these differences are largely overshadowed by their similarities, to the point that it would be appropriate to talk of variations within a single format – the television documentary format. And what better proof than *Animal Planet's* 27 May 2012 highly controversial broadcast *Mermaids: The Body Found*. The program discussed, with documentary evidence and interviews with scientists from official organizations, the so-called *aquatic ape hypothesis* according to which some of our ancestors diverged from other major apes by migrating below the sea, where they developed a hunter-gatherer lifestyle and evolved into mermaids... and its worldwide cover-up. It was the channel's highest rating success to date with 3.6 million viewers (Hibberd, 2013). However, it was controversial for the very fact that it was a mockumentary with paid actors, yet barely advertised as such (Switek, 2012), with the U.S. *National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration* having to issue a formal disclaimer stating that it did not have any proof of the existence of mermaids (NOAA, 2012).

We are aware that such a conclusion may seem controversial... and the reader, entertaining the possibility, may opine, considering that the television documentary format has gone through a number of iterations since its inception, that it is a recent trend. But even a cursory look at the history of television documentaries proves that such was already the case with the first wave of pseudo-archeological documentaries in the 1970s. Again, the reader may attribute it to emulation on the part of the producers,

4 For instance, the voice-over in NG deliberately talks of a "middle class" (26'28") "living the Maya Dream" (26'41") to refer to a well-off stratum of craftsmen, without going into any more detail; while in AA, the interviewee (Praveen Mohan) after being shown by the interviewer a fanged statue, expresses his amazement: "What's really interesting to me, is that the main deity is shown with fangs. That's typical of South India. In Tamil Nadu, Shiva is shown with fangs" (15'15"). The interviewer follows up with the question: "You think that's maybe Shiva, right there in the middle?" (15'28"), to which the interviewee answered: "Yes" (15'31"), with the voice-over immediately cutting in: "Shiva also known as The Destroyer? Is it possible that evidence of this uniquely Hindu deity has been found in South America... and on ancient megalithic stone carvings dating back some 2000 years?" (15:33).

the formal and informal constraints imposed by the various networks upon production companies... And he would not be entirely wrong. Yet, let us go back to NBC's *In Search of Ancient Astronauts* (1973), *In Search of Ancient Mysteries* (1974), and *The Outer Space Connection* (1975) and finally *In Search Of...* (1977–1982). What they have in common besides their network and their topic, is the same producer: Alan Landsburg (1933–2014). However, he began his career in television a decade before, in the early 1960s. And although he is remembered as one of the most prolific producers, touching upon a wide variety of genres, he is above all credited as one of the pioneers of the television documentary format, with, among many others, *National Geographic Specials* (1967–1968), the first season of *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* (1968–1969) and the Academy Award nominated documentary *Alaska Wilderness Lake* (Seitz, 2014). In short, the format, and by extension the medium, overdetermines content. This analysis confirms yet again Adorno and Horkheimer's 1947 observation: "Film, radio and magazine form a system. Each branch is individually coherent, and all branches as a whole"⁵ (p. 146), an observation most aptly summed up by McLuhan's 1964 famous aphorism: "The medium is the message".

REFERENCES

General Bibliography

- Adorno, T.W., & Horkheimer, M. (1947). *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*. Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag.
- Crane, D. (2014). Cultural globalization and the dominance of the American film Industry: Cultural policies, national film industries, and transnational film. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 20(4), 365–382.
- Hartley, L. P. (1953). *The Go-Between*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- House of Lords. (2000). *Science and Technology – Third Report*. Retrieved from <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld/199900/ldselect/ldsctech/38/3801.htm>.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The extensions of man*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- The Royal Society. (1985). *The Public Understanding of Science*. London: The Royal Society.
- Todorov, T. (1970). *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. Paris: Seuil.

Non-Fiction Pseudo-Archeology and Pseudo-Science

- Blavatsky, H. P. (1888). *The secret doctrine: The synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*. London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, Limited.
- Cooper, H., Kean, L., & Blimenthal, R. (2017a). Glowing auras and 'black money': The Pentagon mysterious U.F.O. program. In *The New York Times*, 16 December. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/us/politics/pentagon-program-ufo-harry-reid.html>.
- Cooper, H., Kean, L., & Blimenthal, R. (2017b). 2 navy airmen and an object that 'accelerated like

5 "Film, Radio, Magazine machen ein System aus. Jede Sparte ist einstimmig in sich und alle zusammen".

- nothing I've ever seen'. In *The New York Times*, 16 December. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/us/politics/unidentified-flying-object-navy.html>.
- Donnelly, I. (1882). *Atlantis: The antediluvian world*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Hancock, G. (1992/1993). *The sign and the seal: The quest for the lost ark of the covenant*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hancock, G. (1995). *Fingerprints of the Gods: The evidence of earth's lost civilization*. New York: Crown.
- Hancock, G. (2015). *Magicians of the Gods: The forgotten wisdom of earth's lost civilization*. London: Coronet.
- Hancock, G. (2019) *America before: The key to earth's lost civilization*. London: Coronet.
- Kolosimo, P. (1968). *Non È Terrestre*. Milan : Sugar.
- Pauwels, P., & Bergier, J. (1960). *Le matin des magiciens*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Producers of *ancient aliens*. (2016). *Ancient aliens: The official companion book*. New York: HarperOne.
- Von Däniken, E. (1968). *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft: Ungelöste Rätsel der Vergangenheit*. Dusseldorf and Vienna: Econ-Verlag.
- Von Däniken, E. (1969) *Chariots of the Gods?: Unsolved mysteries of the past*. London: Souvenir Press.
- Von Däniken, E. (1972). *Gods from outer space*. New York: Bantam.
- Von Däniken, E. (2018). "Foreword" in *chariots of the Gods: The 50th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Berkley.

Pseudo-Archeological Websites

- Gaia. (2021a). Main Page. Retrieved from <https://www.gaia.com/>.
- Gaia. (2021b). Ancient Teachings: Hidden History. In *Topics*. Retrieved from <https://www.gaia.com/tag/hidden-history>.
- Graham Hancock. (2021). Graham Hancock. In *Biography*. Retrieved from <https://grahamhancock.com/bio/>.

Fictional Sources of Pseudo-Archeology

- Bulwer-Lytton, E. (1871). *Vril, the power of the coming race*. London: Blackwood and Sons.
- Lovecraft, H. P. (1928). The Call of Cthulhu. In *Weird Tales*, February.
- Lovecraft, H. P. (1936). At the mountains of madness. In *Astounding Stories*, February, March and April Issues.

Critical Studies of Pseudo-Archeology

- Barkun, M. (2013). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Colavito, J. (2004). Charioteer of the Gods. *Skeptic*, 10(4). Retrieved from <https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/04-04-26/>.
- Colavito, J. (2005). *The cult of alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Culture*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books.
- Colavito, J. (2015). *Foundations of Atlantis, ancient Astronauts and other alternative pasts: 148 Documents cited by writers of fringe History* (Translated with Annotations). Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company.

- Feder, K. L. (2017). *Frauds, myths, and mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rodning, C. B. (2019). Editor's Corner. *The SAA Archeological Records*, 19(5), p. 2.
- Schiele, A. (2020). Pseudoscience as media effect. *Journal of Science Communication*, 19(2), 1–11.
- Stoczkowski, V. (1999). *Des hommes, des dieux et des extraterrestres*. Paris: Flammarion.

Critical Journalistic Coverage of Pseudo-Archaeology

- Anonymous (1969). Däniken: Wer von wem? In *Der Spiegel*, 17 March, pp. 184–185. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20120306190531/http://wissen.spiegel.de/wissen/image/show.html?did=45763499&aref=image036%2F2006%2F02%2F03%2FPFM-SPI196901201840185.pdf&thumb=false>.
- Barnes, J. E., & Cooper, H. (2021). U.S. finds no evidence of alien technology in flying objects, but can't rule it out, either. In *The New York Times*, 3 June. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/03/us/politics/ufos-sighting-alien-spacecraft-pentagon.html>.
- Colavito, J. (2021a). How Washington got hooked on flying saucers. In *The New Republic*, 21 May. Retrieved from <https://newrepublic.com/article/162457/government-embrace-ufos-bad-science>.
- Colavito, J. (2021b). Congress is about to send the Pentagon on wild flying-saucer chase. In *The New Republic*, 14 December. Retrieved from <https://newrepublic.com/article/164699/pentagon-ufos-gillibrand-ndaa-spending>.
- Hibberd, J. (2013). Mermaid hoax drowns animal planet's rating records. In *Entertainment Weekly*, 28 May. Retrieved from <https://ew.com/article/2013/05/28/mermaids-animal-planet-ratings/>.
- Kloor, K. (2021). Will the *New York Times* ever stop reporting on UFOs? In *Wired*, 17 May. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/story/will-the-new-york-times-ever-stop-reporting-on-ufos/>.
- Kurutz, S. (2018). Suspicious minds: Mingling with wariness and wonder at a conference devoted to 'Ancient Aliens'. In *The New York Times*, 21 July. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/21/style/ancient-aliens.html>.
- Macdonald-Evoy, J. (2021). Audit using unproven technology developed by 'failed inventor' Jovan Pulitzer. In *AZ Mirror*, 30 April. Retrieved from <https://www.azmirror.com/2021/04/30/audit-using-unproven-technology-developed-by-failed-inventor-jovan-pulitzer/>.
- Peiser, J. (2021). N. J. Man charged for allegedly carving QAnon Hashtag into a centuries-old stone at 'America's Stonehenge'. In *The Washington Post*, 4 March. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/03/04/qanon-americas-stonehenge-vandalism/>.
- Switek, B. (2012). *Mermaids* embodies the rotting carcass of Science TV. In *Wired*, 31 May. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/2012/05/mermaids-embodies-the-rotting-carcass-of-science-tv/>.

General Journalistic Sources

- Alberge, D. (2021). Figures of Babylon: Oldest drawing of a ghost found in British Museum vault. In *The Guardian*, 18 October. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/oct/16/figures-of-babylon-oldest-drawing-of-a-ghost-found-in-british-museum-vault>.
- BBC (2021). Vikings settled in North America in 1021 AD, study says. In *BBC.com*, 21 October. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58996186>.

- Blake, R. F., & Christie, R. H. (1994a). *15th Annual news and documentary Emmy Awards* (Press release, 8 September), p. 13. New York: The National Academy of Television Arts and Science.
- Blake, R. F., & Christie, R. H. (1994b). *15th Annual news and documentary Emmy Award Nominations* (Press release, 18 July), p. 18. New York: The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.
- Blakemore, E. (2021). 'Lost Golden City of Luxor' discovered by archaeologists in Egypt. In *National Geographic*, 8 April. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/lost-golden-city-luxor-discovered-archaeologists-egypt>.
- Brown University. (2021). In Guatemala, archaeologist from brown helps uncover Hidden Neighborhood in Ancient Maya City. In *News from Brown*, 28 September. Retrieved from <https://www.brown.edu/news/2021-09-28/tikal>.
- Davis-Marks, I. (2021a). 120,000-year-old cattle bone carvings may be world's oldest surviving symbols. In *Smithsonian Magazine*, 8 February. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/wild-cow-bone-may-have-120000-year-old-symbols-180976933/>.
- Davis-Marks, I. (2021b). These 200,000-year-old hand and footprints could be the world's earliest cave art. In *Smithsonian Magazine*, 17 September. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/these-200000-year-old-hand-and-footprints-could-be-the-worlds-oldest-cave-art-180978702/>.
- Ferreira, B. (2021). Researchers say they found the largest drawing in the world with satellite imagery. In *Vice*, 28 May. Retrieved from <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qj8v4w/researchers-say-they-found-the-largest-drawings-in-the-world-with-satellite-imagery>.
- Fitzpatrick-Matthews, K. (2012). Does fiction become true if it's repeated often enough? The 'qlien' of Tuerin Monastery. In *Bad Archeology*, 10 November. Retrieved from <https://badarchaeology.wordpress.com/2012/11/10/does-fiction-become-true-if-its-repeated-often-enough-the-alien-of-tuerin-monastery/>.
- Gershon, L. (2021a). Life-size camel sculptures in Saudi Arabia are older than Stonehenge, Pyramids of Giza. In *Smithsonian Magazine*, 16 September. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/life-size-camel-sculptures-in-saudi-arabia-are-older-than-stonehenge-pyramids-of-giza-180978693/>.
- Gershon, L. (2021b). Is this 4,000-year-old Bronze Age slab the old known map in Europe? In *Smithsonian Magazine*, 7 April. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/bronze-age-slab-oldest-known-map-europe-180977439/>.
- Greshko, M. (2021). Million-year-old mammoth teeth yield world's oldest DNA. In *National Geographic*, 17 February. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/million-year-old-mammoth-teeth-yield-worlds-oldest-dna>.
- GlobeNewsWire. (2021). *Gaia reports third quarter 2021 Results: Revenues Up 17% with 20% EBITDA Margin*, 1 November. Retrieved from <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2021/11/01/2324808/0/en/Gaia-Reports-Third-Quarter-2021-Results.html>.
- High, L. (2021) Gaia turns around losses in second quarter. In *DailyCamera*, 3 August. Retrieved from <https://www.dailycamera.com/2021/08/03/gaia-turns-around-losses-in-second-quarter/>.
- Kirsch, J. (1992). Speculation ladled on with a heavy hand: The sign and the seal; A quest for the lost ark of the covenant. In *Los Angeles Times*, 1 April. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-04-01-vw-29-story.html>.
- Larson, C. (2021). Oldest human footprints in North America found in New Mexico. In

Washington Post, 5 October. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/oldest-human-footprints-in-north-america-found-in-new-mexico/2021/10/01/bc777f76-20ae-11ec-9309-b743b79abc59_story.html.

Seitz, J. L. (2014). Famed Emmy-Winning producer, thoroughbred racing executive Alan Landsburg dies at Age 81. In *The Beverly Hills Courier*, 22 August.

Wei-Haas, M. (2021). This 45,500-year-old pig painting is the world's oldest animal art. In *National Geographic*, 13 January. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/45500-year-old-pig-painting-worlds-oldest-animal-art>.

Survey Reports

Chapman University. (2016). *Survey of American fears: What aren't telling us?* Retrieved from <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2016/10/11/what-arent-they-telling-us/>.

Chapman University. (2018). *Survey of American fears: Paranormal America 2018*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2018/10/16/paranormal-america-2018/>.

Jones, J. M. (2022). Americans reading fewer books than in the past. In Gallup News. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/388541/americans-reading-fewer-books-past.aspx> & <https://news.gallup.com/file/poll/388568/220110Books.pdf>.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *The condition of Education 2021*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2021/2021144.pdf>.

Saad, L. (2021). Larger minority in U.S. says some UFOs are alien spacecraft. In *Gallup News*, 20 August. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/353420/larger-minority-says-ufos-alien-spacecraft.aspx>.

TheTVratingsguide. (2019). *Friday cable ratings 6/28/19: Real time enters Hiatus with an Uptick, diners drive-Ins and dives rises*. Retrieved from <http://www.thetvratingsguide.com/2019/07/friday-cable-ratings-62819-real-time.html>.

TheTVratingsguide. (2022). *Tuesday cable ratings 1/26/21: The misery index rises from finale, curse of Oak Island Leads, CNN slips but remains #1 in cable news*. Retrieved from <http://www.thetvratingsguide.com/2021/01/tuesday-cable-ratings-12621-misery.html>.

YougovAmerica. (2021). Ancient Aliens. In *TV Shows*. Retrieved from https://today.yougov.com/topics/media/explore/tv_show/Ancient_Aliens.

Official Websites

NOAA. (2012). *Are Mermaids real?* National Ocean Service. Retrieved from <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/mermaids.html>.

U.S. Department of Defense. (2021). *DoD announces the establishment of the Airborne Object Identification and Management Synchronization Group*. Retrieved from <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2853121/dod-announces-the-establishment-of-the-airborne-object-identification-and-manag/>.