

Memento [Mori] and Golden Reason: The Smile of Mummified Figures

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“ If I take a moment in time, that moment is neither today nor tomorrow, nor yesterday. But if I take the present, that includes all time ”

Meister Eckhart, *Treatises and Sermons*

“ Memory is that fictitious clarity of superimpositions that annul each other. Meaning is that kind of map of criss-crossed operations, like scars of successive blows ”

Ana Hatherly, *351 tisanas*

“ The sea raises an archaic smile
Of statues —as though by mistake—
Sometimes they cross glances
(Where is the old hesitation of
the journey?) ”

Sophia de Mello-Breyner, *El sol el muro el mar*, Islas

Memento mori is an archive of simulations where light is silent (like the title of the 2007 Carlos Reygadas film).

In iconography and in the terms of western art history, *memento mori* is the designation given those paintings on themes considered to point out or warn about the transitory nature of life, the

awareness that everybody must “remember thou art dust”, that one must flee the mundane, and the vanity that seduces mortals. Curiously, despite its use of the Latin expression, the Classical world recurred more often to the motto *carpe diem*, remitting us to a dichotomy of understanding on advising us to enjoy life, since death was certain.

The consolidation of Christianity fully introduced the myth of paradise, gradually increasing the significance and scope of the idea of *memento mori*. Nevertheless, in essential terms – whether we expound on the maxim *carpe diem* or *memento mori*, admission of human mortality is an irreversible fact behind the iconic character of artistic creations holding symbolic and even allegorical value. During the Middle Ages, the literal terms of the concept were defined and its visual elements determined, which would result in explicit and direct iconography, such as skulls, hourglasses, Death wielding his scythe or dealing cards and throwing dice on the terrestrial globe (e.g.), a corpse shown as a skeleton, etc. – in a word, all those visual symbols recalling the ephemeral dimension of humanity.

“ Our life is a journey
Through Winter and Night,
We look for our way
In a sky without light ”

Song of the Swiss Guards. 1793

Thus reads the epigraph to Louis Ferdinand Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night*. The concept of the ephemeral implicit in this conceptual framework –both ontological and anthropological– was assimilated and spread by European culture, assuming rhizomatic meanings in artistic praxis,

which simultaneously confronted it as an expression of aesthetic seduction and an irreversible threat to the human element. It may be underscored that, initially, the designation “ephemera” applied to fragments, objects, artefacts, etc. included in collections, despite their not having such intention or function at the outset (papers, fabrics, different types of small or medium-sized objects of no lasting value for personal or family use, etc.). Such objects were proper to a period of time in human life. They made temporality explicit, measured in the linear terms of the mundane, beyond the cycle of eternal recurrence expressed by the sacred, which, by analogy, associates to the funerary rites of the Egyptians. On its side, the metaphor of the journey is poetically articulated in the irrevocability of the ephemeral in an existential dimension. The mummy, with its hieratic appearance, stabilizes the momentum of the voyage. The draped fabrics signify the unequivocal impulse of flight and travel beyond unsurmountable limitations.

Related to the [literary and] pictorial category of *memento mori*, vanitas art accounts for another subtype belonging to the genre of still life. Both proliferated above all starting from the 17th century, depicting skulls, mirrors, clocks, candles lit or extinguished, fruit or flowers. Other objects are also valid as symbolic elements for expounding on the condition of mortality, and musical instruments, books, wine, etc. have been represented in European painting, giving us to understand that everything in life is vain. The term *vanitas*, in the sense adopted by theologians, philosophers, artists and aesthetes, comes from the *Book of Ecclesiastes* [1:2] “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher ... all is vanity”. During that period, general religious conviction consisted of believing that life on Earth was simply a preparatory transition for eternal life after death. In the continuum of artistic production and, above all, in modern and contemporary art, other visual elements of symbolic value were identified, adding to the *iconology* in the wake of Cesare Ripa.

“ Your mummy is in the British Museum
among the sad rows of the second floor. (...)
Thus you dried up serenely, while
what you were was quickly lost
in the human memories you inhabited. ”

Jorge de Sena, *Artemidorus*, *Metamorphoses* [Poem II]

In Lucía Vallejo’s case, the mummies form part of the iconographic glossary systematizing the symbols of *memento mori* quite explicitly and legitimately.

The mummies symbolize the human element in a “state of suspension”, but not exclusion from that category, by virtue of the meaning and pragmatism that the Egyptians attributed to them. This also applies to the succession of “shrouds”, rigid and extending in their curved baroque folds, luminous and empty golden wrappings embodying the negation of death. Mummification was a position of negation, in which death is understood as a passage. Through a chain of premeditated actions, mummification was assumed as method and ritual, fulfilling its role in the negation of death and aspiring to “annul” it in a given act that would persist in other, more diluted and less anthropomorphically direct circumstances – portraiture is numberless in its forms, first drawn, painted or sculpted, and, more recently, photographed and recorded on videotape or in cinema. On another hand, funerary masks continued to be present in symbolic cultural (and artistic) practices, applied to persons whose memory it was needful to perpetuate. To oppose the movement of time that does not allow for permanence, for bound and anchored reminiscence, immobilized so as not to be seduced by the voluptuousness of death, perhaps... since

“ ...dreams do not [survive]. Prometheus Unbound shall fade ...
Time deals hastily with them who deal hastily with it.
Saturn eats his own children ... ”

Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas de Estética e de Teoria Literárias*

The bodies, the mummies ascend, situated in that territory of transition. In a certain way, we are in a “golden temple” that propagates silence. The suspension of the ordinary is the artist’s decision, transcending the ascendancy of objects and channelling it towards the immaterial. In other words, despite the reverberation of the three-dimensional elements represented by the mummies quasi-embodied, there is flight towards the immaterial; a clamour.

“ ... I stop including myself
Within me. There is no
Here-within or there outside.
And the desert is now
Turned upside-down.
The idea that I move
Cannot recall my name. ”

Fernando Pessoa, «Episodes - The Mummy», *Poems*

The viewer accessing the hall, approaching and situating himself at closer distance, encounters a grand scenario. A certain vocation to the grandiosity and fear qualifying and representing experience of the sublime subsists. The eleven three-dimensional elements are enhanced by an unexpected approach, since it is not usually possible to appreciate mummies in aesthetic

terms. It could be said that the experience they convey is characterized by ascension to a state of spontaneous sublimity.

The eleven female mummies heighten the tremor that experiencing the sublime may inspire. In dialectic terms, they are located between the two opposite poles that 20th-century art surmounted and abetted: between the expansiveness and/or predominance of aura in art and its eradication/annihilation [destruction]. The mummy, in a borrowed extrapolation such as this, could by analogy and metaphor externalize the paradox of a certain definition of art [modern and contemporary].

The sculpted pieces of so much density penetrate us viscerally through their simulation of absence, of non-existence – viscera transposed and portrayed in the concealment that the strips of cloth encase in the act of simulation. In other words, in Lucía Vallejo's three-dimensional pieces, under the stigma and designation of "mummy", there [perhaps] presides the obsession to redeem the inevitability of death through a glamour that excites and deceives the viewer. Lucidity rapidly asserts itself over the shock provoked by a tragic scenario that dominates the lesson that the archaic Greeks have taught us: that expressive arts are capable of propitiating extreme experience, engendering redress for the deepest repressed impulses. Catharsis, achieved through excessive crescendo [pathos], was a guarantee of mental health [our Greek forbears had previously noted this on observing a strategy with the audience, showing how the aesthetic effect of the arts on the public is an act that is lost over time]: radical emotional experience and the release of dramatic excess demanded remission from pain and suffering. Thus, human beings detached themselves from the constructs that their own humanity unequivocally created and imposed upon them.

A mummy shows a related threefold function on being artefact/remains, relic/body and artwork/museum piece, thus transcending far beyond the literal condition of individual body, which is, almost always, also anonymous. The body, in a mummy, becomes an absence. It stabilizes, it is suspended. A time-transcendent psycho-affective mapping of lost individuality, overtaken and possessed more by social than by [inter]subjective concerns will prevail. It is observed as a paradigm or paradox, in consonance with questions that are verbalized, but it rarely maintains its name. And it is known how the name of each person is decisive (for good or ill). Almada Negreiros says so in her 1925 novel, *Nome de Guerra*, underscoring the power and consequences of individual names. Mummies, who do not enjoy the benefit of names, are protected but do not obtain/enjoy feelings that are filtered out by that sort of protective film Clarice Lispector referred to:

“ And whoever lacks the strength to do so, let them cover every nerve in a protective film, in a film of death that lets them tolerate life ”

Clarice Lispector, *Discovering the World*, 23 November 1968

The mummy loses the affection of her lover, her husband, her children, her family, her friends ... She will subsist, living on in the legacy of her subjects, in generational and historical proximity. The corpse, progressively weakened, shows evidence of the drive for subsistence, despite the irreversibility of the corporal; hence, death, which is the simultaneous destruction of the "self" and the "ego". "Quieter than a mummy" is a very common expression in Portugal when referring to someone who does not know, or cannot or does not break his silence. It thus bears a burden of impotence or a decision to remain silent, not to communicate. In another sense, it means to suspend dialogue and so many other arrangements as may be extrapolated, depending on the context of what is expressed. On another hand, proverbs and popular sayings commending and lauding the wisdom of silence are numberless. Silence is gold.

Lucía Vallejo's mummies stoke the need for questions in contemporary society; they require us to explore a corridor (in the mastaba/exhibition hall) where the riddles are not those of a sphinx, but rather lie within ourselves. The mummies are astute, domestic and ambiguous, existing between the reality of bodies of window display mannequins and the fictional reality of turning into figures of gold and fabric. Gold and fabric are almost antagonistic materials: they symbolize wealth and poverty. Nevertheless, they are equal in the silence, in the hieratic character they depict in the installation *Memento Mori* by

Lucía Vallejo, since gold arrests, and the fabric pressing around the bodies renders them even more immobile.

The magnificence of gold has covered churches since the Baroque, mingling with the shadows and striking fear into the hearts of visitors, who, from the outside, saw churches of darkened stone and massive geometry. The dread subsided until the period of the empires and the sacking of riches, along with the implicit mission of acculturation. In the case of Spain, it is associated to territorial incursions and religious architectural construction, the discovery of solid civilizations and cultures with formidable and perfected detailed attributes. Mummies distilled the density of aesthetic strangeness raised to a degree of higher appreciation. Masterful details characterize some of those enduring relics that we are able to admire in museum settings.

The Spanish golden age, even now – whether in the European or South American imagination – offers ambiguous routes that move between the contemporary consciousness of a post-colonial era and the unquestioned myths of previous periods in Iberian history. It is the fascination, the voluptuousness applied to the making of superior poetic and artistic artefacts and creations that we read, see and enjoy. That propagate themselves in fantasies that always placate us.

Lucía Vallejo's mummies are touched by gold; they glow. They might be thought to have been hit by a Midas-touch effect – a prohibited and punishing gesture. Not because the mummies had overriding ambitions, showed impulsiveness and hungered for power: *Turn iron (or stone) into gold by touch*. The living body or artefact touched by Midas lost its existential condition, turning into gold and dying, converting the king into a pariah. In the case of the purple mummies, it is perhaps the exact opposite that the public should perceive. In the absence of voluptuousness, they were punished by history. These are ideas that emerge from the symbolic burden, the multiple meanings that gold embodies. The ages of the world in Greek mythology still hold sway over our fantasy and frequently serve as metaphors: ages of Iron, Bronze, Silver and, without a doubt, Gold.

In an era where artists privilege the notion of archives (in immaterial form) with regard to the diverse substances comprising these, Lucía Vallejo develops an aesthetic discussion that affects their symbolic effectiveness and the repercussion of her refined and erudite works, allegories that the audience can access, expanding upon their own interpretations, extrapolating contents and images. Some helpful questions could be raised: how does one observe, analyse or interpret, how should the audience evaluate the different senses in which archives are transfigured into works perpetuated in contemporary art? How does one confront the variants arising from the philosophies of the imagination as regard conceptual bases to systematize (and stimulate) visions that prove to be of greater intensity, influencing the global situation of western European society with regard to what its history attributes to these, as well as what objectively happened?

Pre-Columbian civilizations inundate us with objects, artefacts and works to be taken along three axes: aesthetic value, artistic value and "commercial" value. All these values are subject to the symbolic value they are acknowledged by intertemporal dominance.

The work of Lucía Vallejo offers reflections on silence, on the manner in which it emanates, taken within the matrices of the western imagination. To meet this supposition, the sculptress withdraws into a mythical period long before in time: she evokes these constructs in the morphology of these eleven anonymous figures wrapped in themselves that show the relentlessness of destiny. They neither simply exhale nostalgia nor mere melancholy. They call upon us and warn us so that we desire to act, displaying themselves beyond the conventional skin that "mummies" possess in our culture. Converging in them are superimposition, the opaque density of historical time, all those names that remain to be said and are no longer called beloved. Mute beneath the strips of untainted and luminous cloth, they radiate from within the redeeming identity that can finally restore the power of speech ("Speech is silver, silence is gold".)