

## **Egypt in Western Popular Culture** **From Bram Stoker to *The Jewel of the Nile***

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### **Abstract**

In April 2011, Western eyes were fixed on Egypt. Many were astounded when Hosni Mubarak, who had presented himself as the anti-colonial hero who nationalized the Suez Canal, was ousted by a popular uprising after thirty years of authoritarian rule. The subsequent waves of political protests sweeping over the Arab world put in evidence the complexities of the historical background, and brought attention to the long shadows of a not-so-distant violent past. For Europe and North America, there was something else about Egypt. Culturally, the West had absorbed Egypt onto its collective memory as the gate to the Near East since the nineteenth century. Casablanca and Hong Kong had been *pied a terres*, but Cairo, in a way that not even Byzantium had ever managed, was *home*. Egypt has been embedded in Western consciousness for the last two centuries, and its ancient, pharaonic past has reinvented the store of myth of Europe and North America to an immeasurable extent. The present essay is concerned with the discreet but powerful interventions of Western popular culture in translating Egypt for Western consumption, both building and resisting stereotypes. The essay considers Bram Stoker's novel of 1903, *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, which solidified many of those stereotypes, and goes on to discuss three popular renderings of Egypt produced around a hundred years later, which rewrite those stereotypes from within: the film *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985), the novel *The Map of Love* (1999), and the documentary *The Hidden History of Egypt* (2002). All four works are particularly interested in 'looking' as a form of 'knowing', and the essay investigates how they all articulate what we may call an 'active witnessing'.

### **Keywords**

Egypt, popular culture, postcolonialism, orientalism, popular film, popular literature, gendered gaze, Bram Stoker, Ahdaf Soueif, Terry Jones

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### **Introduction: Seeing as Owning**

In April 2011, Western eyes were fixed on Egypt. Many were astounded when Hosni Mubarak, who had presented himself as the anti-colonial hero who nationalized the Suez Canal, was ousted by a popular uprising after thirty years of authoritarian rule. The subsequent waves of political protests sweeping over the Arab world put in evidence the complexities of the historical background, and brought attention to the long shadows of a not-so-distant violent past. For Europe and North America, there was something else about Egypt. Culturally, the West had absorbed Egypt onto its collective memory as the gate to the Near East since the nineteenth century. Casablanca and Hong Kong had been *piéd a terres*, but Cairo, in a way that not even Byzantium had ever managed, was *home*. Egypt has been embedded in Western consciousness for the last two centuries, and its ancient, pharaonic past has reinvigorated the store of myth of Europe and North America to an immeasurable extent. The present essay is about the discreet but powerful interventions of Western popular culture in translating Egypt for Western consumption, both building and

resisting stereotypes. I start by considering Bram Stoker's novel of 1903, *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, which solidified many of those stereotypes, and go on to discuss three popular renderings of Egypt produced around a hundred years later, which rewrite those stereotypes from within: the film *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985), the novel *The Map of Love* (1999), and the documentary *The Hidden History of Egypt* (2002). All four works are particularly interested in looking as a form of knowing, and I investigate how they articulate what we may call an 'active witnessing'..

The Western gaze upon Egypt is often eroticized. An emphasis on "sensuality" was identified by Edward Said in 1978 as part of the Orientalist mindset (2011, 4), agent and manifestation of a Western sense of superiority over the Near East. In this binary construction, "[t]he Oriental is [presented as] irrational, depraved . . . , childlike, 'different'; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'", and this structuring fiction of the Orient, "because created out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient" (Said 2011, 40). Said acknowledged the influence of Michel Foucault's work from the 1970s. Foucault's elucidation of how normative and queer sexual behaviours become associated with interlocked 'identities' through discourse was a crucial step in the development of queer theory in the 1980s, and the role of non-normative sexualities and affects in Western texts about Egypt will also be part of my discussion. While regularly unacknowledged by later critics, the foundational poststructuralist work of Simone de Beauvoir in the 1949 treatise *The Second Sex* established the existence of an even more historically embedded hierarchical binary, that of man and woman. De Beauvoir summarises it thus: "He is the subject; he is the absolute. She is the Other" (2011, 6). Misogynist and feminist attitudes are articulated alongside, and through, references to colonialism and sexuality. A text such as *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, committed to the aesthetics of the gothic mode, exploits the genre's constitutive ambiguity to make all kinds of provocative suggestions.

An emphasis on the visual apprehension of the wonders of a distant world was transferred from orientalist literature into film (Lant 1977, 85). As a medium, cinema is chained to reality, in that you *must* believe what you see. This has resulted in much mischief, and much outright harm. The origins of cinema seem inextricably linked to the archaeological discoveries in Egypt, to the extent that Antonia Lant has claimed that “Egypt played midwife to film’s birth” (1977, 81). The country’s ancient past provided the new medium with keen Western audiences, an influential visual grammar, and jaw-dropping story lines. In addition, in the early days of cinema the exhibition of Egyptian artifacts, and of films set in Egypt, sometimes shared the same building, and “there was an association between the blackened enclosure of silent cinema and that of the Egyptian tomb, both in theoretical texts and in the use of Egyptianate architectural style for auditoriums” (ibid., 71). In the process, the colonial framework was strengthened, because cinema “inherited and disseminated colonial discourse” (Shohat 1977, 19). It is particularly interesting, therefore, to see how Western popular fiction and documentary films have processed this legacy at the turn of the twenty first century.

### ***The Jewel of Seven Stars***

Popular culture is a way of deploying dominant ideology, but it is also a site of resistance to it. This essay is concerned with that “double movement” (Hall 1981, 228). Normative ideas on religion, politics, sexuality, class, and gender are not only reflected, but often articulated in a coherent, interlinked manner through popular texts. Bram Stoker’s *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, of 1903, is among the most important of the early cultural products on ancient Egypt. Gerardine Meaney sees the novel as a foundational text for most mainstream Western films on the subject, from the 1932 *The Mummy* onwards (Meaney, January 2002). The novel is the first to bring

together tropes of western popular fictions on Egypt such as the powerful artifact, the mummy's returning to life, the curse, the harmless young woman who becomes a murder suspect, the hero as a lonely mature gentleman, local events that have consequences for the world at large, non-normative sexuality, or a story within a story set in ancient Egypt. The inadequacy of technology and science is another concern of the novel. Finding proof of the immortality of the soul is the climax towards which the novel moves – and the male protagonist eventually *witnesses* the resurrection of an ancient Egyptian, queen Tera, an event which is referred to as “the Great Experiment” (Stoker 1999, 243). The investment on the senses in the text amounts to an obsession, as the body is taken over by, given over to, the physical experience of coming in contact with ancient Egypt. The emphasis of *The Jewel of Seven Stars* on the act of seeing is remarkable for a work predating the development of film. The novel even reproduces hieroglyphs and an actual drawing in the printed text, as a scientific essay may have done (ibid., 146, 196). Connections between characters are normally established through glancing and gazing (Bryson 1983, 121, 209), and watching is what the characters *do* for most of the novel. What the hero and the reader want is to *see* – to see the attacker, to see the attack, the queen, her transformation... The text is constructed around the compulsion to witness: meaningful looks, mistrustful looks, looks that betray how one feels, looks that search for clues. The text is also much concerned with feelings that distort vision, as when we are told that “[l]ove is, after all, a selfish thing; and it throws a black shadow on anything between which and the light it stands” (Stoker 1999, 248). Magnifying glasses are alluded to, bifocals are adjusted, telescopes employed, but they all prove useless, because the mystery at hand can not be apprehended by an uninvolved onlooker – only by a participant. The wholehearted investment of the narrative on witnessing is beyond question, as the following fragments show:

I watched her face as she began to read; but seeing at once that Sergeant Daw kept his keen eyes on her face, unflinchingly watching every flitting expression, I kept my eyes hence forth fixed on his. (21)

At last she raised her eyes and looked at me for a moment; after that I would not have exchanged places with a king. For a while she busied herself round the extemporized bedside of her father. Then, asking me to be sure not to take my eyes off him till she returned, she hurried out. (24)

He stopped, struck by the strange pallor of her face. Then his eyes, following her look and mine, lit on the cluster of lamps in the drawer. . . . I looked at [the detective], and as he caught my glance he turned his eyes on Miss Trelawney whose back was towards me. There was in them the same look of suspicion which had been there when he had spoken to me... (106)

These are not isolated occurrences. If first looks are recorded, together with the instinctive feelings they inspire (*ibid.*,69, 115, 26), characters remain locked in a mesmeric trance or keep ‘watching watchers’ throughout as if caught up in a hypnotic chain. Unsurprisingly, we learn in the story that Hypnotism is “another art or science of Old Nile” (*ibid.*,191). This frantic gazing is the common thread in all subsequent factual and fictional accounts of ancient Egypt in the west. It is not surprising either to learn that “cedar oil, which was much used in the preparation and ceremonials of the Egyptian dead, has a certain refractive power which we do not find in other oils. For instance, we use it on the lenses of our microscopes to give additional clearness of vision” (*ibid.*,207). Even the Egyptian climate has a similar effect: “In that wonderful atmosphere of theirs, where sunlight fierce and clear is perpetually coexistent with day, where the dryness of earth and air gives perfect refraction, why may they not have learned secrets of light hidden from us in the density of our northern mists?” (*ibid.*,213). Another character exclaims: “The clue is intended for seeing eyes!” (252). Wonders are meant for the discerning, and seeing is a by-word for knowing, for taking possession. Much of the western archaeological activity in

Egypt at the time the novel was published, shared the impetus of the colonial project which financed it: to see/know/possess for the first time with human (i.e. Western) eyes. In the words of Antonia Lant, “clearly the burgeoning of images of Egypt is part of the colonialist project that involved mapping and photographing, claiming both territory and subjects by reproducing them in visual form...”(1977, 76). Said identified the Orient as one of the West’s “deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (2011, 1), but the otherness of Egypt stares back in defiance in *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, and from unexpected quarters — passive femininity turns into a troublesome, proud, unpredictable force, and the young English Victorian lady Miss Margaret Trelawney metamorphoses into the Ancient Egyptian queen Tera. Margaret’s name had held a clue to her “dual existence”, an inverted second half. (Stoker 1999, 248; 236, 246). This is an almost literal imaging of Said’s suggestion that “European culture . . . se[t] itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (2011, 3). Consider the very first impression of the young woman on the protagonist, Malcolm Ross, when he sees himself in her “black mirror” eyes:

She had marvelous eyes; great, wide-open, and as black and soft as velvet, with a mysterious depth. To look in them was like gazing at a black mirror such as Doctor Dee used in his wizard rites. I heard an old gentleman at the picnic, a great oriental traveler, describe the effect of her eyes ‘as looking at night at the great distant lamps of a mosque through the open door.’ The eyebrows were typical. Finely arched and rich in long curling hair, they seemed like the proper architectural environment of the deep, splendid eyes. (Stoker 1999, 26-27)

Compare this to Malcolm’s comment near the end of the narrative: “There was something in her voice so strange to me that I looked quickly into her eyes. They were bright as ever, but veiled to my seeing the inward thought behind them as are the eyes of a caged lion” (ibid., 246). Woman as ‘black mirror’, as Islam, as night that

complements masculine daylight; and then, an inviting exoticism which is revealed as threat, a fascination which turns to dread. Said proposed that “European culture gained its strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (2011, 3). Poststructuralist feminism has contended that the construction of the western *male* is interdependent on the creation of western women as a perpetual other. We can see the Western colonial gaze as simply a manifestation of the normative proprietary male gaze, which would explain why western stereotypes of the feminine are often transferred to eastern culture. In her feminist treatise of 1938 *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf shocked many by asserting that the subjection of women was on a continuum with fascism and imperialism, and by declaring that “the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; . . . the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other” (2000, 270). In Ella Shohat’s words, “[t]he western imagery [has] metaphorically rendered the colonized land as a female to be saved from her environ/mental disorder...” (1977, 39). The connection is exemplified by a scene in one of the numerous films inspired by Stoker’s text, the 1999 *The Mummy*, set in Egypt, where at one point the heroine, an Egyptian-English Egyptologist, gets tipsy and tells the American hero: “I know. You’re wondering what is a place like me doing in a girl like this. . . . Egypt is in my blood” (Sommers, 1999). But imperial, patriarchal discourse relies on ambivalence to legitimize itself. Fear is never incontrovertibly grounded, desire is never fully satisfied, so permanent suspicion and unquenchable need sustain a binary system that promises stability, in exchange from permanent control and permanent vigilance. As we see in Stoker’s novel, opposites are embedded in the narrator’s authoritative assessment:

We learn of great things by little experiences. . . . For the eye of infinite wisdom [the Eye of Horus] there is no need of shading. All things, all thoughts, all emotions, all

experiences, all doubts and hopes and fears, all intentions, all wishes seen down to the lower strata of their concrete and multitudinous element, are finally resolved into direct opposites. (1999, 233)

Thus, in *The Jewel of Seven Stars* the all-seeing eye of infinite wisdom corroborates how the world is perceived by the upper class English gentleman: the gendered, colonial, classed gaze. But the ‘resolution’ of the world into ‘direct opposites’ shape-shifts in the un-mappable sands of Egypt, when those opposites are transported to “our little oasis” in suburban London (ibid., 120). The readers witness strange reversals: a strong man can become a passive tool in the hands of a powerful woman, Egyptian royalty can enslave the representatives of the British crown, women can make history while men become victims or observe from the sidelines, religion can take over science... The binary system is still intact, but the hierarchy has been inverted.

Like a magician’s trick, the internal contradictions of the system are suddenly revealed, but only to vanish again, seemingly without a trace, in a text that keeps offering glimpses of the suppressed within dominant culture. In this context, it is interesting that, as Shohat points out, “seeing himself as explorer and discoverer of new worlds, Freud in *Studies on Hysteria* compared the role of the psychoanalyst to that of the archaeologist [...], [which he saw as] analogous ‘with the technique of excavating a buried city’” (1977, 33). One example of the suppressed, in the novel, is the muddled familial links repeatedly suggesting incestuous feelings, in keeping with the custom of the ruling classes in Ancient Egypt. Margaret Trelawney seems to turn at various points into her father, her mother, and into the sister of her suitor Malcolm Ross (Stoker 1999, 49). Each of these possibilities marks a breach of established roles, which is not only relevant in the context of Ms Trelawney’s ambiguous

personality, but crucial to the novel in that the ambiguities are embodied in a female character.

Bram Stoker was writing in the heyday of the ‘new woman’. The term originated in Irish novelist Sarah Grand’s feminist essay of 1894 “The New Aspect of the Woman Question”, where she discussed the dawn of a “new woman . . . [who] has solved the problem [of her dissatisfaction]” and has “prescribed the remedy”: sociopolitical engagement (1894, 271). The ‘new women’ were an emergent group of self-consciously feminist, financially self-sufficient, artistically inclined, and somewhat more sexually autonomous women. Contemporary allusions to “the Sphinxness of modern woman”, Antonia Lant points out, were “surely a defense, a way of figuring her desires as a series of riddles, illegible for modern culture...” (1977, 91). Hence the anxieties of a male narrator, in *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, over the undecidability of what the woman *knows*, a knowledge that is linked to sexuality:

“Leave her [queen Tera] alone with me [Margaret said]. There are still many hours to pass, and I do not like to leave her lying there, all stark in the glare of light. This may be the Bridal she prepared for — the Bridal of Death; and at least she shall wear her pretty robes” (Stoker 1999, 272)

The ceremony turns out to be the bridal union of two women, Margaret and Tera, climaxing in an orgasmic explosion that joins them in death and resurrection. The final scene thus becomes a lifting of eyelids over two “black suns” (ibid., 276), which refuse to share with the reader the secret of their new –sexual– knowledge. *The Jewel of Seven Stars* can be interpreted as one man’s attempt to *read* the orientalist mystery of the feminine, and his failure to do anything but witness his own irrelevance in the light of a transhistorical bond between women. In this way, the jewel itself can be seen as a metonymy of undecipherable, inapprehensible female sexuality. In the same way, it is possible to read the jewel-like artifact at the centre of

the Orientalist Western action film from 2001 *Tomb Raider* as a clitoris. Jewels and pearls have a long tradition of encoding in lesbian literature (Faderman 1995, 441-6), and Stoker's novel also suggests another symbol of non-normative sexuality, in the cat that keeps reappearing in suspicious circumstances. A number of literary critics have remarked on the use of pets to encode homoerotic desire (Vanita 1996, 215-41).

Lesbian eroticism and homoeroticism are not uncommon in Orientalised Egyptian fiction, but homophobia is not far away. An interesting example is Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "Lot No. 249", published in 1894, about an Oxford university student who keeps an Egyptian mummy in his room. He has the power to revive the mummy at will, and uses the creature as a surrogate to stalk and assault young men. While the mummy's intent is not explicitly sexual, the awkward title's link to Lot's Sodom serves as the Rossetta stone for this disturbing tale. Ailise Bulfin sees this short story, as well as *The Jewel of Seven Stars* and a cluster of Western fiction from the period, as an example of 'paranoid Imperial gothic' related to the Urabi revolt of 1879-82, and explains that "the iconic figure of the vengeful mummy ultimately came to act as a signifier for Egypt" (2011, 438). In this case, it is also a queer signifier for how "the path of nature has been overstepped in open day" at a rarified English institution (Doyle 1892, 525).

The conclusion of *The Jewel of Seven Stars* marks the shattering of a system that relies on the opposites of male-female, aristocrat-plebeian, eastern-western, and even life-death, since it describes how two women of different class, religion, and race, become one and eternal. Malcolm Ross, who had seen himself as consort to Margaret and "guardian of the light" (Stoker 1999, 278), is reduced to a mere scribe, entrusted with the frustrating task of recording Queen Tera's reclaiming her favoured companion, together with an assorted court of brilliant minds, into her realm of darkness. If "Divine Wisdom" is synonymous with "Divine Power" (ibid., 253), the

only thing Malcolm has confirmed by witnessing this miracle is his inability to understand – and consequently, his own powerlessness.

### ***The Jewel of the Nile***

Many of the tropes advanced in works like *The Jewel of Seven Stars* quickly became stereotypes in a succession of movies. These movies reproduce the same story-line: tomb execration, followed by curse, followed by innocent western girl under a spell, followed by western man attempting to rescue her. Rescue fantasies, according to Shohat, “serve to define the ‘West’”, and the “homecoming of this desert odyssey is the disciplinary punishment of female desire for liberation and renewed spectorial appreciation for the existing sexual, racial, and national order” (1977, 57). Films like the 1932 *The Mummy* normativised Stoker’s tale by eliminating the philosophic-religious debates, by having the female protagonist fall for an eastern man instead of a woman, and by stressing the colonial significance of the story through setting it in Egypt. Bram Stoker himself wrote an alternative version of the last chapter of his novel in 1912, offering a happy ending (for the male protagonist), and most popular films also ended with a restoration of order. The bleak *al-Mumia*, an Egyptian production of 1969, steered away from stereotypical film fare. Interestingly, its director Chadi Abdel Salam had been the set designer for the film that marked the apotheosis of Hollywood Egyptomania six years earlier, Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *Cleopatra*. Meanwhile, some western movies were resisting from within. This is the case with *The Egyptian*, based on a popular 1945 Finish novel by Mika Waltari, whose protagonist is an existentialist anti-hero, the Egyptian Sinue.

There are other interesting examples, such as the more recent *The Jewel of the Nile*, an unpretentious and relatively small budgeted comedy-romance-adventure produced in Hollywood in 1985, which was enormously popular, and which subtly

undermines stereotypes in a number of ways. Marketed as a romance action film, *The Jewel of the Nile* is also an effective comedy. It often resorts to humorous exaggeration —the sign of a camp sensibility—, for example in the repeated statement that the Arab villain “is a *very* bad man”. The film constantly undermines its own plausibility, as we see, for example, in the co-protagonist Joan’s response to the news that her ex-boyfriend is dead: “Don’t be ridiculous. Jack would never die without telling me” (Teague 1985). Self-deprecatingly, the film alludes to Western indifference to the rest of the world when a westerner meets a major Egyptian politician and wonders: “I’ve seen your face in *The Times*?” (ibid.. 1985). Newspaper reports also make a brief appearance in the 1932 film *The Mummy*. The popular medium of the press is another important site of resistance to, as well as articulation and perpetuation of, colonial priorities. Rather shockingly, in a 2002 issue of the London and Manchester newspaper *The Guardian*, a paper not known for patriotic excess, the discovery of a new pyramid tomb in Egypt was reported in the ‘National News’ section, on account of the leaders of the archaeological team being British (Radford 2002, 11).

In *The Jewel of the Nile* it is not just the one-liners which ironically revisit stereotypes, as befits to a primarily visual medium. The numerous slapstick gags, for example, support the vaudevillian attitude displayed by the movie. There are also visual links to other films, like the parodic scene showing one of the protagonists, a fat and short white man, emerging from a rubbish container as if from a mummy’s sarcophagus. Some scenes seem attempts to visually familiarize, de-orientalise, the eastern other. For example, after a westerner successfully walks over hot coals in the tribe which has adopted him, a staple of the colonial visual imagery of ‘generic tribal rituals’, he ambiguously exclaims: “I did it! I am one of us!” (Teague 1985). In the same way, the film may be alluding to its own contradictory position when it shows

two westerners enjoying a tribal rave party in an oasis. Given that they dance to the tune of “There isn’t a sheep safe tonight” (ibid., 1985), the scene is also used to mock orientalist perceptions of non-normative sexuality. The epitome of the power of a visual spectacle in contemporary western popular youth culture, the rock concert, is also satirically incorporated into the film by showing a rock producer ‘imported’ from the West, who designs the propaganda rally of an Arab warlord.

The characterisation in *The Jewel of the Nile* also undermines gender expectations, by showing the female protagonist as a physically active and fearless heroine. She is the bread-winner, and the politically committed, enterprising half of a heterosexual couple; her male partner is an idle hero without intellectual curiosity or any discernible assets whose sole motivation is his love for a woman. The movie itself opens with a related visual joke: in what appears to be the real film we are watching, the female protagonist is presented in a stereotypical swashbuckling adventure, with a male hero attempting to rescue her from a group of pirates. The scene turns out to be a chapter in the novel that the actual protagonist of *The Jewel of the Nile* is writing, as she lays on her boyfriend’s yacht. She turns away in frustration from her writing, exclaiming: “I wanna do something serious. How much romance can one woman take?” (Teague 1985). She is about to become the heroine of an action film. However, romance is not ejected from the story. While the American protagonists observe a ceremony, a local explains: “This is the marriage dance. In this tribe, the women –they choose the man, and then, according to the custom, they will be together for the rest of their life” (ibid., 1985). In this way, Egypt has managed to remind westerners that their social arrangements are not universally endorsed, while simultaneously helping westerners to renew their Hollywoodian ideal of everlasting heterosexual union.

*The Jewel of the Nile* is a mainstream film, and inevitably, to borrow from Christine Gledhill, it is caught in the “continuous (re-)negotiation” of ideology in “[t]he culture industries of bourgeois democracy” (1999, 170). Subverting expectations is nevertheless a central aim of this movie. To give another example, greed is a recurrent theme in orientalised Egyptian films, and perhaps the accursed western archaeologist is a modern archetype in a cautionary tale about punished greed. In fact, ‘mummy films’ can be seen as a manifestation of capitalism’s unease about its own ability to endure as a system. In *The Jewel of the Nile*, the title itself becomes a critical statement, because the ‘Jewel’ turns out to be the name of a holy man – a fragile looking, childishly cheerful, peace loving Arab intellectual who is considered to be their real wealth by his oppressed people. But perhaps the most powerful attack of *The Jewel of the Nile* on orientalist stereotypes resides in its refusal to incorporate the iconic staple of western representations of Egypt: not a single shot of a pyramid is included in the film. In this way, *The Jewel of the Nile* not only articulates resistance through *re-vision*, but also by default – in its refusal to *see* what normativity requires that it should see.

### ***The Map of Love***

So many non-fiction books on Egypt are regularly published in English, that it is not uncommon to find bookshops which have sections on the topic. Neither archaeology nor travel, the ‘Egypt section’ may include a mismatch of pharaohs’ biographies, introductions to ancient Egyptian art, and mummification manuals. In the section, one may also find speculative treatises on an alien connection to the pyramids, and it is remarkable that a creation myth developed in the twentieth century, that of an alien civilization landing on the planet and triggering human development, should be often recalled to provide ‘answers’ for what are perceived as ‘mysteries’ of ancient Egypt.

The common traits of this wide range of books is their reliance on *visual* material. Fiction is far less common, although novels with Egyptian settings and subjects by western authors have appeared regularly, at times from somewhat surprising quarters, such as Norman Mailer's monumental *Ancient Evenings* saga, of 1983.

In 1999, a novel about Egypt became a bestseller in Europe. Billed as a romance, Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* is structured through two parallel interracial love stories beginning in 1897 London and 1997 Cairo. Soueif was born in a British colony, like Bram Stoker, who began his professional career working as a clerk in the administrative centre of the British empire in Ireland, Dublin Castle. Like Stoker's writing career, Soueif's took off in London, and like him, she recreated colonial tensions and cultural hybridity imaginatively into her Egyptian story. A novel such as *The Jewel of Seven Stars* was directly affected by "the political riddle posed by Egypt . . . whose independence was forever hovering just over the horizon" in the period of unofficial British occupation, 1882-1914, which saw the publication of Stoker's book (Deane 2008, 385). In order to understand present-day Egypt, Soueif contrives a double narrative that revisits that same period. If *The Jewel of the Nile* had articulated its rebellious streak through comedy, *The Map of Love* is an activist novel structured as a romance. Both share some concerns, like the inadequacies of the press, and the predictability of western attitudes. These are brought together in the novel, when Amal agrees to speak to an American journalist: "[Amal] braced herself: the fundamentalists, the veil, the cold peace, polygamy, women's status in Islam, female genital mutilation – which would it be?" (Soueif 2000, 6). Western media has regularly demonstrated an inability to think outside its own regulatory terms. A 2009 essay by a Muslim feminist activist protested yet again that "the only place for Muslim women in global media coverage is that of the victim" (Karaca 2009, 37), and, as Meyda Yeğenoğlu has pointed out, the "liberal desire to . . . re-value the weak

and the subjugated is the very gesture by which the sovereign Western subject constructs himself/herself as considerate and benevolent” (1998, 121).

Written in English by an Egyptian woman, *The Map of Love* stands out for its denunciation of the imperialist grip of Europe, the USA, and Israel, which breeds Muslim fundamentalism in the region, doubly curtailing its development. In order to convey this message, the novel not only avails of the conventions of romantic fiction but, even more surprisingly, it adopts some orientalist stereotypes. Orientalism assumes an imperial *male* gaze, but as Reina Lewis has shown, Western feminist women have also reworked orientalist stereotypes to denounce imperial and patriarchal priorities (1996, 35-43, 158-61). Crossdressing for example, a typical manifestation of orientalist sexual ambiguity, plays an important part in *The Map of Love*. One of its protagonists, Anna, dresses up as a man in order to get to know the real Egypt, and it is in this guise that she meets her future husband, an Arab nationalist. In the words of Marjorie Garber, Orientalism reflects “the constructed role of the Middle East itself as an ‘intermediate’ zone, a place where pederasty, homosexuality, and transexualism are all perceived (by Western observers) as viable options” (1991, 242). Incestuous feelings are another non-normative trait that may be added to the list, and one which plays a part in this novel, since the lovers Isabel and Omar are related; in a pronouncedly allegorical narrative, this is however likely to symbolize membership of ‘the human family’.

In *The Map of Love*, empathy between women seems at times to collapse into homoerotic appreciation of each others’ beauty, as when Hanim meets the crossdressing Anna:

I opened my eyes and found her looking at me. A beautiful European woman, her hair flowing to her shoulders in free golden waves, the bandages it had been tied up in last night fallen in an untidy heap to the floor”, and later, “[s]he spoke simply and with sincerity and when she turned to the window, her eyes, which seemed oddly

dark with all that golden hair, took your breath away with their deep violet light.  
(Soueif 2000, 135, 137)

The text simultaneously suggests and undermines the possibility of same-sex erotic attraction, for example when Anna imagines that she may have been kidnapped by a princess, so that when her true sex is revealed “they would fall laughing into each other’s arms and become sworn sisters from then on” (ibid., 134-5). In a novel so tuned to the language of film, this episode exemplifies the complexity inherent in Laura Mulvey’s ’ famous claim that “in the classical narrative cinema, to see is to desire” (83).

In addition to the lengthy and detailed political discussions that take up much of the novel, some of its most effective political criticism is realized through subtle visual links that in fact mimic the language of cinema, zooming in on significant details like a camera would. For example, in a scene set in 1901 in a picnic at the foot of the Great Pyramid, a British official talks “fervently” about the virtues of Lord Cromer’s administration, as it ensures that trains run on time and so on. The man works as the ‘Oriental Secretary at the Agency.’

But I [Anna] was distracted by the thought that his clothes seemed to get more and more crumpled – *by their own agency*, as it were, though he was engaged in nothing more strenuous than eating his lunch. (Soueif 2001, 99, emphasis added)

Shortly after this, another British man “held that it would take generations before the Natives were fit to rule themselves” (ibid., 99), But Anna’s eyes wander again to “Mr Y, holding a strip of smoked ham to the nose of Toti [a dog], who showed not the slightest interest in it” (100). The crumpled clothes and the uninterested dog symbolize colonizer and colonized. They are visual statements ushered into the reader’s perception by verbal links.

The desire to *see* is in fact what triggers the narrative, as Anna becomes interested in the fascinating yet somewhat unsatisfying paintings of Egyptian landscapes at a London museum. When she finally arrives in Cairo, Anna realizes that something is still missing in what she sees, but she nevertheless persists in surveying every bit of the new land and culture in the hope that what she seeks will be revealed somehow. Her servant Sabir had been instructed to “look after her like your eyes” (111), but despite the vigilance Anna is kidnapped by rebels and imprisoned in a store room . Even then, her curiosity is still intact.

Oh, how I wish I knew where I was, and how I wish it were light! For this is a room of noble proportions. I have travelled around it with my little lamp and found high windows and recessed divans, rich hangings and a tiled floor leading with dainty steps to a shallow pool, and I feel, rather than see, the presence of colour and pattern.(108)

Despite of her genuine desire to absorb all the wonders around her, Anna has always suspected that looking is never enough. We learned this in an earlier scene.

I sit here in my room at Shepherd’s Hotel possessed by the strangest feeling that still I am not in Egypt. I have sat on the Pyramid plateau and my eyes have wandered from the lucid blue of the sky through the blanched yellow of the desert to the dark, promising green of the fields. . . . I have visited the Bazaar and the Churches and the Mosques . . . , but there is something at the heart of it all which eludes me... (102)

At the time, she did not realize that it was precisely *the heart* which was missing. She had wondered “whether it is possible for a conquering ruler to truly see into the character of the people whom he rules” (99), and she learns that the answer is *no*. Only an emotional bond will allow the English visitor to become one with the host culture. Unselfishness erases all difference, and finding a friend, or a lover —that is, finding an equal— is the key to the mystery of Egypt.

The story is less about Anna’s journey towards the real Egypt, and more about her progressive shift away from an imperialist gaze. It is as if this ambiguously-

gendered Victorian-Edwardian English woman (assertive, independent, cross-dressing) becomes feminized by her contact with Egypt. This sounds like a 'corrective', normative, misogynist adjustment, but the novel in fact promotes an open-ended, vulnerable, non-assertive, tender feminine gaze as the correct one for all men and women wishing to transcend colonial directives. Seeing is useless without feeling, and knowing is impossible without loving, which is the reason why, the book suggests, the only true map is the map of love. What was missing in the Victorian Egyptian landscapes hanging in the South Kensington Museum, as well as in every stereotypical depiction of Egypt in Western popular culture, is in fact nothing other than the Egyptian people, who have become invisible to the surveyor's cold gaze (121).

### ***The Hidden History of Egypt***

It is unsurprising that, given the overwhelming emphasis of popular western culture on the *visual* apprehension of Egypt, documentary films offering a virtual journey through the country have been regularly produced for television in the USA, Canada, and the UK. Most of them implicitly acknowledge the primacy of their visual content by placing the writers in secondary positions on the credits, generally after producer, director, art director, and editor, and occasionally even after the composer of the soundtrack. The definitional assumption that documentaries are a document of reality makes the genre particularly pliable to political manipulation. In addition, documentaries made for television are often intended to introduce historical periods to people who may have little knowledge of history, making a biased account more difficult to identify without that specialized knowledge. Many anglophone documentary films on Egypt made in the same period as *The Jewel of the Nile* and

*The Map of Love* have been driven by orientalist priorities. A brief survey should prove the point.

To begin with, pro-colonial attitudes are signaled by a fascination with the colonial past at the height of archaeological activity. These attitudes are so persistent that the narrator in the 2002 documentary *Journey Through the Valley of the Kings* affirms, while discussing the modern discovery of the tomb of Seti I, that: “Nothing like this had been seen. No European had been in a tomb in which such vivid detail was still preserved on the walls” (Lav 2002). Only what the West sees counts as history. In fact, we also find an imperialist mindset in the underlying —and sometimes explicit— assumption that the entire history of Egypt has been somehow assimilated into the collective memory of the West. As a guest from the USA put it in the 2001 documentary *Egypt’s Golden Empire: The Warrior Pharaohs*: “We are only now beginning to reclaim [the history of the ‘New Kingdom’]” (Hawes 2001). This may explain why *we* need to *disclaim* charges of cruelty, as in the following remark, by , discussing the Ancient Egyptian custom of cutting off the hand of enemies: “I suppose it’s not quite as horrid as cutting their heads off” (Ibid ).

Westerners may be eager to cannibalize Egyptian history, but only history up to the last pharaoh, because the centuries that follow are variously unworthy of interest or pitiable in their ‘degradation’, as shown by the 1999 documentary *Napoleon’s Obsession: The Quest for Egypt*. According to the narrator, Bob Brier, the Egypt of two hundred years ago “had lost touch with its glorious past, its vast temples and monuments shrouded in mystery; its ancient writings, indecipherable. The Egypt of Napoleon’s day was an Islamic country. The skyline of its capital, Cairo, filled with the mosques and minarets of the faithful” (Spry-Leverton 2000). According to Bob Brier, speaking in the same documentary, the rarified atmosphere of the time explains why three thousand people were murdered by the French army at Jaffa:

“This massacre could never have happened in Europe. But Napoleon wasn’t in Europe, and he was behaving like a Middle Eastern despot. You know? It took three days to kill all of those Turkish prisoners” (Ibid).

The visible ‘reconstruction’ of the Egyptian past works as a metaphor of colonial desire. Documentaries produced in the West often include short fictional scenes of past events filmed in black and white, with archaeological discoveries being a favorite subject. It is not by chance that the names of western archaeologists and the precise dates —sometimes the precise hour— of their discoveries, are seamlessly, organically, incorporated into the lists of pharaonic dynasties, as if they were part of the same lineage. Thus, in the USA-produced documentary *Egypt’s Golden Empire: The Warrior Pharaohs*, a scholar, John Ray, says that the woman pharaoh Hatsepsut “can be seen as the Queen Elisabeth the First of Ancient Egypt” (Hawes 2001). In the same film, the narrator’s voiceefers to the “stroke of genius” of kidnapping “the children of . . . defeated princes, to indoctrinate them in the ways of Egypt”, a strategy, Gray adds, similar to “what the British did in India” (Ibid 2001). According to Stephen Harvey, North American Egyptologistspeaking speaking in the same documentary, this “superpower” who was threatened north and south reminds us “perhaps of the United States” (Ibid 2001). He goes on to discuss “the nation” (not the Kingdom) being threatened by Hiksos and Nubia: “It would really be as if Canada and Mexico were pressing against the U.S. and actually managing, or talking about, invading” (Ibid 2001). History certainly comes to life by making links to lived experience, but this kind of cultural blurriness, like the ‘black mirror’ of *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, displays the anxieties and aspirations of an imperialist mindset.

There is a strong class-related component here. The insistence on showing the riches of ancient Egyptian rulers in most western documentaries presupposes non-affluent yet greedy television viewers, indulging in transoceanic, transhistorical

voyeurism. Unperturbed, the voice-over in *Egypt's Golden Empire: The Warrior Pharaohs* states: "But behind these treasures, lays an epic tale of real people. People like Rameses the Great, the boy-king, and one of the most beautiful and powerful women of the ancient world, Queen Nefertiti" (Hawes 2001). In the majority of these 'epic tales of real people', monarchy is more than the visual anchor; it is also their ideological core, as they persistently naturalize the ruler-ruled binary. We learn from the narrator of the 1998 documentary *Egypt: Chaos and Kings* that autocracy is the cure to all ills, as the ancients knew so well: "To overcome the ever-present threat of danger, they put their faith in one man, and the power of the gods. To protect themselves from disaster, the Egyptians vested their king with absolute power, and worshiped him, as a god" (Morgan 1998). Nothing can be more natural, we are reminded in *Egypt's Golden Empire: The Warrior Pharaohs*: "The reunification of Egypt is crucial. It means a new beginning. It means that Egypt is back to where it should be. As a unified land under the rule of one king, one pharaoh" (Hawes 2001).

This pervasive conservative impetus displays, unsurprisingly, patriarchal and heteronormative agendas. Women are objectified, sexualized, with such frantic tenacity, that the only purpose of some documentaries seems to be the articulation of an idea of women not merely as *other*, but as irresistible yet cursed *artifact*. A void of information is forcibly filled with misogynistic statements and representations. So for example, in the 1999 documentary *Cleopatra's Palace: In search of a Legend*, an amateur archaeologist is introduced thus: "A former financial adviser, he abandoned a successful career to pursue Cleopatra full time" (Armstrong 1998). This man is attempting to locate the pharaoh's palace in the bay at Alexandria, and we are told that: "Somewhere in these waters lie the palaces where she seduced the most powerful men on Earth" (Ibid.). Apparently, this is the main reason to study her, and it is therefore unsurprising that archaeology becomes a sensual, even erotic, quest, so

that “[a]fter two thousand years, Frank Goddio [the amateur archeologist] has touched her world” (Ibid, ). This erotization of male archaeological excavation is ubiquitous in documentaries and films.

Accounts of female pharaohs focus on beauty and seduction, just as those of male rulers concentrate on wealth and warfare. The tone of the documentary from 2000 *Women Pharaohs* is typical: “Startling new discoveries are unraveling the secret of their seductive charms and political might”, the narrator explains. We are told that with their “skills of divine seduction”, these “master manipulators” could “beguile their enemies” (Glassman 2000). We are also told that Nefertiti “was more than just a pretty face”, which apparently was the reason why she became “one of history’s most recognizable women” (Ibid ). As for Nefertari, “[h]er very name evokes beauty, splendor, and sensuality” (Ibid ). In a similar vein, the documentary *Egypt’s Golden Empire: The Warrior Pharaohs* devotes a sizable amount of airtime to the pharaoh Hatshepsut’s -possible affair with a courtier, although the episode seems irrelevant to her rule. The narrator also explains that Hatshepsut “personally embraced her sexuality, reveling in descriptions of her own beauty” (Hawes 2001). So, it would appear that the search for imperial Egypt in Western documentaries is on the one hand a search for normatively gendered “beauty, splendor, and sensuality” (Glassman 2000), and on the other a search for a historical justification for might and expansion.

As we have seen, even if conservative ideology and oppressive stereotypes are regularly promoted in Western texts about Egypt, some texts are fighting back from within. *The Hidden History of Egypt*, produced in 2001, is a rare example of a documentary intended for mass consumption which sets itself the task of undermining every western stereotype on the subject. Co-written and presented by Terry Jones, one of the founders of the Monty Python comic troupe, the documentary sets out to investigate how ordinary women and men lived in Ancient Egypt. Its

subversive intent is made clear from the very opening sequence. We see a wide shot of an ancient Egyptian temple and hear a generic epic soundtrack for a few seconds, but this ends abruptly with a ‘scratched record’ sound effect, and the camera zooms in on the figure of Terry Jones, who tells the viewer:

Look. Quite honestly, this stuff isn’t what interests me. I mean. This is just the funeral arrangements for some crazed megalomaniac who lived three thousand years before they thought of cryogenic freezers. Turn the camera over there <points>. Look <camera turns to a landscape of palm trees> over there <people walking down the street>. Instead of looking at how the rich and powerful died, <ordinary people in the streets of contemporary Cairo> lets look at how the ordinary people lived three thousand years ago. (Grabsky 2002)

Opening with the colloquial “Look” functions as an introduction to the informal, hands-on approach of the documentary, and also as a direct appeal to review our assumptions. One is reminded of bell hooks’ reclamation of black women’s active and oppositional gaze: “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality” (1999, 308). In *The Hidden History of Egypt* the will to re-write stereotypes is openly acknowledged in the script itself. It is remarkable that a sequence which abruptly terminates a normative narrative also opens *The Jewel of the Nile*, while *The Map of Love* is structured through two intercut stories which alternatively question and validate each other.

The new focus of *The Hidden History of Egypt* is set up against the necrophiliac obsession of western films and documentaries on Egypt, which is explicitly dismissed early on:

You sometimes get the impression that the ancient Egyptians were obsessed by death, but it’s actually just because of a quirk of fate. You see, only five per cent of the land of Egypt is fertile, and they didn’t want to waste that in the old days on graveyards, so they got in the habit of burying their dead out here in the desert. And it was the sand and the heat that preserved these tombs, almost as long as any other human artifact. But the ancient Egyptians weren’t obsessed by death. If anything, they were obsessed by life. (Grabsky 2001).

The documentary certainly endorses it, with the camera roaming through the streets of Cairo, showing the buzzing urban life invariably neglected by western films. The focus of the documentary on ordinary activities, like praying and harvesting, is also a statement in itself. The stereotypical emphasis on an Ancient Egyptian class structure appealing to a western imperial capitalist mentality, is visually undermined and explicitly condemned. In fact, scenes from Euro-American films are used to illustrate the point. Jones explains:

[A number of archaeologists] are convinced that the men who built the pyramids were not slaves, but free men working in some sort of cooperative effort. So it may be that the image of ancient Egypt conjured up by Hollywood is based on a profound misunderstanding of how the ancient world worked. (Grabsky 2001).

This comment is followed by images of a black and white Hollywood film set in Ancient Egypt, showing slaves at work. To prove that this is a misconception, we are later told that workers building a tomb in the Valley of the Kings went on strike in 1170 BCE. The reason for the strike was the insufficient supplies of both food and 'make up'. This prompts the presenter to subvert another persistent orientalist stereotype: the supposedly sensual interest of Ancient Egyptians in adornment, exemplified by the black paint applied under their eyes. Jones explains that the practice was not cosmetic, but that its function was to reduce the glare of the sun. The archaeologist Joan Fletcher further demystifies the issue by declaring: "It's kind of like Ancient Egyptian sunglasses really" (Ibid.). Fletcher, the engaged and informed travel companion of Terry Jones throughout Cairo and environs, which they explore on foot, herself represents a break with tradition in more ways than one. Most guest appearances in documentaries on Ancient Egypt are usually men filmed in offices and archaeological sites, with the names of 'experts' superimposed on the screen, followed by either their professional title, or the University or Association to which

they belong. In many cases, the contributions of ‘experts’ are shockingly irrelevant, and their presence is simply an attempt to legitimize the film.

Given the stereotypical focus on the looks of aristocratic women at the time of the pharaohs, it is not surprising that Patriarchal orientalist assumptions on gender are another target of *The Hidden History of Egypt*: Terry Jones reverses the familiar imperial logic: I was surprised to learn that in ancient Egypt women were legally on an equal footing with men. What’s more, they could marry and they could get divorced, they could buy and sell property, and they were entitled to receive the same wages as men, something even the modern world is still struggling to achieve. [...] In Ancient Egypt, the balance between the sexes was all part of the balance of life in general. (Ibid. )

The documentary also ridicules the aura of mystery associated with Egypt, exemplified by the western fascination with hieroglyphs, offering a translation of a representative sample.

So, here we are, listening to the language of the pharaohs [that is, the derivation of ancient Egyptian used by the Coptic Church], and able to read their scripts. What words of wisdom, what secrets and mysteries are they handing down to us through the millennia? <Voice off continues> ‘On this day, the following clothes were given to the laundry man: ten quilts, eight loincloths, and five sanitary towels.’ (Ibid. )

Throughout the film, the images confirm the stated intention to move away from the ‘crazed megalomaniacs’ of the past and to look instead at the ordinary Egyptians in the shops and holy places, in the coffee shops and the countryside. Perhaps the most radical gesture in *The Hidden History of Egypt* is the visual transformation that the presenter undergoes at one point. The film documents how Terry Jones ‘becomes’ an Ancient Egyptian: we see him choosing the material for his clothing, we see a tailor making it, Jones buying perfumed oil and ‘make up’ powder and having it applied to his body, shaving his head at the barber’s, ordering a wig, and proceeding to wander through the streets of modern Cairo in this guise to the amusement of the locals.

Fittingly, *The Hidden History of Egypt* closes in defiant mode:

When [the Ancient Egyptians] thought about the afterworld they saw it... very much

like this one, for, you see, for the Ancient Egyptians, heaven *was* Egypt, and hell was to be anywhere else. I wonder how many people living in Los Angeles or London could say the same. (Ibid.)

And so, it is our own inadequacies that make us project our desires (including our desire of normalcy and validation) onto the foreign. *The Hidden History of Egypt* is nothing short of extraordinary, as it manages to overturn every stereotype persistently endorsed by other documentaries produced in the west.

### **Conclusion**

The hero of the 1932 *The Mummy* tells the heroine that he fell in love with a mummified woman after unwrapping her face, and she asks: “Do you have to open graves to find girls to fall in love with?” (*Mummy* 1932). Perhaps the common trait of all the stereotypical accounts of ancient Egypt is their determination to avoid any constructive engagement with the present, with a real world full of living people. What gives their force to the resisting counter-narratives considered in this essay is their enthusiastic embracing of the now. Terry Jones at the Cairo market, the protagonist of *The Map of Love* arguing with Western journalists, the oasis rave party in *The Jewel of the Crown*, all have their feet on the ground. It has been claimed that all art has a “mummy complex” (Andre Bazin, quoted in Lant 1977, 69), but the impetus of the artist, rather than preservation, is surely movement, development, generation. The merit of *The Jewel of Seven Stars* rests on its imaginative qualities. Works such as Bram Stoker’s novel have facilitated the construction of oppressive stereotypical representations of gender, class, sexuality, and race which filter western perceptions of Egypt. Other popular works such as *The Jewel of the Nile*, *The Map of Love*, and *The Hidden History of Egypt* have attempted to undermine those stereotypes. There are a handful of other examples, but still they are not enough. In

the words of Ali Behdad: “That Orientalism as a Western discourse on the Other continues to operate so powerfully only makes the need for counter-representational practices more urgent” (1994, viii). The Eye of Horus, the ‘all seeing eye’ of the falcon-headed god from Ancient Egypt, is an icon of power. The very ubiquity of this image in the West is symbolic of the *Western* predatory gaze on a former European colony which continues to be culturally pillaged. Fantasies of feminized, acquiescent, erotized, luxurious bodies, ready for consumption, continue to be regularly produced by Western film, literature, and visual culture. Ancient Egypt, as reinvented by Western eyes, is an accessible ‘body’ of sensual experience, in a narrative that legitimizes autocracy, class divisions, state violence, slavery, and a view of women as non-rational, unpredictable, untrustworthy, and ultimately unworthy. This is also on a continuum with sexual allure as an orientalist trope, where the promise of transgressive experiences (the lesbian, the cross-dresser, the assertive heterosexual woman, the feminized passive male, the incestuous bond) is the ‘holiday’ of hard-working Western heteronormative self-regulation. Representations of Egypt in Western postcolonial popular culture thus demonstrate a continuum between the nineteenth century colonial imagination and the late twentieth century imaginary of global-minded market capitalism.

If the Eye of Horus is impossible to escape, we do have a means of deflecting its glare. The Hamsa, the blessing hand of the Goddess, is the Arab sign of a hand lifted against the evil eye. Also used in Jewish culture, and called the Hamesh hand, this symbol, a palm with an eye at its centre, is traditionally hung on doors to protect the household. Each Western stereotype of Egypt is a bird of prey scouting for an easy meal while policing Western knowledges, but the simplest of gestures can drive it away. Mainstream interventions ignored by historians and critics, such as the *The Jewel of the Nile*, *The Map of Love*, or *The Hidden History of Egypt*, are Hamsa

hands on the doors of culture. Popular culture has an ability to create and sustain tropes, and to resist, arrest, and reinvent them. Popular culture has a staggering power, which does not reside in the military, the media, or the market. It is as simple as raising a hand with an eye in it.

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