

Science/Pseudoscience TV Series: a comparison

Alexandre Schiele¹

PhD Communication science

PhD Political science

University of Quebec at Montreal, Canada

Introduction

2018² is a momentous year as it marks three important anniversaries. First, one of the most infamous books of the 20th century (no, not *that* one) will be republished to mark its 50th year anniversary by none other than Penguin: *Chariots of the Gods?: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*. A huge step up for a book originally published by second or even third tier publishers. This step up is accompanied by an apparently marginal, and yet major, change: the question mark has been dropped entirely, implying the elevation of the Ancient Astronaut (or Cosmonaut, or Alien) hypothesis to the level of theory. Second, its author, Swiss hotel manager, notorious swindler and now multimillionaire bestselling author Erich von Däniken will celebrate his fifty year-spawning career from young maverick (33 years old) to old patriarch (he turns 83 on April 14th) of contemporary pseudoarcheology during a fee-paying event. It is to be noted that his original version, published in Germany, was simply entitled: *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft: Ungelöste Rätsel der Vergangenheit*, Memories from the future: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past, thus blending pseudoarcheology with pseudoscience. Finally, *Ancient Aliens*, the longest running documentary series on *History Channel*, and possibly on television itself, marks its tenth-year anniversary, with a 13th season debuting April 27th and a new box-set containing all past 12 seasons and 134 episodes since its first run in 2010, plus the original made-for-TV documentary aired in March 2009. Nearly 100 hours of run time. Disclaimer: this is not a paid advertisement!

All of you might wonder, why care at all about this series or this channel for that matter, and not focus on real science shows. Well, as I said the series is in its 9th year, 12th season and, most important of all, it has a viewership of 1.2 million among the 18-49 demographics, the 13th most watched cable TV program in the United States. If other shows rack higher numbers, it is only temporary, the effect of their novelty, before their ultimate decline below the minimum level necessary to justify continuing a series. Though definitely not the highest, the numbers are stable with over one million well into the 12th season. No Science TV series can compare, and none are even in the top 25. The History Channel executives cannot ignore this stable long-term demographic. This might explain the change in content on History Channel and its continuous programming, watched on average by an audience of three million. In 2014, H2, a spin-off channel to History Channel ran between May 26th and June 1st nearly 40 hours of “conspiracy and fringe-history” programming, including 20 hours of *Ancient Aliens* alone. All in all, in 2014, average

¹ Alexandre Schiele, alexandre.alexandre@videotron.ca.

² This is the text read during the conference, thus it has no footnotes or references. Full paper forthcoming.

American viewers were exposed to roughly 100 hours of such content each week across all channels. If only science shows could enjoy such popularity. What the viewership asks, the producers give!

The Structure of Ancient Aliens

In the following section we will show that *Ancient Aliens* is at the same time modeled on science documentary series and a travesty. It must be sufficiently stressed that all other series that sprang up focusing on fringe subjects since the first run of *Ancient Aliens* are simply imitations and derivatives trying to tap in on its success. No channel is immune to this phenomenon. As such, *Ancient Aliens* has become an archetype that deserve a thorough analysis.

When History Channel showed *Ancient Aliens: Chariots, Gods and Beyond* on March 8th, 2009, it was a two-hour long made-for-TV documentary recapping of the Ancient Astronaut hypothesis, this time recast as the Ancient Aliens hypothesis, and of the warmed-over speculations of Erich von Däniken. It was directed and produced by Kevin Burns, who has always made documentary films or series in the past on popular culture, science fiction and fringe topics. But for History Channel, it was simply another made-for-TV documentary on a fringe topic like most channels were in the habit of regularly showing. However, this time it was a rating success, one that could warrant producing a series. The same producer was asked to direct a new series: *Ancient Aliens: The Series*, which simply expanded on the content of the original documentary. Yet, its success being uncertain, it was limited to five episodes of one and a half hours each which started running on April 20th, 2010. The series enjoyed the same success as the original documentary, and it was decided to continue it following standard TV format.

From now October 28th, 2010, on, the start of the second season, each episode was shortened to a mere 44 minutes long. At the beginning of the third season, *The Series* was dropped, leaving the name simply as *Ancient Aliens*, while the original made-for-TV documentary was retconned as the quote-unquote pilot. On average there are 11 episodes per season, but an average of 17 episodes per year since more than one season ran some years. Each season lasts on average five and a half hours, although the first season was somewhat longer at nearly seven and a half hours. It must be stressed that for each hour of programming there is 16 minutes of advertisement spread at regular intervals. Thus, the so-called pilot played on TV for over two and a half hours, and each episode of the first season for nearly two hours. After one documentary, 12 seasons and 134 episodes, the average viewer sat for nearly 127 hours of television, 100 hours of quote-unquote content and 27 hours of advertisements over the course of nine years.

The Talking Heads of Ancient Aliens

The section that follows is still a work in progress, as I have analyzed only in detail 4 of the 12 seasons of the series so far. Over the course of these first four seasons, including the “pilot”, 251 different talking heads were cast, and, on average, 17 appeared in each episode. Before cataloging their qualifications, or lack thereof, it must be underlined that from episode to episode and season to season the way they are introduced is subject to changes.

If their titles and speciality is legitimate, 66 individuals out of the 251 are genuine experts, or roughly over 25%. If we add the 24 with professional job titles, we arrive at a number of 90, or around 36% of the total. In other words, 161 individuals, or 64%, have their credibility in doubt. However, this last number could be higher, if among the apparently genuine experts a number of them got their degrees from unaccredited institutions. I know of at least one case in the list: Sean David Morton, who got his quote-unquote PhD in from an unaffiliated institution in my hometown of Montreal, and who is now in jail for tax fraud.

During the course of an episode, the majority of non-experts is mixed in with the minority of experts, all are presented under the same visual format (seated in front of similar backgrounds) and introduced using the same convention (text appearing on screen with name, qualification, job title and/or institution) which serves to give the impression of equivalence between the individual cast on screen, while the rapid succession from one individual to another creates a blur which gives the appearance of interchangeability. Although everyone only talks on their subject, this feeling of blur and interchangeability is reinforced by the fact that each statement is reduced to a soundbite. Furthermore, each soundbite is chosen in such a way that it is never in direct contradiction with the preceding one, nor with those of the narrators whose only function is to provide an overarching narrative. The narrator's narrative and the succession of soundbites are usually accompanied by images, stock footage at first and then purposely shot or animated images as the series progressed. These live action or animated images shown on screen are never justified and serve more as a way to distract the viewer from the succession of soundbites. Thus, the succession of individual soundbites plays ultimately the same role as that of the images: filler.

If the great majority of new faces appear in one, or perhaps two, episodes, and thus are forgotten as quickly as they appeared on screen, 22 individuals appear in more than five episodes over the course of the first four seasons. Furthermore, when these 22 individuals do appear on screen in the course of an episode, they do so repeatedly.

By the end of season 4, we can have no doubt that the producers of the series favor the Ancient Astronauts hypothesis and, beyond it, alternative history and archeology. Any counter-narrative is eliminated from the start. It must be pointed that even David Icke, a former BBC sports commentary and UK Green Party spokesperson turned New Ager and proponent of the conspiracy that transdimensional shapeshifting reptilians rule the world, is given a voice.

And yet, the show is truly set around Giorgio Tsoukalos, David Childress, Philip Coppens and Erich von Däniken, who appear in nearly all episodes so far, all four setting the tone of the series.

This is further emphasized by the fact that, as William Henry, one of the 22 recurrent talking heads, himself stated, that before the run of each season the talking heads are interviewed and asked to elaborate on a variety of subjects in order to be later quote-mined to serve the narrative of each episode, not even bothering to make sure that each talking head does not appear to talk outside of his or her field or hold position inconsistent with the consensus of his or her field (although it must be pointed out that more men, and white men at that, are shown on screen).

The narrative is made clear from the intro used as early as the original made-for-TV documentary: “Who were they? Why did they come? What did they leave behind? Where did they go? Will they return?” In other words, Ancient Aliens did come and guide civilization and might return to do the same. If in the beginning talking heads such as William Bramley and L.A. Marzulli (appearing in fewer than 5 episodes) asserted that aliens were evil, the great majority expressed their belief in their benevolence. As the series progressed, actually from season 3 on, not only were the quote-unquote evil alien proponents cast aside, the comments of the main talking head, Giorgio Tsoukalos, changed from “Is such a thing even possible? Yes, it is!” to “We know it’s aliens!” It must be stressed that Giorgio Tsoukalos is also a consulting producer to the series and a co-producer on 34 episodes. In short, the series celebrates the legacy of Erich von Däniken.

The content of Ancient Aliens

The made-for-TV documentary was simply a recap of Erich von Däniken’s Ancient Astronaut hypothesis, which had not changed much since the 1970s. Thus, the documentary was a finished product that dealt with every major point of the hypothesis and presented the main material and literary evidence. In view of its success, the first season was little more than a rehash of the pilot spread over four episodes: 1) the evidence, 2) the visitors, 3) the mission, and 4) (historical) closer encounters. As such, each episode dealt with one of the four building blocks of the hypothesis. However, the fifth episode dealt with the underlying but never truly expressed theme of the return of the Ancient Astronauts and for this reason veered towards Ufology, which became popular only after the Ancient Astronaut theory originally started to fall out of fashion.

But as the series continued, the core of most episodes remained historical material evidence, especially major construction projects, preferably exotic, such as the pyramids and the Nazca lines, and literary evidence, preferably from a remote culture, the literal interpretation of which could point to forgotten highly advanced technologies. Each episode of the first season originating a line of like episodes. In parallel, Ufology continued to form the content of a minor strain of episodes, usually one per season.

However, there are so many times you can show over and over again the pyramids and the Nazca lines, and the same passages from the Book of Ezekiel and the Mahabharata. And yet, the series did not shy away from showing the same evidence time and time again, providing the same interpretation time and time again. Yet, the continuing success of the series meant that it could not simply rely on the same evidence and interpretation thereof. Thus, as the series progressed they were increasingly not bothered to present contradictory interpretations of the evidence, even within individual episodes. And even then, the more the series progressed, the more they had to continuously bring in new material and literary evidence in order to captivate the viewership.

Still, it was not enough. And it had to expand rapidly and in a multiplicity of direction incorporating from a variety of sources not originally part of the Ancient Astronaut canon. Thus, with the start of season 3, it opened itself to cryptozoology and, with the start of season 4 to Government conspiracy, mainly American but also foreign. Although the main talking heads, Giorgio Tsoukalos and Erich von Däniken, showed little knowledge or interest for the subject, the producer firmly integrated cryptids within the Ancient Astronaut hypothesis in the eye of the viewer. The situation

was different with the Government conspiracy claims, which allow the main proponent of the Ancient Astronaut hypothesis to not only link the lack of official interest they receive to a conspiracy, but also to draw from a variety of second-hand material, some even fictions and hoaxes, while raising the specter of a widespread conspiracy to explain the lack of material evidence. Disturbingly, we see an explosion of episodes on supposed Government conspiracies in 2016 and 2017, which marked the end of the Democratic administration of Barack Obama and the presidential electoral period that led to the election of Donald Trump. But this idea of suppressed evidence or lack of evidence plays an even wider role as the series progresses.

By far, the most significant development of the series in comparison to the original core of the Ancient Astronaut hypothesis is its overture to esotericism and New Age. From season 2 on, the number of episodes drawing from this separate area of fringe knowledge will come to rival the number of those drawing from the original core. With the inclusion of these materials, we turn to mystical traditions and occult writings, some deliberate hoaxes, on power vortexes, crystal skulls, pyramid power, the Akashic records, and the like, all claiming a higher spirituality that is said to lay beyond the power of reason and that cannot be observed through standardized experiments. Thus, the series claims that Ancient Aliens are behind everything mystical and spiritual as well either by creating them, and thus are the effects of technologies beyond our level, or by recognizing and tapping into them, thus proving that our contemporary science is far inferior.

Conclusion: Ancient Aliens, a faith for a troubled postmodernity

However, it goes far beyond. As with UFOs, Government conspiracies, the absorption of esotericism and New Age signifies a shift from reliance on theoretically testable objective facts to untestable personal testimony and beliefs. Thus, Ancient Aliens become the *deus ex machina* of a world disenchanting by science, and yet an increasingly troubled world in which science is neither as powerful nor infallible as it once was. Now, everything exists and finds its explanation in the doings of Ancient Aliens, even as no definite evidence of the existence of Ancient Aliens has been shown to exist. Nothing escapes Ancient Aliens, everything bears the marks of Ancient Aliens. As such, Ancient Aliens simply become a matter of faith, a faith promoted and encouraged by the series and its producers. And because, the source material comes prominently from religious canons, mythologies and New Age beliefs, the narrative of the Ancient Aliens series unmistakably takes religious undertones. In 2016, after the end of season 11, History Channel even published an "Official Companion Book", the first and only time it ever published a book. It contained, texts written by each principal talking heads of the series, all but two openly endorsing the benevolent Ancient Aliens hypothesis. It could be likened to a postmodern bible, and its contributors to postmodern prophets and oracles to postmodern Alien Gods.

If the real credited experts who appear on screen in the first season could be deemed innocent of deception, those who in full knowledge of the facts willfully chose to appear in succeeding seasons are not, and even more so those who remain on the show season after season such as Micheal Dennin, Jonathan Young and Richard Rader and others. By simply appearing on screen and not voicing a critique of the Ancient Astronaut theory or of the purported evidence shown to the public, they give the show a veneer of scientific legitimacy. Thus, for a shot at media exposure,

they are ready to sully their name, their reputation and that of their institution. But, the real tragedy, is that the success of *Ancient Aliens* could be read as the failure of not only science education and science communication, but of education and communication in general. In fact, they are simply powerless in the face of the media onslaught.