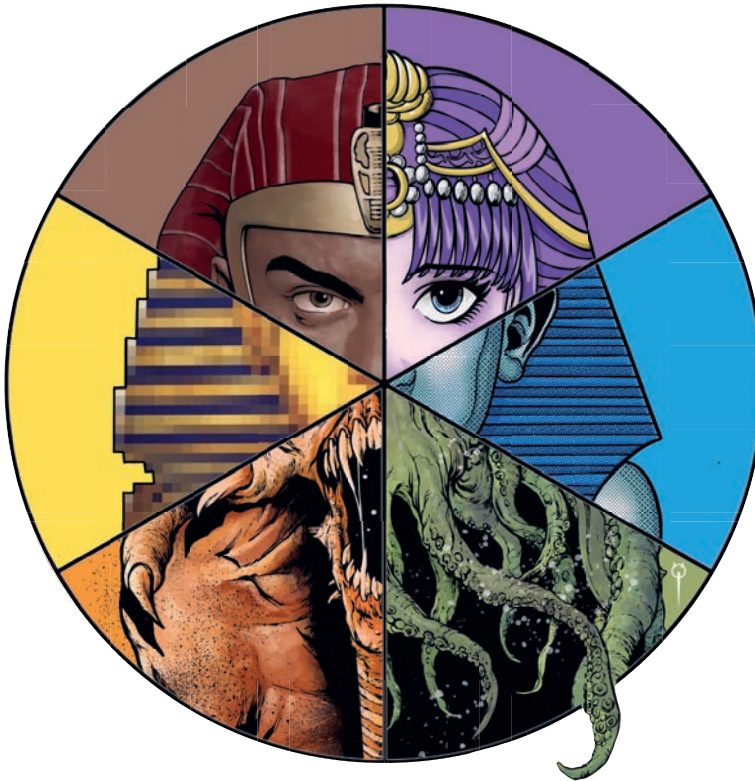


How Pharaohs Became Media Stars





Successive reinterpretations and resemanticisations of the pharaoh in the Egyptianising narratives of popular culture, following the aesthetics of Japanese manga, Marvel and DC superhero comics, H.P. Lovecraft's cosmic horror novels, vampire literature, the computer games of the 1980s and classic Hollywood cinema (Yul Brynner in *The Ten Commandments*)

Drawing by Jesús C. Gan @Egypopcult Project

How Pharaohs Became Media Stars: Ancient Egypt and Popular Culture

Edited by

Abraham I. Fernández Pichel

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Front Cover: Successive reinterpretations and resemanticisations of the pharaoh in the Egyptianising narratives of popular culture, following the aesthetics of H.P. Lovecraft's cosmic horror novels, Marvel and DC superhero comics, classic Hollywood cinema (Yul Brynner in *The Ten Commandments*), Japanese manga, and horror literature and comics. Drawing by Jesús C. Gan @Egypopcult Project



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Preface

The history of the reception of pharaonic Egypt, especially in popular culture, was long ridiculed under the heading of Egyptomania as a venial scurrility and was hardly considered a subject of solid scholarly work. Since the turn of the millennium at the latest, a clear change has taken place: it is becoming increasingly clear how formative and relevant the engagement with Egypt was for the self-understanding of European culture, and still is today. Initially, topics such as the Italian Renaissance, the history of religion, or the Enlightenment, with the subsequent deciphering of hieroglyphs and the establishment of scientific Egyptology, were the focus of interest. The importance of solid research into popular culture and how much this can only succeed as a project beyond disciplinary boundaries is made clear in this volume. Film, literature, comic books and video games cannot be understood in separate case studies of the reception of Egypt, but only as part of a history of fascination that is interwoven in many themes and aspects.

Abraham Ignacio Fernández Pichel has created a solid basis for this research. With his education at renowned French and German universities and his work first in Egypt and now in Lisbon, he has an insight into numerous different research cultures and can bridge the gaps that unfortunately still exist between the language families. The research project “‘Ich mache mir die (ägyptische) Welt, wie sie mir gefällt’”. Current Conceptions and Ideas on Egyptology and Popular Culture’ (abbreviated to ‘Egyptopcult’) based at the Centre for History of the University of Lisbon, which he initiated and directs, provides a solid basis for documenting and analysing the reception of Egypt within pop culture in the long term.

It was not only the theories of post-structuralism and new historicism that drew attention to the fact that the supposed difference between high culture and pop culture is a construction for prestige gain. Pop culture’s images of Egypt are much more widespread than those of scientific Egyptology. Nevertheless, they also make use of the results of scientific Egyptology and shape the evocations and associations that Egypt triggers in the public imagination. Pop culture has contrasting aspirations from those of scientific Egyptology, and different epistemological foundations. But the reception of ancient Egypt and pop culture on the one hand, and scientific Egyptology on the other, are closely connected in the reality of life. Without research into the reception of ancient Egypt, Egyptology as a reflected cultural science hardly seems possible.

Florian Ebeling, LMU Munich

Editor of *Aegyptiaca - Journal of the History of Reception of Ancient Egypt*

(<https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/aegypt>)

Introduction

“Ich mache mir die (ägyptische) Welt, wie sie mir gefällt” (Egypopcult Project)

Abraham I. Fernández Pichel

Even today the academic world often rejects the different manifestations of contemporary popular culture as a source of study in many subjects of the humanities. In the fields of history and archaeology its role is, however, fundamental to the framework of research into cultural reception. In this respect, as defined by Sonna and Illarraga (2016: 9-10):

Cines, series, películas, libros, videojuegos: las cosas que nos divierten hoy no tienen nada que envidiarle a *La Ilíada* o a *La Odisea* de Homero - el *Game of Thrones* en tiempos del surgimiento de la filosofía - si nos quitamos la venda romántica de nuestros ojos.¹

But if in the study of other historical periods, such as the classical world (Frauenfelder 2005; Llewellyn-Jones 2009; Nisbet 2006; Wyke 1997) or the Middle Ages (Aberth 2003; Elliot 2010; Harty 1999; Young 2015), this traditional opposition between academicism and popular culture has been progressively softening since the end of the 20th century, in the case of academic Egyptology this process is proving to be much slower and more incremental.²

In addition to this drawback, we can add others that are affecting our discipline. Firstly, academic research on reception in Egyptology has been dominated by the processing of isolated and significant leitmotifs of Egyptian civilisation, mainly mummies, pyramids, the figure of Cleopatra, and some objects from Tutankhamun's tomb (Brier 2013; Taterka 2016). Secondly, for the analysis of these leitmotifs, researchers have often exclusively drawn on mainly Anglo-Saxon literature from the turn of the 20th century and Hollywood epic movies since the middle of the that same century, while more recent productions and media such as TV series, comics, games, or the internet have been almost completely ignored. Thirdly, most of the works frequently analysed refer exclusively to the reception of ancient Egypt in western civilisation, ignoring other cultural spheres, like modern Egypt and the Islamic world or the Far East.³

The analysis of the visions of ancient Egypt reflected in contemporary popular culture must go beyond the simple observation of the use of Egyptian incidental motifs or complex narratives set in antiquity or featuring characters from the pharaonic past in current literary

¹ 'Cinemas, TV series, films, books, video games: the things that entertain us today have no need to envy Homer's *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* - the *Game of Thrones* in the time of the rise of philosophy - if we remove the romantic blindfold from our eyes' (translation by the author).

² In this respect, Jean-Marcel Humbert's extensive bibliographical production is particularly noteworthy, including numerous books (1989) and articles (1988; 2014). Equally decisive is the contribution of Florian Ebeling at the scientific level (2019; Assmann and Ebeling 2020) and as co-editor of the journal *Aegyptiaca. Journal of the History of the Reception of Ancient Egypt*, published by the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München since 2017. MacDonald and Rice 2009, among others, may also be included.

³ An exception to this purely Western approach can be found in Cooperson 2010; Cornelius 2003; Kesh 2022; Haikal 2012.

and audiovisual products. It is essential to integrate these elements into a long tradition that clearly shows the fruitful dialogue established between the past and the subsequent presents (in the plural), up to and including our own time, in the framework of cultural reception, Egyptomania and mnemohistory.⁴ In this respect, Florian Ebeling (2019: 57) states:

The focus here is therefore not on two points in time, that of the act of reception and that of the object of reception, but on the processual and semantically unfolding interaction of history, reference to the past and self-understanding in this interspace.⁵

Within this diachronic perspective there is certainly a constant recurrence of the same motifs and narratives inspired by ancient Egypt over time, but there is also a continual transformation and resemanticisation of them. Examples just from recent sources illustrate this: the pyramid appears in many contemporary works in its function as a tomb as it was in the past, but in other testimonies it is a spaceship (*La trilogie Nikopol* (1980-1992) by Enki Bilal) or the lair of a tyrannic ancient god (*Moon Knight: Welcome to New Egypt* (2016) by Jeff Lemire). Elsewhere, the pharaohs might be portrayed as travellers from the future (*Chrononauts* (2015), Mark Millar), as representatives of a civilisation from outer space (*Ian Kaledine: Le secret de la taiga* (1983) by Ferry-Vernal; *Stargate* (1994) by Roland Emmerich) or one may embody the terrestrial appearance of a superior cosmic being (*Nyarlahotep* (1920) by H.P. Lovecraft). Therefore, within the apparent reiteration of the same leitmotifs there is room for both continuities and discontinuities.

The subjectivity of the authors of works of popular culture including writers, screenwriters or comic artists, among others, and the influencing factors of various kinds (political, social, economic and ideological) in which they are embedded, also play a decisive role in these dynamics. The *Sitz im Leben* of these authors thus often allows us to explain some of the different motivations for and purposes of the versions of ancient Egypt that they develop in their work. Only in this way can we understand, for example, the implications for contemporary politics of works such as Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Faraon* (1966) or Ismail Kadaré's novel *Pyramidia* (1992), the various social and gender changes of recent decades in the western world as reflected in *Stargate* (1994), *The Mummy* (1999) or *Agora* (2009), or the influence of diverse currents of contemporary thought on the visual or textual modern representation of Egyptian civilisation. In addition, as products primarily intended for entertainment, films, novels or comics are subject to the trends and preferences dictated by audiences and readers.

In conclusion, these questions show the capacity of contemporary popular culture to recover elements from the past from the viewpoint of the present, which is, at the same time, influenced by the succession of previous presents that have created the tradition that surrounds and influences each author in his creative process.⁶

Seen in this way, as one might suppose, historical or archaeological authenticity and accuracy is not a necessary objective in all cases, hence it has only a limited impact on reception studies.

⁴ The term 'Egyptomania' is currently undergoing a profound revision and is even considered by many scholars as inappropriate. In this regard, see Berger (2021: 12) and Versluys (2017: 131). See also the different contributions to this topic in Versluys 2020. Regarding mnemohistory, we refer to the previously mentioned articles by Ebeling and Assmann, as well as to Assmann 1997; Ebeling 2018.

⁵ See also Assmann 1997: 9.

⁶ On the authors and their relation to this tradition, see Assmann and Ebeling (2020: 33).

Although authors often carry out genuine research work, with direct access to historical sources or, more often, to scientific literature,⁷ we must not forget that contemporary popular culture is made up of fictional products and therefore recreates a recognisable but not necessarily historically truthful version of ancient Egypt.

These preliminary questions briefly summarise some of the fundamental principles and theoretical approaches governing current academic research in the field of cultural reception. This draws on contributions from numerous disciplines and sub-disciplines including collective memory, mnemohistory, historiophoty, Egyptomania, intertextuality, visual culture, transmedia narrative, and many others. The application of these in modern research is changing the landscape of cultural reception studies, while progressively enabling its consolidation within academia and its presence in the educational programmes promoted by different universities all around the world.

I have no doubt that the development during 2023 and 2024 of the research project “Ich mache mir die (ägyptische) Welt, wie sie mir gefällt”. Current Conceptions and Ideas on Egyptology and Popular Culture’ (abbreviated to Egypopcult) will contribute to this goal. Its German title is adapted from a phrase from a well-known Swedish TV show of the 1960s and 1970s, *Pippi Långstrump* (or *Pippi Longstocking* in its English version), summarising the conscious reinterpretation of the past in the minds and creations of contemporary authors: ‘I make the (Egyptian) world in the way I like it’. The project is funded by the *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia* (FCT), the main governmental research institution in Portugal, and is, to my knowledge, the first and only academic project on ancient Egypt in contemporary popular culture funded by a public institution worldwide.

To carry out this project, the scientific team, coordinated by myself as Principal Investigator (PI), is multidisciplinary and intergenerational, integrating mainly experts in Egyptology, but also from the fields of literature, art history, audiovisual communication, cultural studies, museology or informatics, among others, from American, African and European universities. In the first phase of its development, Egypopcult consists of 11 scientific members, 4 consultants and more than 40 external collaborators from more than 20 universities. These numbers will only increase over the project implementation period.

In terms of concrete objectives and outputs, Egypopcult aims to promote studies in Egyptology and popular culture by creating a space for multidisciplinary scientific debate and exchange. This collaborative initiative is channelled through the creation of a free-access online database and a scientific network, which can be used as an essential source for future research internationally. In the configuration of the database, we intend to record the evidences of popular culture that allude, explicitly or implicitly, to ancient Egypt, from the 19th century to the present day, paying constant attention to the new examples provided by movies, TV series, comic books, genre fiction literature, games, the internet, and the list continues. In this work of data collection and analysis, the participation of researchers, but also of ordinary people interested in popular culture and Egyptology will be essential in order

⁷ Even works that strive for greater historical veracity are, in the end, fictional and not documentary. Sometimes the research work of screenwriters and artists is complemented by the involvement of a historical consultant in films or novels. Thus, in the case of Egypt fiction, Egyptologist Kazimierz Michalowski advised Jerzy Kawalerowicz on *Faraon* (1966) and Stuart Tyson Smith did the same for *Stargate* (1994) and *The Mummy* (1999). In this respect, see Coleman 2004.



Figure 1. Logo of the Egypopcult Project by Dirk van Dijk Animation & Illustration (© Egypopcult)

to promote the creation of a broad and heterogeneous community of users. With regard to this, another priority in the configuration of this user network is the integration of people from cultural backgrounds other than the western world, such as Africa and Asia, whose cultural manifestations and mass media are less known to us.

Another of the main outputs of the Egypopcult project is an international seminar to be held in Lisbon in early 2024, open to the whole academic community and to the general public in the on-site modality or via Zoom or other video platforms. This international event aims to constitute a reference framework in the field of reception studies in which new approaches to the multiple recreations of ancient Egypt in contemporary popular culture will be presented.

This monograph, *How Pharaohs became Media Stars: Ancient Egypt and Popular Culture*, is also of great relevance to the development of the Egypopcult project. The book begins with an *état de la question* on popular culture and its relationship with Egyptology: José das Candeias Sales offers an analysis of the concept of popular culture resulting from the frequent opposition of notions such as high culture, low culture, *culture lettrée*, mass culture and others, while presenting the essential dynamics that have shaped the reception of ancient Egypt from antiquity to the present. In doing so, the author stresses the necessary and desirable valorisation of Egyptianised popular culture as a sub-discipline of Egyptology in its own right.

The next three articles present the use of Egyptian narratives in literary works of historical fiction, of mystery, and of science fiction and fantasy. Firstly, Filip Taterka analyses the multiple influences of ancient Egypt in Terry Pratchett's *Pyramids (The Book of Going Forth)* (1989). In this and other works Pratchett creates a fantasy universe in which he projects some of his main concerns, while at the same time using it to expose some of his criticisms of life in the modern world. Secondly, Pauline Gedge's novel *Child of the Morning* (1977) is the

subject of Maiken Mosleth King’s analysis. In this article, King analyses the literary portrait of Queen Hatshepsut from the perspective of academic Egyptology and contemporary feminism, specifically the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. Thirdly, Sara Woodward’s article focuses on Marie Corelli’s *Ziska, the Problem of a Wicked Soul* (1897), which reveals a representation of ancient Egypt linked to mystery, secret wisdom, occult power and esotericism. This and other works by Corelli and other nineteenth-century authors also serve to contrast the ideas of various theologies of the time, such as ‘Electric Christianity’, and the otherness represented by ancient Egypt.

The next section of the book focuses on Egyptian-inspired cinema and consists of four articles. In the first, Eleanor Dobson explores both the visual and narrative influence of the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922 on cinematic versions of *The Mummy*, specifically Karl Freund’s 1932 film and Stephen Sommers’s more recent one (1999). Nuno Simões Rodrigues then looks at the sequences set in Egypt in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956). In his article, Rodrigues goes beyond a purely visual analysis of the film and delves into the documentary sources that inspired the American director and producer, mainly the Bible and Flavius Josephus, as well as other ancient authors. All of this gives the Moses played by Charlton Heston obvious biblical, but also Hellenistic, resonances. Guillermo Juberías Gracia uses some of the same sources as the previous article, but his approach is eminently visual. As an art historian, this author exposes the obvious analogies between early recreations of settings and scenes in some classic Hollywood films and the paintings of various nineteenth-century painters, notably the Dutch painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The last contribution in this section, written jointly by Abraham I. Fernández Pichel and Marc Orriols-Llonch, brings together examples from cinema, but also from literature and comics, to analyse the recurrent sexualisation of numerous Egyptian characters in contemporary popular culture. Their analysis also reveals the configuration of specific models of masculinities and femininities that are part of the tradition of popular culture and Egyptomania.

The following two articles constitute a section devoted to games of different types inspired by ancient Egypt. Tara Sewell-Lasater studies the figure of Cleopatra in the video game *Assassin’s Creed Origins* and her analogies with the portrayal of the Ptolemaic queen according to ancient sources and up to the present day. Sewell-Lasater’s approach poses the confrontation between the female Cleopatra and the eminently masculine perception of her conveyed by numerous sources, which was decisive in the construction of the character in *Assassin’s Creed*. The second article focuses on some of the books in the *World of Darkness* RPG universe. Ancient Egypt is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for this type of game, of which the authors, Abraham I. Fernández Pichel and Víctor Sánchez Domínguez, offer a brief compilation. The article focuses on the analysis of the Egyptian narratives used in the game, with a double motivation: to know the historical sources available to its creators and the influence of various works of popular culture in the textual genesis of the game.

The different audiovisual and textual media studied in this volume also include the internet. Within this vast domain, Samuel Fernández-Pichel examines the image of the Egypt of the pharaohs transmitted by the content creators of the social network TikTok, drawing on models taken from digital ethnography. From this observation, different visions and recreations of a multifaceted Egypt emerge, sometimes configured through personal and subjective perceptions of the past, and sometimes following the guidelines of today’s mass tourism.

By way of an epilogue, *How Pharaohs became Media Stars: Ancient Egypt and Popular Culture* culminates with a contribution that seems to me innovative and necessary. Studies, academic or otherwise, focusing on popular culture abound with reflections by specialists and amateurs, but the testimony of the authors themselves who recreate ancient Egypt in their works or who include characters and artefacts taken from the pharaonic past in their plots is undoubtedly lacking. The choices made by these creators according to their historical and geographical contexts, their knowledge of history and popular culture, and their personal preferences and those of their audiences are an object of study in themselves and, as such, are integrated into the interests of Egypopcult. Among the authors collaborating with our project, Jesús Cañadas, one of the main representatives of the new fantasy literature in Spain, stands out. He is the author of the article ‘The Road to *El ojo de Nefertiti*. Representing Egyptian Mythology for Middle-grade Readers’, in which, in a tone far removed from the purely academic, he presents the different stages of the creative process of this novel set partially in Egypt and with historical characters introduced in a plot of horror and fantasy.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members of the Egypopcult team for their collaboration and help during the preliminary and initial phases of the project: scientific members, consultants, external collaborators, reviewers, translators, proof-readers, fellows and students. Among all of them I would like to highlight Filip Taterka and Alfonso Álvarez-Ossorio for their availability and help in all circumstances; Eleanor Dobson, Tara Sewell-Lasater and Sara Woodward for always giving me an affirmative and pleasant response to my constant requests during the last months; Samuel Fernández-Pichel for the fruitful conversations we both had and will have on every topic we can imagine; Marc Orriols-Llonch, for our shared complaints, frustrations and also motivations, and for the longest WhatsApp voice messages I can remember; and Michael Vina, for always finding time to revise my English. Thanks also to José Augusto Horta, director of the Centro de História at the Universidade de Lisboa, for his unconditional help and the support that all my projects have had from him since I arrived in Lisbon. Thanks also to my colleagues at the Centro de História for their collaboration in logistical matters, among many others. The permanent assistance of Mike Schurer, editor of Archaeopress Publishing Ltd., has been equally invaluable throughout the planning and writing of the book. I would also like to thank Florian Ebeling and Kevin McGeough for their collaboration and kindness, for guiding me in matters that I am only learning little by little.

Finally, Egypopcult and this book would be nothing without the love and patience of my family. Their presence was enough for me to often go beyond what I could humanly do. In this section I include you, Sarah. Without you, none of this would have made any sense.

Abraham I. Fernández Pichel
Ulm, June 2023

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