



# ANCIENT MYTHS AND SCIENTIFIC FICTION: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE BIG HEAD IN PREHISTORIC ART AND ITS RECREATION IN WESTERN CULTURE

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**Abstract** - Ancient myths and scientific fiction: the representation of the big head in prehistoric art and its recreation in Western culture

In the history of social anthropology, the discussion concerning the creation of myth has been associated with the development of cultures. From this perspective, the mythological worldview of societies considered as primitive was, on one hand, seen as a necessary factor for their existence as a group and, on the other hand, as an element of comparison between traditional and scientific knowledge. To know some of the similarities and differences of both worlds is important in order to better evaluate how it should be seen the phenomenon of creation of mythological knowledge. In this paper, we intend to discuss this perspective using examples of figures that show anthropomorphic beings with a disproportionately large head as compared to the rest of body, both in prehistoric rock art and in images of contemporary society

**Riassunto** - Miti antichi e fantascienza : la rappresentazioni delle grandi teste nell'arte preistorica e la loro riproduzione nella cultura Western.

Nella storia dell'antropologia sociale, la discussione concernente la creazione del mito fu associata allo sviluppo della cultura. Da questa prospettiva, la visione del mondo mitologico delle società considerate primitive era, da un lato visto come un fattore necessario per la loro esistenza come gruppo e, dall'altro come elemento di confronto tra le conoscenze tradizionali e scientifiche.

La conoscenza delle differenze e similitudini di entrambi i mondi è estremamente importante per valutare al meglio il fenomeno della creazione del mito.

**Résumé** - La représentation de grand tête.

La communication et une vision comparative d'un thème qui se présente dans culture différent. Le figures de grand tête dans l'art rupestre préhistorique est compare avec certains image de la science fiction. Ce qui contribue a la comprenions du phénomène de la création mythologique. la communication considère des être a la tête disproportionné a la comparaison du corps qui se répète sois dans l'art préhistorique sois dans l'imaginaire de la société contemporaine.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the major ideas of Ethnology was that Primitive cultures had a mythological worldview, while contemporary Western culture is based on another form of conception, more associated with reason. For Lévy-Bruhl (1960: 14), primitive peoples are characterized by an aversion to rational logical thought. This aversion wouldn't come from some sort of inability, or a natural impulse on their understandings, but from their habits of mind.

According to the psychologist Henri Wallon (1979: 103-106), Lévy-Bruhl constructed an opposition between the way of thinking of Western and Primitive cultures. While people from Western societies analyse reality through experience (experimental thought), those from Primitive societies use collective representations (pre-logical thinking) which form the image that society makes of itself. Thus, Primitive societies do not conceive the world through the knowledge acquired from the accumulation of their experiences, but by a previous knowledge coming from mythological narratives.

Myths are narratives in which symbolic languages of religious content are used to describe and portray the origins and assumptions of some culture, explain the creation of the world, the universe, or any subject difficult to be explained.

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For Levi-Strauss (2005) myth is distinguished from the art and science. However, unlike what was thought by Lévy-Bruhl, myths can have a proximity to art and science due to their logical and systematic character. In this case, myth is defined as an attempt of explanation and understanding of natural and social reality by means of a scheme of binary oppositions and correlations in the primitive mind, expressed through an assembly of images recorded in a narrative. The myth is thus a manifestation of “superstructures” and ideologies that are reflections of the technical-economic conditions of collective life, i.e. the “infrastructure”.

Given this condition, we might wonder about the possibility of also finding myths in contemporary Western culture, as well as the objects that could be used to elaborate those myths.

From these assumptions, it appears that the creation of myths depends on how a culture is organized. But considering that the creation of a myth also reveals a uniquely human ability related to its cognition (Anati, 2009:31), is it possible to associate it to societies in which ideological systems are based on scientific reason?

To answer this question we intend to find the representation of a specific figure in two different social systems in order to find if they have the same kind of meaning in a way that may reveal if they satisfy the typical structure of a myth.

One type of representation that appears documented both in ethnographic literature and in scientific fiction literature and movies is that of anthropomorphic beings who have their heads disproportionately larger relative to the size of the body.

To compare this sign fully, considering both its significance and its meaning (Saussure, 1995), it is important to understand if there is some similarity in the systems in which they are symbolized, even with differences of meanings given by social groups.

In general, the difficulty to understand the meaning of prehistoric rock art made is due to the loss of prehistoric cultures and their respective authors. However, if we use ethnographic information of living groups that still have a prehistoric culture we can attempt to understand the meaning of rock art through analogies.

#### THE WANDJINAS' REPRESENTATIONS AND ITS MEANINGS.

From the point of view of rock art studies, Australia is unique in providing a large region in which rock art is a part of the living cultures of hunters and gatherers (Layton, 1995:217). This region from north Western Australia offers outstanding opportunities to investigate how rock art is ‘read’ by members of the cultural traditions to which it belongs and how we could deduce some general procedures for interpretation of rock art.

In the Kimberly region of north Western Australia there is a strong integration of Aboriginal rock art with traditional religious systems and social structure (Vinnicombe & Mowaljarlai, 1995: 228). The most recent traditional art in this region is associated with ancestral creator beings that existed during the so-called Creation Period or “Dream Time” known as *Wandjina* (Figure 1), who are depicted in highly formalized and characteristic style. Direct dating of Kimberley rock art by AMS radiocarbon techniques have established almost 4000 years for these paintings (Morwood, 10:2010), although its production remains until the current days.

The figures from this style are normally imposingly large, although in some occasions only the head is represented. The depictions are full frontal and may extend to overhanging ceilings where they loom over and look down on the spectator, or they may be painted horizontally on rock ledges. Characteristically, faces are white, the large rounded black eyes are fringed with lashes, the mouth is absent and the head is surrounded by a semi-circle often marked with radiating lines. The body is patterned with dashes or stripes, the legs are straight and the feet turn outwards. Although there are variations in style and proportion over time, the conventions governing the depictions of *Wandjina* figures were clearly strictly regulated.

The connection between images on rock and creation and perpetuation of life, particularly through the metaphors of rain, regeneration and symbolic acts of repainting, is made explicitly in the belief system. Indeed, the notion of spiritual power inherent in water is fundamental to an understanding of Kimberley cosmology. This power is symbolized by *Wungud* that corresponds to the black-headed Python or Rainbow Serpent. In this case either *Wungud* and *Wandjina* are closely associated with water (Vinnicombe & Mowaljarlai, 1995: 228-229).

The *Wandjina* are Ancestral Beings envisaged as having human form, but often three times life-size. They are described as spirits of the clouds, the markers of land and sea and human beings, and

have characteristics of both humans and clouds. The stylised figures are portrayed without mouths. Aborigines have explained that figures have no mouths because they contain the rain as well as the thunder and lightning. Considering this narrative, if they had mouths they would release unceasing rain upon the land (Flood, 1997:296).

These clouds, or *Wandjina*, also control the fertility of animals and humans and regeneration of all life. In some sites large snakes or crocodiles are painted in the same multi-coloured style, because they are considered *Wandjina* spirits' remains (Flood, 1997:298).

According to one of first ethnographic works about this style, *Wandjina* means rain or power to produce rain (Lévy-Bruhl, 1935:23). If someone touching a head *Wandjina*, or renew the picture, rain will fall, even during dry season. In this case, *Wandjina* not only expresses a clearly defined concept, but also a complex set of ideas and feelings related to a mystical reality, in which the nucleus is composed by ideas linked to rain and generation of things.

*Wungud* also relates the paintings to a time so far from the origin of civilization (mythical time), implying any final and definitive thing. To keep the prosperity of today it is vital to be linked with the original period through the reproduction of figures in a trustworthy manner (Figure 2).

#### REPRESENTATION OF BIG HEADS IN WESTERN CULTURE

The representation of anthropomorphic figures with big heads such the *Wandjina*, also appear in other cultures too, although with quite different meanings. In Western culture they have been very common in movies and literature of the scientific fiction genre. Their meaning is specifically associated to life beyond earth.

There are many movies that show this characteristic, in which the UFO theme is very emphasized, such as the War of Worlds - 1898 literature, 1953 movie, Close Encounters of the Third Kind - 1977, E.T - The Extra-terrestrial - 1982 and Independence Day - 1996.

But not only movies participated in this conception. The study of rock art was also influenced by this perspective, especially the work of Henri Lhote, who created names for the rock paintings of Tassili n' Ajjer - Algeria - with a strong allusion to science fiction and ufology. The *Round Heads* are the oldest phase of painting made both by a semi-schematic and semi-naturalistic technique (Figure 3).

This style was chronologically positioned in the pastoralism period, since 5000-4000 BC. Its painting technique used a thick outline which is filled in a white or pale color. In the final phase the figures were painted in flat ochre filled by a thick outline with a dark flat surface.

The members of mission called "Martiens Primitifs" the anthropomorphic figures from this style, considering the thoughts from our current days. Otherwise, Lhote already knew that these denominations could take many people falling in a "romantic fantasy" (Lhote 1984:86). In this case, were not only Round Head anthropomorphic figures from Tassili's style compared with ufology, but also some drawing of humans with helmets and ornaments found in Valcamonica.

From these perspectives, some writers created a way of conceiving human history in order to discriminate the progress that was typical for some groups. In this case, some buildings of ancient civilizations were attributed to extraterrestrial beings, which would be endowed with a potential greater than the human (Däniken, 1968, 1975), necessary to build it. These are ideas that conceived people of the past as unable to create buildings of great magnitude.

Where did these authors find inspiration for such an appealing model that disregarded other possible interpretations, as the use of hallucinogens (Anati, 1989)? In a time when the population was experiencing, approving and reiterating comfort originated from advances in scientific knowledge, new researches related to human evolution associated with the progress could have been a great source of inspiration of this kind of ideas. One of scientific fiction movies of 1968 presented the topic of evolution linked to the human extraterrestrial beings.

In "2001: A Space Odyssey", there aren't extraterrestrial beings with big heads represented, although brain evolution of man is showed as an intermediary link between the past and the future of the Homo sapiens, achieved during an encounter between humankind and extraterrestrial forms.

In 1970s arises another phenomenon related to the anthropomorphic model contemplated by ufology (Banaji & Kihlstrom, 1996) based on the increasing the number of cases of people suffering from sleep disturbances, which is recorded in the offices of psychology and psychoanalysis in the United States.

The majority of patients are usually women that claimed to have suffered some kind of nocturnal experience with beings that have head and eyes disproportionately larger and would have



an extraterrestrial origin. Several explanations, especially of psychoanalytic scope, associated these experiences with specific cases of sexual abuse (McNally & Clancy; 2002, 2005). Others attributed these cases to a phenomenon of Abduction, that is, kidnapping of people by extraterrestrials with objectives that could be related to studies by those beings (Jacobs, 1996, 1999).

This new phenomenon has also found its way into the cinema in a movie directed by Dan Curtis called "Intruders - 1992", in which it can be observed the same pattern in the descriptions of the abductees. The aim of this work is not the discussion about the possible origin and veracity of this phenomenon, but how the graphical model represented by patients in general relates to the same pattern of movies of scientific fiction related to UFOs: big head and eyes and small members (Figure 4).

#### THE MEANING OF THE FIGURES BASED ON THE TYPE OF NARRATIVE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS.

Why our culture conceives the representation of anthropomorphic beings that present a great head associated with extraterrestrial beings? Perhaps the meaning of these representations made in our culture could be related to an archetype of the collective unconscious that has a close connection with what is subliminally understood as a symbol.

Whereas the archetypes represent essentially an unconscious content, though they appear in a form that reveals the influence of conscious elaboration (Jung, 2000:53), it is possible to link this representation to something that reflects intensely in our society as a contents of the collective imagination.

The head of large size seems to symbolize a tendency to progress, achieved in the process of technological evolution of cultures. In this case, there is a close correspondence between progress and an image pronounced in very visual means of communication, related to the evolution of the Homo sapiens.

On the other hand, if aliens are thought as beings with a higher technological capability than humans, capable to travel at unimaginable speeds throughout the universe, would be designed as creatures more intelligent and logically its representation would emphasize a large brain.

In relation to the representations of rock art presented here and the narratives that are told by groups that reproduce it, we may observe some character of power in *Wandjina* beings associated with the knowledge and control of the cosmos, like they were a kind of guardian of the climate. In literature and scientific movies, the beings with large heads are also associated with awareness and control beyond which human capabilities. However, that does not mean that the *Wandjina* necessarily have a higher intelligence, much less that they are extraterrestrials. This meaning is only associated to the representations of Western culture.

Another difference between the two systems of representation is that while in Primitive culture the referents are associated with the mythological past, in Western culture the myths are constructed by science fiction and associated with the future.

The figures of anthropomorphic beings with large heads appear to have been represented in various cultures and at different times, supporting themselves on the basis of mythological significance. It must be noticed that the meaning of these beings was recreated in our society from its own semiotic structure and it is detached from the mythological knowledge of other groups. Scientific knowledge was the parameter used to a new form of storytelling - science fiction - which moved the understanding from the rational knowledge to another type of tale, contextualized in a futuristic and technological world.

This interpretation and its socio-psychological implications allows discussing the existence of mythological thinking, not only as a characterization of society, but rather as a psychological capacity present in anyone, in a greater or lesser degree, depending on the socio-cultural context.

This phenomenon of questioning, seems to overcome the apparent order of the world, attesting in this way the reality of the religious fact, already present very early in other species of the genus homo (Anati, 1995). When we refer to the findings of the Upper Paleolithic we see the difficulty to explain the presence of ochre in the habitat of Neanderthal man from of the material survival. Such event could only be explained if we take in consideration concerns related to mystery that were present in these men (Leroi-Gourhan, 2007:26).

Howard Gardner discuss the existence of a form of intelligence called "spiritual" (1999: 53-60), such as mathematics and space, which would come in three forms in any person. One of the varieties of spirituality comes from the desire to know about our existence in relation to the cosmos. The other is the ability of some people to reach stages of altered consciousness or to achieve deep levels

of mental balance, that allow them to relate with infinity. And the other intelligence is related to the ability to stimulate the emergence of introspective feelings in others.

All these forms are important for understanding how a particular figure becomes ritualized because are related to the recognition of forms in which would be able to stimulate the feeling created by a mythographical system.

The nature of a religious character images is due to the existence of a mythological composition and an anthropomorphic figure, as it is observed in the Paleolithic Art (Anati, 2009:32). Considering these factors, we can think of the figures related to the style *Wandjina* as religious since they are anthropomorphic and present a recurrent form in a pattern that resembles to each mythological figure. On the other hand, those figures who have gained a specific meaning in science fiction could be admitted as archetypes of our time, because its expression is more detached, naive and incomprehensible than a myth (Jung, 1995:53). Nevertheless, they can also be categorized as contemporary myths, since they have the same structure as a significant representative of traditional systems.

#### DISCUSSION ABOUT THE CURRENT SEARCH FOR LIFE BEYOND EARTH

The representation of the universe is a millennial theme, both in myth and science, which allows us to consider it as a quintessentially human theme. The way it is represented varies according to the specificities of each culture. The significance of the anthropomorphic figures depicted with a disproportionately large head was associated with alien beings in contemporary Western culture, unlike other cultures. This meaning probably has its reasons based on the problems of our own culture.

Today, it is increasingly clear the search for life beyond Earth, which can be noticed in the international media and in programs of big economic investment such as SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), developed in partnership with NASA. Amid the many other problems that could be solved, such as famine and wars, we could wonder what is the reason for this search.

Perhaps the amount of explanations about the existence of the cosmos does not allow us understand why it exists (Hawking, 1998). In this context, the growing sense of man's solitude amid the seeming emptiness of the universe may create a mental structure that needs "someone else" from outside to help him understand that same universe.

The "Other", a reflection in a mirror created by water, allows us to see ourselves when we are looking out. Although such image is twisted by waves, we can recognize it just by observing some differences where images seemed to be quite familiar before. We build our identity in the recognition process related to what resemble us in the world (Almudena, 2002). But when our differences are accentuated, sometimes we emphasize our recognition through a desired identity.

In this process, the subliminal desire related to collective unconscious may correspond to the hope of many people, especially regarding intelligent life forms. In this case, it is possible to think that beings from other worlds do exist. However, we are inevitably fundamental for their existence, because if somehow they are not inserted in our communication systems they can't be recognized, can't be conceived.

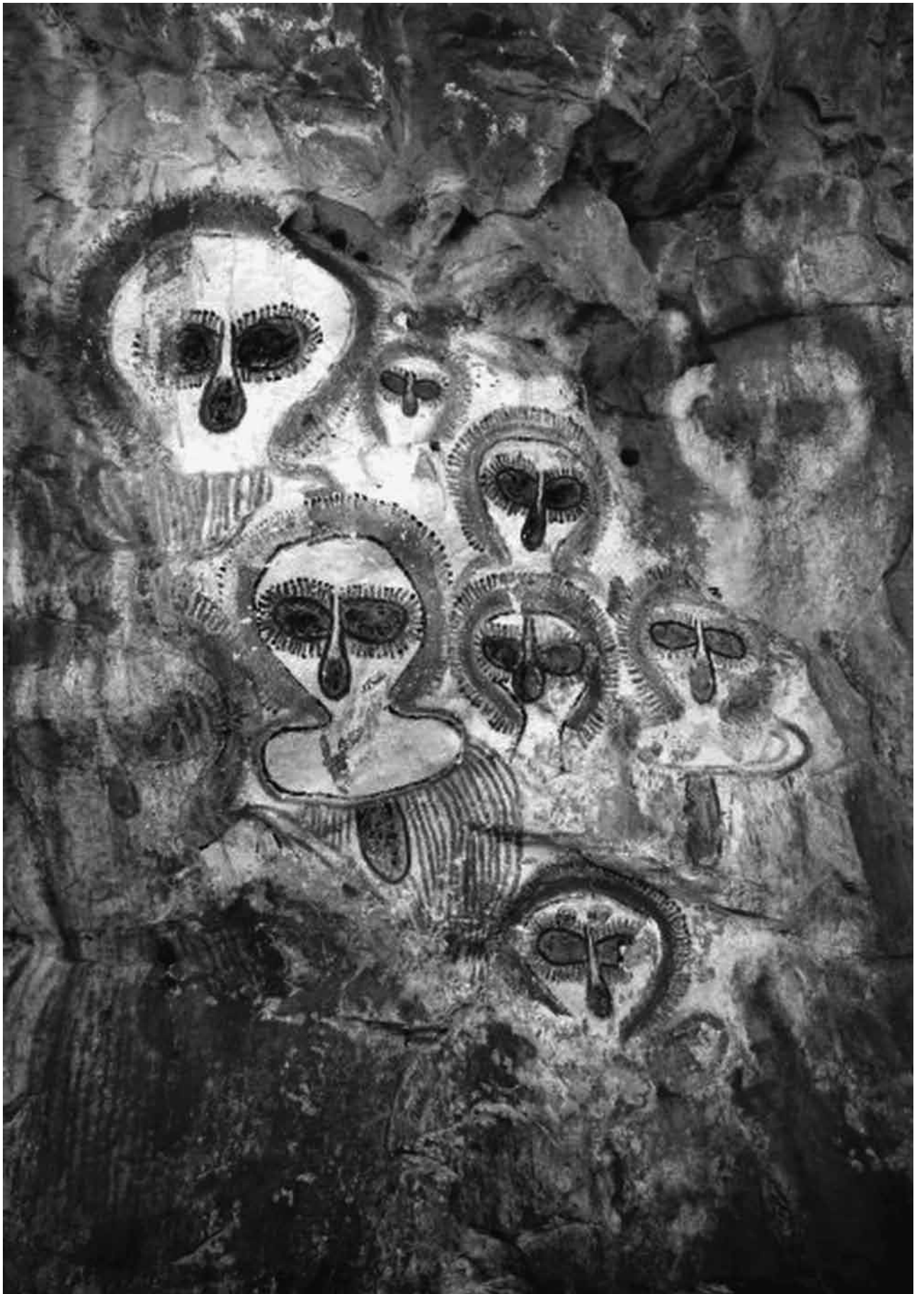
In reality, if we look to the narratives present in the media it is possible to note that these beings already exist, at least as a form of a collective unconscious of contemporary Western society. Its description reveals that representations of anthropomorphic beings with big heads were elaborated by several cultural traditions, but only in our culture they have a meaning related to intelligent life beyond Earth. Thus, this meaning also reveals the presence of explanations based on myths, as observed in other social systems. In fact these myths reflect the techno-economic conditions of our system, having paradoxically arose from a kind of knowledge structurally distinct from mythology, i.e. a scientific knowledge.

Whatever the type of culture, we can perceive that the existence of these anthropomorphic forms allow us to think an anthropological theme which is the "Other" and the creation of mythological narratives for its understandings. They attract curiosity of humans for what is different, although they also help them to understand themselves, what differentiates them and help them to construct other worlds, on the bases of our own reality.



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*Figure 1 -Wandjinas depicted*



Figure 2 - Wandjina figures represent cloud spirits and form part of a continuing cultural tradition dating back almost 4,000 years. (Donalson, 2000)



Figure 3 - Tassili N'Ajjer - Jabbaren. Source <http://www.ennedi>



Figure 4 - Aliens from movie "Intruders" (1992) Directed by Dan Curtis