STARGATE ATLANTIS:
Islandness in the Pegasus Galaxy

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how 'islandness' is constructed within the science fiction television program, *Stargate Atlantis*. While fictional, considering the Atlantis of *Stargate* offers the opportunity to examine what islandness may be like outside the physical, technical and social parameters of Earth; and to this end this paper offers three insights. Firstly, this paper proposes that even in a distant galaxy, and on an island that is arguably not really an island, several familiar features of 'islandness' can be found in places entirely surrounded by water. Secondly, the sea surrounding Atlantis plays an important role in the survival of the city yet remains mostly unexplored by the Earth expedition team, echoing Earthly island scholarship that calls for greater understanding of the maritime aspects of islands. Thirdly, Atlantis is a mobile city-ship and its islandness shifts and transforms to the point of refutability but this paper argues that it resembles an aquapelagic assemblage despite its extraterrestrial capabilities.

KEYWORDS: Atlantis, island, islandness, aquapelagic assemblage, science fiction, *Stargate*

Stargate Atlantis

Stargate Atlantis (henceforth *SGA*) is a Canadian-American produced science fiction (SF) television show with elements of action, adventure and military drama. The show was created by Brad Wright and Robert C. Cooper and ran for five series with a total of 100 episodes between 2004 and 2009. It is a spin-off of a spin-off. Following the commercial success of the 1994 feature film *Stargate* directed by Roland Emmerich and starring Kurt Russell and James Spader, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer commissioned a TV spin-off series. This series, *Stargate SG-1 (*henceforth *SSG-1)* (1997-2006), follows a team of explorers called SG1, under the command of the US Air Force, as they travel to distant worlds through a large circular device known as a stargate. There are a multitude of stargates throughout the universe but the enormous power requirements of gate travel generally restrict transportation between two stargates in the same galaxy. The system operates by each gate having its own dialling address, like a telephone number, consisting of symbols. When a gate address is dialled a wormhole is established between the home gate and the dialled gate allowing almost instantaneous travel across vast distances of space (see Johnson-Smith, 2005: 173 for more detail on stargate operation). In this way, *Stargate* differs from the usual SF reliance on ships to travel through space. Unlike the *Star Trek* franchise that emphasises the journey as a narrative tool, travel becomes reduced to a fleeting moment between origin and destination, a literal time-space compression (Barrett and Barrett, 2001: 38; Harvey, 1989: 284).
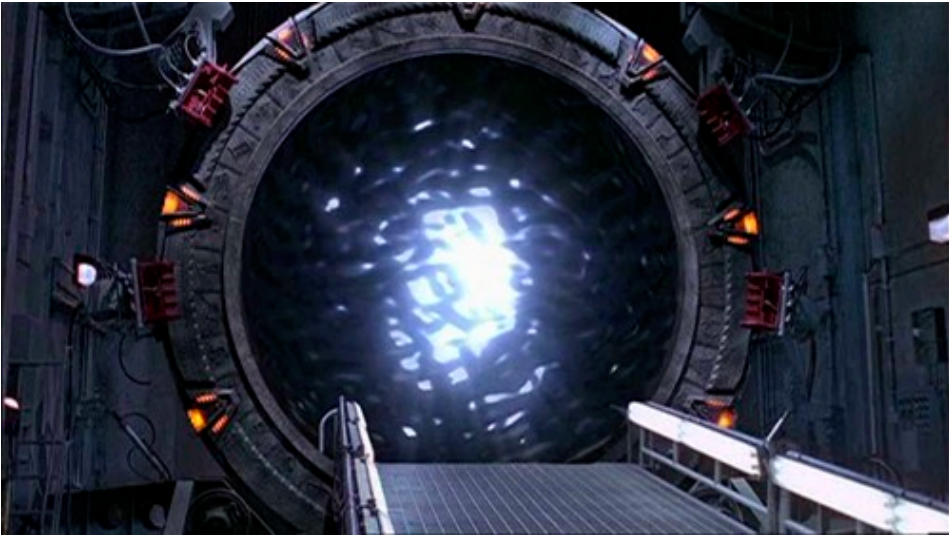
Figure 1 - A stargate (Source: MGM)

SF feature films relish images of destruction (Bould, 2012: 65) such as *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) and *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996). SF television shows, on the other hand, frequently employ only the threat of destruction so the good guys live to fight another day, for example, the threat of assimilation by the Borg in *Star Trek: Next Generation* (1987-1994) (see Bould, 2012). *SSG-1* is no different from other SF television shows in this respect; while exploring the galaxy the team discover several races of malevolent aliens - such as the Goa'uld, the Replicators, and the Ori - that have plans to dominate and/or destroy Earth. The mission of SG-1 throughout the course of the show was primarily to acquire new technology to protect the Earth from any and all extra-terrestrial threats. In this way, the Stargate franchise follows typical SF canon of humans exploring uncharted territory for the betterment and security of mankind. Examples of the SF genre in literary works, feature films or television shows often rely on "mytho-histories" as a narrative tool (Johnson-Smith, 2005: 35) and *Stargate* is no different. Egyptian symbology, Arthurian legend and Atlantean mythology are used to frame story arcs and provide detail to characters and sets. The Goa'uld, for example, have names like Ra, Anubis and Hathor, use hieroglyphics as their written language and the Egyptian pyramids are landing docks for their spaceships. It is in the search for a powerful weapon to defeat the Goa'uld that SG-1 finds a reference to a 'Lost City' on a stone tablet. The team concludes that the 'Lost City' may refer to Atlantis but the dialling address consists of eight symbols rather than the usual seven. SG-1 infers that Atlantis must exist outside the Milky Way network of stargates, in another galaxy.

An international team of human explorers led by civilian Dr Elizabeth Weir (Torri Higginson) travel to Atlantis via Earth's stargate to discover the scientific and military secrets of the city as well as to establish diplomatic relations with the inhabitants of the Pegasus Galaxy. This becomes the second spin-off series called *Stargate Atlantis* (2004-2009). Intergalactic travel is facilitated by way of an alien power source with enough energy to power a single trip to Atlantis, meaning the team know they may never return to Earth. On arrival at Atlantis the team soon learn more details about the city through an information hologram. Atlantis was constructed around 7 million years ago by a

technologically advanced race of humanoid aliens called The Ancients. The Ancients built the city in Antarctica where it was used as their capital during construction of the stargate system. A plague on Earth then forced the Ancients to relocate Atlantis to the Pegasus Galaxy on a planet called Lantea. However, the Ancients and Atlantis were not safe. An evil race called the Wraith, who feed on the life energy of humanoids, attacked Atlantis in a war lasting 100 years. The Ancients, sensing no hope of winning, erected a force field around the city and submerged Atlantis to protect it from falling into the Wraith's hands. Before submersion the Ancients evacuated back to Earth through the stargate and assimilated with humans. Their stories became the foundation of the modern Atlantean myth, concerning a city at the bottom of the ocean.

Adventure and Atlantis

Epic tales of heroic journeys and exploratory adventures can be traced through the ages; narratives, such the *Iliad*, trace the development of civilisations (Johnson-Smith, 2005: 34). Islands in particular have long held a central place in Western mythical geographies; an obsession that has been termed "islomania" (Gillis, 2007: 247). Few tales have been quite as pervasive in the Western world as the story of the lost city of Atlantis. Atlantis, from the Ancient Greek meaning 'island of Atlas', is a fictional island mentioned within Plato's allegorical works on the folly of nations *Timaeus* and *Critias* (Rosenmeyer, 1956*)*. Plato's works are set 9,000 years before his lifetime and describe Atlantis launching a naval attack against ancient Athens. Atlantis fails and, in their displeasure, the Greek gods submerge the island to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean through a cataclysmic environmental event (Schuchert, 1917). The exact location of Atlantis has inspired centuries of scientific and pseudoscientific research (see Steiner, 2007; Danalek, 2008; Greer, 2007). Plato gives the location of Atlantis as "beyond the Pillars of Hercules", suggesting somewhere beyond the strait of Gibraltar (Hackforth, 1944) but this has been open to interpretation and has given rise to various theories such as near the Azores (eg Schuchert, 1917), or somewhere near Crete (eg Coombs Knapp, 1919).

It is the very fuzziness of the location and landscape of Atlantis that allows it to be picked up and easily accepted into various contexts with minor, even major, alterations to the story as there is no definitive Atlantean tradition (Johnson-Smith, 2005: 35). For this reason, the lost city of Atlantis has been a popular backdrop for epic cinema adventures such as *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (Henry Levin, 1959), *Atlantis, the Lost Continent* (George Pal, 1961), *Warlords of the Deep* (Kevin Connor, 1978) and Disney's animated *Atlantis: The Lost Empire,* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 2001). It has also served as the location for literary works such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Maracot Deep* (1929) and Pierre Benoit's *L'Atlantide* (1919), in which Atlantis is discovered in the Sahara. Benoit's version of the Atlantis tale has been eponymously adapted for cinema several times, including by Jacques Feyder (1921) and by Bob Swaim (1992). Atlantis has featured less as a backdrop for television series possibly due to the production costs associated with creating and maintaining an Atlantean landscape. Two notable exceptions to this are the *Stargate Atlantis* series analysed in this article and the BBC's production *Atlantis* (2013-2015) that involves a 21st Century man being pulled into a white abyss at the bottom of the ocean and waking in a mythical kingdom of strange creatures and supernatural powers. More often Atlantis is alluded to or included as as an incidental background detail to give character depth or a plot point, as in the 'The Monkey Suit' episode of *The Simpsons* (2006), in which Homer Simpson has a To-Do list upon which the item "Find, destroy Atlantis" is already crossed off; or in the 'Waterworld' episode of

Flipper (2000), in which one character is rescued by a diver looking for Atlantis. The Atlantean myth thereby serves as a popular screen motif and in literature as a setting for tales of action, adventure and mystery. This article discusses one of the few instances where Atlantis forms a central plot device on the small screen.

The Geography of Atlantis

SF is a notoriously difficult genre to define (See Booker and Thomas, 2009: 3; Seed, 2011). Hubble and Mousoutzanis (2013: XII) state that "realist fiction sets out to describe the world; science fiction (SF) sets out to change it". Booker and Thomas (2009: 4) settle on the purposefully broad definition:

> *fiction set in an imagined world that is different from our own in ways that are rationally explicable (often because of scientific advances) and that tend to produce cognitive estrangement in the reader.* (2009: 4)

Successful SF then must juggle creating a sense of the fantastical and the sublime with achieving plausibility so that the fictional narrative is balanced with scientific explanation (Kitchin and Kneale, 2001: 21). To the end of sublimity, SF calls us to pay attention to the background details that are often taken for granted in other television genres; so that the visual spectacle is on par with the narrative (Johnson-Smith, 2005: 20). The sense of the familiar combined with the fantastical is often achieved within SF television through landscape and architecture (see Fortin, 2011). There is a running joke within *SG-1* that every planet they visit looks a lot like the forests of British Columbia (where the program was filmed) and this is explained away by the fact that aliens would also choose worlds and continents with life-sustaining resources and a temperate climate. In this way, the original *Stargate* TV series departs from the traditional artificial, low-budget sets of the past like the original series of *Star Trek* (1966-1969) or even the more elaborate sets of *Farscape* (1999-2003) (Fortin, 2011) and instead spectacle is often achieved through subtler cues such as stylised weapons, technological devices, costumes and strange written languages. The *Stargate* franchise also makes use of CGI (computer generated imagery) to enhance the sense of the fantastical, such as the blue plume of the energy vortex that erupts every time the stargate is dialled. The use of CGI in SF is a significant development within the genre allowing sets and locations to develop beyond what is too dangerous, difficult or costly to construct in reality (Telotte, 2009: 118). The quality of CGI is directly proportional to its believability; how readily the elements of CGI are accepted as part of the ongoing narrative (Grant, 2014). The *Stargate* franchise achieves believability in several ways; firstly, when a character touches the stargate the vortex, ripples, secondly, camera tricks show characters walking towards the gate before stepping through it and disappearing on the other side (Johnson-Smith, 2005: 179). These details inform the audience that the stargate is a tangible part of the *Stargate* world and CGI is carefully integrated into the live action and analogue special effects such as the full size gate model.

The sublimity of Atlantis is as a constructed spectacle. The architecture and skyline of Atlantis is not entirely strange to the team or to viewers as the proliferation of high-rise buildings, particularly rising to a central point, is reminiscent of high density city centres such as Shanghai or San Francisco. Atlantean architecture is strange and fantastical by its sheer urbanity, with a cold, stark exterior, few windows and no sign of natural flora or fauna. The angular shapes of the buildings, Ancient script on inner walls and the sharpness of the boundary between the city and the sea creates an otherworldly sense of

estrangement that convinces the audience that such a city does not, and could not, exist on Earth. The team arrives on the planet Lantea via the stargate to find the Lost City still underwater and its internal power source almost depleted. The team's arrival and inevitable 'turning on the lights' triggers a failsafe whereby the force field drops and the city rises to the ocean's surface to conserve power (Season 1: 2, 'Rising Part 2'). Through exploration of the city, the team discover that Atlantis is roughly equal in size to the island of Manhattan, around seven square kilometres, and is snowflake-like in shape with a central platform and six extruding piers. Atlantis is an entirely constructed urban environment of mainly high-rise buildings with no open, green spaces. Transport around the city is facilitated by a network of transporter rooms. The central platform contains the inner city which houses many of the communal living areas, as well as the control tower where the most critical operations, such as the stargate, the main scientific laboratories, the infirmary, and the main power room are located. The six piers are named the East pier (mostly research labs), the West Pier (lookout and research labs), The North Pier (mostly weapons and transportation), The South Pier (cargo hold), The South-East Pier (the main living quarter area) and The South-West Pier (essential systems for city maintenance). As anticipated, the team finds that Atlantis has two main functions; firstly, as a defensive fortress with high-tech weapons, and secondly as a sophisticated scientific research centre equipped with numerous laboratories.

Figure 2 - Artist's representation of Stargate's Atlantis (Source: Dimitrov, 2014)

Atlantis, edges and the sea

Island scholars have illuminated that the term 'island' is not straightforward; numerous typologies, taxonomies and phenomenologies exist (Royle, 2007, 2014; Hay, 2006; Ronström, 2009; Williams, 2012). The issues of definition arise due to differences in scale and location. If an island is connected by a bridge, is it still an island? (see Baldacchino, MacDonald and Spears, 2007) and when does a piece of land become so small that it is not an island but an islet or simply a rock? (see Royle, 2001: 9). For the purpose of this paper the classical definition of 'a piece of land surrounded by water' will suffice (see Stratford et

al, 2011; Royle, 2014). Island scholars have also proffered the term 'islandness' to replace 'insularity' to describe the particular geographic characteristics that identify islands. The latter term is loaded with negative connotations of remoteness and isolation that can be linked to a pessimistic, even fatalistic conception of small islands (Baldacchino, 2007) while islandness has been debunked as equating to poor and peripheral (Baldacchino, 2004).

The immutability of land and water boundaries often results in islands being defined by their coastlines, their natural edges (Farran, 2006). Furthermore, "the ocean's very restlessness, the retreat-and-advance rhythm of its tides, moving the land-sea edge forward and back, accentuates the temporality and contingency of island boundaries" (Hay, 2013: 215). Unlike naturally forming oceanic islands, Atlantis has no intertidal zone or accompanying sea bed; there is no "retreat-and-advance rhythm", the sea is always at the edge of the city. This ever-presentness is often reiterated when characters have private conversations on a balcony looking out towards the sea. Frequently, two characters will end an episode by standing on a balcony summing up their experiences or simply looking off into the watery horizon, emphasizing their distance from 'home' and the vastness of the surrounding waters. This is perhaps representative of what Nicholson describes as the metaphysical power of islands to make people consider consider their "own insignificance in the extent of space and time which stretches around it in one pure continuum… universe-exposing world" (2007: 153-154). The very visible and exact edges of the city can create a particularly precise and acute sense of place. Laurie Brinklow describes how this sensation can affect people in different ways:

> It's one thing to vacation on an island… It's quite another to live on an island, where life is distilled, essentialised; there's a realness that comes with the isolation. For some it's comforting, knowing where your edges are. For others its confining, cloying and you can't wait to escape its clutches. (2011: 1)

This metaphysical sensation derived from 'islandness' can instil a strong sense of place for island residents that can manifest as a particular feeling of belonging and 'home' (Conkling, 2007, Oliver, 2011). This becomes true for the team who quickly come to regard Atlantis as their home to the point that when the city is re-taken by 'Ancients' they have a difficult time accepting that they must return to Earth. Further, when the city must relocate to escape this enemy several of Atlantis' non-earthling inhabitants would prefer to stay with the city and travel to the Milky Way than leave Atlantis and remain in the Pegasus Galaxy.

Returning to the sea, several island scholars have identified that there has been a typically land-based, and therefore "land-biased", approach to studying islands (Baldacchino, 2012: 22). Hayward proposes the concept of the "aquapelago" to better integrate the human-land-ocean nexus of island societies. Hayward initially defined the aquapelago as "an assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters" (2012a: 5). This is a somewhat novel thesis as the water surrounding islands have often been peripheral to island scholarship. Seas are frequently represented in atlases as "huge, monochromatic and isotropic space(s)… where nothing seems to happen except for the activity of fishermen" (Fleury, 2013: 1-2). This is despite a wider recognition that historically the sea "binds particular modes of civilisation together" as well as being "negotiated with and incorporated, as much as they are charted, quantified and overcome" (Maxwell, 2012: 22). On Earth the sea has been counter-imagined as a barrier to the outside world or a 'bridge' or 'highway' to it (Royle, 2001; Hay, 2006; Gosden and Pavlides,

1994). Science fiction television programs such as *Star Trek* frequently use the metaphor of nautical navigation for space travel. Exploration of the 'starry sea' echoes ways which Western powers used ships to "discover" and "seek out new life and new civilisations" (from the *Star Trek* opening sequence) (see Barrett and Barrett 2001: 11-12). Further, the lexicon of *Star Trek* travel is full of nautical terms such as the 'decks' of a spaceship, and 'the brig' as form of prison. In *SGA* the sea is rather overlooked in favour of outer-space and the stargate network of other worlds. It is on other worlds where there are people to meet and technology to acquire; the sea on Lantea largely remains a "huge, monochromatic space" except for two incidents. The first involving one of the scientists becoming trapped at the bottom of the ocean in a malfunctioning Puddle Jumper (Season 2: 14, 'Grace Under Pressure') and the other when a group of large sea creatures interfere with Atlantis's communications via electromagnetic pulses (Season 3: 12 'Echoes'). Beyond these two events the sea warrants little interest from the team who are more concerned with what is going on in space.

Hayward's aquapelagic assemblage invites acknowledgment that the sea is more than simply an ecosystem, a resource, a natural wonder, or wilderness but as being fundamental to our understanding of nature (Maxwell, 2012: 22). In the fabled Atlantis, the sea is often depicted as the destroyer and source of decay but the ocean in *SGA* has a more nuanced relationship with the city. Lantea is one of only two known planets in its solar system which has an atmosphere capable of sustaining human life. It is mainly covered with a large ocean, although a single landmass exists which covers roughly 15 million square miles. For ten thousand years the sea effectively acted as the city's protector and defender. After raising the force field and lowering the city to the bottom of the ocean the volumes of water above not only helped disguise the city to alien scanners but also helped attenuate any laser weapons that may have had the power to breach the force field. This is not to say that the ocean does not pose a challenge to Atlantis. The city is almost destroyed by the weight and pressure of the water before it rises to the surface, due to the depletion of the force field. Additionally, its low altitude and exposure to the elements makes Atlantis vulnerable to extreme meteorological events and it is almost destroyed by a violent storm shortly after the team arrive. This is not dissimilar to Earth islands that due to their size and exposure to the sea, are often 'miners' canaries' for environmental and climate change (Farbotko, 2010; Royle, 2001; Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012; BBC News, 2013).

Atlantis, connection and aquapelagity

The oft-quoted words of John Donne that "no man is an island, entire of itself" have been paraphrased and adapted within Island Studies to claim that 'no island is an island' (Smith, 2006: 227; Boomert and Bright, 2007). Islands are, by necessity, places of connection and interdependence; they lack the hinterland of continental places and so require people, resources and information to move between the 'inside' and 'outside' spaces (Baldacchino, 2006, 2012). Stratford describes this condition as: "Islands… (inter)dependent, identifiable; relative spaces – bounded but porous; isolated, connected, colonized, postcolonial" (2003: 495). Hay (2013: 216) proposes that connectivity is not the antithesis of 'isolated' but that islands *are* isolated by their very geography, not from the rest of the world in a cultural or social sense but in a physical way. Hayward (2012b) elaborated on his original concept of the aquapelago by proposing that it is "constituted by human (inter)activity within a combined terrestrial and aquatic environment. In this regard, without human presence and connectivities within island-water spaces there can be no aquapelago" (2012b: 2). Aquapelagos are therefore performed entities that shift with the movement of people,

waxing and waning with climate patterns, technology and structural change (ibid). Atlantis typifies the definition of an aquapelago in many respects, it is a place that has a complex relationship with its surrounding waters, being both submerged, afloat and travelling through outer space; it is periodically inhabited by various races, it is at risk of extreme weather events, the infrastructure of the city changes with the inclusion of Earth technology, and finally the level of connectedness changes with technological and political change. However, the lack of direct interaction between the team and the surrounding sea, as discussed above, could suggest it is arguable whether Atlantis constitutes a "performed entity" like that of an aquapelago. Instead, it could be argued that the inhabitation of Atlantis may be more akin to the cruise liners discussed by Cashman's (2013), which skim the surface of the sea minimising interaction for those aboard. However, this article argues that the recent inhabitation of Atlantis by the team on Lantea occurs during a period of the aquapelago waning rather than being completely non-existent. It may be that when Atlantis settles on a new planet (Earth) the team, the city and the ocean will develop more of a true land-ocean-human nexus.

When the team first arrive in Atlantis and the alien power source is too depleted to enable a return visit home, they are essentially on a sunken urban island without any form of communication or travel beyond the city itself. Over the course of *Stargate Atlantis* the sense of isolation decreases as exploration of the city reveals various modes of transportation are available. Although the Milky Way is out of reach initially, the Atlantean stargate can be used to travel to other worlds in the Pegasus Galaxy. This allows the team to establish diplomatic relations with several other planets, learn about other cultures and histories, and inevitably brings them into contact with less than friendly groups of aliens. Further exploration of the city reveals a hangar loaded with small cylindrical crafts that come to be named Puddle Jumpers; a double pun on the Earth nickname for small aircraft used for short distance flights and the ability of these crafts to 'jump' between the puddle-like event horizons of stargates. These are surprisingly well equipped for their diminutive size with dozens of weapons, a cloaking device and the ability to travel through space via two anti-gravity drive pods. As well as being used as space crafts Puddle Jumpers can be used underwater as submarines. Puddle Jumpers become vital to the team as they allow travel between the 'inside' and 'outside' of Atlantis, in a sense they are the equivalent 'lifeline' ferry and plane services that many Earth islands rely on for connection to the rest of the world. These little ships are first used to explore the Lantean planet and the team discover there is a continental mainland with lush vegetation. The mainland, which is never given another name, becomes home to a group of refugees that are evacuated from their planet to escape the Wraith. These people are called the Athosians and they grow and harvest crops on the mainland to feed themselves and Atlantis. Islands are typically held in contrast, even opposition to a continent, usually a particular mainland. This has often resulted in islands being considered weak, dependent and peripheral (Connell and Conway, 2000; Royle, 2001). In the case of Atlantis this is not so. The Athosians live a simple rural life on the mainland and it is they who are ultimately peripheral to the highly advanced and connected Atlantis and for the rest of the show the mainland remains incidental. Therefore, Atlantis provides an interesting inversion where the island, by way of technological advancements, is the powerful political and economic centre of Lantea.

Figure 23 – Artist's representation of a Puddle Jumper (Source: David Gian-Cursio, 2007)

The team knew that Atlantis had been transported from Antarctica to Lantea but were unsure of the means by which this occurred. Further exploration of the underside of the city reveals a propulsion mechanism called a stardrive that allows Atlantis to travel through space contained within a force field. When Atlantis comes under attack on Lantea, the team have no choice but to transport the entire City to another planet called M35-117. Atlantis is discovered here and transported again, this time to Earth off the San Franciscan coast. While seemingly alien, the prospect of mobile islands has already been floated on Earth. There are several city-ship projects in the planning stage such as the Seasteading movement and the Freedomship that propose highly engineered states, mostly based on libertarian philosophies (Gamble, 2014). Atlantis with its hyper-mobility, periodic inhabitation, complex and changeable relationship with the sea and various forms of connection to beyond the city limits suggests that it may be an excellent representation of Hayward's "aquapelagic assemblage".

Conclusion

Atlantis is neither a metaphorical nor allegorical island within the *Stargate* franchise. It is a real place, a high-tech city-ship with the dual function of a fortress and a tactical base. Its submersion on the planet Lantea by the Ancients gave rise to the fabled Lost City on Earth. Unlike the common Earth myth of Atlantis crumbling due to aquatic erosion the sea on Lantea has kept the city hidden and protected over the centuries. However, without a force field the city would have surely been destroyed under the weight of water. The sea, therefore, is not a large empty space where nothing happens, as was often considered to be the case in island scholarship, but is an essential element to the survival and destruction of Atlantis.

The city's striking architecture and its unnaturally discrete edges create a sense of the sublime that is canonical within Science Fiction. The strangeness of the built environment aside, several accepted elements of islandness are present within Atlantis; there is interconnectedness and mobility rather than insularity and remoteness with various modes of transportation available within the city, on the planet and through space.

Additionally, the distinctive sense of place due to the discrete nature of Atlantis' edges gives rise to a strong sense of home that is often present on islands. Atlantis' islandness is not a fixed characteristic but waxes and wanes; the city has been submerged, afloat, and travelled through space several times. Its status as an island and therefore its aspects of islandness vary with its location, mobility, level of threat and level of inhabitation. Atlantis thus typifies Hayward's concept of the "aquapelagic assemblage" as a complex "performed entity".

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