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Mummymania: mummies, museums and popular culture

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Abtract

This lecture presents the major findings of the first anthropological study of British and American "mummymania", the public fascination with ancient Egyptian mummies, and its associated myth, the mummy's curse: a belief that those who interfere with Egyptian tombs will be punished. The study incorporates museum-based field research, textual sources, film analysis and material culture studies. Originally lay critiques of archaeological ethics, curses were appropriated by the mass media, which reduced public sympathy for them by associating them with evil living mummy characters. Fictional mummies? abject traits later came to symbolise old age, decay, pollution, death and differencenegative concepts with which museum visitors now associate real mummies. Museum displays inadvertently remind visitors of stereotypes and museums may exploit stereotypes for profit or employ staff who elaborate curse myths. In my view, museums could do more to counter stereotyping by addressing visitors? predisposition to regard mummies with abhorrence and derision.

Introduction

Why have Egyptian mummies received an inordinate amount of public attention since their rediscovery by Europeans? They have acquired more meanings within modern popular culture than those they held in the society that produced them. Yet we seldom consider how these meanings originated or question the prejudices inherent in them. Mummymania – the popular fascination with Egyptian mummies – evolved from Victorian fine arts through horror films and into the late twentieth century "fringe" culture of children's toys and cartoons, but all the while its *raison d'être* was overlooked. The manifestations of the mania must have seemed strange or tawdry to scholars, discouraging them from taking it seriously.

Academics can no longer afford to dismiss popular culture. In many parts of the world, the mass media have usurped the role of principal producer of culture and, therefore, demand investigation. My contribution to this effort, a PhD thesis in Cultural Anthropology, is to be published as *The Mummy's Curse: Mummymania in the English-speaking World, 1800-2005* (Day [in preparation]). This article summarises the major findings of my study, which is probably the most comprehensive study of English-language mummymania. The story of mummies' treatments in the hands and imaginations of Britons and Americans could persuade people to think more critically about the insidiousness of stereotypes that seem harmless, and of the power of the media to manipulate our thoughts.

Background

Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt gave birth to Egyptology and a public fascination with ancient Egypt and mummies – Egyptomania and mummymania. Public interest was further heightened by the 1922 discovery of the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamun. Since the nineteenth century, British and American popular culture has represented mummies with reference to the legend of "the mummy's curse". Journalists claimed that "the curse of King Tut" killed those associated with the excavation of his tomb. These legends are based upon a belief that the presence or possession of mummies brings bad luck. Entering an Egyptian tomb or tampering with its occupant was thought to be a sacrilege, and the perpetrators – whether archaeologists or thieves – would be punished by ancient magic. Such beliefs expressed guilt at robbing the dead. The curse legend was adopted by Hollywood films during the 1930s-40s and by British cinema during the 1960s-70s. These films have influenced popular ideas about mummies ever since. Today, many museum visitors interpret mummy displays with reference to horror films or cartoons rather than to archaeology books (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 - Museum visitors' interpretations of mummies are influenced by popular culture. Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, San José. Photo: ©J. Day 1996.

Legends about curses and mummies raised from the dead to exact revenge for sacrilege began as ethical arguments that the dead should be left to rest in peace. They were precursors to the more direct objections now made by indigenous peoples to the possession and display of their ancestral human remains by museums. During my fieldwork it was clear that museum visitors today refer to curses and living mummies only in jest or credulous fear. Why has sympathy for mummies turned to disparagement? Why is the curse no longer about ethics? I believe that mummies' popular roles have changed – they now symbolise concepts of pollution, age, death, difference, and defiance of authority. How did this come about? I have identified three major phases in popular culture's re-invention of mummies: the Preclassic Period (Victorian mummy romance literature), the Classic Period (mid-twentieth century horror films) and the Postclassic Period, the current juvenile paradigm. Before tracing this history, I should explain my approach to it. As a collision point between curators' academic and visitors' popular views, museums were my principal field sites. I conducted research in various British and American museums and preliminary research in several Australian museums. My field sites included the British Museum, Field Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Western Australian Museum and South Australian Museum. Fieldwork included photographing displays, studying labels and archival documents, observing and surveying visitors and interviewing curators. I also studied mummy fiction, films and toys. The major issue I have explored is the reason why the mass media have contributed to changes in the character of fictional mummies and the structure of curse legends over time. Was the transformation of mummies into monsters by movies an attack upon Victorian opposition to digging up the dead? Was it meant to encourage public support for archaeology – or just an attempt to cash in on its growing popularity?

The Preclassic Period

During the nineteenth century, Europeans plundered Egyptian antiquities. In England and the United States, mummies were displayed in travelling exhibitions and unwrapped for entertainment. They were also made into paint, ground up and consumed as medicine, and used to fuel steam engines. Perhaps their resulting anonymity and object status was compounded by the large, impersonal mummy exhibits in some museums.

Yet mummies were also represented as being human or alive. In poems and stories, they talked. Some were nicknamed by museum visitors. Some even received Christian burials! However, not all visions of sentient mummies were sympathetic. In both fiction and everyday life, large collections of mummies or coffins gave some museum visitors an impression that their gazes were returned by supernatural adversaries. This anxiety persists today. A security officer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art refused to enter a room exhibiting coffins and mummies. 'It's creepy,' he told me. His concerns echo Bram Stoker's words from his 1904 novel, *The Jewel of Seven Stars:*

> The room and all in it gave grounds for strange thoughts.... There were so many mummies, or mummy objects... that one was unable to forget the past.... [T]he multitudinous presence of the dead... took such hold on me that I caught myself looking round fearfully, as though some strange personality or influence was present. (Stoker 1978:37)

Just as sentient mummies were not necessarily sympathetic, sympathetic mummies did not always evade treatment as objects – especially sex objects (Daly 1994). In Victorian romances, men fell in love with the spirits of female mummies. The alluring fantasy figure who invited the attentions of men (Fig. 2a,b) was later recast as the victim of an archaeologist whose invasive examination was seen as a form of sexual assault. The public display of denuded mummies now appeared distasteful to more people. They complained in newspaper editorials that the unwrapping and exhibition of Tutankhamun would be a kind of rape. Yet as this view evolved, so did a reactionary response. As if goaded by the idea that they ought to feel guilt, some people began to represent mummies' vengeance not as justified, but as an overreaction. The spirit of an angry priestess inhabiting a coffin at The British Museum was said to have killed innocent people by sinking the *Titanic*. There

Fig. 2a-b - Victorian and Edwardian fictional mummies were erotic female figures. Brass erotic statuette by Franz Bergman, Austria, c.1905–10 (author's collection).

were stories about innocent victims of Tutankhamun. The supernatural world that initially avenged itself upon unbelievers now became sinister and met a European counter-attack. In Stoker's story, a mummy's unwrappers are killed by her pagan power, but the Christian God destroys her.

The Classic Period

By the early twentieth century, the dominant mummy paradigm had shifted from romance to curses. Mummies were increasingly seen as evil. When Hollywood adopted the mummy, a need to represent the character not as a spirit, but in a concrete form able to be portrayed by an actor meant animating a corpse. The mummy, magically raised from the dead, became ambulatory (Holt 1986). The American Universal Pictures and British Hammer Studios films depicted the mummy avenging himself upon sacrilegious archaeologists who disturb either the mummy's tomb or that of an ancient princess whom the mummy loved.

How did cinema portray mummies as evil despite referring to curses, which originally cast mummies as victims? The answer does not lie in the plot; the mummy is usually defeated not by the heroes, but by a conflict with his allies. The answer lies in the imagery that associates him with everything wrong and rotten. Classic mummies raise clouds of dust, leave mouldy footprints and trudge through swamps. They are soulless automatons directed by High Priests. They are aged, limping and maimed, animated by pagan gods. An offence to hygiene, free thought, youth and Christianity, they connote a threat to moral order.

Did filmmakers consciously attempt to suppress public revolt against archaeology by inverting the curse's morality? Mummy films were not political propaganda, but the values of a culture colour even its most whimsical products. Insofar as they made the curse represent a suite of things feared by patriarchal, Christian and colonial authority, and made the mummy fallible, Classic films symbolically defeated challenges to British or American authority. Everyday curse legends, which once critiqued "Western" values, were reinvented by the media as a means to critique "non-Westerners". The mummy embodies this transfer of guilt from oneself to someone else; blame is redirected from archaeologists to him. Ironically, Hollywood's addition of ambulatory mummies to the curse formula brought about the demise of the curse as justified revenge. Now it was a malicious foreign pestilence, attacking indiscriminately. Audiences were free at last to identify with the archaeologist as a hero.

The Postclassic Period

Cinema spawned a vast industry of mummy products, most

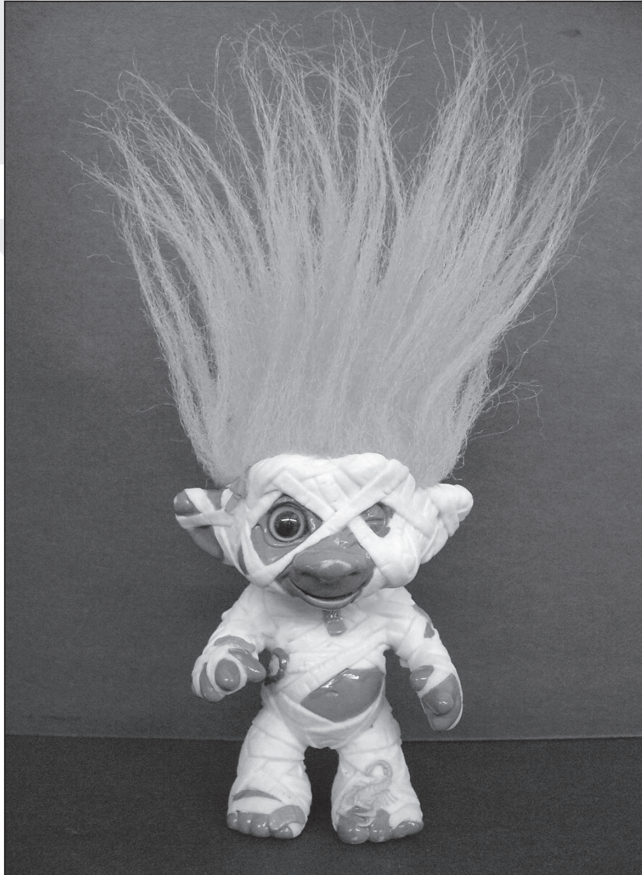

Fig. 3 - Wrapped mummies as injury victims: this doll wears Band-Aids® on his forehead, chest, arm and toe. Monster Trolls: Mummy Troll (©The Toy Boys/Galoob 1993).

of which are humorous and aimed at children (since mummies no longer frightened adults). In this current paradigm, the forms of mummies' abjection in cinema are elaborated and invested with meaning.

One type of joke conflates the meanings of the homophones 'mummy' (Egyptian mummy) and 'mummy' (mother). Until children learn to differentiate between the two and can joke about it, they remain confused. Sometimes adults inadvertently increase the confusion, as in this exchange I observed in Leicester's New Walk Museum in 1996:

> Child [to mother]: There's a mummy behind you! There's a mummy behind you!
> Mother [amused]: There's a mummy behind you!
> Boy: Why aren't there any daddies?

The resemblance of mummies' wrappings to medical bandages prompts joking analogies between injured people and mummies. During an Australian Rules football match in 1998, an injured player returned to the field with his face bandaged. A commentator quipped, 'Well we've got Tutankhamun out there – maybe we'll see another mummy come out'. The hospital analogy represents mummies as incompetent and broken down (Fig.3); it derives from the depiction of ragged bandages in films to represent antiquity and filth.

Most current stereotypes portray mummies with mouldering green skin, brown grime on their bandages, clouds of dust, cobwebs or flies surrounding them. Gaps between their bandages expose their bones. Their faces combine skeletal features with rotting flesh.

> The smell of decay is overpowering... The ancient being lopes forward... [D]ecayed cloth falls from its body as it walks, leaving a grey trail of bandages on the dusty floor … Closer, closer it comes... reaching to envelop you in the stench of its mouldy wrappings. (Stine 1983:58, 67)

The abject traits of movie mummies are exaggerated to emphasise substances regarded as pollutants in industrialised societies' concepts of hygiene. These substances are often associated with decay; bodily decomposition threatens the regime of hygiene, epitomises the terror of death and, while suppressed in modern funerals, is exploited in horror and children's genres, which lie on the margins of popular culture. Today, few First World people ever handle and bury their dead. The resulting unfamiliarity with decay exaggerates visions of it, and these are projected onto mummies, since many people do not know that their flesh is fortified against decay. Some museum visitors think that mummies are decomposing, bleeding, or skeletons. People interpret mummies as rotting cadavers or skeletons since they cannot imagine a state of perpetual preservation. Thus Imhotep in *The Mummy* (Sommers dir. 1999) remains 'juicy' – still decaying after thousands of years.

I have heard children attempt to disgust family members with graphic descriptions of the removal of the brain and organs during mummification. Many juvenile questionnaire respondents described mummies as 'gross and cool'. Embracing pollution mocks the regimes of hygiene that adults impose upon children. Yet by enticing children with an empty promise that they will have an opportunity to misbehave, fictional mummies actually teach children how not to behave. Like movie mummies who take revenge but are defeated, juvenile fantasies that reject the status quo are tolerated because they have no power to change it. Many children surveyed asked whether mummies could revive and some experienced fear in museums. Children's books and cartoons simplify curse scenarios, omitting reference to disturbing the dead as the reason for

Fig. 4 - Mummies, synonymous with Egypt, advertise the British Museum in the nearby Holborn station of the London Underground. Photo: © J. Day 1996.

mummies' animation. This implies that ambulation is automatic, so that a child's mere presence in a museum might awaken an angry mummy. Museum guards have contributed to this belief. A Brooklyn Museum guard told me that he disciplined some children by warning them that the mummy nearby might get them!

Many museum visitor interviewees did not assume that all exhibited mummies were authentic. They judged authenticity according to whether mummies or coffins showed signs of damage or decay. This might reflect the influence of special effects in films and television programmes that simulate and exaggerate decay to symbolise antiquity. What constitutes a sign of decay, however, is a matter of opinion. While some visitors thought that wrapped mummies were real and unwrapped ones fake, others believed the reverse! At the Field Museum in Chicago, interviewees who thought that at least one exhibited mummy was a replica outnumbered those who assumed that all mummies were authentic.

Today the function of the curse has shifted away from ethical critique to creating contexts for mummies as symbols of difference. Fictional mummies represent difference as strange or evil, which is poor preparation for encounters with other cultures. Whether killers or humorous fools, mummies are always our opposites. There is a danger that Egyptological information presented by museums can actually blend with stereotypes in the visitor's mind instead of displacing them, so I believe that displays should explicitly challenge stereotypes.

Conclusion

Why are mummies so popular (Fig.4)? They are constructed as a means for children to come to terms with the adult world, for adults to reflect with nostalgic amusement upon their own childhood learning, and for people to allude to the things they despise. The curse has succeeded not as a moral critique but as a challenge to academic domination of discourses about mummies. Despite this victory, real and fictional mummies have become accidental casualties in wars of authority over representation and crusades for profit. They have become versatile symbols of the abject, but have been vilified in the process. Culture is constantly manipulated by political and economic interests, and entertainment, personal values and beliefs are not immune. As we borrow and reinterpret images from a foreign culture, we should consider the implications of our actions. If this borrowing and adaptation is essential to cultural development, is it possible to practise one culture without misrepresenting another?

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