“Une géographie intérieure”: The Perpetual Presence of Egypt

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Introduction: “l’Égypte que je portais en moi”

In 1975, the South-African artist William Kentridge, then 20 years old, visited Paris for the very first time. Among the many sketches he made in his travel notebook only three drawings document his visit to the Louvre; an encounter that nevertheless made a profound impression on the young student. From the Louvre collections, Kentridge chose to draw two Egyptian baboons from granite as well as “un gardien du musée se reposant sur la chaise”.¹

In his fascinating Carnets d’Égypte from 2010, Kentridge wonders whether it was his familiarity with baboons from his childhood, during which time these animals were still a common sight in South Africa, that made him document exactly these two objects from the Louvre collections; or perhaps his interest in ethnography as a very necessary addition to the Art Historical canon. But the remainder of his text shows that something else was going on; as Kentridge himself is well aware. It is exactly for that reason that, 35 years later, he decided to compile his Carnets d’Égypte: an exhibition and an accompanying booklet documenting and exploring his relations to Egypt. These relations take a variety of forms. In his Carnets, Kentridge presents us, amongst other things, with drawings of Egyptian themes on old and used papers and books (thus evoking the inherent palimpsest character of things Egyptian?); self-portraits as a seated Old Kingdom scribe; a real “Isis tragedie” (“When does the tour start? I’d like to see the terracottas, the monuments, the marbles, the sarcophagi, the death masks the sarcophagi […]”); musical performances; and even films with wonderful installations like “Nubian landscape”, a pyramid landscape made up of metronomes amidst all kinds of drawings and illustrations referring to Egypt. After having worked on Mozart’s Zauberflöte and its Egyptian themes earlier, Kentridge is very specific about his reasons for undertaking this project and writes:


En renouant avec l’Égypte pour ce nouveau projet, j’avais une préoccupation centrale: je voulais explorer une géographie intérieure, mettre au jour l’Égypte que je portais en moi et plus particulièrement trouver le lien entre ce monde intérieur et les importantes collections de vestiges exposées au Louvre. Ces vestiges constituent à mes yeux un pont entre le monde historique et un monde mythologique [...].

This fascinating statement by one of the leading artists of our time constitutes the ideal overture of this small essay dedicated to that great scholar, because talking about “une géographie intérieure” underlines to what extent Egypt is actually part of us and how Egypt is thus unavoidable, perpetual, and haunts us infinitively. Cultural manifestations, in this case the collections of the Louvre, can help us to arrive at and understand the Egypt we carry within ourselves – if we do not make the mistake of solely understanding these objects as historical sources. Indeed they also, as Kentridge phrases it intuitively, belong to the domain of mythology; forming a bridge between history and, perhaps in more appropriate and Assmannian terms, mnemohistory.

In this article I would like to briefly comment on and introduce a forthcoming book on the relations between history, mnemohistory and material culture with regard to Egypt. The edited volume, entitled Beyond Egyptomania. Objects, Style and Agency is dedicated to Jan Assmann for his 80th birthday, as this article is – to honour him and to thank him for his outstanding contributions to also this field of the Kulturwissenschaften.

**History, mnemohistory and material culture**

The material and intellectual presence of Egypt is at the heart of Western culture, religion and art from Antiquity to the present. *Beyond Egyptomania* aims to provide a long-term and interdisciplinary perspective on Egypt and its impact, taking theories on objects and their agency as main points of departure. The central questions the book addresses are *why*, from the first millennium BC onwards, Egyptian things and concepts are to be found in such a great variety of places throughout European history and *how* we can account for their enduring impact over time. By exploring an object-oriented perspective on this question, the volume aims at contributing to both: recent discussions on the “reception” of

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2 Kentridge, *Carnets d’Égypte*, 56.

3 Miguel John Versluys, ed., *Beyond Egyptomania. Objects, Style and Agency* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019). This article is a slightly altered and adapted draft of the Introduction to that volume.
Egypt and how to move forward in this discipline, as well as current debates on the agency of artefacts across archaeology, anthropology, and art history.

This collection’s point of departure is the hypothesis that the Egypt that is such an important and enduring part of Western culture is not only made up of cultural, religious or artistic concepts – routinely discussed under the heading of reception in one form or another4 – but consists also, or perhaps even primarily, of objects that have oriented and shaped many processes and events throughout history. Those objects, it must immediately be added, do more than simply communicate those cultural, religious and artistic concepts.5 Not only do they passively represent such human ideas, they are active agents in their relationship with people and history simultaneously.6 Within this human-thing entanglement, their impact, or agency, does not seem to always solely depend on what they represent.7 A quote from Gottfried Semper’s lecture on primitive art, held in London in 1851, illustrates this well:

The granite & porphyry monuments of Aegypt exert an incredible power over every mind. Whence is this Charm? Partly perhaps, because they are the neutral Ground, where the hard and resisting material and the pliant hand of man have met. "So far shalt thou go and no farther" has been the silent language of these massive creations for centuries. Their majestic quietness, their sharp, flat, and angular lineaments, the economy of labor in the treatement of the stern material

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5 Already in a conference from 1986, published in 1990, Jan Assmann talked about how Egyptian Bildproduktion was constitutive of its context through its main two functions of monumentality and magic, also applying the concept of Bildakt; Jan Assmann, "Die Macht der Bilder. Rahmenbedingungen ikonischen Handelns im alten Ägypten”, in Genres in visual representations 7, proceedings of a conference held in 1986 by invitation of the Werner-Reimers-Stiftung in Bad Homburg, ed. Theodorus P. van Baaren (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1–20.

6 See now also the recent article by Jan Assmann, "Die Aura der Dinge. Lektüren einer altägyptischen Fayence-Schale”, in Hans Peter Hahn, ed., Vom Eigensinn der Dinge. Für eine neue Perspektive auf die Welt des Materiellen (Berlin: Neofelis, 2015), 101–126.

and their whole appearance are beauties of Style, which to us, who can cut the hardest stone like Chalk are no longer prescribed by necessity.

For Semper the power of the porphyry and granite monuments from Egypt has nothing to do with their being Egyptian in the first place but depends on their materiality and, what he calls, “beauties of style”. Those specific characteristics will in turn play a major role in making cultural, religious or artistic concepts have an impact on history as being Egyptian.\(^8\) The aim of Beyond Egyptomania, therefore, is to open up and investigate the fascinating intersections between history, mnemohistory, and material culture with regard to Egypt.

**Beyond Egyptomania?**
The case of Egypt is particularly compelling because hardly any other culture produced a repertoire of objects, forms and styles that is so recognizable and that had such a long afterlife, or Nachleben, to use Aby Warburg’s term.\(^9\) Indeed, the cultural memory of Egypt is enormous and seems perpetual, as most prominently Jan Assmann has shown throughout his work.\(^10\) This storehouse of memory is stocked with concepts but also with objects, each with their own unmistakable aesthetics that we call Egyptian. As the cultural, religious or artistic concepts that were framed as Egyptian, these objects were substantially influential to the societies they entered. What’s more, often these Aegyptiaca seem to function as

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catalysts that "get things going". Nevertheless, the enduring persistence of both Egyptian objects and concepts is most often described as a process of revival and reception, in which they only play a passive role, awaiting their rediscovery in later ages. From this historical perspective, the endurance of Egypt tends to be a history of episodes of reception and revival. Often these episodes are studied in chronological isolation and not infrequently are they then labelled as manifestations of Egyptomania, with all of that term’s negative connotations of fashion, obsession or even irrationality. The recent monograph by Ronald R. Fritze, characterizing Egyptomania as a history of fascination, obsession and fantasy, is only one of many more variants and examples. In this respect, especially the distinction between Egypto-logy (logos) and Egypto-mania (mania) has done much harm to our pursuit of a proper understanding of the phenomena indicated by the latter term. Beyond Egyptomania aims to rewrite the history of “the Egyptian preference” from the perspective of mnemohistory and its Wirkungsgeschichte, namely, the active role of Egyptian objects and especially the interaction between both. Is it possible that ultimately the particular materiality and style of Egyptian artefacts constitute one of the main backbones of Egypt’s Nachleben?

The title Beyond Egyptomania, is, of course, explicitly and purposefully programmatic. It is simply meant to say that we should take the impact of Egypt seriously. I think this is hampered by our use of the word Egyptomania itself, because of the associations inherent to it, and moreover by the lack of a clear definition. The word Egyptomania came into being around 1800 and implied some sort of irrationality from these beginnings onwards. It has been used indiscriminately for a very wide variety of phenomena since. When concerning

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13 See already the important note by Helen Whitehouse, "Egyptomanias", American Journal of Archaeology 101/1 (1997): 158–161, now with the article by Moser, "Reconstructing Ancient worlds”.
concepts and ideas, these often are associated with fashion, obsession or irrationality; when material culture is the focus of attention, it often concerns popular material culture – or Tutankhamen. In both respects Egyptomania is something audiences tend to mildly smile upon or laugh about; Egyptomania makes Egypt harmless. The book is called *Beyond Egyptomania* because I believe that such an approach is not helpful to use when aiming to better understand why Egypt is everybody's past. It is important to underline, however, that I do not wish to suggest that previous or future research by scholars using the term is unsound or should be discarded, at all.\textsuperscript{15}

**Investigating the longue durée**

Much work has already been done on chronologically and/or contextually isolated responses to Egypt. Usual suspects include Cleopatra; Hadrian and Egypt; the Borgia apartments; Sixtus V and the Vatican obelisk; Napoleon and Egypt; Tutankhamen, et cetera. However, all kinds of boundaries – between disciplinary specialisations (history, philosophy, religious studies, art history, archaeology, etc.), on the one hand, and period specialisations (Classical studies, Egyptology, Renaissance studies, Modern history, etc.), on the other – stand in the way of a clear, overall view of the persistence of Egypt in Western culture. As a result, the study of the reception of Egypt has so far remained rather antiquarian.\textsuperscript{16} Scholary attempts to arrive at interpretative overviews, like the 1969 book by Siegfried Morenz entitled *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten* or the series *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* edited by Peter Ucko, are very few.\textsuperscript{17} *Beyond Egyptomania* certainly does not provide such an overview, but aims to investigate the coherence, if any, between all these individual examples distributed over time and across space, and proposes to combine history, history, history...
mnemohistory, and material culture as a compelling research instrument to do so.\textsuperscript{18}

The question of Nachleben thus constitutes this book’s central research problem. For that reason, the eight case studies that form the core of the volume start in the Iron Age and subsequently deal with the Greek-Hellenistic world, the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the eighteenth century, the early nineteenth century, and the long nineteenth century, while in each case departing from a specific object or context and trying to answer a similar set of questions regarding Egypt. This structure puts difficult questions about transmission into sharp focus. A sceptical reader might well ask whether we can actually talk about comparable phenomena here and whether we can really speak about transmission through time, as from the case studies it becomes perfectly clear that Egypt can mean and do myriad different things in myriad different contexts. The mnemohistory of Egypt is therefore not a coherent discussion about a coherent topic because Egypt has been used to make a very wide variety of arguments, to borrow a formulation by Jan Assmann.\textsuperscript{19} The aim of the book is therefore not to simply construct or position a vertical line of transmission, but rather to investigate the Nachleben of Egypt throughout time and space seriously and in particular from the perspective of material agency.

Outlining such an overview is important for various reasons. It makes clear that Egypt has always played an important role in processes of cultural innovation, be it as cultural foundation or as quintessential Other. In many historical contexts, Egyptian civilisation was considered to be an important testator. But unlike Classical Antiquity, which has always been seen as place of origin and therefore an integral part of the Western world, Egypt was not only the deeper past, but also the Other simultaneously. Hence, Egypt was often strange and familiar at the same time, and this liminal position will prove to be important for our understanding of the impact of Egypt and things Egyptian. The longue durée thus redirects our attention from the many individual historical contexts that for one reason or another appropriate Egypt towards the cultural and material forms that constitute Egypt and, as such, enables us to study these two perspectives in relation to each other beyond passive reception. Moreover, Egypt is not an

\textsuperscript{18} See Versluys, “Exploring Aegyptiaca” for more (theoretical) background and an attempt to at least picture what this longue durée might look like (79–82) and how we should account for it (84–86).

isolated case. The discussions and insights provided by Beyond Egyptomania can serve as an inspiration to study the longue-durée (material) agency of, for instance, “the Greek”, “the Chinese” or “the Celtic”.

Objects are fundamental to investigating the long-term for many reasons, as has been outlined above. Cultural responses to Egypt cannot be understood without taking into account the tangible form of Egyptian objects, their style, and materiality. By addressing the longue et vaste durée of the dissemination of Egyptian objects, forms and motifs across the Mediterranean basin and subsequently the entire Western world and by showing the complexity of the relations between being Egyptian, doing Egyptian, and looking Egyptian, Beyond Egyptomania also hopes to incite reconsideration of the problem of style, which for too long has been rejected from archaeology, anthropology, art history and Egyptology — and which is fundamental to understanding Egypt.

There is, however, also an important methodological reason why adding objects so prominently to Jan Assmann’s mnemohistory project concerning Egypt matters: it adds another historical layer. In the Bronze Age, Egyptian stylistic features were an important constituent of an international koine. In the Iron Age Near East and Mediterranean, Aegyptiaca were everywhere and have been usefully described as the most popular global commodity of that world. It is important to realise that cultural responses to Egypt therefore started much earlier than with Herodotos — and we need objects in order to document that prehistory of Egypt’s mnemohistory.

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23 Joan Aruz et. al., eds., Assyria to Iberia: at the dawn of the Classical Age (New Haven et. al.: Yale Univ. Press, 2014).