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Ancient Astronauts and Sumerian Aliens: *The Fourth Kind* as a Pseudo-Archaeological Narrative

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Abstract

This article analyses the narrative of the film *The Fourth Kind*, which revolves around the concept of 'ancient astronauts' and the direct involvement of extraterrestrials in the emergence of civilisation in the ancient Near East. The text demonstrates how the narrative perpetuates pseudo-scientific ideas formulated by Erich von Däniken, whilst drawing on the 'grey alien' lore of contemporary science fiction. The aliens in *The Fourth Kind* serve as antagonists, imbued with supernatural abilities that align them with the demons of Judeo-Christian traditions. The article also demonstrates how the film treats ancient Near Eastern cultures as monolithic, drawing on Orientalist traditions of 'the West' and 'the East' as dialectical opposites, and places the ancient Near East within a Biblical worldview centred on 'good' versus 'evil'.

Introduction

The Fourth Kind is an American science fiction film released in 2009, purportedly based on a true story of extraterrestrial activity in the town of Nome, Alaska.¹ The narrative is framed as a documentary telling the story through the format of a televised interview of the main character, Alaskan psychologist Abigail Tyler, by the director, Olatunde Osunsanmi. The interview segments are interspersed with found footage recordings and dramatised re-enactments. In the interview and found footage segments Dr Tyler is played by British actress Charlotte Milchard. She appears in the film's credits simply as 'Nome resident'. In the re-enactments, the character is played by American actress Milla Jovovich. The marketing ploy of presenting the film as a true story was criticised by film critics, psychologists and Alaskan residents.²

¹ I am grateful to Dr Shelley Hales at the University of Bristol for her proofreading and insightful comments.

² 'Boy, is the Nome, Alaska, Chamber of Commerce going to be pissed off when it sees *The Fourth Kind*'; Ebert 2009; 'The reason I found this film so "disturbing" was because experience shows that no

The film's title is based on Josef Allen Hynek's system of classifying extraterrestrial encounters, which covered encounters of the first, second and third degree.³ An encounter of the fourth degree, first hypothesised by Jacques Vallee, describes an alien abduction or another type of close contact which transforms the victim's sense of reality.⁴ The narrative is told from Dr Tyler's perspective, telling the story of how she, her family and their hometown of Nome were terrorised by extraterrestrials nine years prior. These aliens are shown to be malevolent 'ancient astronauts', who have been visiting earth for millennia. They are implied to have influenced human evolution and engineered the emergence of civilisation in Mesopotamia. Their victims are abducted from their homes, brought onboard a spacecraft and subjected to invasive medical procedures. Afterwards, the victims are unable to remember these experiences, as their memories are altered by the aliens and replaced with the mental image of a white owl. Dr Tyler initially becomes involved in the situation as a therapist, counselling these victims through hypnotic regression. The hypnosis uncovers the suppressed memories, and the victims' testimonies spur Dr Tyler to investigate the nature of the alien visitors. We eventually learn that Dr Tyler herself, her husband Will and her daughter Ashley are all abductees.

The purpose of this article is to examine the film's narrative within the traditions of Orientalism, pseudo-archaeology and abduction lore in Western spirituality and popular culture. My research questions are: how does the narrative of *The Fourth Kind* draw on cinematic and Orientalist traditions of portraying ancient Near Eastern cultures and religions? How does the narrative, which purports to be based on scientific fact and academic scholarship, reproduce pseudo-scientific and spiritual

matter how obvious a hoax may be to those capable of critical thinking, there will always be many who will accept at face value the film's claim to be based on true events'; French 2009; 'The horror movie tries to say that documented disappearances of Nome residents are the result of alien abductions and that's just Hollywood hoey, said Mayor Denise Michels'; Hare 2009; 'Nomeites didn't much like the film exploiting unexplained disappearances of Northwest Alaskans, most of whom likely perished due to exposure to the harsh climate, as science fiction nonsense'; Medred 2009.

³ A third-degree encounter is a situation in which an animated extraterrestrial being is observed or 'felt' telepathically; Hynek 1972: 158.

⁴ Vallee 1998: 360.

ideas regarding extraterrestrial involvement in human evolution and history? The film is of interests to archaeologists and historians because a central premise is that extraterrestrials were instrumental in shaping early human civilisation and religious beliefs. Cinematic films dealing with the ancient past often draw on and replicate contemporary stereotypes and mythologies.⁵ This can be achieved through intertextuality, which refers to the relationship between different texts,⁶ and intermediately, which refers to the relationship between different media.⁷ As such, film scripts can reference other films, books and computer games. Intertextual references can be implemented in various ways, for example quotation, parody and imitation. The visual media of cinema also allows intertextual references to be expressed through icons, i.e., recognisable objects, gestures and characters infused with symbolic meanings because of their use in existing films; icons are frequently genre-specific and have culturally determined meanings, and each new use of these icons reinforces their existing symbolic meaning.⁸ As we will see, *The Fourth Kind* produces a meaningful narrative through intertextual and intermedial references in the form of dialogue and icons.

‘When our Space-ship landed on Earth’: The legacy of Erich von Däniken

In his book *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, Erich von Däniken makes a number of fantastical and racist claims about many ancient cultures, particularly non-European and non-Caucasian cultures. His proposed explanation for the emergence of state formation in Mesopotamia is of interest here: he claims that cuneiform texts from the Sumerian city of Ur record tales of ‘gods’ who came from the stars and travelled in spaceships; that the Sumerians were an invading group of mysterious origin who conquered the indigenous ‘semi-Barbarian Semites’; and that the Sumerian civilisation was brought by non-human space travellers who were worshipped as gods by the Sumerians.⁹ He attempts to make connections between

⁵ Hiscock 2012: 157.

⁶ The term ‘intertextuality’ was coined by Kristeva 1980: 69; Bloom 1973: 70 argues that all literature imitates previous texts.

⁷ Rajewsky 2005: 43-64.

⁸ Grant 2007: 12.

⁹ von Däniken 1969: 24-6.

geographically and temporally disparate cultures, and even proposes that the Sumerians arrived in Mesopotamia from South America, where they had previously created the Tiwanaku culture.¹⁰

Von Däniken's claims have been refuted elsewhere, and this does not need to be repeated here.¹¹ However, *The Fourth Kind* includes a number of intertextual references to his work and is a testimony of his lasting influence on science fiction and representations of archaeology in popular media. The character of Dr Awolowa Odusami, played by British-Nigerian actor Hakeem Kae-Kazim, is emblematic of von Däniken and perpetuates his ideas. Dr Odusami, presented as an expert in ancient languages, is asked by Dr Tyler to identify the mysterious language spoken by her patients during hypnosis. He recognises the language as Sumerian, which he erroneously refers to as 'the oldest language in human history'; whilst it is correct that the Sumerian language is the oldest known written language,¹² it does not logically follow that it is therefore also the oldest spoken language. During the same scene the camera cuts to footage of a museum display case, and a voice-over by Dr Odusami informs us that these objects, which depict celestial bodies and anthropoid beings, are Sumerian and date to ca. 4000 BC. As such, the viewer is encouraged to make a mental connection between these objects and extraterrestrials, and it is implied that the Sumerian language is extraterrestrial in origin.

However, upon closer investigation it is clear that these objects are not in fact Sumerian, nor is their given date of 4000 BC accurate. One particularly remarkable object on display is what Dr Odusami asserts is a sculpture of a man in a spacesuit and oxygen mask. In reality this is a modern replica of a sculpture of a woman with large eyes and clearly articulated breasts; the sculpture came from the temple of Ishtar

¹⁰ von Däniken 1969: 45. Contrary to von Däniken's claims, radiocarbon dating suggests that Tiwanaku was founded in the 1st or 2nd century AD; Marsh 2012: 203-18.

¹¹ Story 1976.

¹² The oldest known Sumerian texts come from the city of Uruk, with the earliest examples consisting of numerical tablets dating to ca. 3400 BC; the earliest administrative and lexical texts date to ca. 3200 BC; Krispijn 2012: 181. The earliest known Egyptian writings, essentially proto-hieroglyphs related to the contemporary iconographic repertoire, come from tomb U-j at Abydos, dating to Early Naqada III (ca. 3300 BC); Wengrow 2006: 200-3.

at Assur in Iraq, dating to stratification layer H, and likely depicts the goddess herself.¹³ This corresponds to Early Dynastic III (2600-2350 BC), and it is not clear whether the population of Assur during this period was Sumerian at all.¹⁴

Another object on display is an example of the numerous 'Eye Idols' from the Eye Temple at Tell Brak in Syria; the earliest stratum of the temple dates to ca. 4200-3900 BC, and the latest dates to ca. 3400 BC.¹⁵ The emergence of the Eye Idols pre-dates the earliest known cultural contact between the Sumerians and the inhabitants of Tell Brak, which took place in the latest phase of the Middle Uruk period (ca. 3600 BC).¹⁶ As such, the Eye Idols are not Sumerian in origin and belong to an entirely different Near Eastern culture.

We also see a close-up shot of a winged sun disc, a ubiquitous feature of ancient Near Eastern art;¹⁷ however, the winged sun disc is unknown in Sumerian iconography. It originated in Egypt as a visual representation of the falcon god Horus, and the earliest attested example comes from the tomb of the Fourth Dynasty Queen Hetepheres I (ca. 2550 BC).¹⁸ The motif was eventually transmitted to the eastern Mediterranean and Near East, and its earliest known usage outside Egypt is on Anatolian cylinder seals dating to the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000-1600 BC). It was adopted as a Hittite royal motif no later than the reign of Suppiluliuma I (ca. 1344-1322 BC), likely as a result of cross-cultural contact with Egypt.¹⁹ The winged sun disc shown in *The Fourth Kind* is strikingly similar to a line drawing published by Zecharia Sitchin, which in turn is based on an unprovenanced cylinder seal; Sitchin, a prolific proponent of the ancient astronaut hypothesis, assigned the image a date of 2500 BC and labelled it 'Earth-

¹³ Andrae 1922: 54, plates 27a & 28c.

¹⁴ Bär 2003: 147.

¹⁵ Oates 2005: 15; Karsgaard et al 2011: 7.

¹⁶ Oates 2005: 25.

¹⁷ The erroneous usage of Egyptian iconographic elements as shorthand for 'Near East/Oriental' can also be seen in the comic *Sanctum: Discovery* (2015) by Christophe Bec and Xavier Dorison; the entrance to an underwater Ugaritic temple dedicated to the god Mot is decorated with an Egyptian-style cornice doorway.

¹⁸ Shonkwiler 2014: 64.

¹⁹ Yalcin 2008: 521-38.

Mars connection'; he claimed it proved that extraterrestrials used Mars as a 'way station' *en-route* to Earth.²⁰

Dr Odusami replicates the *modus operandi* of both von Däniken and Sitchin by presenting ancient iconography as evidence for ancient astronauts and spaceships.²¹ He also uses the Hebrew Book of Genesis as evidence for extraterrestrials, claiming that both the Judeo-Christian creation myth and the story of Noah's Ark are examples of the 'Alien-God legend' that originated in ancient Sumer. The 'Sumerian' objects shown on display are not presented as expressions of abstract and sophisticated religious beliefs or practices; they are instead interpreted in a literalist fashion based on the premise that the Sumerians did not employ symbolic or abstract iconography. Furthermore, rather than using academic chronology and dating conventions for the ancient Near East, Dr Odusami attempts to establish a temporal point of reference for the objects by stating that they 'pre-date Egyptian hieroglyphs' and that they were created 'four millennia before Christ walked the earth'. Like von Däniken before him, Dr Odusami disregards the fact that these objects and cultures are geographically and temporally disparate, and instead assumes that they form part of the same cultural continuum. The objects are chosen because, once assembled, they are perceived to form a unity saturated with meaning. The objects are de-contextualised and treated as significant in themselves, which is a staple and driving principle behind both Orientalist works and pseudo-archaeology.²²

There is an implication that Dr Odusami has access to esoteric and mystical knowledge, which he uses to aid Dr Tyler in her quest for the truth. He is the only non-Caucasian character to appear in the re-enactments and is never shown in any of the found footage segments, ostensibly to protect his real identity. He is not portrayed as a heroic figure attempting to save the world, as is typically the case with archaeologists and other erudites in computer games and cinema.²³ Instead, his character follows the cinematic trope of the person of colour who possesses secret knowledge, whose sole

²⁰ Sitchin 2002: 1, 62.

²¹ von Däniken 1969.

²² Andersson 2012: 132-3; Moshenka 2017: 126; Mosleth King 2019: 143-64.

²³ Hiscock 2012: 158.

purpose of existence is to aid the Caucasian protagonist.²⁴ As his ideas are derived from the writings of von Däniken and Sitchin, his appearance in the film serves as a plot device intended to validate and perpetuate the ideas put forward by these Caucasian authors. The viewer's response to Dr Odusami will ultimately depend on their familiarity with archaeology and ancient Near Eastern cultures. To an academic audience with in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, Dr Odusami is in effect a peddler of fringe theories and someone who exists outside 'mainstream' academia. The character is perhaps more likely to be better received by viewers already sympathetic to the ancient astronaut hypothesis.

When translating a recording of one of Dr Tyler's hypnotised patients speaking Sumerian, Dr Odusami notes that some of the words are unknown; however, he is able to pick out the words 'our creation', 'examine' and 'destroy'. Trained philologists in the audience will undoubtedly notice that his method of translation is rather curious and does not seem to involve the consultation of existing Sumerian texts, dictionaries or grammar books. Nonetheless, accepting the film's premise that his intuitive translation is correct, it is clear that the aliens take on the character of creators of humanity. The concept of extraterrestrials bringing evolutionary advancement to humankind is a central theme in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a Stanley Kubrick film based on a novel by the same name.²⁵ The film was released a year before *Chariots of the Gods* and may have influenced some of von Däniken's ideas. The concept that humanity owes its existence and abilities to a higher power is essentially a religious one. By replacing deities with extraterrestrials, the narrative takes on a scientific façade, drawing on contemporary ideas and concerns regarding space exploration and space travel. However, the representation of humanity's ancient past is pseudo-scientific in nature and draws on the tradition of Orientalism.

²⁴ Cunningham & Glenn 2009: 135-52.

²⁵ The concept was inspired by Arthur C. Clarke's short story *The Sentinel* (1951), in which humans discover a technologically advanced artefact left by ancient aliens on the Moon.

Orientalism and the ancient Near East

In Western scholarship, the ancient Near East has often been studied under the umbrella of 'Oriental studies', distinguished from the study of 'Classics'. The latter subject centres on Greek and Latin, which are perceived to form an important part of Western cultural heritage; Greek and Roman myth and literature are familiar to Western audiences because these subjects often form part of the school curriculum, and they are also frequently referenced and explored in contemporary media.²⁶ By contrast, the ancient Near East is frequently perceived as a type of 'other' and treated as monolithic within an Orientalist framework.²⁷ *The Fourth Kind* perpetuates this 'othering' by conflating different Near Eastern cultures.

Dr Odusami asserts that the Biblical creation narrative 'came from the Sumerian Epic of Creation' and that Noah's Flood 'came from the Sumerian Deluge'. These ideas are not original to the film and have been explored by numerous scholars, although the existence of Sumerian prototypes for the Biblical stories is difficult to prove. Leonard Woolley assumed that the Sumerian flood story was older than Genesis, and argued that the Biblical flood was a localised event that affected 'the valley of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates' around 2800 BC.²⁸ However, the oldest known versions of the Mesopotamian flood stories are written in Akkadian rather than Sumerian. The Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* contains a flood narrative in which the mortal Utnapishtim is instructed by the god Ea to build a large boat and fill it with 'the seed of all living things' in preparation for the coming flood.²⁹ The earliest known clay tablets recording the Gilgamesh epic date to approximately 1700 BC, however, the Flood narrative itself is recorded on a Neo-Assyrian tablet from Nineveh, dating to the seventh century BC.³⁰ Some scholars believe that this tablet is a copy of an older version dating to the twelfth century BC;³¹ others argue that the Nineveh tablet represents a neo-Assyrian addition to the Gilgamesh epic, inspired by the Babylonian

²⁶ Lowenthal 2015: 99, 499-502.

²⁷ Said 1978: 67.

²⁸ Woolley 1953: 52-4.

²⁹ Dalley 2000: 109-20.

³⁰ British Museum, accession number K3375; Budge & King 1922: 220-1, plate XLVI.

³¹ Simoons-Vermeer 1974: 2.

epic *Atrahasis*, in which the eponymous hero builds a boat in preparation for the flood.³² This epic is known from Akkadian clay tablets from Sippar, dating to the reign of Ammi-Saduqa (ca. 1646-1626 BC).³³ The Sumerian flood narrative, which features Ziusudra as a protagonist, is known from a tablet from Nippur, where it forms part of the Sumerian creation myth; this tablet dates to approximately 1600 BC and is thus later than the *Atrahasis* tablets.³⁴ The Sumerian King List, known from fragments ranging in date from Ur III (2112-2004 BC) to the reign of Seleucus II (246-225 BC), lists a number of antediluvian kings and thus suggests the existence of a Sumerian flood narrative pre-dating both *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh*.³⁵ However, as the original form and content of this story is unknown, any resemblance to Noah's Flood is speculative.

The Sumerian creation myth is known from the Nippur tablet as well as three other fragments from Nippur.³⁶ Contrary to Dr Odusami's assertion, these texts are separate compositions and do not constitute an epic. The 'Sumerian Epic of Creation' to which he refers is in fact the Akkadian *Enûma Eliš*, an account of a cosmic battle between deities and the subsequent creation of the world.³⁷ The Neo-Assyrian version, starring Ashur as the protagonist, is known from tablets from Nineveh, dating to the seventh century BC.³⁸ The Neo-Babylonian fragments, which date to the first millennium BC and feature Marduk as the protagonist, may be copies of an older text composed during the early second millennium BC.³⁹

³² Abusch 2001: 618.

³³ Dalley 2000: 1-38.

³⁴ Penn Museum, accession number B10673; Poebel 1913: 41-50 originally dated the tablet to the reign of Hammurabi (ca. 2117-2075 BC), but a later date of ca. 1600 BC is preferred by other scholars; Jacobsen 1981: 513; Simoons-Vermeer 1974: 2.

³⁵ Jacobsen 1939: 128-38; Rowton 1960: 156-62; Young 1991: 156-62. See Lenzi 2008: 137-69 on the Seleucid fragment.

³⁶ The fragments were first published by Barton 1918: 1-20, 49-56.

³⁷ Dalley 2000: 228-77.

³⁸ First published by Smith 1876.

³⁹ Heidel 1942: 13-4.

The film treats Akkadian and Sumerian literature as interchangeable and presents them as a unity. This body of literature is furthermore implied to be meaningful only insofar as it validates the historicity of the Genesis and supports the ancient astronaut hypothesis. As such, the film reinforces the perception of a monolithic ancient Near East by presenting temporally and geographically diverse Near Eastern objects and texts as Sumerian. This 'Sumerian' monolith is then contrasted against the Greek and Roman cultures. Dr Tyler explicitly describes the alien voices as follows: 'It wasn't Latin, it wasn't Greek... It wasn't any language I'd heard before'. Greek and Latin are presented to the audience as a linguistic norm, and Sumerian becomes a type of mysterious 'other'. This is further emphasised by Dr Odusami's assertion that our knowledge of Sumerian vocabulary is incomplete, making it impossible to completely translate the words spoken by the aliens. The narrative thus both draws on and perpetuates the Orientalist notion that Near Eastern cultures and religions are so exotic and different that they can only be understood by placing them within the framework of the Judeo-Christian worldview, and by juxtaposing them with the ancient Greek and Roman cultures.

Dr Odusami refers to Sumerian as 'the Holy Grail of dead languages', which evokes both the Last Supper of the New Testament and the Arthurian lore of Western Europe.⁴⁰ The term 'Holy Grail' implies that deciphering the Sumerian language is a kind of heroic and spiritual quest, which will result in the discovery of truth and wisdom. The search for a 'higher truth' is a recurrent theme in cinema and literature dealing with extraterrestrials.⁴¹ This demonstrates that such narratives are not merely concerned with science, but also explore philosophical and religious issues such as the meaning of life and the place of humans in the universe.

The Judeo-Christian framework

The smell and behaviour of the aliens in *The Fourth Kind* evoke the demons of Judeo-Christian tradition and Western popular culture. Dr Tyler's patients initially seek

⁴⁰ Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-38; John 13:1-17:26. The search for the Holy Grail is a major theme in the twelfth century *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* and the thirteenth century Vulgate Cycle.

⁴¹ Dick 1996: 135.

counselling due to sleep disturbances and insomnia, and they all report waking up in the middle of the night to find a white owl with large black eyes peeking in through their bedroom window; this owl is also shown visually in the film. It is implied that the owl is in reality an extraterrestrial of the grey type, which has featured in science fiction since the publication of H. G. Wells' novel *The First Men in the Moon*. The grey alien became an icon in popular culture and cinema following the widely publicised abduction story of Barney and Betty Hill, which allegedly took place in 1961.⁴²

In the film, 3.33AM is presented as significant: Dr Tyler's patients report waking up around this time; this is the moment when Dr Tyler's patient Tommy Fisher kills his family and himself in a murder-suicide after repeated visits from the aliens; and Dr Tyler's daughter Ashley is taken by the aliens at 3.33AM. This time carries Biblical connotations, as the New Testament holds that Jesus was crucified during 'the third hour'.⁴³ In Western popular culture, 3AM is associated with malevolent entities due to its inverse relationship with the time of the crucifixion: the horror films *The Amityville Horror*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* and *The Conjuring* portray this hour as a time of demonic activity. The association of the number 333 with demons also occurs in Western occult movements such as Enochian Magic and Thelema, in which 333 is sacred to the demon Choronzon.⁴⁴ The number 3 is associated with the Christian Trinity, and the number 333 is supposedly favoured by demons as a way of parodying and mocking God. This numerological conceptualisation of evil is also evident in the New Testament, which associates the number 666 with the Antichrist: 'This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666'.⁴⁵ In the 1976 horror film *The Omen*, the antagonist Damien's true identity as the Antichrist is apparent from his birthmark shaped like the number 666; he was also born on 6 June at 6AM.

The film displays clear influences from the novel *The Exorcist* and its cinematic adaption, in which the Assyrian deity Pazuzu is given the Orientalist treatment and re-

⁴² Published by J. G. Fuller (1966).

⁴³ Mark 15:25.

⁴⁴ Crowley 1911: 86.

⁴⁵ Revelation 13.18; NIV.

conceptualised as an evil demon within a Judeo-Christian framework.⁴⁶ He is portrayed as having the ability to possess people, and his possessed victims emit a terrible smell. The promotional poster for *The Fourth Kind* shows an outstretched human body levitating horizontally above a bed, which directly mirrors an iconic scene from the film adaptation of *The Exorcist*, during which the possessed Regan MacNeil levitates above her bed.

Like the Assyrian Pazuzu, the Sumerian-speaking aliens in *The Fourth Kind* have the ability to possess people, manipulate bodies and practice mind control; they have a telepathic connection to their victims and can track their whereabouts; the victims become involuntary contactees who function as channels and mouthpieces for the aliens; and the victims experience multiple abductions over time. Channelling, tracking and multiple abductions are all staples in modern abduction lore.⁴⁷ One scene shows Dr Tyler undergoing hypnotic regression guided by her colleague, Dr Abel Campos, accompanied by Dr Odusami. She begins to speak Sumerian, channelling the aliens, and the transcription and translation of the words are shown on screen; the phrases 'Saviour', 'Father' and 'I am God' are identified. The footage ends with Dr Tyler, Dr Campos and Dr Odusami being abducted off-screen by the aliens.

During an interview segment, Dr Tyler states that the aliens merely 'pretend to be God'; their deceitful nature implicitly aligns them with the Devil of Christian tradition, who is referred to in the New Testament by epithets such as 'father of lies'.⁴⁸ *The Fourth Kind* treats the Bible as an authoritative text and validates the Christian worldview of good-versus-evil. Both Dr Tyler and Dr Odusami are shown to be believers; Dr Odusami appears to entirely reject the notion that Genesis consists of mythical or allegorical stories; and the truthfulness and historicity of the Biblical stories are taken as a given fact.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Mosleth King 2019: 157-8.

⁴⁷ David 1967: 74-5; Bader 2003: 676.

⁴⁸ John 8:44. Revelation 19:20 details how the Antichrist operates through a human agent, a false prophet, who deceives people into receiving the mark of the Beast and worshipping the Beast's image.

⁴⁹ Wiggins 2018: 167.

The manner of abduction defies the laws of physics and takes on a quasi-religious character: a bright light emitted from the hovering spacecraft engulfs the victims and allows them to pass unharmed through physical barriers such as walls. This kind of abduction gained prominence in popular culture through the story of prolific abductee Travis Walton, who claims to have been transported into a hovering spacecraft by a beam of light in 1975. His account,⁵⁰ which also features grey aliens, was dramatised in the 1993 film *Fire in the Sky*, whose promotional poster depicts a man hovering above ground engulfed by a beam of light. This kind of abduction evokes a religious ascension: Christian tradition holds that Jesus and Virgin Mary physically ascended to Heaven,⁵¹ and the prophet Ezekiel describes being carried towards the sky by a 'chariot' consisting of winged cherubim with wheels.⁵² The alien abductions parody Ezekiel's ascension: Ezekiel's chariot is angelic in nature, whereas the alien spacecraft is demonic. Whilst the ascension of Ezekiel results in spiritual wisdom, the abduction victims undergo a profoundly negative transformation: victims Tommy Fisher and Will Tyler are left so traumatised by their experiences that they commit suicide; the possessions of Dr Tyler and her patient Scott leave them paralysed by spinal cord injury; and Dr Tyler's daughter, Ashley, never returns from her abduction. Ashley's disappearance causes permanent damage to the relationship between Dr Tyler and her son Ronnie, who believes that his mother has fabricated the alien abduction stories.

The negative consequences of the abductions increase in severity when the victims seek to uncover the repressed memories through hypnotic regression. The hypnosis allows the victims to acquire esoteric and suppressed knowledge; however, the price for this knowledge is the deterioration of mental and physical wellbeing, and the destruction of interpersonal relationships and the social fabric. This finds a parallel in Genesis, in which the Fall of Man occurs as a result of Adam and Eve obtaining secret

⁵⁰ Walton 1978.

⁵¹ Acts 1:1-10. The Assumption of Mary is not mentioned in the Bible; however, it was declared a Catholic dogma by Pope Pius XII in 1950. *Munificentissimus Deus*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html, (Accessed: 7/01/2022).

⁵² Ezekiel 1:4-24 & 3:12-15. Von Däniken 1969: 35-7 and Blumrich 1974 interpreted this chariot as a spacecraft and took the story as evidence for extraterrestrial visits.

knowledge by eating fruit from the Forbidden Tree.⁵³ The implication of this is that the aliens have established parameters for human knowledge, and any transgression of these limits will be punished. As such, the line between 'divine' and 'demonic' is blurred, and the true nature of the aliens is left ambiguous.

Science or religion? Extraterrestrials and Intelligent Design

The Biblical framework is a tool of reception intended to reduce or neutralise the otherness of the ancient Sumerians. The film's narrative does not display or encourage academic interest in ancient Sumerian culture, and the Sumerians instead merely provide a convenient pretext for discussing extraterrestrials and contemporary religious themes. Dr Odusami asserts that 'the legend of the Alien God has its basis [...] in Sumerian history'. The audience is thus meant to understand that the Sumerian religion centred on worshipping extraterrestrials who presented themselves as divine. By contrast, Dr Tyler explicitly rejects the divinity of the extraterrestrials, which creates an implication that the ancient Sumerians were ignorant and primitive due to their mistaking the aliens for gods. It seems likely that the Sumerian culture is chosen as the object of focus in the narrative for two reasons: ancient Sumer is widely conceptualised as the 'cradle of civilisation', and the Sumerian language is a linguistic isolate with no known relatives.⁵⁴ From the perspective of a lay audience unfamiliar with Near Eastern archaeology, these factors imbue the culture with mystique and otherness, which lends itself well to a supernatural narrative.

Like most alien abduction narratives, the film displays clear parallels with religious narratives and folkloric tales, in which the abductees are helpless victims; a central theme is human vulnerability to external powers.⁵⁵ The existence of extraterrestrial life has not been proven scientifically, and interstellar travel is currently only a theoretical concept. As such, the idea of alien visitation is in practice a matter of faith, and abduction lore can thus be categorised as a form of contemporary religion and

⁵³ Genesis 3:1-24.

⁵⁴ Sumerian is classified as an agglutinative language, and already in 1869 did Assyriologist Jules Oppert recognise that Sumerian belonged in the same category as modern languages such as Finnish, Hungarian and Turkish; Kramer 1963: 21.

⁵⁵ Bullard 1989.

spirituality. Some contemporary religious movements, such as the Raëlian movement, centre on the concept of extraterrestrial involvement in human history and destiny.⁵⁶ By contrast, in the Abrahamic traditions the belief in extraterrestrial life constitutes a type of religious taboo: Genesis emphasises that humanity is God's special creation and rules over all other creatures.⁵⁷ In the Quranic creation narrative most living creatures are created out of water, except for humans who are created out of clay.⁵⁸ These narratives are geocentric in nature, and there is no mention of life on other planets. For religious individuals it may therefore be difficult to reconcile their beliefs with the scientific theory of evolution and the concept of extraterrestrial life.⁵⁹ However, the advancement of space exploration in the twentieth century resulted in an increased interest and belief in UFOs and extraterrestrial life, particularly in the Cold War era following World War II.⁶⁰

The narrative of *The Fourth Kind* attempts to reconcile the scientific interest in extraterrestrial life with the worldview of the Abrahamic religions. The behaviour and abilities of the aliens imbue them with supernatural qualities, and they are presented as responsible for human existence. The narrative thus rejects natural evolution and portrays intelligent design as behind significant events in natural and human history. The humanoid appearance of the aliens imply that humans were created to resemble them; this mirrors the Judeo-Christian belief that God created humans in his image.⁶¹ As such, *The Fourth Kind* presents to the audience a Judeo-Christian worldview legitimised by two strands of science: archaeology and astrobiology. However, the narrative rejects academic archaeology, and the ancient past is re-interpreted within an Orientalist and pseudo-scientific framework. Likewise, the film presents fantastical elements of astrobiology and relies on science fiction tropes such as grey aliens and faster-than-light travel. Science is accepted insofar as it validates, rather than contradicts, the Biblical worldview.

⁵⁶ Lewis 2012: 215-6.

⁵⁷ Genesis 1:26.

⁵⁸ Quran 15:26 & 21:30.

⁵⁹ The question of whether to teach evolution or intelligent design in schools remains a controversial debate in the United States; Berkman & Plutzer 2015: 253-70; Branch, Plutzer & Reid 2020: 14.

⁶⁰ Rojcewicz 1987: 149-50.

⁶¹ Genesis 1:27.

Conclusion

The Fourth Kind draws heavily on the ideas presented by Zecharia Sitchin and Erich von Däniken, perpetuating their pseudo-scientific and racist claims that human civilisation was brought by extraterrestrials. The character of Dr Odusami functions as a mouthpiece for Sitchin's and von Däniken's theories, whilst at the same time fulfilling racist cinematic tropes.

The extraterrestrials are never shown on screen, but their physical appearance is described through dialogue. They are implied to be grey aliens, a staple in science fiction films. Their behaviour evokes Judeo-Christian demons, and they are shown to be able to possess their victims, manipulate their bodies, practice mind control and track their victims telepathically. Their activities are particularly prevalent at 3.33AM, which is associated with demonic activity in Western popular culture and occult movements. The narrative presents the extraterrestrials as both deceitful and malevolent, and they are implicitly aligned with the Devil of Christian tradition. The Bible is treated as an authoritative text containing true accounts of real historical events. The manner in which the victims are abducted also draws on Biblical imagery and evokes the ascensions of Ezekiel, Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

The film portrays the Sumerian culture as emblematic of the ancient Near East, which is treated as a monolithic entity. This monolith is presented as a mysterious and exotic 'other', whereas the Greek and Roman cultures are presented as normative and familiar aspects of 'the West'. Near Eastern texts and de-contextualised objects are assembled and interpreted as a meaningful unity, following Orientalist conventions of representing the 'East'. Furthermore, the 'ancient Near East' is absorbed into a Biblical worldview, which in turn is imbued with authority through pseudo-science, in order to reduce some of its perceived otherness.

The Fourth Kind bears strong similarities to other abduction narratives, which display parallels with religious myths and folklore. A central theme is human vulnerability to higher powers. As the existence of extraterrestrial life has not been proven scientifically, the entire premise of alien visitation is a matter of faith and constitutes a type of modern mythology and spirituality. The narrative attempts to reconcile this faith

with the worldview of the Abrahamic traditions. As such, the film accepts the scientific merits of space exploration whilst rejecting the scientific theory of evolution. Humans are presented as deliberately created or modified through extraterrestrial intervention. The extraterrestrials take the place of deities in creation myths, which shows that the narrative is essentially a religious one. The narrative raises the question of whether the Judeo-Christian god actually exists, but ultimately leaves the question unanswered. At the end of the film, the audience is left to ponder the nature of the universe, the mystery of creation and the meaning of life.

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