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Nolwenn Corriou

- 1 When André Bazin discussed the way cinema strives to fight the passing of time and its ultimate triumph in death in *What is Cinema?*, he defined this effort to cheat death through artistic production as the “mummy complex”. Indeed, ancient Egyptian funeral rites, and embalming in particular, were only one of the earliest and most striking instances of an essential human drive to escape death and oblivion. The choice of this metaphor by Bazin can be explained by a common history as well as a number of shared features between Egyptology and the budding practice of filmmaking and film-watching at the end of the nineteenth century, as Antonia Lant argues in “The Curse of the Pharaoh, or How Cinema Contracted Egyptomania”. Beyond the conceptual meaning of the phrase coined by Bazin, we can also detect a certain obsession of the cinematographic industry with Ancient Egypt and its discovery and return to life through the work of archaeology. Just as the “mummy complex” aims to preserve what is or to bring what was back to life, the representation of Egypt in films, from the very first animated views¹ to today's huge Hollywood productions, is mostly concerned with the return of the preserved dead and the awakening of an ancient past.
- 2 The cinematographic mummy appears in the wake of a literary tradition developed throughout the nineteenth century at the same time as Egyptology was becoming an increasingly professional but also popular science. The great interest in archaeological discoveries, as well as the craze for antiquarian collections, gave pride of place to Egyptian mummies who were both fascinating and repulsive for museum visitors.

- 3 The first literary mummy was imagined by the British author Jane Loudon (1807-1858) in 1827, in *The Mummy! Or A Tale of the Twenty-Second Century*, a novel that anticipates late nineteenth-century science fiction by placing the awakening of the mummy of Cheops in the year 2126. In a modern London teeming with imaginary technological devices, the arrival of the mummy wreaks havoc with the political organisation of the British monarchy. Similarly, the revived mummy in Poe's short story, "Some Words with a Mummy" (1845), the sardonic Allamistakeo, serves to convey a satirical commentary about American democracy. It was another American author, Louisa May Alcott, in her 1869 short story, "Lost in a Pyramid, or The Mummy's Curse", who initiated the association between Egyptian antiquity and the motif of the curse, with her story of mysterious seeds discovered inside the wrappings of a female mummy in the pyramid of Giza and of the deadly flower they yield once planted, a flower "which slowly absorbs the vitality of whoever cultivates it" (Alcott 45). This first occurrence of what Alcott already names "the Mummy's Curse" (45) paved the way for the many tales of mummy fiction written at the turn of the century, more particularly in the realm of British popular fiction. What had then become a well-known motif took on a darker political hue within the genre defined by Patrick Brantlinger as the imperial Gothic. In tale after tale, the mummy—and, more broadly, the antique Egyptian—has indeed come to stand for a mysterious but also menacing Orient, which threatens to wreak a terrible vengeance upon those guilty of imperial transgression.² Ailise Bulfin dates this shift in the representation of the mummy back to "the geopolitical upheaval occasioned by the advent of the Suez Canal, albeit one that greatly increased following the occupation" (from 1882 onwards) (Bulfin 419). As nationalist tension escalated and claims for independence gradually weakened the British hold on the imperial territories, the fictional mummy came to appear as one of what Patrick Brantlinger describes as "the demons who threaten to subvert the Empire and invade Britain" (Brantlinger 234). Through the tales written by Bram Stoker, Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry Rider Haggard as well as lesser known authors between the 1880s and the 1930s,³ the reader can perceive the political as well as social concerns that mark the British *fin-de-siècle*, from the defeat of imperial power to the decline of British civilisation.
- 4 Most of the mummy movies that appeared during the second part of this period, although they did not erase the geopolitical context of the occupation of Egypt in their representation of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century archaeological excavations, focus more specifically on the purely monstrous aspect of the figure of the mummy by representing silent and decaying male mummies shuffling in pursuit of whoever will become their next victim. The literary mummy, on the contrary, is usually a seductive female whose abject character is betrayed by disturbing physical details.⁴ As such, she represents both the fascination and the revulsion the "Orient" constructed by nineteenth century scientists, artists and politicians exercises on the West.
- 5 Released in 2017, the film *The Mummy*, directed by Alex Kurtzman, pertains to a form of mummy complex insofar as it demonstrates the way Orientalist discourse can be preserved and even revived by the cinematographic industry. As the first instalment in the Dark Universe series, the film was meant as a way to give new life to the Universal monsters that were the heroes of dozens of movies from the 1920s until the late 1950s. Many of these films were inspired by nineteenth century literary monsters such as Dracula, Frankenstein's creature or the mummy. Interestingly, while setting the action

of his movie in the present time, Alex Kurtzman not only brings some figures of Victorian literature back to life, but first and foremost revives the original meaning of the mummy as it was developed by late-Victorian and Edwardian writers of imperial Gothic fiction. As a consequence, *The Mummy* may be read as an Orientalist tale for our time, in keeping with the ideology the mummy first came to embody in literary works at the turn of the century.

The Mummy in Fiction: a Figure of the Imperial Other

- 6 Before we tackle the way Orientalism is constructed in Alex Kurtzman's 2017 film, it is necessary to look back at the literary origins of the character of Ahmanet, the mummy that comes back to life in the movie, to examine how the mummy imagined by late-Victorian and Edwardian writers is depicted as a figure of the imperial Other and, as such, as a threat for the men who discover her as well as the civilisation they belong to at large.
- 7 Mummy fiction, as a consequence of the geopolitical context in which it appeared, was very much an Orientalist genre. The development of archaeology, and of Egyptology in particular, is historically linked with imperialism and Western domination in the East. The birth of Egyptology as a systematic science happened as part of the military operations led by Napoleon in Egypt (1798). Along with the regular army came a whole army of scientists determined to conquer the mysteries of Egyptian antiquity and appropriate its objects. Throughout the nineteenth century, Egyptology played an important part in the production of a discourse about the Orient and therefore participated in the invention of an Orient that only existed in the Western imagination.
- 8 The Orient which, according to Edward Said, was thus produced by linguists, scientists, historians, archaeologists, but also writers of fiction, is clearly opposed to the West as it was conceived in the nineteenth century: instead of the rationality of the Western mind, the Orient evinced an irrational understanding of the world, based on its belief in magic and the supernatural. Similarly, while the West was supposed to stand for masculine values, the East was regarded as essentially feminine which, in Victorian terms, not only meant that it was weak and in need of protection and guidance but also that it could be dangerously seductive and demonstrate devious sexual appetites. As a consequence, the imperial project was as much a civilising mission as it was a rescue mission for populations that needed to be saved from their own inclinations and for objects that they would be unable to care for. Anne McClintock underlines how "gender dynamics were, from the outset, fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise" (McClintock 7). What Said describes as the West's will "to control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world" is narrativised as gendered exchanges, much like the relationship between Gustave Flaubert and the courtesan Kuchuk Hanem which is analysed by Said as the paradigm of Orientalist discourse:

He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was "typically Oriental". My argument is that Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands out for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled. (Said 6)

- 9 The character of the mummy, such as it is described in mummy fiction, is as “typically Oriental” as Kuchuk Hanem may have been thought to be by Flaubert and his readers. Indeed the female mummy⁵ epitomises many of the characteristics of the Orient imagined by the West. The motif of the mummy, asleep in her tomb and waiting to be awakened by the male archaeologist who will discover her can be connected with the gendered rhetoric which commonly describes imperial territories as lascivious females waiting to be conquered (in both a military and a romantic sense) by a Western adventurer.⁶ For instance, Ma-Mee, the queen imagined by Haggard in his “Smith and the Pharaohs” (1913) seems to summon the archaeologist to discover her tomb: “something seemed to attract him towards a little *wadi*” (12) “something seemed to call on him to come and see” (18). In many texts, the discovered mummy is soon uncovered by the archaeologist in a process which aroused a lot of interest in the nineteenth century and was often described—and eroticised—in fiction. The public unrolling of a mummy was indeed a very popular form of scientific entertainment as it was meant to reveal shiny amulets and mysterious papyri which may have been hidden between the wrappings. Thus, in Bram Stoker’s *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, the unwrapping constitutes the climax of the novel and of the “Great Experiment” meant to bring the mummy back to life in order to penetrate the mystery of Ancient Egypt. The notion of uncovering, of revealing something hidden, is reminiscent of Orientalist discourse insofar as, Ella Shohat states, “the inaccessibility of the veiled woman, mirroring the mystery of the Orient itself, requires a process of Western unveiling for comprehension” (Shohat 32). The process of unwrapping which Bradley Deane describes as “imperial striptease” can be read as a fictional variation on the motif of the unveiling of the Orient, so that the mummy’s wrappings become “the veil of sexualized Orientalism” (Deane 391).
- 10 However, “the fatal curiosity that is ever prompting man to draw the veil from woman” (Haggard 1886, 147), as Haggard describes the irrepressible desire which is also a quest for the truth, is always bound to fail. The Orient cannot be made sense of, it cannot be unveiled and understood. Thomas Richards analyses the Victorian enterprise he calls the imperial archive as an attempt to control the Orient and give it a form that can be more easily apprehended. The production of maps, drawings and texts was such that, according to Edward Said, “the Orient studied was a textual universe” (Richards 53). An echo of this idea can be found in mummy fiction where the bodies of mummies are often represented as a text to be deciphered. Their parchment-like bodies, however, do not yield anything and can even be misinterpreted. In *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, even though by their own admission, “hieroglyphic writing is not quite mastered yet” (Stoker 103), the characters persist in their effort to read Queen Tera and make sense of her and the texts that surround her—and eventually perish in the attempt in the first ending of the novel (1903). This motif of the mummy as an undecipherable text can be found in Alex Kurtzman’s movie where Ahmanet, played by Sofia Boutella, appears covered in stylised characters inspired by the *Book of the Dead*. This text is never explained throughout the film so that instead of helping to make sense of Ahmanet, it reinforces her mystery and makes her perfectly undecipherable.
- 11 Moreover, as an embodiment of the Orient and therefore of “unimaginable antiquity, inhuman beauty, boundless distance” to use Edward Said’s words (Said 167), the mummy inspires contradictory feelings to the Western man who discovers her. As the latter hovers between attraction and repulsion, it may be hard to decide whether he

means to harm her or marry her. The very act of discovery is steeped in both sensuality and violence as the archaeologist forces his way into the tomb to answer the mummy's summons. In Haggard's novella, "Smith and the Pharaohs", the eponymous character has to dig furiously to clear the entrance of the tomb, a "virgin rock" (12)⁷ which turns out to have been broken once before. As he eventually achieves what he calls "violating a tomb" (15), he has to deal with a sense of guilt which emphasises the awareness of the transgression he is committing. In the same way, the leitmotiv of the mummy's unrolling is always tinted with an underlying violent desire which can sometimes take the upper hand. In *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, the narrator describes his growing excitement as the wrappings are torn away and the perfectly preserved body of Queen Tera is revealed. In many texts pertaining to mummy fiction, this sexual violence, metaphorically expressed by the penetration of the tomb, and then again by the act of unrolling, is constantly intertwined with the romantic hopes expressed by the characters, as is the case with Smith in Haggard's novella or by the narrator of H.D. Everett's novel, *Iras: A Mystery*, in which the archaeologist eventually marries his mummy whose return to life is rather doubtful. In imperial terms, the seduction exercised by the mummy serves to justify the desire to possess her through marriage, a desire which is extended to the "virgin" colonial territory also awaiting conquest. However, the danger of yielding to the seduction of the Orient is constantly suggested by the abject details one cannot disregard: Queen Tera's bloody stump left by her severed hand, Iras' "dead stick of a hand" (Everett 102), and Ma-Mee's "withered and paper-white" (Haggard 1913, 20) hand point out to the illusory ambition of obtaining the mummy's hand in marriage.

- 12 The fragile balance between attraction and repulsion can be found in Alex Kurtzman's *The Mummy*, a feature which distinguishes it from classic Universal mummy films in which the mummy is invariably a wizened male swathed in decaying wrappings. On the contrary, Ahmanet's strategically placed wrappings only serve to emphasise the actress's figure while the choice of a female mummy blurs the relationship established with the male protagonist.⁸ Indeed, each of the scenes in which Nick Morton (Tom Cruise) is brought together with Ahmanet turns out to present a curious combination of flirting and violence. Thus, when Ahmanet first tries to sacrifice Nick in the ruins of Waverley Abbey, the way she caresses his chest while straddling his body introduces an ambiguous sexual dimension to the scene. Similarly, the last confrontation between the two characters alternates exchanges of vicious blows with flirtatious moments between Ahmanet and Nick. The ambiguity of their relationship is underlined when Nick presents his eventual rejection of the mummy's offer to make him immortal as a breakup by telling her: "we're never gonna happen. It's not me: it's you". This parody of a breakup scene comes right after a reminder of the mummy's essentially revolting animal nature as she licks Nick's cheek with her reptilian tongue.
- 13 However seductive, the mummy, as a metaphor of the Orient, is always dangerous as the spectator is repeatedly warned. The same danger is expressed in mummy fiction as encounters with mummies can lead to death (*The Jewel of Seven Stars*, *Iras: a Mystery*) or madness ("Smith and the Pharaohs", "My New Year's Eve with the Mummies"). For this very reason, much like imperial territories, the mummy has to be contained and controlled. This is what is meant by the desire for the archaeologists to put their mummies under lock (or in wedlock) in their private museums. In Kurtzman's film, the necessity to contain the mummy is also given a sexual dimension as the scene which

shows Ahmanet bound in Henry Jekyll's lab was inspired, according to Kurtzman, by “a bondage photo of a woman in chains” (Kurtzman, audio commentary).

- 14 This brief overview of a few motifs of mummy fiction highlights how *The Mummy*, without being an adaptation of any specific text, brings back to life the Orientalist discourse ingrained in imperial Gothic literature—much more so than the many mummy films which preceded it.⁹

From Isis to ISIS: Orientalism in Alex Kurtzman's *The Mummy*

- 15 The motif of the mummy's curse is inseparable from its historical context (see Luckhurst) as well as from the spectacular discovery in 1922 of the tomb of Tutankhamun, which revived superstitious fears about such curses. This explains why most of the classic mummy movies are entirely or partly set in the 1920s: it is the case for Karl Freund's *The Mummy* (1932) which starts in 1921 as well as its remake, Stephen Sommers' *The Mummy* (1999), whose action is set in 1923. Imperial and Orientalist discourse can be made out in the representation of the mummy in some of the earlier movies and in Freund's *The Mummy* in particular. However, as years passed and Universal produced a series of movies which are no more than weak reiterations of Freund's movie,¹⁰ this discourse followed the path of British imperialism and progressively disappears in the background so that the films only retain the classic Hollywood representation of what Jack Shaheen calls “reel bad Arabs” (Shaheen). The ideology of British imperialism would hardly seem relevant to modern representations of the mummy's curse so that Stephen Sommers chooses to redistribute the roles, making a group of American treasure hunters the enemy in his 1999 film while an Egyptian occult order led by the mysterious Ardeth Bey regularly comes to the rescue of the heroes. The same rejection of an imperialist discourse would be expected to apply to Alex Kurtzman's movie whose originality is to set the plot in the present day. As it turns out, his movie not only rests on an Orientalist imagination but brings it up to date to resonate in the world we live in today and in the context of American imperialism. The Orient may have a new face but continues to be depicted as essentially other and, as such, as the enemy the West has to face, over and over again. The following statement by Matthew Bernstein very much holds true when analysing the latest cinematic representation of the mummy's curse: “Western narrative and ethnographic cinemas of the late nineteenth and twentieth century inherited the narrative and visual traditions, as well as the cultural assumptions, on which Orientalism was based, and filmmakers discovered how popular Orientalism could be” (Bernstein 3).
- 16 The choice of setting the action of the film in 2017 stems from Kurtzman's wish to “tell a story that felt relevant and fresh while also paying homage to all of the things that built the foundations of these monsters” as well as from “the need to ground our movie in the real world” (“Rooted in reality”, bonus features of the DVD *The Mummy*). These words are used by Kurtzman to justify the choice of certain sets, such as the National History Museum in London, home to Henry Jekyll's organisation, Prodigium. However, while the building may be familiar to the modern spectator, it seems to ground the action in a Victorian rather than contemporary reality (the National History Museum

opened in 1881), as does the presence of Henry Jekyll whose handwriting, glimpsed at the beginning of the movie, is decidedly not of our time.

- 17 The opening of the movie itself—the funeral of a crusader in 1127 A.D.—sets the action in the past. This scene, far from grounding the film in our contemporary reality, contributes to suggesting an ideological framework based on the historical opposition between the Orient and the Occident, Islam and Christianity. The drill that reveals the crusaders' tomb as it bores a hole into London's past, as it were, brings the spectator back to today's reality through the use of the Crossrail project as well as of some real footage of an archaeological excavation. The flashback that immediately follows this discovery, as Henry Jekyll tells the story of the “cunning and ruthless” Ahmanet, draws on the same opposition: as the London of the crusaders has become modern London, the Orient represented by the Egyptian character and the Mesopotamia where she was buried alive has become the modern Orient that is still at war with the West—as the very next scene explicitly tells the spectator. Here, the editing serves to build the parallels and oppositions the whole film relies on, suggesting to the spectator a binary understanding of the characters and what they stand for.
- 18 The archaeological site discovered in London is echoed by the Assyrian site glimpsed for a few seconds, in a slow, contemplative movement of the camera, before it is fired upon by a group of armed men. The place is presented by a caption as “Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization” followed by “currently known as Iraq”. The insertion of the shooting between the two parts of the caption serves to suggest that the replacement of Mesopotamia by Iraq has erased what the place stood for: civilisation and the birth thereof. Instead, the place seems to be teeming with terrorists bent on defacing or destroying all traces of a former civilisation. This scene of destruction as well as the following one, which leads to the revelation of Ahmanet's tomb, are the only two scenes that take place in Iraq—the rest of the film being set in England or in Egypt as far as the flashbacks about Ahmanet's past are concerned. The country is therefore very summarily portrayed as a place of violence and absurdity; a portrait, in short, of the new Orient of Orientalism. This place is inhabited by violent, armed, faceless men¹¹ shouting and shooting at impassive statues and then running away as soon as they feel threatened by the American army. The historical and political evolutions induced by the end of the British Empire do not seem to have brought any change to the representation of the “Oriental” as an irrational, cowardly character at odds with any form of civilisation. No other Iraqi character is presented to the spectator so that the association of the Middle East with terrorism is immediately suggested. This association, reinforced in the West in the years following 9/11, contributes to grounding the movie in contemporary Orientalist representations, as does the context of the battle of Mosul which is the reason for the presence of Nick Morton and his sidekick, Vail. The eternal war of the West against the Orient, first embodied by the figures of the crusaders at the opening of the film, has now become a war on terror against the fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Even though the terrorist organisation is never mentioned by name, the well-known images of destruction and the attack on the archaeological site immediately bring to the modern viewer's mind images of the war in the Middle East as well as the memory of the destruction of Palmyra, among other sites.
- 19 The choice of the region of Mosul as the setting for the discovery of an Egyptian mummy hardly seems to make sense, historically or geographically.¹² Jekyll's narrative

only states that Ahmanet's body was carried far from Egypt as a consequence of her crime but does not propose any explanation for this fact. Similarly, the strangeness of the discovery of her tomb in Iraq is flippantly dismissed in a short dialogue between the two American soldiers and the archaeologist, Jenny Halsey:

Jenny: Oh my god... It's Egyptian.

Vail: Well, is that unusual?

Nick: We're in the Persian Gulf, Vail.

Vail: Right, Egypt's 1000 miles away so it's unusual.

- 20 No more is said about the rather unconventional location of the Egyptian tomb and the heroes soon leave Iraq to fly back to England. Surprisingly, Alex Kurtzman does not comment on the choice of Iraq in his commentary of the film or in any of the short documentaries that accompany it. Indeed, even though the director insists on the grounding of his narrative in reality, he never seems to find it relevant to justify the geographical setting or geopolitical context he selected to stage a story that has apparently nothing to do with either Iraq or the actions of ISIS in the Middle East. The original choice of Iraq as a location in what appears as a classic mummy's curse narrative only starts to make sense if we question the literary background of the movie. The mummy was, in Victorian and Edwardian fiction, a figure of the Orient and of the danger it represents for the West, its religious order and what was believed to be its civilisation. In other words, the mummy embodies what Tzvetan Todorov calls "the fear of barbarians" (see Todorov). As the face of the "barbarian" has changed throughout history, following political upsets and an ever-changing distribution of power globally, the mummy, who first stood for colonised people claiming independence and threatening to avenge themselves for the violence of colonisation, has come to represent the threat of the Orient now embodied by radical Islam and terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda or ISIS or, more broadly, by the people the characters of *The Mummy* simply call "the enemy" as they are only defined by their essential opposition to the British and American characters, their essential Otherness. And so, after growing up in the Egypt of Isis, Princess Ahmanet comes back to life in the Iraq of ISIS.

"Evil is real, and it must be opposed" (G.W. Bush, 2002 State of the Union Address): Imperialist Discourse and the Question of Gender

- 21 The geopolitical situation of the United States since 9/11 pervades—perhaps unconsciously—the whole movie, without ever being explicitly mentioned. The mummy is closely related to the political and military situation she finds as she wakes up from her long sleep. Indeed, the military operations taking place in Iraq (in the form of an airstrike) are responsible for the discovery of her tomb.¹³ Unwillingly, Ahmanet becomes involved in the battle opposing the American army and the terrorist group. Given her presence in Iraq, she is almost automatically considered as guilty by association and as her murderous past suggests,¹⁴ she logically chooses the side of the terrorists against the Western (British and American) characters. Her first action is to turn Vail into a zombie before crashing the plane that is taking her to England, killing most of the crew. This crime reinforces her association with terrorism as it evokes the 9/11 attacks. This time, the war with Iraq precedes the criminal hijacking of the plane.

This war seems justified by the violence of the terrorist group and its will to destroy what the film describes as the “cradle of civilisation”. What first appeared as a rescue mission for antique artefacts¹⁵ that, according to Jenny Halsey need to “stay out of enemy hands”,¹⁶ turns out to achieve the discovery of the weapons of mass destruction—in the shape of an Egyptian mummy—which were the reason for the war in Iraq in the first place. She therefore appears as the embodiment of the undefined threat described by George W. Bush in his State of the Union address in 2002, following the attacks of September 11: “This [Iraq] is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world”. This phrase coincidentally echoes the mummy’s name, Ahmanet, “the hidden one”.¹⁷ When the work of the Egyptian priests who tried to keep Ahmanet hidden is destroyed by an American airstrike, the mummy takes up the mission of the terrorist group by crashing a plane in England, destroying a place of history and science¹⁸ and trying to recruit allies who will help to “take [her] vengeance upon humanity”. Moreover, as the film develops in the context of a religious war with the reference to the Crusades, the choice of Waverley Abbey as the mummy’s “headquarters” seems to suggest that she is bent on appropriating or destroying what is left of this symbol of Christianity.

- 22 If Ahmanet is a figure of evil insofar as she embodies the terrorist threat associated with the Middle East, her identity as a woman also contributes to her monstrous character. By taking up the tradition of representing the mummy as a female, Alex Kurtzman also renews the Orientalist tradition of endowing the Orient with feminine features and characteristics. This both serves to explain the attraction exercised by the Orient on the West—associated to masculine values—and justify the dynamics of control and domination established within the British Empire.
- 23 The mummy, however, is dangerous because she rejects traditional gender roles and embodies a type of femininity that threatens the patriarchal order. This is suggested in Victorian and Edwardian mummy fiction where the mummy is represented appropriating male roles and attributes, such as political power (Tera in *The Jewel of Seven Stars*) or sexual initiative (Ma-Mee in “Smith and the Pharaohs” who calls the archaeologist to come to her, or Iras in *Iras: A Mystery* who starts unwrapping her own arm to invite the archaeologist to further undress her). Many studies underline the link between the way the New Woman—whose claim for independence anticipated the Suffragette movement—threatened male hegemony in Great Britain at the turn of the century and the way the mummy threatens imperial hegemony in mummy fiction by refusing the roles assigned to her (as a woman, as a figure of the colonised and even as a dead person). Thus, Bradley Deane argues that “the collapse of distinctions [coloniser/colonised, masculinity/femininity] suggests a darker fragmentation of identity and an emasculating reversal of the imperial hierarchy” (Deane 402). The same blurring of lines between genders appears quite clearly in Kurtzman’s movie while the character of the mummy has been repeatedly defined as a feminist by Sofia Boutella who plays the part of Ahmanet. The actress underlined the originality of Kurtzman’s movie in his choice of a female mummy, when most Hollywood mummies are male: “I love that they gave this to a woman. Ahmanet is the definition of a feminist: strong, powerful and opinionated”.¹⁹ Boutella somehow seems to forget that these are the very reasons why Ahmanet is eventually defeated and utterly destroyed by the male character. Ahmanet may be a feminist figure but she is eventually punished for her transgressions and her trespasses against male hegemony. Her sins are many

throughout the movie but her main one remains the murder of her father and baby brother: by this act, she stands against a patriarchal order that will not give her any access to power. By attempting to usurp the power from her brother to establish a matriarchal dynasty, she becomes a figure of evil, as her alliance with the god Set suggests.

- 24 Ahmanet is also guilty of manipulating men to achieve her goals and using her sexuality to prevail over them. Thus, she converts a small police squad into zombie allies through a vampiric kiss that drains them of their life and strength while allowing her to rebuild her own body. The motif of vampirism, present in some texts pertaining to mummy fiction, had already been used by Stephen Sommers in his movie *The Mummy* as Imhotep also reconstructs his body by absorbing the life of his enemies. Kurtzman adds a sexual dimension to this motif by representing this act of vampirism as a kiss. As a consequence, female sexuality appears as dangerous and likely to turn men into living dead creatures ready to obey the mummy's will. The reversal of gender roles also appears in the way Ahmanet objectifies the male body, not only by absorbing its life, but by making it the object of her gaze and desire. This appears most clearly in the scene where Ahmanet subjects Nick to a humiliating examination in the ruins of Waverley Abbey in a comedic parody of the traditional unwrapping scene. Bound to the altar, Nick is powerless against the mummy as she considers various parts of his body (eyes, teeth, and finally his chest). Her tendency to lick Nick's cheek whenever she gets the chance to also suggests her power to use the male body according to her whims. Finally, she utterly unmans Nick when, just as Jenny is prompting him to "kick [Ahmanet's] ass", the mummy sends him flying through the air with a mere punch.
- 25 Although she is portrayed as a strong female character, Ahmanet is mostly considered so because she appropriates masculine characteristics or attributes. Thus, the object of her quest is to complete the phallic dagger she needs to rise to power again. Once the dagger is shattered, Ahmanet is soon defeated as Nick turns her own weapon against her by kissing her to death, as it were. The masculine qualities of the mummy can also be perceived in the portrayal of Ahmanet's physique as androgynous and the way her voice is used in the film to suggest the ambiguity of her gender. Thus, her otherwise soft voice becomes very deep whenever she asks Nick to give in to her will. Her authority therefore rests on her ability to appropriate masculine features, her capacity to perform the male gender.²⁰ Whenever the focus is on her femininity, however, she appears as an extremely seductive figure, seen through the eyes of Nick in a number of dream sequences which only show a fragmented vision of her body. The close-ups on her eyes, hands or feet echo the description of Oriental women in Orientalist literature²¹ and contribute to portraying the mummy as an object of desire. The monster vanishes to reveal Ahmanet no longer as a mummy but as the woman she was in her lifetime. However alluring she may appear, the symbolic association developed throughout the movie between Ahmanet and the figure of the Gorgon Medusa, whose screaming face is suggested by the cover of the mummy's sarcophagus, reminds the viewer that she is not to be trusted and that she is essentially a threat to the male character.²² This notion is reinforced by her association with the spiders she can control and whose movements she often emulates, as well as with the reptiles which she also resembles at times. Ahmanet is not only a strong female character, she is also a figure of sinful femininity, precisely because she repeatedly asserts her strength and her will.

- 26 On the contrary, the character of Jenny, played by Annabelle Wallis, embodies a more traditional construction of femininity: the blonde, fragile woman who constantly needs to be rescued by the tough American soldier is obviously a far cry from what the mummy stands for. The film represents the tension between the two paradigms—which echo the tension between East and West—as Nick constantly struggles with his desire for the two women. If the mummy often seems to prevail, thanks to the sexual gratification as well as the infinite power she offers Nick in each of the dream sequences, Jenny eventually triumphs by appealing to the “good man” “fighting to get out” that she perceives in the American soldier. This triumph of his “good side” eventually determines the identity of the monster he is reborn as at the end of the movie—a monster, Jenny and Jekyll hope, who will become useful to fight evil in any form; the perfect cure to what Jekyll describes as an “infectious disease”.
- 27 The struggle between good and evil is indeed at the centre of the movie. The film’s Orientalism as well as its choice to set the action in the context of the war against terror echoes the rhetoric and the dichotomy constructed by George W. Bush in his State of the Union address in 2002. Indeed, the words pronounced by George W. Bush (“evil is real, and it must be opposed”) can find an echo in Henry Jekyll’s words as he presents his organisation, Prodigium, to Nick Morton: “We recognise, examine, contain and destroy evil”; “evil is the shadow that exists just outside our world, continuously searching for a way to come in, for a way to become flesh and blood”. Where evil stands, however, is difficult to say: if the mummy clearly represents the most dangerous threat of the movie, Nick himself is a rather ambiguous character. Jekyll describes him as “a thief, physically capable, compulsively devious, and utterly devoid of soul” to explain why the mummy chose him as the ideal candidate to bring evil to earth in a material shape. Obviously, Henry Jekyll himself bears within him the dichotomy between good and evil and hovers between his two identities as Jekyll and Hyde in almost every scene he appears in, turning into the vicious Hyde whenever he has not taken the serum that helps him maintain the identity of Jekyll.²³ Because traces of evil can be found within the Western civilisation the Oriental mummy comes in contact with, she easily converts a number of people, through vampirism, making them the enemies of their own civilisation. Her greatest challenge is to “turn” the American soldier, Nick, by making him the receptacle of the god Set. However, the process fails when Nick decides to listen to the good angel represented by Jenny so that the end of the movie shows the emergence of an American hero, standing up for good. In the Orientalist perspective suggested by the film, the terrorist attack led by Ahmanet eventually has the reverse effect as Nick finds redemption and can be said to “have responded magnificently, with courage and compassion, strength and resolve” as George W. Bush said of the American people in his address.
- 28 The unanimously negative reception of Kurtzman’s movie underlines how disappointing it is when compared to the iconic mummy films of the twentieth century. However, as a neo-Victorian reinterpretation of the motifs and ideology of mummy fiction, *The Mummy* presents interesting features in the way it adapts the discourse of British imperialism and Orientalism to the context of contemporary American imperialism and gender politics. The mummy, as was the case at the turn of the century, serves to convey a number of anxieties about Otherness, the decline of Western civilisation and the imagined threat represented by the Orient. The eternal return of the mummy is also the eternal return of the fears that inhabited the

Victorians. In moments of political and social upheaval, our society turns to the monsters of the past to embody threats (or imaginary threats) over which one can eventually triumph. As in the nineteenth century, Egyptomania and mummymania still provide attractive figures which, by inspiring both attraction and repulsion, serve to assert the rejection of a monstrous Other—whether it is a female or an Oriental Other. However, the film is not as Manichaean as it appears as the spectator is also made to feel pity for the mummy while the Western characters are shown as responsible for the curse they bring upon themselves by encouraging the evil in themselves and being, in many ways, quite comparable to the terrorists represented at the opening of the movie. Nevertheless, the last few minutes of the film, in spite of the doubts uttered by Jekyll concerning Nick's morals, offer the spectator a triumphant image of the character's victory over the axis of evil as Nick is reborn as the defender of Western civilisation, launching a new crusade as he rides away in an unidentified desert that stands for the Orient at large. The words from an Egyptian prayer of resurrection presented at the opening of the movie are as relevant to the Ancient Egyptian culture which has been represented over and over again in literary as well as cinematographic fictions as they are to the Orientalist images and ideological framework developed in the nineteenth century: "We live today, we shall live again / In many forms shall we return".

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The Mummy. Dir. Stephen Sommers. Perf. Brendan Fraser, Rachel Weisz. Universal Pictures, 1999.

The Mummy. Dir. Alex Kurtzman. Perf. Tom Cruise, Sofia Boutella, Annabelle Wallis, Russell Crowe. Universal Pictures, 2017.

NOTES

1. For instance, *The Monster*, by Georges Méliès (1903), *The Mummy*, by Karl Freund (1932), or even Wilfred Jackson's short animated movie *Egyptian Melodies* (1931), among many other productions.
2. See for instance, *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903) by Bram Stoker, *Pharos the Egyptian* (1898) by Guy Boothby, "Lot No. 249" (1894) by Arthur Conan Doyle, among others.
3. See, for instance, Richard Marsh's *The Beetle: A Mystery* (1897) or Sax Rohmer's "The Valley of the Sorceress" (1920).
4. One can think, for instance, of the bloody stump left by the severed hand on the mummy of Queen Tera in Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars*.
5. There are very few male mummies in mummy fiction. The nameless mummy of Conan Doyle's "Lot No. 249" is one of the few exceptions. Filmic representations of the mummy, on the contrary, show a much greater proportion of male mummies, Alex Kurtzman's film being a rare exception. *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* by Seth Holt and Michael Carreras (1971) and *The Awakening* by Mike Newell (1980), both adaptations of *The Jewel of Seven Stars* by Stoker also centre around a female mummy.
6. For instance, this is how Richard Burton describes the coast of Zanzibar glimpsed in the distance: "Earth, sea, and sky, all seemed wrapped in a soft and sensuous repose. [...] The island itself seemed over-indolent, and unwilling to rise; it showed no trace of mountain or crag, but all was voluptuous with gentle swellings, with the rounded contours of the girl-negress, and the brown-red tinge of its warm skin showed through its gauzy attire of green" (Burton 28-29).
7. This phrase echoes the well-known metaphor of "the rape of the Nile" used to describe the exploitation of Egypt by Western powers.
8. In the mummy films of the 1930s and 1940s, there may also be a certain amount of sexual attraction on the part of the mummies Imhotep and Kharis but their love always remains unrequited as their appearance only provokes fear and disgust.
9. In his article, "THE MUMMY in Context", Richard Freeman shows which themes of mummy fiction can be found in various mummy movies but I want to argue that Kurtzman's film is closer than any of them to mummy fiction in terms of the ideology it conveys.
10. For instance, *The Mummy's Hand* (1940), *The Mummy's Tomb* (1942), *The Mummy's Ghost* (1944), or *The Mummy's Curse* (1944).
11. The scarves that conceal their features act as a variation on the motif of the veil.
12. In his review of Kurtzman's movie, Daniel Potter, Assistant Curator at the National Museum of Scotland, explains that burial in a distant land was not a likely solution to get rid of an unwanted dead: "no matter their transgression, the Egyptian way of dealing with such undesirables was not to put great effort into macabrely imprisoning them in distant lands. They

instead preferred to chisel out their names and images from monuments, effectively erasing them from existence". "*The Mummy* reviewed by an Egyptologist: 'Tom Cruise's Late Egyptian is passable'". <https://inews.co.uk/culture/film/mummy-reviewed-egyptologist-tom-cruises-late-egyptian-passable/amp/> (last accessed 26 December 2019).

13. The historical link between archaeology and warfare that can be dated back to Napoleon's campaign in Egypt also appears in Stephen Sommers' *The Mummy* as the city of Hamunaptra, where the mummy of Imhotep is hidden, is the scene of a battle set in 1923 between the French Foreign Legion and Tuareg troupes.

14. The flashback narrated by Henry Jekyll tells the spectator how Ahmanet murdered her father, her stepmother and their baby son and associated with the god Set, himself a fratricide and the brother of Isis.

15. Nick and Vail repeat to each other that they are not looters but "liberators of precious antiquities".

16. The rescue fantasy is a common motif of Orientalism in Hollywood movies and in fictional representations of archaeology (see Shohat and Stam).

17. The name "Ahmanet" may be a variation of the goddess Amunet's name which is the feminine version of the name "Amun" and is therefore more accurately translated as "the female hidden one".

18. The damage she inflicts on the collections of the Natural History Museum can be seen as an echo of the destruction of the Assyrian archaeological site at the opening of the movie.

19. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2017/06/06/sofia-boutella-says-her-mummy-definition-feminist/102508018/> (last accessed 26 December 2019).

20. By navigating various gender roles, Ahmanet underlines what Judith Butler identified as the "performative construction of gender" (see Butler).

21. For instance, Edward Lane, in his description of Egyptian women, only focuses on the parts of the body that are visible to the Western visitor: the feet, hands and eyes of the women who are otherwise veiled in public spaces. He therefore offers a fragmented vision of Egyptian women as is suggested by the series of engravings presenting different types of feet or hands.

22. One may think of Freud's contention that the image of Medusa's head represents the masculine fear of castration (see Freud). In *Women and Power*, Mary Beard also reminds her reader that the image of the Gorgon Medusa is an extremely common signifier of the way "the dominance of the male is violently reasserted against the illegitimate power of the woman". (Beard 73).

23. He also appears to have a lot in common with the terrorist group represented at the beginning of the movie as he declares himself ready to destroy what Jenny describes as "a living witness to a history that we barely know".

ABSTRACTS

As part of the Dark Universe reboot of Universal Monsters, Alex Kurtzman's movie, *The Mummy* (2017) was meant to give new life to the Victorian monsters that fascinated Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s. As it happened, the film also gave new life to the ideological dynamics of Victorian and Edwardian mummy fiction by displacing them to reflect current global issues. Indeed, the anxieties and obsessions put forward by the authors of mummy fiction (Bram Stoker, Conan Doyle, etc.) within the genre of imperial Gothic are dramatised in Kurtzman's film and

brought up to date to resonate with contemporary issues. The original tales of the mummy constructed the female mummy as a terrifying as well as enthralling embodiment of an imperial Other who comes back to life to wreak revenge upon the transgressive male archaeologists who disturbed her rest. Therefore, the well-known motif of the mummy's curse acts as a metaphor for imperial dynamics as well as an ominous projection of what may happen, should the Empire strike back. The gender of literary mummies also points to the fear of a patriarchal society confronted to the growing struggle of women for social and political empowerment. The political and gendered dimensions of mummy fiction were left out of the numerous film adaptations which only retain the monstrous character of a dead body come back to life to threaten the living. Alex Kurtzman's film marks the return of the Victorian mummy as a female embodying radical Otherness and the threat of an Orient embroiled in an endless war with the West.

Premier opus de la franchise destinée à redonner vie aux Universal Monsters des années 1940 et 1950 inspirés par la littérature britannique du XIX^e siècle, *The Mummy* d'Alex Kurtzman (2017) redonne également vie aux dynamiques idéologiques qui sont celles de la littérature victorienne et édouardienne, qui a vu émerger la figure de la momie. Genre éminemment politique, la *mummy fiction*, telle qu'elle prend forme sous la plume d'auteurs tels que Bram Stoker ou Arthur Conan Doyle, se fait l'expression des angoisses et des obsessions liées à l'Empire britannique en déclin. Le film de Kurtzman, en plaçant le récit de la découverte de la momie à notre époque, offre un écho contemporain aux problématiques impériales de la fin du XIX^e siècle. Les premiers récits de momie de la littérature populaire britannique ont construit la femme momifiée en tant que figure à la fois terrifiante et séduisante d'un Autre impérial revenu à la vie pour se venger de la transgression commise par l'archéologue qui l'aurait tirée de son sommeil. Ainsi, le célèbre motif de la malédiction de la momie peut être interprété comme une métaphore des dynamiques impériales et de la menace qui pèse sur la métropole, si l'Empire s'avisait de contre-attaquer. En outre, le genre des momies littéraires indique également la crainte d'une société patriarcale confrontée à une lutte pour l'autonomie politique et sociale de la femme en plein essor. Si les dimensions politique et genrée ont le plus souvent été oubliées dans les nombreuses adaptations cinématographiques des récits de momie, le film d'Alex Kurtzman marque le retour de la momie victorienne en tant qu'incarnation d'une altérité radicale et d'un Orient éternellement en guerre contre l'Occident.

INDEX

oeuvre citée *Mummy* (The), *Jewel of Seven Stars* (The), *Smith and the Pharaohs*, *She*, *Irish: A Mystery*, *Lost in a Pyramid*, or *the Mummy's Curse*

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