EGYPT AND/AS STYLE

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In the Fall of 2013 Katy Perry scored a monster hit with *Dark Horse*. In the song her character proclaims that gentlemen are welcome, but they have to watch their steps. She urges them to get prepared for risking their lives by getting totally overpowered by what she calls »a perfect storm«. In the clip this warning of the *femme fatale* is visualized with the help of remarkable allusions to ancient Egypt. We see a floating pyramid, a pink hypostyle hall, a canopy barge at sunset on the Nile, golden clothed female dancers with cat masks, and even a sarcophagus that magically opens to reveal rapper Juicy J. Not in the least, we can admire Perry in full Egyptian royalty, expressed by her long black hair in straight bangs filled with golden pendants, by her eyes in heavy black make up forming a wedjat, and by the cobra-winged golden head gear inlaid with colorful stones. A sphinx-formed throne enforces her enchanting, pharaohesque allure. The male dancers flanking her wear their nemes, but only as an open carcass of golden thread. Whereas they have an Egyptian-like wraparound skirt, the white boxer shorts clearly visible underneath are surprisingly modern, as well as their white sneakers; their blue skin has strong resemblances to the jinn from Disney's blockbuster *Aladdin* (1992). Thus the clip plays with Egyptian style by bringing together prototypical images, but without missing any chance to deconstruct them. It is combined with other styles, as well as linked to popular previous appropriations of Egyptian style. The dancers walk like the Egyptians in the Bangles' song from 1986 and Perry's appearance brings Elizabeth Taylor into memory in her most flamboyant role of Cleopatra, predating exactly half a century. The Egyptian hall contains clear references to video game culture with its oversimplified architectural structures rendered in prominent perspective, such as in *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* of 1999 in which archaeologist Lara Croft resolutely hunts

for artefacts associated with Horus. Moreover, the Egyptian gods covering the walls, as well as (strangely enough) the ceiling, are not carved into sandstone, but look like wallpaper made of exceptionally grand papyri.

These explicit references to Egyptian style, as well as to previous uses of it and the stunning combination with other styles in Perry's clip can easily be set aside as an evident example of postmodern popular culture which combines all it can catch. The clip does not look back much further than the 1960s, whereas the scope of this book volume goes from the Iron Age till the 19th century. Nevertheless, we can approach Perry's clip in the same way as the contributions in this book. These all deal with Egyptian appropriations by (re-)evaluating the concept of »Egyptomania«, starting from the theoretical viewpoints of Miguel John Versluys and of Jean-Marcel Humbert. More precisely, the clip can be placed within the *longue durée* approach of this book clarifying that every culture has its own Egyptian styles in a complex way relying on previous Egyptian styles, but seldom dealing with Egypt purely »maniacally«.

At least as much as Biblical and Graeco-Roman narratives situated in Egypt, the construction, reconstruction and (sometimes even) deconstruction of Egyptian style is an interest shared by many Western civilizations. Just as Perry's clip does not primarily interact with concrete Egyptian narratives, most of the cases discussed in this book point at instances where Egyptian stories are overruled by stylistic allusions to Egypt, e.g. Molly Swetnam-Burland's focus on the difficulties for the visitors of the Metropolitan Museum to fully grasp the famous »Black Room« from the Villa of Boscotrecase. After clarifying how concrete historical narratives hinder a thorough understanding of the room, she shifts the focus to the effect of the room's Egyptian style. To fully grasp the impact of Egypt every contribution pays attention to references to the formal and visual aspects of objects and architecture (thought to be) produced by that ancient, legendary culture flourishing along the banks of the river Nile. Thus, in order to explore the relations between the eight case studies, we can look at correspondences in the effect of Egyptian style on the diverse cultures that appropriated it. To do so, let us begin by defining style in more general terms.

Everything humans do or make has style. A common element in most of the theories of style is that it refers to the design of an action or artefact, its set of formal and visual characteristics.[1] The style of an action or artefact is the most direct, visible and basic tool that we use to stage and adorn ourselves and our environment. It appears on the surface of actions and artefacts, but is far from superficial. Style is an essential factor in the economic value of artefacts. It constructs and defines individual and collective identities, thus facilitating social relationships, while it is also an instrument to visualize, to enforce, and even to create ideologies. Stylistic appropriation and hybridity are also conspicuous signs of and motors in intercultural exchange.[2] Most important in the context of this volume is that style often functions as a gateway to the past. Formal and visual characteristics of artefacts of previous societies are appreciated and appropriated or, conversely, rejected to express contemporary

artistic, moral, religious, and political values. Thus style is constitutive for the invention of tradition and the construction of history.

In the 19th century, the study of style focused on classifying artefacts into style periods with the help of clearly defined sets of formal and visual characteristics. However, from the 1920s onwards defining style in terms of classification became increasingly controversial and was criticized as a model used merely to identify groups of artefacts without being able to explain the dissemination of styles.[3] Together with the rise of the socio-cultural history of artefacts, visual culture studies, and most recently the interest in materiality, this gradually resulted in the disappearance of style from the research agenda. Nevertheless, style as a means of categorization is at the same time still very prominent in surveys, curriculums, ordering principles in libraries or curating practices for museums and exhibitions. It is without question that style has become a problem; it provokes resistance, but is simultaneously far from easy to dismiss.[4]

To get out of this deadlock, recently archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians, often closely working together, shifted the attention from style as a means of categorization to style as effect.[5] We find excellent examples in the work of many of the contributors to this book volume. Parallelly, in sociology the study of the effect of style became important thanks to Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of style* of 1979 and the discussion the book provoked in the field of sociology into the new millennium.[6] So central to the academic reappraisal of style, and more particularly the growing interest in the study of its effects, stands the focus on styles that travel from one culture to another and from one social milieu to another. The contribution of this book to the study of the effect of styles is that it gives us more comprehension in how styles travel from one period to another.

The book leads to a deeper understanding of how the historical travelling of styles can involve a metamorphosis and even how that travelling can be so intense that nothing much of the original context is left, hereby even the original formal and visual characteristics can get out of sight. Concerning the motors behind the historical travelling, the book gives better insights in how Egyptian style was used in many cultures to fulfil the need of a set of stylistic characteristics different from the own style(s). The success of Egyptian style while travelling across the Mediterranean and Europe – and even beyond, as Peter Mason clarifies – is defined by its aura of eternal perseverance. The idea that for centuries and centuries »the« Egyptian style remained unchanged was often central to its appreciation and evaluation. However, this timelessness became a primary reason to use Egyptian style as an alternative and thus to bring alteration in dominant formal and visual choices. So an intriguing paradox turns up; Egyptian style travelling across time relies on its everlasting aura, but is in the same time initiator of stylistic change.

The changes Egyptian style effects in other periods are not brought about by one coherent set of formal and visual characteristics. We cannot speak of »the« Egyptian style, since the stylistic characteristics related to Egypt are far too variable for that. This is made clear in among others the contribution of Anne Haslund Hansen pointing out that throughout the

18th century the categorization of the formal and visual characteristics of »the« Egyptian style altered. In her central case study, Piranesi's *Diverse maniere*, we could even speak of defining »the« Egyptian style by »rubbing off« exemplary Egyptian artefacts. To put it in other words, in his etchings Piranesi adapted the formal and visual characteristics of notorious artefacts related to Egypt in such a way that the definition of Egyptian style could be changed without transgressing against the limited reservoir of artefacts at hand. Moreover, Pascal Griener marvelously elucidates how in Piranesi's century the fascination for Egypt was very closely related to the own time. The travelling of Egypt's monumental artefacts was presented as an index of the own progress. Besides, references to Egypt were eagerly used to be able to deal with the almost magical power of artefacts. Thanks to the appropriation of Egypt, art's agency could be explored »outside the box, [...] outside the boundaries defined by all the systems of value – aesthetic, political ones«.

To understand even better »the« Egyptian style as a construct so often telling more about the own time than about ancient Egypt, we also have to reckon with a complex relation between form and content. The very same stylistic characteristics taken from Egypt can gradually shift in meaning while travelling, as Laurent Bricault demonstrates with his study of the Hellenistic drachma of Myndos. Thus, the present book points at the complex relation between our modern definition of style and the socio-cultural impact of artefacts. We need to analyze the artefacts' formal and visual characteristics in close relation with their historical context, since even if formal and visual characteristics stayed unchanged for a while, their reception could be radically different. Whereas our contemporary stylistic analyses still focus very much on periodization and on considering an artefact genuine or false, this volume learns that stylistic analyses need to be combined with the study of artefacts' biographies and with network analyses.

The productive powers of Egyptian style relying on complex, often paradoxical relations between timelessness-change and invariability-variability are made possible from the moment that Egyptian style is no longer part of its original context. Egyptian style while travelling can keep its aura of a centuries-old invariable set of formal and visual characteristics, but in the same time is able to bring renewal to its new home, as long as that new home is far enough removed from the old one. In her contribution, Ann Gunter explains that in the Iron Age »a new chapter in the life of Egyptian styles« emerges, precisely because then the close connection between Egyptian style and Egyptian political and economic domination became far less strong than before. The fading importance of its concrete origin did certainly not diminish the impact of Egyptian style. The book makes clear that the aura of invariability of Egyptian style can only achieve change in travelling across the Mediterranean, Europe, and beyond, if a delicate position towards its original context is answered. Egypt cannot be too close, but on the other hand neither too far. Dimitri Laboury and Marie Lekane point at the fact that in the Middle Ages Egyptian style gets so extremely far removed from its origins that they speak of a »loss of style«. However, they nuance this medieval loss by examining the possibility that most suddenly, seemingly *ex nihilo*, Egyptian style arises anew, as

is the case in the 13th century Roman *arte cosmatesca* with its Egyptian-looking sphinxes and lions.

Some of the object-based studies in this book give us further insights in how Egyptian artefacts were thought of containing the key to opening up the closed Egyptian territories. The more eager people tried to find that key, the less interest they gave to the particular style of the artefact. In his contribution on the reception of the *Mensa Isiaca* Peter Mason discusses the belief that the distant Egyptian past could be brought closer to the viewers thanks to a careful examination of the tablet's figures. Mason shows how at the start of the 17th century antiquarian Lorenzo Pignoria based his study of the *Mensa Isiaca* on the belief that all figures must have a concrete meaning and that these figures together must lead to one coherent message. So the figures had to be »read« in order to retrieve the Egyptian mysteries. However, this analysis of Egyptian »texts« equaled to a large degree the acknowledgement of the own phantasmagorias (which can be related to what Assmann and Ebeling in their introductory contribution define as »mnemohistory«). Moreover, in this context of iconography *avant la lettre* stylistic choices were totally downgraded in importance. Style was deemed of secondary importance, as trivial as handwriting was estimated for the meaning of a text.

In Odile Nouvel-Kammerer's contribution it becomes crystal clear how in the period around 1800 the representation of Egyptian architecture very closely interacts with urgent political and historiographical concerns. Thanks to the exceptional riches of primary source material, the impact of Egyptian style in a centerpiece in Sèvres porcelain – a technical marvel that represented three Egyptian temples surrounded by obelisks, colossi, and sphinxes – can be exploited to the fullest. We get a fascinating insight in how the use of Egyptian style served complex diplomatic agendas, but how similarly this use also interacted with current historical and art-historical debates. Here, the effect of style is studied in a thorough, most innovative way thanks to relating stylistic analysis to the biography of artefacts and network analysis.

Finally, Cecilia Hurley focusses on the museological difficulties in presenting Egyptian artefacts. Urgent stylistic issues popped up when Egyptian artefacts arrived in the museums throughout the 19th century. The architecture of museums was primarily defined by Neo-Classicism showing explicit differences with the Egyptian styles of the artefacts on show. Prominent scholars saw this as a problem, since the stylistic differences obstructed the artefacts' power to transport the visitors to ancient Egypt. Possible alternatives were found in the international exhibitions and their presentation of Egyptian artefacts in reconstructions of temples, thus facilitating the immersion into the glorious past of the pharaohs. Here, we see how the »academic« museum and the »spectacular« international exhibition were both prominently involved in the question how best to stage Egypt.

Thanks to Hurley's comprehensive discussion of the complex relation between academic and popular culture in the presentation of Egyptian style, we find ourselves again where we started, Perry's video clip for *Dark Horse*. As we already said, its use of Egyptian style can

easily be set aside as merely postmodern popular culture. However, it can also be seen as a playful exploration of the role of Egyptian style in Western civilization and beyond. Admittedly, in terms of explicit references the clip does not look much further back in time than Elizabeth Taylor playing Cleopatra. However, by eagerly commenting upon the effects of Egyptian style it picks up issues addressed in the book that predate the 1960s by far.

As is so often the case in video clips, the lyrics have no direct relation with what is shown. The images do not merely illustrate the words, since there are no direct references to Egypt in the song itself. Therefore, the viewers are invited to see links between Egyptian style and Perry warning her admirers for a »perfect storm«. Thus Egypt can be maximally exploited. The clip's use of Egyptian style plays with the idea of inescapable strength and spectacular magic. Perry's monumental throne, for example, is given the form of a sphynx. In the clip that throne is animated. Through its eyes, it spectacularly beams Perry's bragging lovers to death. In doing so, not only Egyptian style is overemphasized and explicitly turned into a commonplace, but also the effect of Egyptian style. Furthermore, the clip uses the long tradition of appropriating Egyptian style to express gender roles by staging male and female clichés as amusing caricatures. The femme fatale, as well as her arrogant admirers are given form with very obvious references to Egypt, consequently eliciting pleasant recognition. Finally, the clip's use of Egyptian style evokes sensual beauty with its sharp-cut female contours and muscular male torsos, as well as life-threatening sexuality by giving the central role to a Cleopatra-like femme fatal. Maybe, these elements so central to the effect of Egyptian style in the clip – cliché, humor and sexuality – can be further explored in future research with the help of the methods and theories developed in this thought-provoking book volume.