Digital Reincarnation: The Mediated Bodies and Multiple Lives of *The Mummy*

**ABSTRACT**

This article mobilizes the motif of digital reincarnation to examine the regenerating bodies and the multiple lives of the mummy in *The Mummy* franchise. I read the body of the mummy as a cyborg hybrid because it features enhanced powers of rejuvenation that are indicative of malleable, porous, and networked bodies of our digital era. This updated version of a computer-generated mummy infuses digital aesthetics and logic into the mummy complex of cinema. Assembled in the virtual production pipeline of global Hollywood, this contemporary mummy is a heterogeneous amalgam of media forms: organic flesh, synthetic prosthetics, and digital bytes.

Death is but the doorway to new life.  
We live today, we shall live again.  
In many forms shall we return.

—*Titles in the opening sequences of The Mummy (1932) and The Mummy (2017)*

**THE MUMMY RETURNS**

The main poster for the 2017 Hollywood film *The Mummy* (Alex Kurtzman) unsurprisingly features the two leading characters (see Figure 1). What is surprising is that neither looks like the familiar image of the titular character.

The poster for Stephen Sommers’s 1999 blockbuster *The Mummy* includes imagery that is vaguely associated with ancient Egypt in global popular media set against a desert landscape (see Figure 2). In contrast, the 2017 version depicts the cityscape of London disintegrating into dust particles, which is reminiscent of apocalyptic science fiction cinema. This poster is a visual metonymy of the hybrid attributes of the 2017 film, which merges horror and science fiction with elements of action and fantasy. For fans of the franchise, the most striking aspect may be the unfamiliar image of the mummy that sharply deviates from earlier iterations. Instead of the familiar iconography of a bandage-wrapped, rotting corpse, the mummy’s face is tattooed with hieroglyphic-like characters and its eyes inexplicably feature double irises.

In several versions of the franchise—*The Mummy* (Karl Freund, 1932), *The Mummy* (1999), and *The Mummy Returns* (Stephen Sommers, 2001)—the titular mummy character Imhotep is a reanimated Egyptian priest who was mummified alive as punishment for having an affair with the Pharaoh’s mistress and killing the Pharaoh.1 In the 2017 reboot, however, the mummy figure is revitalized in female form as an Egyptian warrior princess, Ahmanet (Sofia Boutella). After losing her claim to her father’s throne with the birth of her brother, Ahmanet turns to supernatural evil forces and kills them both. As punishment, she is captured, mummified, entombed, and erased from history. When she is inadvertently awakened by a US mercenary,

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1 The character is described as a “living mummy” in *The Mummy* (1932).
Sergeant Nick Morton (Tom Cruise), the mummified Ahmanet (hereafter Ahmanet) decides to use his body as a physical vessel for the Egyptian god of death, Set (Javier Botet), and complete the ritual of attaining eternal life.

Why another iteration of a (digitized) mummy? One reason is Universal Studio’s plan to create a film franchise—namely, a “Dark Universe” populated with a diverse group of studio-owned characters that could emulate the gargantuan success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This new installment can easily be discounted as one of many big budget Hollywood blockbusters trying to capitalize on the current trend of digitally enhanced superheroes. It can also be read as an attempt to revive a formerly successful franchise and to revivify the dusty figure of the mummy to situate it alongside other supernatural characters that populate digital cinema today: superheroes, monsters, and zombies. To explain the presence of the digital mummy, I conduct a critical inquiry into technological advancements and posthuman aspirations that are incarnated in the cyborg hybrid figure of a computer-generated mummy. I examine its role in the contemporary digital mediascape, in which posthuman characters traverse boundaries of time and space and embody changing perceptions of mortality, mutability, and temporality.

Tom Gunning notes that the 1922 film *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau) exhibits the excitement of “redefining a medium by testing and transforming its relation to its own history and to other media,” including visual art, literature, and scientific discourse. He contends that “the film offers lessons not only in the nature of cinema as a visual media but also in the question of what a ‘new medium’ can create by reflecting upon itself and its differences from and similarities to other media.” Gunning evokes the “phantasm,” which he describes as “a discredited and untimely concept in both philosophy and science,” in order to analyze modern media and virtual images of the new media environment. In this article, I perform a similar task by reinvigorating the dated figure of the mummy to consider what makes its computer-generated form a timely iteration of a cyborg hybrid. For one, the computer-generated mummy is simultaneously organic and synthetic, corporeal and virtual, in that it incorporates both material and digital media. Also, its body is a composite figure that transcends time-space limitations and the seemingly porous borders between life and death.

This article mobilizes the motif of digital reincarnation to examine the regenerating bodies of mediated mummies and to analyze the multiple lives of the mummy as the focal point of *The Mummy* franchise. By forging theoretical connections among mummification, digital production, and franchise logic, I discuss the significance of the mummy figure in the context of film history and theory, digital media, and production studies and interrogate how a digitally (re)animated mummy sustains and develops our fascination

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4 Gunning, 97.

5 Gunning, 98.
with this mediated monster. This analysis engages with scholarship on digital filmmaking, visual effects, and motion capture to examine how cyborg hybrids visually and materially synthesize physical bodies and digital forms in the diegetic spaces and production spaces of contemporary cinema. Here I consider how the cinematic mummy has adjusted to new developments in digital production. To do so, I study the process of reanimation that combines the traditional techniques of photochemical processes and practical effects, computer animation, and the techniques of digitally capturing and enhancing actress Sofia Boutella’s physical body and performance for The Mummy reboot. Then, I discuss the potential of the cinematic mummy to be regenerated in digital form and in multiple iterations as a franchised character. The computer-generated mummy, I propose, is emblematic of visual and technological cultures that perform digital enhancements and regenerations of the human body and envision its integrated position within an interconnected media network. The mummy’s digital rejuvenation not only indicates the studio’s aspirations to construct a franchise but also presents a popular culture version of posthuman existence via cyborg hybrid forms that fuse organic and machinic elements as well as animal, monstrous, or nonhuman features.

As a timely (and timeless) figure, the digital mummy is situated in the intersection of analog and digital media. A dichotomy that separates mummies and cinema from cyborgs and digital media is inadequate and unnecessary. The composite nature of digital imagery should be incorporated into the genealogy of media technology. Accordingly, the figure of the mummy can be situated alongside the cyborg to examine how perceptions of regeneration are shifting in a digital environment. The body of the mummy can be read as a cyborg hybrid because it features enhanced powers of rejuvenation that are indicative of malleable, porous, and networked bodies of our digital era. This cyborgian fusion of physical and virtual bodies, I contend, is emblematic of digital composites in terms of mobility, mutability, and modularity. Digital posthuman characters in contemporary films reflect and affect our conceptions of human mortality and technologically mediated lives. The digitally reincarnated mummy illustrates our fluctuating and conflicted attitudes toward posthuman beings that could help us negotiate or overcome the limitations of our human bodies as mortal and material organisms. It can also help us envision and embrace ways to destabilize the dichotomy between human and nonhuman, dead and undead, material and virtual, organism and machine, natural and manufactured, hardware and software.

MEDIA AND THE MUMMY
Laura Mulvey has noted that “cinema combines, perhaps more perfectly than any other medium, two human fascinations: one with the boundary between life and death, and the other with the mechanical animation of the inanimate, particularly the human, figure.” Cinema’s close connection with life, death, animation, and reincarnation has often found expression in narrative and visual forms of the medium. This has been exhibited through

its representational and indexical characteristics. Cinema’s capacity to reanimate images of the past through the illusion of movement raises the possibility of constant regeneration. Since early cinema, films have expressed a fascination with this uncanny power of simulating life by depicting a wide range of undead entities that embody motifs of death, decay, and mortality, as evidenced by the constant invocation of ghosts, vampires, zombies, and mummies.

Universal Studios produced many iconic horror films that featured reanimated dead bodies, including Dracula (Tod Browning, 1931), Frankenstein (James Whale, 1931), and The Mummy (1932). Among these, the mummy—as character, motif, spectacle, and franchise—has been particularly integral to cinema. The 1932 version of The Mummy was produced only a decade after the much publicized and mythologized excavation of Tutankhamun’s tomb by Howard Carter’s archaeological team in 1922. In addition to historical synchronicity, the figure of the mummy held a close cultural and technological connection to the cinematic medium during the early twentieth century. Antonia Lant examines the perceived parallel between the cinematic medium and mummification and between cinematic spaces and Egyptian tombs: “There was an association between the blackened enclosure of silent cinema and that of the Egyptian tomb . . . a perception of cinema as a necropolis, its projections mysterious and cursed . . . a noted parallel between mummification as a preservation for a life beyond life and the ghostliness of cinematic images . . . a link between the chemistry of mummification and that of film development and printing . . . an uncanny parallel between archaeologists’ descriptions of their discoveries of tombs and the effects and conditions of film projection.”

Here Lant describes how the modern medium of cinema and the premodern system of mummification could be associated rhetorically and symbolically in the popular imagination through the common desire to imagine and visualize life beyond death. In addition, she explains that mummification has material and aesthetic links to cinema in terms of spatial experience, chemical processes, and phantasmatic imagery. As Lant noted, “the arrival of cinema seemed to invite an encounter with death,” or rather an encounter with reanimated existence after death.

The monstrous figure of the mummy is simultaneously human and not-human, similar to the ubiquitous zombie in contemporary popular culture but with a distinctive historical background that is heavily engaged in myth, religion, philosophies of life and death, and belief in the afterlife. The cultural figure of the mummy is multilayered in terms of history, temporality, and media technology. In the context of film theory, André Bazin famously observed that a “mummy complex,” or a desire to preserve life with a representation of life, is manifested in the mechanical process of photography.

Although he focuses on photography, Bazin’s observation also includes cinema. This desire to preserve life is readily applicable to the cinematic

8 Lant, 108.
medium, which adds an impression of dynamic vitality and mobility to the stillness of the photographic image. Bazin writes, “Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were.” Tantalizingly, he describes the temporal aspect of cinema as “change mummified,” a phrase that encapsulates the tension between movement and stillness in cinema as well as the physical tangibility of the film image. The cinematic medium thus reanimates traces of material reality through the illusion of movement.

The ancient Egyptian techniques of mummification embalmed the dead. Through his concept of the mummy complex, Bazin explains how photography “embalms time.” In our era of digital rejuvenation and posthuman aspirations, the medium of digital cinema no longer embalms time or the human body. Indeed, the notion of embalming seems rather anachronistic. It is no longer our main objective to retain bodily integrity in a digitally mediated and networked environment. The critical pivot of moving images is no longer the tension between stasis and movement or between life and death. As a cultural symbol that signifies life beyond death, the mummy remains a relevant figure in the digital era because it offers the possibility of radical hybridity, mediated immortality, and complex temporality by being simultaneously human and nonhuman, alive and dead, then and now.

In ancient Egypt, the mummy functioned as material embodiment of the enduring human desire for immortality. This aspiration to preserve dead (or soon-to-be dead) humans in analogous forms gained new life through the medium of cinema. In the case of moving images, it is not the physical form of living beings that is kept intact but their visual form and vital energy. This is made evident in the dramatic rendition of the process of mummification, a defining feature of mummy films that vividly manifests the unimaginable horror of being buried alive. As noted by Lant, cinema not only depicted the process of mummification but also simulated it via the chemical processes of celluloid and the spectral quality of filmed and projected imagery. Instead of chemical processes of film development and printing, digital mummies are created and composited via computer algorithms. As a result of their high-definition crispness, computer-generated images have moved away from the “ghostliness of cinematic images.” Despite these changes, the mediated figure of the mummy continues to be reincarnated in the twenty-first century. The digital mummy helps us navigate the potential uses of the “new” medium of digital cinema while remediating film traditions and rebooting film franchises. It is useful when coming to terms with, and crafting stories about, undead and regenerated bodies. Although the 2017 film failed to launch Universal Studio’s Dark Universe, it offers an opportunity to reevaluate the cultural relevance of the mummy in the era of digital technology.

10 Bazin, 15.
11 Bazin, 14.
12 Lant, “Curse of the Pharaoh,” 90.
13 Universal Studio’s plans for an interconnected Dark Universe franchise have been postponed indefinitely because of the underwhelming box office performance of The Mummy. Instead, the studio is reportedly planning to release individual projects with smaller budgets. See Robert Ito, “There’s No Dark Universe Anymore, Just One Monster after Another,” New York Times, February 27, 2020,
Revivified via computer-generated imagery, the mummy now embodies qualities associated with digital media and virtual networks: mobility, mutability, and modularity.

**THE MUMMY’S NETWORKED BODY**

The hybrid quality of live-action digital cinema, which integrates real bodies with computer-generated and enhanced imagery, is indicative of the increasingly symbiotic relationship between human/nonhuman and organic/mechanical. Nicholas Carah writes, “A cyborg world is one where bodies are integrated into digital circuits in technical and cultural ways.”14 The figure of the digital mummy is also integrated into a global network that is composed of invisible yet material connections. This is made apparent in the virtual production process, in which the physical bodies of actors are converted into digital forms and merged with computer-generated elements. In its digitally enhanced state, the mummy embodies newly envisioned forms of human existence, thanks to its ability to regenerate and connect to other organisms via natural or artificial networks. The idea that new media technologies produce spectral doubles of bodies and dissolve bodily boundaries is not a novel concept. Emerging forms of media have frequently been associated with fantasies or fears regarding the disembodiment of physical bodies. In *Haunted Media*, Jeffrey Sconce examines how electrical and electronic communications technologies have been associated with spectral disembodiment. When media technologies (i.e., telegraphy, radio, television) were first introduced to the public, he writes, some thought they had the potential to realize the technological fantasy of having “the ability, real or imagined, to leave the body and transport his or her consciousness to a distant destination,” even enabling the physical body to “be electronically dissolved and teleported through telecommunications technology.”15

In contrast, Allan Cameron analyzes the connection between embodied monstrosity, imaging technologies, and media through his concept of “zombie media” and focuses on the “spectacle of the disintegrating zombie body” and its close relationship with the “body” of the medium.16 Moving away from the scholarly emphasis on disembodiment (as discussed by Sconce), Cameron argues that the figure of the zombie “embodies technological mediation” and that zombie media “embody the liveliness of death, in the form of a cadaverousness that is visceral and very much present.”17 Cameron’s study of media ontology thus highlights the materiality of the zombie body and its alignment with media materiality. This intersects with my analysis of the mummy’s monstrous body and its material connections to the medium of cinema—analog and digital. Although the zombie is potent in its ability to transmit its undead status to other bodies, it lacks the mummy’s supernatural

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17 Cameron, 69, 77.
ability to rejuvenate its body—a conspicuous talent that differentiates the mummy from other monstrous bodies. More important, this aptitude enables the mummy to forge an inseparable connection with the cinematic medium, whose ability to (re)animate human forms has been theorized as a mode of mummification. To paraphrase Cameron, cinema has always been mummy media and continues to be in the digital age.

Like the zombie, the mummy figure is far from being disembodied. As is the norm in monster films, its uncanny body is central to the narrative and visual spectacle. In the 2017 version of The Mummy, the mummy’s embodied nature is specifically foregrounded in Ahmanet’s obsession with recovering her corporeal body and the material force she exerts on living creatures and the surrounding environment. Ahmanet’s obsession is striking when compared with the titular protagonist of Luc Besson’s film, Lucy (2014): a woman who inadvertently obtains enhanced physical and mental capabilities, including telepathy, telekinesis, and the ability to travel through time. In the film’s conclusion, Lucy (Scarlett Johansson) transforms into nonhuman form and ostensibly disappears into thin air (or a virtual network). When another character asks where she is, he receives a cryptic text message on his mobile phone that reads, “I am everywhere.” According to Garrett Stewart, this character “has willfully become the network” and “spreads out over the entire framed world in the disincarnate name of her own former person.”18 In his analysis of the film’s self-referential allusions to computer-generated visual effects and audiovisual screen technology, Stewart highlights the mediated nature of Lucy’s newfound abilities by comparing them to the powers of “cinema itself in its own electronic enhancements.”19 Although Lucy and Ahmanet both acquire superhuman-level mobility enabled by networked connectivity, they manifest this digital omnipresence in vastly different ways. The former ultimately relinquishes her fleshly biological form, whereas the latter is fueled by her fixation with physical reincarnation, which brings us back to the materiality of mummy media.

The Mummy emphasizes the embodied monstrosity of Ahmanet by revealing that she requires living human bodies to regenerate her own body and to create an army of the undead as her minions. (She also needs Nick Morton’s body to use as a replacement vessel for Set.) The ever-present risk of becoming a mummy minion is a reminder that individual bodies are not discrete units in both natural and technological environments. Human beings physically inhabit a complex ecosystem comprising living organisms, natural elements, and artificial forms, and many are now virtually embedded in a global network of data streams and digital connections. Similar to popular depictions of the zombie virus, acts of transmission depicted in The Mummy follow the model of viral contagion or infection, as described by Sharalyn Orbaugh in her analysis of Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence (Mamoru Oshii, 2004): “The metaphorical models here are invasion, expressed through the idea of ‘hacking,’ and contagion, infection, as expressed through the idea of

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19 Stewart, 127.
a computer ‘virus.’” This invasion is reminiscent of the terrifyingly efficient and pervasive models of viral attacks that render us open and vulnerable in our lived experience by seeping through “holes” in penetrable computer systems and our porous bodies.

A sense of being “caught in a visual economy of endless circulation” is aptly illustrated by the proliferating presence of digital characters—cyborgs, hosts, clones, and undead bodies—in contemporary popular culture. By integrating formerly disparate categories in composite forms, digital creatures “emblematize fantasies about and anxieties over the increasing technological mediation of life and death and the blurring—or even the disappearance—of the lines that separate the organic and the artificial, the biological and technological, genetic code and binary code.” Ahmanet’s ability likewise enables her to invade organic forms and to control environmental elements. In one sequence, Ahmanet exerts power over a flock of ravens to attack an airplane. In another, the mummy controls a colony of rats to swarm toward Nick Morton. Filmmaker Alex Kurtzman attributes this ability to mesmerize other beings to the psychic power of Boris Karloff’s character in earlier versions. In a predigital world, one might call these magical or supernatural powers, but in a science-based world, it is associated with electrical, digital, or telecommunications technology. This is well represented in The Mummy’s computer-generated sequences that visualize the mummy as the core source of a virtually interconnected network transcending limitations of time and space. Mediated by digitally enhanced visual effects, the mummy’s power is depicted as dissolving interspecies categories and ontological borders by manipulating humans, animals (ravens, rats, spiders), and natural elements (wind, dust elements).

The digitally mediated body of the mummy also traverses spatio-temporal boundaries. This cosmopolitan cyborg hybrid asserts an omnipresent force that is truly global in its reach. Not only does the mummy physically transport its body from Egypt to England, its influence jumps from host to host, region to region, continent to continent. This transnational mobility is comparable to the “spreadability” of digital data that is widely circulated in the media ecology of mobile platforms and online connections. The digitally enabled authority wielded by the mummy is also analogous to the power attributed to the medium of cinema. Analyzing parallel connections between the spatio-temporal dexterity of the emerging cinematic medium and its

24 As a real-life example of a cosmopolitan mummy, Ramesses II was reportedly issued a valid Egyptian passport in 1974 to comply with French laws that require valid identification documents for all individuals (dead or alive) so that his mummy could be flown from Cairo to Paris for restoration.
propensity to depict the mummy, Lant writes, “The nineteenth century packaged the pharaonic past to represent timelessness and the conquest of death, and these are capabilities that the new medium of cinema could also be understood to inherit. Cinema controlled time and space, objectifying it, rearranging it at will. As Vitagraph boasted of Dust of Egypt [George D. Baker, 1915]: ‘In one tenth of a second you are transported from our present day world back to the Egypt of three thousand years ago.’”

In contrast to previous The Mummy films, the 2017 version is set in a contemporary world grounded in science and technology. Aside from brief flashback sequences that depict the origin story of the mummy in ancient Egypt, the film’s narrative mostly focuses on the tension wrought by a premodern monstrous character resurrected in a highly technologized modern environment. This change in historical backdrop is accompanied by a change in location. Whereas previous films were set primarily in Egypt, the 2017 version mostly takes place in London. The film’s narrative offers a rationale for this setting by suggesting a link between the Crusades and the Egyptian mummy, which leads to a sequence that depicts the spectacle of Ahmanet raising the skeletal remains of Crusader knights buried in underground London. Filmmaker Kurtzman explains this new location by describing London as “a modern city built on centuries of death” and notes that this setting allowed the production team “to bring an ancient creature into modern day with some credibility.” His words imply the intersectionality of time and space by alluding to the temporal layers of history embedded in a specific location, although I would argue that this inclusion neither adheres to historical credibility nor contributes to narrative coherence.

In fact, the film’s London setting is more significant in regard to the historical connections forged between Egypt and the United Kingdom during and after the archaeological excavation of Tutankhamun’s tomb by Carter’s British team in 1922. The colonial traces of this relationship are evident in the collection of Egyptian artifacts in the British Museum. Although this historical association is not overtly invoked, it has left material residues in the film. For instance, members of the production crew, including the film’s visual effects supervisor and makeup effects supervisor, examined the museum’s Egyptian mummies for reference to create their cinematic version. This historical backdrop invites a postcolonial reading of the mummy’s fictional trajectory that relocates its power from the Middle East to the United Kingdom as an inversion of the imperial expansion of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, but the film, as a whole, is not conducive to such an interpretation. The geopolitical tension caused by this relationship between

27 An exception was the third installment in the series, The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor (Rob Cohen, 2008), which was set in China and featured a character based on the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (Jet Li).
28 This unlikely invocation of the Crusader knights resulted in a multitude of undead entities in various stages of decomposition, which the production team succinctly described as “Newly Undead,” “Plague Undead,” and “Crusader Undead.” See Fordham, “The Mummy,” 112.
29 Fordham, 112.
30 Fordham, 102–103.
the two regions does, however, culminate in a scene that shows the resurrected Ahmanet, fueled by vengeance and fury, wreaking havoc in a modern cityscape by summoning a formidable sandstorm that engulfs the streets and buildings of London—namely, the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben (see Figures 3 and 4). Filmed on location, this climatic sequence visualizes a non-Western premodern alien force—embodied by an Egyptian mummy and performed by Algerian French actress Boutella—invading and ravaging the heart of modern London, albeit on a mythical and fantastical register. This sequence also holds intertextual significance, because it references the iconic sandstorm scene featuring Imhotep’s face in the 1999 version of *The Mummy*. In the diegetic spaces of the reboot, however, the sandstorm does not originate from the Egyptian desert. Instead, it is produced by the explosion of the Natural History Museum in London and surrounding buildings. Although the gusts of wind were generated via practical effects on location, the sand particles were created via digital production. These digitized particles were produced in the computer system of the effects company Double Negative and then composited to “seamlessly” merge with one another.\(^\text{31}\) By shattering buildings and turning them into sand particles, the mummy

\(^{31}\) Fordham, 116.
demonstrates its (digitally enabled) control over elements of the natural environment.

Although such supernatural powers are commonly depicted in the fantasy genre, these fantastical elements have now migrated into the realms of science fiction and fact, thereby fusing the worlds of fantasy/fiction and science/reality. This fusion of fantasy and science manifests technologically fueled aspirations of mutability that envision human bodies interacting, and even merging, with other organic and inorganic entities. The image of Ahmanet’s face appearing in legible form via the medium of computer-generated sand particles visually replicates the process of creating virtual doubles. Here grains of sand are used to give tangible form to digital bytes. This updated version of a computer-generated mummy in the rebooted Hollywood franchise thus infuses digital aesthetics and logic into the mummy complex of cinema. If early cinema’s mummies thematize and visualize the chemical and technological processes of celluloid film, then contemporary cinema’s mummies manifest the mutability and modularity of digital media.

THE MUMMY’S MUTABLE BODY

In her oft-quoted manifesto, Donna Haraway states that we are all cyborgs, that is, “theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” and a “condensed image of both imagination and material reality.” For Haraway, the cyborg is a figure that embodies the notion of dissolved binaries and traverses ontological categories: a creature that is both organism and machine, natural and manufactured. Asserting that the form of the cyborg harbors hybrid multiplicity, she writes, “Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.” Now, in the twenty-first century, we are imagining and actualizing ways to make ourselves “disturbingly lively” by incorporating new technologies to enhance and modify our human bodies. In contemporary science and medicine, bodies are no longer considered to be “autonomous, clean, and purely human” but rather “multiply invaded, radically hybrid.” In our encounters with technologically enhanced and genetically engineered humans, we now recognize that our bodies can also be “radically hybrid.” What, then, is expressed through the representation of hybrid bodies in popular media? In the 2017 reboot of The Mummy, science coexists with the mystical or mythical powers of premodern beliefs, and digital enhancements supplement the animating qualities of the cinematic medium. The contemporary mummy demonstrates a cyborg hybrid that embodies digital media’s visions of reanimation and evolves from cinema’s continued fascination with mortality and vitality.

33 Haraway, 152.
Similar to the cyborg in terms of transgressive hybridity, monsters are liminal figures that cannot be contained in stable categories. They are replete with the potential of mutability and multiplicity. Monstrous bodies in *The Mummy* manifest a fusion of fantasy and fear vis-à-vis interstitial entities that blur boundaries between self and other, human and nonhuman, prehistoric and contemporary, myth and history, material and virtual. Most notably, the figure of the revivified mummy bridges the divide between the living and the dead. This liminal status is visually emphasized by the open wounds and gaping holes on its skin, which reveal layers of flesh and muscle underneath. Nick Morton’s identity and body are also rendered porous when he performs the ritual to attain supernatural powers to defy death and transforms into a hybrid entity that is simultaneously man and monster, alive and dead, good and evil. Nick’s military partner, Corporal Chris Vail (Jake Johnson), likewise straddles the border between living and dead, human and nonhuman. After a fatal spider bite, Vail’s body becomes possessed by the mummy and progressively shows signs of decay; dark veins stretch across his body and face, and his eyes are coated with a white glaze (see Figure 5). Perhaps influenced by the aesthetics and prosthetics of zombification in contemporary media, Vail’s physical deterioration invites visual and thematic analogies to being exposed to a viral infection. Yet another character, an immunology specialist named Dr. Henry Jekyll (Russell Crowe), turns into his monstrous alter ego, Mr. Hyde, when he experiences emotional agitation or chemical imbalance (see Figure 6). This Jekyll/Hyde character reinforces the comparison to infection when he asserts that evil is a pathogen for which science can find a cure. He demonstrates this by preventing his monstrous transformation with a serum injection.

Metamorphosis has commonly been regarded with dread, disgust, and distrust in many cultures. Referring to Marina Warner’s explanation that physical metamorphosis connotes a dread of obliteration and diffusion, Lisa Purse reconsiders metamorphosis in the context of digital imagery. She asserts that the malleability of a digitally created body “generates anxieties that are rooted in primal cultural fears about metamorphosis and its characterization of the human body as mutable.” These fears are influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which metamorphosis signifies “instability, perversity, unseemliness, monstrosity” and the belief that “in hell, everything combines and recombines in terrible amalgams . . . breeding hybrids, monsters—and mutants.” Instead of seeing this mutability of the virtual body as a desirable quality to attain, Purse contends, cultural notions of metamorphosis regard it as losing the integrity of one’s physical body and “distinct self.” Purse observes that this fear of mutable virtual bodies can materialize in the form of villainous or monstrous figures in popular media.

Stories of mutating or regenerating bodies continue to be told in contemporary cinema through modes of horror, fantasy, and science fiction, but responses of fear, aversion, and disgust are now regularly accompanied

36 Marina Warner quoted in Purse, 15.
37 Purse, 16.
by a sense of sympathy, affinity, and even kinship. Likewise, the dissolution of clearly delineated boundaries is commonly perceived as terrifying, but the possibility of posthuman conditions can also elicit positive responses of acceptance and anticipation. This ambivalence is articulated in cyborg hybrid figures that embody changing perceptions of mortality, corporeality, and temporality in contemporary media through a recurring motif: the digital reanimation of the undead. Jason Sperb examines the issue of reanimating dead bodies by focusing on the labor practices of using virtual images and performances of real actors. These practices of commodifying and endlessly reproducing images of human subjects (particularly those of dead actors) from the past compel us to face our mortality, even as they simulate the illusion of immortality. Noting that digital imaging technologies blur boundaries between life and death, Sperb raises a pointed question: “If computers do indeed store various forms of dead labor, then the question becomes: what life does death have in the age of digital cinema?” His inquiry invigorates


39 Sperb, 388.
our discussion of how digital imaging technologies continue the tradition of mediating (un)dead bodies to sustain and satisfy our desire for immortality.

In the process of digital film production, the imaged body is regener-ated and degenerated at will. These deliberate transformations illustrate the notion that human bodies are already posthuman, or that they are ready to be manipulated and mediated in different forms via ever-evolving technologies. In our digital era, the undead are often reanimated—either reproduced in the same form or reincarnated as an enhanced amalgam of organic and synthetic parts. Multiple instances of physical interactions, transformations, and fusions manifest in contemporary films through diverse forms of monstrous, extraterrestrial, cyborg, virtual, or genetically modified bodies. A significant number of such bodies are portrayed in varying stages of transition. Some bodies are in the process of morphing into a different form of being; human-alien hybrids in *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) are two notable examples. Some bodies transition into a human-encased-in-a-machine, as depicted in such science fiction films as *RoboCop* (José Padilha, 2014), *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017), and *Alita: Battle Angel* (Robert Rodriguez, 2019). Some bodies are in various stages of deterioration or rejuvenation.

The reanimated figure of the living mummy exhibits the possibility of physical regeneration. One memorable scene in *The Mummy* shows Ahmanet absorbing vital energy from her human victims. This sequence reveals the rejuvenation process of the decrepit revenant. The open holes in her desiccated flesh heal, thereby covering up the exposed muscles and bones. Ahmanet's grotesquely slouched bestial body straightens into upright form. Her dislocated joints pop back into place. This sequence of regeneration, which compactly visualizes the process of digital production and manipulation, is infused with horror if one identifies with Ahmanet's victim. It is strangely reassuring, however, to see Ahmanet's rejuvenating body, as though we are witnessing the real possibility of regenerating human flesh—that is, our flesh. If viewed from the posthuman perspective of the mummy, this depiction of reanimation alleviates our fears of death and bodily decay by actualizing the digital potential of replication, revivification, or reincarnation—the long-held desire articulated in the mummification process of ancient Egypt.

This computer-generated resurrection of the mummy demonstrates the potential of the digital medium. In digital cinema, the thematic motif of reanimating dead bodies is analogous to the production process that creates cyborg hybrids by combining manual, mechanical, and digital technologies in such tasks as motion capture and digital compositing. The story of reviving a dead or inanimate body or being regenerated as a physically enhanced form by utilizing new forms of technology is reflexive of the contemporary process of digital filmmaking. John Berton Jr., who worked as visual effects supervisor for *The Mummy* (1999) and *The Mummy Returns* (2001), observed a parallel between the process of digital production and the character of the mummy, which is comparable to the parallel between the cinematic medium and mummification identified by Lant. According to Berton, “You’ve got a character that needs to be desiccated and completely non-human in its
The development of new technologies in reality and the proliferation of malleable bodies in popular culture suggest that these long-held anxieties surrounding mutability are slowly shifting (although not quite settling) into more accepting attitudes toward hybrid, transitioning bodies in our digitally saturated environment. In a more recent publication, Purse focuses on how motion capture, a vital technique in digital production that records the movements of a physical body and maps them onto a computer-generated character, can mitigate the aforementioned dread of obliteration and diffusion. She notes that motion capture helps to disavow our fears of replication, replacement, and obsolescence by digital imagery because it prioritizes “a visible form of performance creation in which the human contribution is highly legible” over the technological process. Tanine Allison also discusses motion capture as a method of merging “new” and “old” media technologies. She explains motion capture in terms of a “digital indexicality” that fuses traditions of older media with digitally “enhanced capacities for automation and manipulation.” Allison refers to the motif of metamorphosis to describe motion capture: “Motion capture seems almost to be a kind of metamorphosis, a profound change in form that was once attributed to witchcraft or the supernatural. With its wireless performer driving the movements of an onscreen digital model—often in real time—motion capture seems to work by magic, recording ephemeral motions out of the thin air and transmitting them to another space and another (digital) form.”

Digital characters obviate the need for supernatural magic to regenerate. Now the possibility of regeneration exists in the fictional realm of science fiction/fantasy and the practical realm of film production. As an amalgam of material and virtual elements, these cyborg hybrid bodies are created by combining motion capture and digital animation. Therefore, what they require is a large amount of labor, including the work of animators and visual effects artists, as well as the physical exertion of performers whose movements are recorded to animate the computer-generated model. In the digital production process of The Mummy, the gestures and bodily movements of actress Sofia Boutella were mapped onto the digital mummy through motion capture technology and digitally enhanced by animators who used reference footage of Boutella’s bodily performance as well as the movements of real contortionists. Visible traces of the performers’ vitality are thus imprinted

43 Allison, 329.
on the ancient yet agile body of the digital mummy, which ignores the pull of gravity and the passage of time. In the 2017 reboot, the performer is no longer restricted by the cumbersome bandages of the profilmic mummy who had to perform in front of the camera. Thanks to the technology of motion capture, the mediated mummy ventures outside the domain of archaeology and analog media. The computer-enhanced corporeality of the mummy is uncanny in that it is visually similar but ontologically different. Here, the mummy is almost *too* alive, or “disturbingly lively.” The mummy’s decaying body with tattered flesh exhibits a frenetic energy that visibly originates from Boutella’s vibrant body and our technologized modern world rather than an ancient or supernatural realm. Although this supernatural character transgresses the border between the living and the dead, this updated version acts and moves like a digitally enhanced being, thereby aligning with cyborg hybrids that proliferate in contemporary cinema.

**THE MUMMY’S MODULAR BODY**

If the cyborg can be conceived as a “postmodern subject writ large and augmented with the full panoply of implanted computer chips, genetically engineered immunities and radical cosmetic modifications,” indeed, they are now among us, inhabiting our real and imagined worlds. Artificial devices and organic bodies are increasingly merging in areas of medicine, science, surveillance, sports, leisure, art, and popular culture. The physically and digitally manipulated body is no longer a single, unified organism. Rather, it comprises heterogeneous elements that are open to modification and enhancement, as personified by such popular Marvel superhero characters as Iron Man and Captain America. In other words, this posthuman entity is an “amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction.” Composed of modular body parts from multiple sources, this cyborg hybrid unsettles the borders between human-machine, human-animal, and human-monster. The plasticity and mutability of this synthetic character fulfill the promise of endless transformation.

With the technological advances of the twenty-first century, the human body can now be attached to, or fused with, other organic and synthetic material—in both virtual and material forms. In addition to motion capture, the production team for *The Mummy* (2017) used live action, makeup, prosthetics, and digital augmentation to create synthetic images of the mummy and various incarnations of the undead, such as the mummy minions and revivified Crusader knights. In an interview, Moving Picture Company visual effects supervisor Greg Butler emphasizes the mutable and modular nature of Ahmanet’s physical form: “We basically replaced her shoulders, her hands, pieces of her face, her eyes, and we added digital hair as well, so an enhance-

46 Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto,” 152.
Butler’s description of these interchangeable parts is reminiscent of the transhumanist rhetoric prevalent in science and biomedical discourse on human enhancement, nanotechnology, neural engineering, cybernetic implants, and robotics technology, as well as newly developed technologies such as artificial retinas, medical prosthetics, brain chips, synthetic skin, and gene-editing technology.

In contemporary film production, digital technology is frequently deployed to create multiple versions of the body in different points in time and in various stages of transformation. This includes transmutations from organic to inorganic (artificial intelligence, machine, cyborg) and transformations from living to undead (zombie, mummy, vampire). This profusion of digital figures demonstrates changing perceptions of the human body—from a single, contained organism to one in a constant process of change, or a being that is always in the process of becoming. The plurality inherent in the posthuman body manifests in literal form through the production process involving the digital character of Ahmanet (see Figures 7 and 8).

This process entailed a complex system for producing the various stages of transformation, including physical and computer-generated effects that recreated the corporeality of the human frame, such as muscles, skin, hair, and blood vessels. The arduous task of articulating bodily decay and rejuvenation via multiple incarnations of Ahmanet was reportedly one of the main challenges for the effects team. Visual effects supervisor Erik Nash explains this process: “We knew we were going to take Ahmanet through a pretty broad transformation in terms of how decayed she was when we first encounter her, she’s extremely emaciated, and we knew her broken nature would necessitate full CG—we called those Stages One and Two. As Ahmanet feeds on victims and regenerates, we moved into a creation that was, for the most part, an augmentation of Sofia Boutella. There were instances where her action, in Stages Three through Five, necessitated fully CG versions, but the bulk of that work was augmentation, where we removed tissue.”

Ahmanet’s transition across different stages of regeneration and degeneration does not follow a sequential order in the film’s narrative. This is most evident in the film’s final moments that depict Ahmanet’s body rapidly decaying and desiccating into her former mummified state. Likewise, the numerical stages do not indicate a chronological order in the film’s narrative but rather the levels of deterioration. According to interviews in the special features on the DVD, members of the production crew, including the visual effects supervisor and special makeup effects designer, describe the different stages as follows:

Stage 1: Bones and rags that are torn to pieces
Stage 2: Developing and returning to original form
Stage 3: Fusion of bandage and skin
Stage 4: Between monstrous form and woman
Stage 5: Fully formed with the Book of the Dead inscribed on her body

This achronological logic is also evident in conceptual designer Mark McCreery’s explanation of the detailed process: “We then developed our own take on bandaging and layering, stripping her back to the skin and bone in areas. Her process of rejuvenation happens several times before she emerges fully recognizable as Sofia Boutella.”

McCreery’s use of the terms bandaging and layering not only alludes to the ancient techniques of mummification but also indicates the modern techniques of digital filmmaking and compositing. It emphasizes the various forms of labor necessary in creating

53 For further discussion of layering and digital compositing, see Hye Jean Chung,
the numerous components that constitute Ahmanet’s body—a combination of practical effects (wardrobe, prosthetics, makeup) and the digital labor of augmentation and deterioration. The digitally composed and composit ed body of the mummy is therefore a layered assemblage comprising multiple stages of digital animation as well as the actor’s vocal, facial, and physical performances. Assembled in the virtual production pipeline of global Hollywood, this contemporary mummy is a heterogeneous amalgam of media forms: organic flesh, synthetic prosthetics, and digital bytes.

The mummy figure is a concrete embodiment of the belief in life after death, or life defying death. Now the mummy is constantly reinvigorated not only in narrative and diegetic spaces but also in the process of digital production. Thanks to techniques of digital reanimation, the mummy can manifest varying levels of regeneration and degeneration. The mutable, modular body of the living mummy simultaneously exists in, or traverses through, various stages of being or becoming undead. As an atemporal figure whose body can be regenerated at will, it is an assemblage that comprises fragments of past and present. As such, the digital mummy can be considered an “icon of the posthuman condition” that “shatters the linearity of time.”

**THE TEMPORAL LOGIC OF THE DIGITAL MUMMY**

In her analysis of the digital resurrection of the late Marlon Brando in *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006), Lisa Bode suggests the need to consider ethical concerns alongside cultural taboos on the treatment of the dead when utilizing posthumous performances. She writes that “reanimation remobilizes the star, not as person or as cultural laborer, but as a signifying image property, an icon that, while alive, accrues connotations that become, in death, the sediment or fossil that remains.” The mummy figure/franchise conveniently sidesteps this ethical issue. Here the body that performs is interchangeable because it is the mummified body that returns, not a specific actor. In the digital production process, this replacement is facilitated by using techniques of motion capture and virtual performance. In the film’s narrative, the powers of the mummy appropriate the viral logic of contagion, resulting in a facile transmission of the undead status. The ending of the 2017 *The Mummy* suggests that Tom Cruise’s character could take on the mummy role in lieu of Sofia Boutella’s character in an upcoming sequel, if there is one. This is implied in the sequence that shows Ahmanet’s vitality being sucked out by the human-nonhuman hybrid Nick Morton, and likewise in the concluding sequence that portrays Nick embarking on a new adventure with his revivified sidekick, Chris Vail, in tow.

Amid the current phenomenon of reviving dead bodies and media franchises, it is thematically fitting that the inception of the Dark Universe film series, which proposed to resurrect popular monster characters from Universal Studio’s horror archives, was heralded by the rejuvenation of *The

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54 Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 74.

Ahmanet’s mission to rematerialize in our contemporary world is analogous to the studio’s mission to revive its horror horde of Universal Monsters (e.g., Dracula, Frankenstein, Invisible Man, Wolf Man) in the wake of the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s blockbuster success. This constant reincarnation of the mummy is actualized not only in the production process but also in the intertextual network of the franchise. Indeed, the repetitive logic of franchises is conducive to the resurrection of the cinematic mummy, which can be regenerated again and again. These undead figures are periodically called forth in altered forms to entertain new audiences.

Explaining our continued obsession with reviving what is dead and gone, Sperb observes that “the future-oriented utopia of digital cinema is steeped largely in a nostalgic dependence on its own (filmic) past.” This brings us back to digital cinema’s potential and propensity for reincarnating (un)dead figures and franchises. The nostalgia evoked by the uncanny yet familiar form of the mummy is deployed in Universal’s plans to rejuvenate the mummy genre and its monster franchise. This reinforces the enduring connection between cinema, death, and mortality by highlighting how the medium’s power to animate and reanimate can manifest in content, form, and imaging technologies, which coalesce in the undying figure of the cinematic mummy. The relentlessly decaying and regenerating body of the mummy inevitably invites the task of being animated and circulated repeatedly to infinity. Therefore, this cyborg hybrid figure can be readily mobilized to explore the possibilities of digital regeneration and its connections to technological desires for immortality and posthuman modes of existence.

In our technologized environment, the human body is tethered to media in conceiving and experiencing time. We envision real and imaginary ways to manipulate time, or ways to inhabit and traverse multiple temporalities. This aspiration often manifests in popular narratives in the form of posthuman characters, such as cyborgs, clones, aliens, androids, and undead bodies. These characters are no longer perceived as other but as variations of self. They embody a temporal complexity by implying that multiple iterations of oneself can exist in the past and the present, or in the case of The Mummy, in ancient time and modern time. The revivified mummy is called a “living witness to history” by another character in The Mummy, but its role is more multifaceted. As discussed above, this digital mummy comprises various forms of labor required in the numerous stages of production and post-production—that is, the bandaging and layering processes of digital compositing that collectively create the computer-generated imagery of a film. The contemporary mummy, then, can be aptly described as a thick composite that fuses multiple points in time.

Vivian Sobchack asserts that “cinematic sf has always been associated with time travel” and that “cinema is itself a time machine.” An ever-

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56 Dracula Untold (Gary Shore, 2014) was initially planned to be the first film in Universal’s newly vitalized franchise, but its poor performance at the box office derailed the studio’s plans.
57 I thank the anonymous reviewer for elucidating this point.
59 Vivian Sobchack, “Abject Times: Temporality and the Science Fiction Film in Post-
growing canon of science fiction cinema displays evolving forms of time travel by featuring non-sequential timelines in a universe where events do not follow a linear trajectory that flows from past through present to future. For example, *Edge of Tomorrow* (Doug Liman, 2014) and *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019) demonstrate that multiple temporalities can coexist and commingle, and both portray characters who move across these mediated time-spaces through technological means. In *Edge of Tomorrow*, the narrative structure is based on a time loop that forces the protagonist (Tom Cruise) to repeatedly relive the same day after he inadvertently hacks into an alien organism’s ability to reset time. As a concluding chapter to multiple sequels and prequels in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the complex narrative of *Avengers: Endgame* deploys devices that enable time travel and create alternate realities—most notably, a Time Stone that allows the user to exert control over time. Both films draw attention to the thematic motifs of multiplicity, simultaneity, and reversibility, which are also evident in the temporal logic of the digital mummy.

In contemporary science fiction, the motif of time travel is not only explored in the narrative but also embodied in the posthuman figure of the cyborg—or, in this case, the mummy as cyborg hybrid. The possibility of existing in or moving through multiple temporalities is actualized by the techniques of digital reanimation that facilitate and manifest elastic temporalities. Here it is the constantly regenerating figure of the mummy that conveys the notion of time travel—what Sobchack describes as a “predestined” future that “always circles back on itself to join (and rejoin) its past.” In other words, the mummy is predestined to be revivified—or there is no story and no franchise. In a temporal register, it represents the “future perfect,” which “articulates the future as always already foreclosed and immutable.” The layered, modular nature of the mummy figure—a composite of physical and digital elements—thereby evinces a temporal complexity that deviates from linearity.

To conclude this analysis of the mediated bodies and multiple lives of the mummy, I conjoin its final image in *The Mummy* with Rosi Braidotti’s invocation of the spectral: “The representation of embodied subjects has been replaced by simulation and has become schizoid, or internally disjointed. It is also spectral; the body doubles up as the potential corpse it has always been.” In the film’s last moments, the mummy is frozen in time and space. It curls up in a fetal position, implying its readiness to be resurrected when necessary. This aligns with the non-linear temporality embedded in the figure of the mummy, which adamantly refuses to regard death as a teleological destination in the trajectory of a living entity. This image anticipates a sequel, as does the protagonist’s newly and conveniently acquired immortality. As indicated in the epigraph, the titles in *The Mummy*’s opening sequence proclaim,

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60 Sobchack, 13.

61 Sobchack, 13.

“Death is but the doorway to new life. We live today, we shall live again. In many forms shall we return.”

This promise is fulfilled in the diegetic and extra-diegetic realms of The Mummy franchise. The non-linear temporality of digital media is reiterated in the narrative, production process, and intertextual history of The Mummy.

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63 This statement appears in the opening sequences of The Mummy (1932) and The Mummy (2017).