

Ägyptenrezeption im Mumienfilm: The Mummy 1932 und Remakes. By YVONNE VOSMANN. Philippika, vol. 96. Wiesbaden: HARRASSOWITZ VERLAG, 2016. Pp. 144, illus. €34 (paper).

This publication brings to mind an issue that we have wondered about for a long time: Can a classificatory approach be developed with respect to popular images about ancient Egypt (specifically mummy movies in the horror genre) to help us understand the perceptions of audiences and improve their Egyptological awareness? To a large extent our interest (and Vosmann's also) is to improve the educational quality of a genre which has grown up by manipulating its audiences with recycled factoids and expectable plot elements. An educational goal calls upon scholars to research literary archetypes and archaeological realities deeply and to ask how these things can be harnessed creatively to help us experience the past and become re-enthused about it. While viewing any movie about the ancient world, an inescapable question emerges in the mind of the scholar: To what extent does this popular material properly represent truth? If confusion is created in minds of viewers, should we care? Is the function of cinema to replace memory with a facile muddle of fact and fiction?

It is likely that the concept forming the operative part of Vosmann's title, "Reception," is unfamiliar to most readers of this journal. "Reception" has been defined as a historical idea having to do with "the meanings imputed to historical events" (Marcuse 2017), and deals specifically with the "ways" events are portrayed (by authors) and moreover, with the "ways" in which the portrayals thus created are themselves "perceived" by a population. When it comes to cinema, the notion of the *authored event* is the *film plot*, and the *population* is the *audience of viewers watching the plot unfold*. Of greatest importance here is the idea that the perceptions of audience members concerning what they are watching are influenced by awarenesses that pre-date the content being viewed.

The total context of the viewer's understanding is key. His or her reactions to the newly created Egyptological combination (like a mummy film) tap into previous sets of meanings, often very complex ones drawing on everything from plastic toys, childrens' books, old National Geographic articles (like those containing vivid color paintings of Egyptians—e.g., those of H. M. Herget, 1941), Sunday school lessons, etc., mixed in with literary archetypes of a bygone age (e.g., the vengeful occultist Cagliostro).

Victorian and pre-Victorian authors contending with mummy plots were playing with material already old in their own time, decades before the motion pictures in Vosmann's study were produced. A short list includes Jane Webb Loudon, *The Mummy—a Tale of the 22nd Century* (1827); Edgar Allan Poe, "Some Words with a Mummy" (1845); Louisa May Alcott, "Lost in a Pyramid or the Mummy's Curse" (1869); A. Conan Doyle, "The Ring of Thoth" (1890) and "Lot No. 249" (1892); Bram Stoker, *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903); and H. Rider Haggard, "Smith and the Pharaohs" (1912). These works contain recognizable genre elements conscripted to add meaning in mummy movies.

Vosmann examines her selections in an effort to discover some of these meanings: *The Mummy* (1932) (Universal Studios, director—Karl Freund, mummy—Boris Karloff); *The Mummy* (1959) (Hammer Studios, director—Terence Fisher, mummy—Christopher Lee); *The Mummy Lives* (1993) (Global Pictures, director—Gerry O'Hara, mummy—Tony Curtis); and *The Mummy* (1999) (Universal Studios, director—Stephen Sommers, mummy—Arnold Vosloo). All of these films (excluding the Tony Curtis vehicle) are essentially versions or "remakes" of the Karloff film, although it may be argued that the greatest similarity among them is the use of the words "the" and "mummy" in their titles.

The same can be said of the 2017 Universal release starring Tom Cruise (once again titled *The Mummy*), which appeared after the publication of Vosmann's book. This film is even weaker than the others as far as its Egyptological underpinnings are concerned. The differences between these films are more significant than their similarities, such as Egyptological accuracy or plot themes, which, though discussed, do not seem to be a major concern of Vosmann's, who is much more dedicated to detailed analysis of cinematic issues, like scene timings and shifts. Furthermore, calling a film a "remake" can be very misleading and even dismiss the value present in an original film project.

During the question-and-answer portion of a recent (November 2017) presentation on mummy science (which lasted two hours), one of the current reviewers was asked whether there was any truth to the idea that mummies were somehow cursed. In fact, the question was asked repeatedly, as if something released from Tutankhamun's tomb (à la Marie Corelli and Arthur Weigall exploiting the occult possibilities of Carnarvon's death in 1923) still walked among us. It was difficult not to conclude

therefore that the modern imagination, like those of so many other eras, finds the most compelling question on earth to be “What is it really like to be cursed?” and “Will I be next?”

One of the most maddening frustrations in studies of mummies in the movies (discussed in Lupton 2003) is that the two diverse and specialized central topics, ancient Egypt and modern cinema, are rarely understood equally well by a single writer. Many authors who emphasize the accuracy, or lack thereof, of the Egyptological elements of a movie are outsiders in the critical analysis of film. The opposite is also frequently the case; students of film writing about mummy movies often analyze actors, directors, and cinematographers in great detail while paying minimal attention to historical accuracy.

A case in point concerns the look of actor Boris Karloff in *The Mummy* (1932). Vosmann (p. 103) quotes the claim of Christine El Mahdy, a popularizer rather than a scholar of Egyptology, that Karloff’s mummy make-up was based on the actual mummy of Thutmose III. However, El Mahdy (1989: 174) shows a photo of Ramesses III, not Thutmose III, next to her caption. Apparently El Mahdy herself remained unaware of this mistake at the time of her own second edition (1991), and Vosmann brought it forward uncritically, although it had been presented correctly in other, easily obtainable sources (e.g., Brier 1994: 313).

More confusing still is the fact that other writers have variously identified the mummy that served as the make-up artist’s (Jack Pierce’s) model for Karloff’s Im-Ho-Tep as Seti I (Glut 1978: 165), or alternatively Seti II (Mank 1989: 24; Pollès 2001: 197), as well as the previously mentioned Ramesses III (Brier 2014: 258). The latter pharaonic mummy has also been proposed as the model not only for Im-Ho-Tep but for Universal’s 1940’s mummy Kharis (Pollès 2001: 201). With so little interest or ability to get these basic “facts” correct, it seems obvious that mummy movies do not justify detailed scrutiny.

The intellectual malaise connected with mummy movies notwithstanding, we persist in the belief that content can be made more accurate without threatening audience enjoyment. More studies of not only mummy movies but of Egypt-based films in general need to be undertaken with the same degree of serious commitment by Egyptologists as has been done by cinephiles. We hope that efforts like Vosmann’s study can continue to enliven discussions about Egyptian mummies and perhaps inspire some future Méliès or Spielberg to create a phantasmagoric masterpiece fairer to Egypt’s ancient dead.

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