



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The 'fragmented body' theory in Egyptology

An ontological framework with a shadow side

CAMILLA DI BIASE-DYSON^{1,*}

¹Macquarie University

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Abstract

This paper takes as its point of departure the theory that the ancient Egyptian lived body was conceptualised as a 'fragmented' entity, a 'Gliederpuppe [jointed doll]'. The idea was proposed by Emma Brunner-Traut in 1988 in relation to her earlier work on 'aspective', the still dominant theory of Egyptian visual representation. Factors potentially influencing the inception, development, and impact of the 'fragmented body' theory are considered here. Concerning inception, the basis of the theory in various types of Egyptian cultural output and its interdisciplinary focus made it a compelling ontological framework. Regarding impact, we will see that early approval and the subsequent expansion of the theory led to a degree of longevity in scholarship, though parallel traditions might have also emerged. This success of the theory, I suggest, has to do with the fact that it attempts to account for the historical situatedness of body concepts—in other words, an ancient 'body-world'. However, a closer look at the sources reveals misleading interpretations and a comparative framework with evolutionist, even racist undertones. It thus becomes necessary to reconsider whether the 'Gliederpuppe' hypothesis has any residual value as a middle-range theory for Egyptology, whether the theory of 'aspective' on which it is based requires revision or rehabilitation, and what kind of models and methods we could use to describe the Egyptian lived body going forward. A lexical analysis of words we tend to think of as meaning 'whole', might, for instance, not be expressing that concept at all, thus requiring a reframing of 'wholeness' and 'fragmentation' in an Egyptian context.

Keywords: fragmented body, body world, aspective, Egyptian art history, body ontologies

نظرية "الكيان المجزأ" في علم المصريات: إطار وجودي ذو جانب مظلم.

الملخص

تستند هذه الورقة البحثية إلى نظرية ترى أن الجسد الحي في مصر القديمة كان يُفهم باعتباره كياناً "مجزأً"، يشبه "الدمية المفصّلية". قدمت إيما برونر-تراوت هذه الفكرة في عام ١٩٨٨، مستندةً إلى عملها السابق حول المفهوم المنظوري، الذي لا يزال يُعد النظرية السائدة في تفسير التمثيل البصري المصري. تستعرض الورقة العوامل التي ربما أسهمت في نشأة هذه النظرية وتطورها وتأثيرها. من حيث النشأة، تعتمد النظرية على مجموعة متنوعة من الإنتاج الثقافي المصري القديم وتتميز بنهج متعدد التخصصات، مما جعلها إطاراً فلسفياً جذاباً. أما من حيث التأثير، فقد أدى القبول المبكر لها وانتشارها لاحقاً إلى استقرارها كمرجع أكاديمي، رغم احتمال ظهور أعمال موازية. يجذب أن نجاح النظرية يعود إلى محاولتها فهم السياق التاريخي لمفاهيم الجسد، أو ما يُعرف بـ"عالم الجسد" القديم. ومع ذلك، يكشف التحليل المتعمق للمصادر عن تفسيرات قد تكون مضللة، وإطاراً مقارناً يحتوي على إشارات تطورية وربما عنصرية. وعليه، يصبح من الضروري إعادة تقييم مدى صلاحية نظرية "الدمية المفصّلية" كنظرية متوسطة المدى في مجال علم المصريات. كما يجب النظر فيما إذا كانت النظرية التي تستند إليها بحاجة إلى مراجعة أو إعادة صياغة، بالإضافة إلى استكشاف النماذج والأساليب المناسبة لدراسة وتمثيل الجسد الحي في مصر القديمة مستقبلاً.

*Corresponding Author: camilla.dibiasedyson@mq.edu.au

الكلمات الدالة جسد او كيان مجزأ، عالم الجسد، منظوري، تاريخ الفن المصري، تجسيد علم الوجوديات

1 Introduction

Egyptologists have long been invested in addressing how ancient Egyptians thought about, depicted, and described their bodies. This is not surprising: Egypt has been known since antiquity as a place in which corpses were turned into mummies, and for this reason the body question continues to generate interest and speculation. However, when we move away from mortuary presentations and conceptualisations, what of the lived, experienced body? From a methodological perspective, we might ask: Can we find ways of modelling bodily conceptualisation and experience in an ancient context? We will see that some Egyptological theories about bodily conceptualisation might be imposing a body world that misrepresents the Egyptian mindset.

Some recent studies explicitly address the potential of accessing conceptual structures of the ancient Egyptians via their textual record (e.g. [NYORD](#), 2013; [DI BIASE-DYSON](#), 2023). As concerns bodily experience, some studies on phenomenology within Egyptology attempt to address this issue. We could refer to Rune Nyord's work on the conceptualisation of the body in the funerary corpus known as the Coffin Texts ([NYORD](#), 2009a), or his work on the way that the Egyptian word *ḥ3.ty* 'heart', came to encompass embodied experience beyond the physical organ, as part of the 'felt body', or *Leib* ([NYORD](#), 2009b: 73). In this way, *ḥ3.ty* encroached on the semantic territory of *jb*, the primary term used for the felt body. Also relevant in this discussion is Richard Bussmann's idea of the 'body horizon', the conceptual sphere of religious practice, experience, and post-mortem expectations on 'the scale that individuals understand as within their reach' ([BUSSMANN](#), 2015). But what of the ancient Egyptian idea of *the body itself*? Was it a whole, or the sum of its parts?

For the purposes of this brief overview, I am going to focus on a contribution by German scholar Emma Brunner-Traut, 'Der menschliche Körper—eine Gliederpuppe' [The human body—a jointed doll] ([BRUNNER-TRAUT](#), 1988). This work did not appear in a vacuum: Brunner-Traut's prior work on aspective in Egyptian visual culture had already set in train the notion that *there is no idea of bodily wholeness in Egyptian thinking*.¹ Brunner-Traut's theory thus attempts to interrogate different types of Egyptian—written and visual—data to uncover a uniquely Egyptian approach to bodily experience. This theory was—and in unexpected ways, seems to be still—influential, despite being highly problematic, so this paper will unpack it and in so doing attempt to account for its popularity.

I shall review Brunner-Traut's theory in several steps. Firstly, I consider what brought this idea of conceptual difference into being. To do so, I will give an overview of the 'fragmented body' or '*Gliederpuppe*' theory, following which I will consider its potential intellectual foundations, from Egyptological art history to neuroscience. As mentioned, Brunner-Traut's own theory of 'aspective' in Egyptian visual culture is key to this, so it bears investigating as a foundational theory of the 'fragmented body' theory. Following this, I will review appraisals of the '*Gliederpuppe*' theory, especially the role of Jan Assmann in developing and disseminating it ([ASSMANN](#), 2001; [ASSMANN](#), 2005) and then suggest some reasons for its enduring popularity. One reason might be that the theory attempts to account for a body concept that is historically situated ([ROBB & HARRIS](#), 2013: 4). Lastly, I will discuss the theory's empirical foundations and its implicit structuring paradigm, comparison ([CANDEA](#), 2018). It turns out that both the empirical foundations as well as the structuring paradigm prove to be problematic. In closing, I will propose some ways forward. I will suggest that an alternative for the term 'aspective' be used and I will posit methods of pursuing more ontologically informed reappraisals of 'bodily fragmentation', discussing potential methods for considering what 'wholeness'

¹The idea was first posited by Brunner-Traut in her epilogue to [SCHÄFER](#) (1974: 442), in which she posits that 'aspective' in Egyptian thought can be seen, amongst other places, in science, which is list-based. Thus, Egyptian thought does not consider the interdependence of constituent elements, instead treating body parts separately in a canonical order. It was applied more explicitly to the human body by [BLERSCH](#) (1972: 3) and described to its fullest extent in [BRUNNER-TRAUT](#) (1988), as we will see (§2).

viz-à-viz 'fragmentation' could mean in an Egyptian context.

From a theoretical perspective, the paper attempts a move that involves at least three different cases of comparison, which in turn entail three different types of relationality: relations as epistemology, as methodology and as metaphysics.² Firstly, I consider how Brunner-Traut herself compares the Egyptian visual style both with that of her own and with that of other cultures, which involves the epistemological relations of her intellectual background as well as the methodological relations of her comparative method. Her synthesis also attempts to relate numerous phenomena to a unified theory of culture, a set of metaphysical relations. I then consider how her work can be compared to approaches within and outside Egyptology that attempt to come to terms with the 'alterity' of ancient Egyptian body concepts. We could consider this step to involve the epistemological relations of other Egyptologists as well as the metaphysical relations they posit as an addition to or alternative to Brunner-Traut's. This study thus takes a historiographical approach to the comparatively-driven 'Us-and-Them' thinking inherent to the anthropological gaze (CANDEA, 2019) that is also visible in Egyptology. In so doing, the analysis 'reads relations backwards' (STRATHERN, 2014), by demonstrating and acknowledging the danger in applying relations like comparison 'forcefully... to any new object of knowledge' (STRATHERN, 2014: 5). It is hoped that this exploration can motivate more methodological awareness regarding body worlds and body concepts in an ancient context. We need to consider that the 'fragmented body' theory might be imposing a body world (with its attendant ontological frameworks) that does not do the Egyptian mindset justice (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012: 668). Egyptian ideas of relationality between body parts might look different to what we expect.

2 An overview of the theory

The 'fragmented body' theory is a 'middle-range theory'³ developed by Brunner-Traut as a subset of another theory of hers that revolutionised Egyptological art history: 'aspective'. It will be argued here that the original 'aspective' theory, as well as its derivate, rely on assumptions about not only the 'mindset', but also the 'mental development' of ancient peoples that is, from today's standpoint, very problematic.

Brunner-Traut's treatise on 'aspective' was published as an epilogue to the fourth edition of Heinrich Schäfer's 1919 work *Von ägyptischer Kunst*, which she had edited after his death (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1963: 395–428). Aspective became widely disseminated thanks to the English translation of the fourth edition by John Baines, which bears the title *Principles of Egyptian Art* and includes the epilogue (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1974: 421–446). Though the 'fragmented body' theory itself was published on its own as 'Der menschliche Körper—eine Gliederpuppe' in the *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988), it was also referred to in Brunner-Traut's entry 'Aspektive' for the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 474–488) and formed the basis of her book, *Frühformen des Erkennens* (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1992; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1996).⁴

To understand the genesis of the 'fragmented body' theory, we must first consider the foundations of its parent-theory, 'aspective'. The central, as we will see, somewhat spurious idea, derived from, but different to Schäfer's work (SCHÄFER, 1919: 5) is that pre-Greek, here specifically Egyptian, representational style is stylistically different to and ergo developmentally preceding the breakthrough achieved in Greek art. BRUNNER-TRAUT (1974: 428) describes this pre-Greek style as 'aspective', i.e. without perspective. 'Perspective' is, broadly, 'a method of representing the illusion of space and volume on a two-dimensional plane,

²HARRIS (2020: 16) presents three kinds of relationality as being used in archaeological theory, all three of which are active here: 'worldviews', which he calls 'relations as epistemology', methods like comparison, which are 'relations as methodology' and conceptualisations of networks as 'building blocks of the world', which he calls 'relations as metaphysics'.

³'Middle-range theory', a term borrowed from sociology (MERTON, 1968), refers to theory construction reliant on developing hypotheses that can be empirically tested, as distinct from the generalising and abstract nature of 'grand theory'.

⁴Since the ideas are represented similarly (sometimes even verbatim) across all the works by Brunner-Traut cited here, any of the works can be drawn on for illustrating the theory.

observed at a particular time and from a fixed position' (PECK, 2015: 372). In 'aspective', on the other hand, an image of an entity is created 'part for part' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1974: 424) in such a way that the component parts stay resolutely in two dimensions without giving an illusion of the third dimension. Specifically, the artist, 'for the purposes of representing an object, picks out all the aspects that would be regarded as desirable' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 477).⁵ Thus, in aspective, the whole is captured based on manageable, meaningfully delimited, and paratactically (i.e. adjacently) placed aspects of an object, while in perspective, the object is recognised hypotactically (i.e. placed lower) in its depth as a whole (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 474). In this way, in aspective the artist can show elements of a scene turned away from or hidden from the viewer (like the other side of a pack on the back of a donkey) and illustrate things that could not even be seen, like water surrounding the fish lifted above the water to show that they were in the water while being speared (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 477). Though capable of conveying great animation, the separation of an individual part from its context that aspective ensures means that 'it loses its relational values, i.e. it simultaneously loses both its relationship with its surroundings and modifications this relationship may produce' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 478).

Most of these ideas are also summed up in the terms used by Schäfer, 'geradansichtig-vorstellig' (SCHÄFER, 1930: 97) or the later, abbreviated 'geradvorstellig' (SCHÄFER, 1963).⁶ Where Brunner-Traut's replacement term, aspective, presents a real departure is that it transcends being a fundamentally representational form that was connected somehow (in a way never specified) to the 'conceptual' foundation of representation.⁷ Aspective is, by contrast, an 'epistemological designation of the Egyptian state of mind' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 474). Tying representation to an entire way of perceiving and thinking about the world is ambitious, to say the least, so to ballast this, Brunner-Traut in works following her epilogue to Schäfer's volume draws on types of cultural output beyond the representational, such as mathematics, history writing, onomastics, religion, and literature and even the human body (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 480, 487; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990).

When aspective is applied to the conceptualisation of the human body, BRUNNER-TRAUT (1975: 480) contends that '[t]he human body is not a structure linked to a middle point, it is rather composed of its 'limbs' (there is no singular word for body), that depending on the question can be combined in different ways or given different names'. Though Brunner-Traut in her 1988 work acknowledges, contrary to her earlier statement, that the heart is indeed represented as a centre of something, she nonetheless insists that the body is appraised as a 'Gliederpuppe' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10), whose limbs are juxtaposed, rather than meaningfully bound. Thus, the body is seen 'not as an organism but as a composite of its limbs' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 9).

More worryingly, aspective and its sub-theory are, in sum, not merely theories of a 'state of mind', as mentioned above, but also phenomena illustrative of 'a grade of mental development' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 487; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990: 12. 40–70). This standpoint is purportedly drawn from theories within psychology and neuroscience of the day (§3). Specifically, in comparison with the Greeks, BRUNNER-TRAUT (1990: 158–164) asserts that in the ancient Egyptian brain the less logical right side of the brain predominated, whereas in brains from cultures in the so-called 'axial age' (§3) the logical left side of the brain predominated.⁸

Brunner-Traut is not alone in attempting to recreate an ancient mindset. Theoretical archaeology has attempted for some time to establish conditions for leaps in human cognition: When, for instance, did humans become 'behaviourally modern' (ROBERTS, 2016: 10), if at all (LATOUR, 1993: 10)? The kinds of benchmarks

⁵All translations from German in this article are, apart from when explicitly quoting translated editions (like John Baines' English translation of the fourth edition of SCHÄFER, 1974), by the author of this paper.

⁶The terms relate to the component elements being 'rectilinear' (geradansichtig), i.e. being shown from the front, from the side or from above (never from an oblique perspective), as well as being 'conceptual' (vorstellig).

⁷The term 'geradvorstellig' is a coinage linked to 'Vorstellung', or 'idea' specifically, not of how an object looks in a defined context, but how it is in general (SCHÄFER, 1930: 94; SCHÄFER, 1974: vxii).

⁸This theory is discussed in §3 below.

set for discerning ‘modern’ behaviour have been hotly contested (ILIPOULOS & MALAFOURIS, 2014), with the very setting of such benchmarks being criticised as teleological. As we will see (§6), this type of criticism applies equally well to the work at issue here.

3 The intellectual background of the theory

A key influence on Brunner-Traut’s work was of course Schäfer, whose own political persuasions, as we shall see, seem to have coloured his interpretations of Egyptian visual culture more than is generally known. They also seem to have accorded with Brunner-Traut’s own convictions. As previously mentioned, after Schäfer had died with the fourth edition of *Von ägyptischer Kunst* unpublished⁹ Brunner-Traut not only edited it for publication but also added the epilogue. Baines, in his translator’s foreword to the English edition, argues that Schäfer demonstrated at times a ‘patriotism verging on chauvinism’ (SCHÄFER, 1974: xii). Indeed, as we shall see, some of his appraisals of Egyptian sources could indeed relate to a National Socialist agenda, extending as they do from intellectuals affiliated with the movement. For this, Baines cites Schäfer’s reference in his fourth (posthumous) edition to Erwin Guido Kolbenheyer’s (KOLBENHEYER, 1935: 129) ‘biological’ (i.e. ethnic) explanation for the emergence of perspectivism (SCHÄFER, 1974: xii n. 3, referring to p. 270 of the translated volume). Indeed, an investigation of the correspondence between the two men after the publication of Schäfer’s third edition (SCHÄFER, 1930) reveals Kolbenheyer’s position in more detail, namely, that the Egyptians are by no means less developed than the Greeks, but that based on their ethnicity saw their reality differently from other peoples (letter from Kolbenheyer to Schäfer in 1931, in PEUCKERT, 2017: 132–133). Allusion to this idea appears for the first time in the fourth edition of 1963.

This new standpoint, reflecting an ethnic basis for representation, represents a departure from the third edition, in which Schäfer seems to attempt to avoid value-judgements about the representational form (SCHÄFER, 1930: 249). This is perhaps a response to 19th century derision of the Egyptian style (see WIEDEMANN, 2020: 35). It also shows a shift from other publications of his (SCHÄFER, 1936: 33; SCHÄFER, 1944: 105–106), in which he likewise emphasises that exclusively ‘historical’ explanations should be sought for the development of perspectivism. Indeed, perspective is ‘the result of a unique historical event’ (SCHÄFER, 1930: 249). Any uptake of the style must therefore not be called ‘development’ but rather (cultural) ‘dissemination’ (SCHÄFER, 1930: 250). In the 1930 edition, Schäfer takes the reader through Ancient Near Eastern texts that describe far-away objects as being small to demonstrate that ‘it is wrong to assume that around the year 500 BCE people had not noticed perspective foreshortening’ (SCHÄFER, 1930: 83–85). It is important to remember, too, that even with the newly-introduced ‘ethnic’ perspective on aspective representation in the fourth edition, Schäfer is not implying that a lack of perspective implies some kind of developmental hindrance. Given all this, it might seem like Brunner-Traut’s notion that these same representational features illustrate ‘a grade of mental development’ (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 487) contradicts Schäfer’s view. However, this would be seeing this seminal, highly scientific work of Schäfer’s as representing the sum-total of his opinions on the topic. As we will see, this is not the case, at least, not in the late 1930s.

In a 1938 article ‘Ungewöhnliche ägyptische Augenbilder’, he compares the Egyptian visual style to that of children, the psychologically-disturbed, ‘stone-age peoples’ and so on (SCHÄFER, 1938: 35–41), citing NIERHAUS (1935) (see VERBOVSEK, 2011: 377), without, however, drawing clear conclusions from the comparison. In any case, Schäfer’s manifest indecision about biological/ethnic reasons for artistic style, and his occasional (contradictory) acknowledgement of developmental forces on Egyptian visual style turn out to be the very things that Brunner-Traut chooses to adhere to. About his term ‘geradvorstellig’ she says: ‘In this way, he hits on a salient symptom of aspective representations, but not on the intellectual constitution of their authors, which I am trying to understand’ (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990: 11).

⁹The fourth edition had been burnt in a bombing attack in 1944 and had had to be completely reworked towards the end of the war (PEUCKERT, 2017: 122)

This 'intellectual constitution' was partly resolved with reference to theories of historical development, such as the 'axial age' theory of **JASPERS** (1949) (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 159–164). According to this theory, the time of Confucius, Lao-Tse, the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, and the Greek philosophers (c. 800–200 BCE) was a time in which 'lies the deepest incision in history. The human emerged, with whom we live today' (**JASPERS**, 1949: 19). Though the idea persists in the historical sciences, the axial age paradigm has been severely undermined by deeper, more exact historical analyses of the cultures and times in question, which do not reveal a homogenous picture of times of peak breakthrough across cultures (e.g. **A. SMITH**, 2016; **MULLINS** et al., 2018). A further critique can be seen in the evolutionist take Jaspers has on pre-axial cultures, including Egypt: such cultures are 'unawakened', with 'a magical religion destitute of philosophical enlightenment' (**JASPERS**, 1953: 12; see **REES**, 2017: 223–224). Such an idea is also well-developed in Brunner-Traut's work, who draws on selected neuroscientific research to address the question of whether the 'axial age' has a biological background (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 159). To be specific, the 'axial age' represents to her a triumph of the left hemisphere of the brain over the right, as is apparently demonstrated by, for instance, the increasing predominance of left-to-right scripts over that of right-to-left scripts, like Arabic (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 163–164).

The (pseudo-)neurological basis of Brunner-Traut's theory can be observed in the idea that two hemispheres of the brain ostensibly fulfil very different functions. The right hemisphere is represented as prioritising intuition and creativity and the left hemisphere is associated with logic and rationality (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 162), though Brunner-Traut admits that the picture of brain function and hemisphere interaction is far more complex than this (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 161). From a developmental perspective, Brunner-Traut claims that the left hemisphere is underdeveloped in children under the age of ten (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 159, 163). Additionally, some psychological illnesses, or their treatments, result in cases in which communication between hemispheres is difficult or non-existent, such as in cases of 'split-brain syndrome' (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 160).

Additionally, from a cultural level it is claimed to be 'proven', on the basis of a single article (**ROGERS** et al., 1977), that 'Hopi Indians and black people rely more for cognitive processing on the right hemisphere than the left hemisphere, as compared to white people' (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 161). Tying all these statements together is the idea that these groups apparently draw without perspective, for which reason she calls them 'geistesverwandt' or 'likeminded' (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 13). It has already been pointed out that these conclusions represent highly selective applications of neuroscientific literature to fit problematic theories: as **NYORD** (2013: 141 n. 1) also points out, no mention is made in the Rogers et al. article of 'black' people, nor are comparisons made with 'white' people, as Brunner-Traut argues (see also **STADLER**, 2009: 19–22). It could be added that the synthesis of ideas is pseudo-scientific: though current neuroscience acknowledges slightly different features in the two hemispheres in terms of processing different kinds of information (for an overview, see **WICKENS**, 2014: 222–223), neuroscience has long—since the 1860s, thanks to the work of John Hughlings Jackson—disavowed the idea that hemispheric specialisation is apparent across individuals or groups (**WICKENS**, 2014: 222–223).

Though in her preface, **BRUNNER-TRAUT** (1990: x) claims that the work is apolitical, this overview suggests that work on Egyptian visual language from the 1920s and early 1930s (including Schäfer) was less value-laden than works from the time of National Socialism and after. Moreover, the very scholars with whom this review is concerned can by no means be regarded as 'apolitical', either in word or deed. Schäfer is shown to have been influenced by intellectuals favoured by the National Socialist movement, such as Kolbenheyer and Nierhaus. Moreover, the affiliation Emma Brunner-Traut with the NSDAP is known (**BECKH**, 2006; **SCHNEIDER**, 2012: 214–216). Given that *Frühformen des Erkennens* dates only to the 1990s this legacy of ethnically based value-judgments could be seen as being long-lived.

4 Dissemination and appraisal of the ‘fragmented body’ theory

Brunner-Traut’s ‘fragmented body’ theory was influential in unexpected ways. Within theology, her work continues to be cited in works handling cognitive approaches to the Bible¹⁰ and in some recent works of evolutionary anthropology (e.g. **OESTERDIEKHOF**, 2015: 10) her work is also positively appraised. In Egyptology, on the other hand, as we shall see, though Brunner-Traut’s ideas were heavily criticised by some German Egyptologists (e.g. **STADLER**, 2009; **VERBOVSEK**, 2011), it seems that in many cases (especially in non-German academe), scholars either attribute the fragmentary body thesis to Assmann or do not cite a source for the theory. Therefore, this paper shall discuss the theory and its development (together with related theories) and also attempt to account for its popularity (and tenacity).

Because the ‘fragmented body’ theory itself is only represented in a brief article, academic reactions are not easy to trace. There was, however, one review of the work: Robert **RITNER** (1989: 42) drew attention to a misreading of some of the sources, which will be discussed below (§5). Regarding ‘aspective’ itself, some (little) pushback can be found in review articles and works of the time. Though not explicit, Whitney **DAVIS** (1989: 57) emphasises that Egyptian visual style is indicative only of ‘a way of drawing and not a (natural, innate, instinctive) way of seeing’, a statement which might be a reaction to Brunner-Traut, as **NYORD** (2013: 142) suggests. More decisively, Bruce Trigger, in his review of Baines’ translation of Schäfer’s *Von ägyptischer Kunst* (**SCHÄFER**, 1974), has to say of Brunner-Traut’s appendix on ‘aspective’: ‘I regret that an excellent translation of a work of such great historical interest should have included Brunner-Traut’s unsubstantiated and probably unverifiable speculations, particularly when these are so alien in temper to Schäfer’s own objective studies’ (**TRIGGER**, 1975: 484–485). The ongoing currency of the term ‘aspective’ to this day, as we shall see (§7), indicates that Trigger’s misgivings were (unfortunately) not considered sufficient to call the whole theory into question.

In any case, most contemporary reviews of Brunner-Traut’s work on ‘aspective’ and the related ‘fragmented body’ theory were positive, though it may be telling that there seem to be no reviews by psychologists or the like. We see positive appraisal in the (German, Egyptological) reviews of the latest, and fullest, exemplar of the broader theory of aspective, the 1990 book *Frühformen des Erkennens*. Walter **REINEKE** (1991) casts an approving eye over her work, particularly as it concerns the interpretation of his area of specialisation, ancient Egyptian mathematics. The problematic, racist tenets of the argument, far from being pushed back upon, are claimed to be ‘supported by relevant publications of the disciplinary literature’ (**REINEKE**, 1991: 248 n. 4). The only other review that could be found, by Jürgen **VON BECKERATH** (1991: 425), is only half a page long. Despite mentioning the central tenet, namely, the ‘likeminded’ connection between Egyptian artists and ‘Naturvölkern, Kindern und sogar Geistesgestörten [primitive peoples, children and even the mentally disturbed]’, he saw nothing to criticise, apart from it having ‘occasional contradictions’, which he did not expand on. His generally positive view may have meant that he favoured the aggregation of data that supported the theory of development from ‘pre-axial’ to ‘axial’ cultures, since this is the conclusion he mentions.

Beyond peer-review, the theory of ‘fragmentation’ as it pertained to a psychological state connected to ‘aspective’, came to be adopted by other scholars. Hartmut Blersch, in applying aspective to healing texts, sees in the writings of Egyptian practitioners ‘the final form of a conceptual development’ that have ‘no direct development in the medicine of classical antiquity’, as encapsulated by the *Corpus Hippocraticum* (**BLERSCH**, 1972: 3). This conclusion is based on the fact that the texts focus on ‘single aspects of body parts’, like *h3.ty* and *jb* for ‘aspects’ of the heart (**BLERSCH**, 1972: 7) or *h3.w* and *jwf* for ‘aspects’ of the flesh (**BLERSCH**, 1972: 15).¹¹ As we shall see (§5), this represents a very partial view of Egyptian words for the human body.

¹⁰ Amongst others, **LASINE**, 2012; **DE HULSTER** and **LEMON**, 2014; **STAUBLI** and **SCHROER**, 2017; and **WAGNER**, 2023.

¹¹ **NYORD** (2009a: 60, n. 233) interprets Blersch’s ‘Aspekte’ as being at times like the ‘Leibesinseln’ in his own, phenomenologically focused work. He concludes that: ‘This suggests that several of the differences between aspectivity and perspectivity with regard to the view of the body may in fact be explained as inherent in the terminology used for parts of the Leib as opposed to modern biomedical terminology referring to the Körper’.

A positive appraisal can likewise be seen in the (unpublished) dissertation of Herbert **SPIESS** (1991), who, in his discussion of the god Thoth, applies aspective to explain the Egyptian conceptualisation of deities, seeing individual aspects of the god as separate rather than connected with each other. This approach was criticised by Martin **STADLER** (2009: 21–22) for not reading the sources sufficiently in context to see manifest connections.

The scholar who most ensured the ongoing impact of the ‘fragmentary body’ theory was Jan Assmann, to whom, incidentally, *Frühformen des Erkennens* was dedicated. Assmann at once developed the theory (in some respects changing it drastically) and disseminated it via his influential works, particularly *Tod und Jenseits im Alten Ägypten* (**ASSMANN**, 2001; **ASSMANN**, 2005).¹² By leaving the theory of a ‘fragmented body’ unchallenged **ASSMANN** (2001) created an environment for further reception of the theory, whether Brunner-Traut was actively cited or not (e.g. **HOFFMANN**, 2012, who only cites Assmann). Assmann is critical of some parts of the theory, acknowledging that the ‘cognitive-psychological interpretation is too one-sided’ (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 35; **ASSMANN & ASSMANN**, 2005). However, he does not comment on the value-judgments that are key to this interpretation,¹³ nor does he attempt to interrogate the empirical basis of the theory. On the contrary, he asserts that ‘It is right that the Egyptian had a dissecting view of the world; simultaneously, however, he is concerned with the connective principles. These are principally what matter to him’ (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 35).

Assmann’s ‘Connectivity Principle’ or ‘konnektives Denken’ relates principally to the mortuary sphere, but it also informs other levels of existence (the centrality of the heart in connecting to other body parts and ensuring their health, for instance, **ASSMANN**, 2001: 36–37). Tied to death is both the Egyptian conceptualisation of the body, which is claimed to concern ‘fragmentation and attachment’ and the Egyptian conceptualisation of social structure, tied to ‘isolation and connection’ (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 36). One would think that such an idea, of individuals, communities, institutions, bound together in meaningful networks would render ‘fragmentation’ as a central organising principle untenable.

The inherent value of Brunner-Traut’s theory must, then, derive from elsewhere. It is possible, for instance, that what Assmann sees as principally worthy of transmission is her argument about the absence in pharaonic Egyptian language and culture of large-scale terms for meta-categories (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 36). This reflects the ‘axial age’ preoccupations of Brunner-Traut, as discussed above (§3), which, since they were shared, though heavily adapted, by scholars like Assmann (e.g. **ASSMANN**, 1992: 291; **ASSMANN**, 2008),¹⁴ may have also been a driving principle for the theory’s popularity.

Though Assmann’s (and by proxy Brunner-Traut’s) claim is in some cases indisputable—there are no words for, e.g. literature, religion, or science in Egyptian (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 35)—it can just as easily be argued that this idea itself requires revising. Just because the Egyptians did not have Eurocentric meta-categories by no means implies that they had no meta-categories whatsoever. It is a rather unjust claim, taken from the perspective of anthropological linguistics,¹⁵ to expect cultures and languages to ‘behave’ the way we want them to and conform to our categories. In essence, it is more probable that large-scale ideas were simply differently labelled. Possible candidates are words like *mdw-ntr*, *sbꜣyt*, *sšꜣt* or *ššꜣw*, none of which have been adequately translated by terms like ‘(hieroglyphic) script’, ‘teaching’, ‘secret’ or ‘wisdom’.¹⁶ We will return to this issue later (§8), when considering the role that an ontological view of the material might afford us. Suffice it to say for now that the absence of a word should not be equated with the absence of a way of thinking, just like, as we will see (§8), the presence of a word roughly equivalent to a foreign word does not entail the presence of a foreign concept. Thus, we can ascribe to Assmann in turn a Eurocentric perspective on the

¹²The ideas here are repeated, sometimes even verbatim, in other texts as well, such as **ASSMANN**, 2004, **ASSMANN**, 2009, **ASSMANN**, 2012, and **ASSMANN** and **ASSMANN**, 2005.

¹³This mildness towards the theory is also pointed out by **ALLOLIO-NÄCKE** (2023: 189).

¹⁴For instance, Assmann has emphasised that pharaonic (i.e. pre-axial) Egypt supplied precedents for future revolutions in thinking.

¹⁵For a good and current overview, see **HAUCK**, 2022.

¹⁶e.g. for *mdw-ntr*, **ALLON**, 2023: 196; for *sbꜣyt*, **SHUPAK**, 1993: 31–34; for *sšꜣt* (or rather, the causatively-marked *sšꜣt*), **EL-SAYED**, 1984: 131–132 and **FITZENREITER**, 2022: 465 and for *ššꜣw*, **WESTENDORF**, 1999: 82–83 and **POMMERENING**, 2014: 9.

material, however much he attempts to disentangle himself from other judgements of Brunner-Traut.

The final reason for the tenacity of 'fragmentation' in Assmann's work could be tied to its relevance for specific bodies of material. For mortuary material, for instance, his Connectivity Principle (and the 'fragmentary body' thesis on which it is based) works particularly well (ASSMANN, 2001: 36). After all, bodies do rot and fall apart, as illustrated in funerary spells (e.g. EATON, 2018). Assmann likewise approves of Brunner-Traut's term '*Gliederpuppe*' in relation to the so-called *Gliedervergottung*, texts in which parts of the creator-god are associated with limbs to protect them, presumably via mythical precedent (ASSMANN, 2004: 267; ASSMANN, 2009; ASSMANN, 2012).¹⁷ However, also here he renovates the theory somewhat, claiming that this partitive description is not 'because the Egyptians were unable to conceptualise it [the body] as an organic whole, but because it mattered to them that the connection of the parts made a whole, according to the *Principle of Connectivity*, in which the body decomposed into pieces could be brought together again to a whole' (ASSMANN, 2004: 267). One might ask, then, once again, given the necessity of refurbishing the theory so much, why Assmann bothered to maintain (and in so doing, preserve) the term '*Gliederpuppe*' (or 'marionette' in David Lorton's translation).

Not until the work of STADLER (2009) did a discussion of the racist basis of the theory of 'aspective' appear in print. Similar misgivings have been expressed by Alexandra VERBOVSEK (2011), who has attempted to move beyond 'aspective' to new terminology (§7). Surprisingly, these critical appraisals have not caught on as much as expected.

Reinhard SELINGER (2012) refers to the 'fragmented body' theory in relation to his work on prosthetics. Following a catalogue of prosthetics, used both in life and after death (SELINGER, 2012: 26–29), he is critical of claims that prosthetics were used to establish bodily integrity on the grounds that '[d]ie Idee eines ganzheitlichen Körpers lag den Ägyptern allerdings fern [the idea of a whole body, however, was far from the Egyptians' minds]'. For this, he simply cites Brunner-Traut's work, without reflecting explicitly on what this contradiction implies for his own study. In other words, if prosthetics were not used for the sake of making the body more whole, what were they used for?

Other recent Egyptological works covering 'cognitive-anthropological' approaches to the body in an Egyptian perspective cite the 'fragmentary body' theory without citing Brunner-Traut at all. An example is the work of Friedhelm HOFFMANN (2012) on pBerlin P. 10472 A + 14400, a text describing statues. The 'subdividing and dissecting view of the body' (HOFFMANN, 2012: 482, 498) is seen as the clearest characteristic of the Egyptian body conceptualisation, and though ASSMANN (2001: 116–159) is cited, the language sounds more like that of Brunner-Traut. The description of statues as the sum of specific 'parts' is seen as demonstrating this view (HOFFMANN, 2012: 498), but since the 'parts' referred to are not body parts but instead features like type, posture, and dress, one might wonder whether the theory is pertinent here.

Aside from German-speaking Egyptology, the reception of Brunner-Traut's ideas in related disciplines in the German-speaking world has been the most positive and productive. Bernd JANOWSKI (2012) uses the 'fragmentary body' theory as the pivot for research on 'Alttestamentlicher Anthropologie', which seeks to uncover an 'anthropology of the body' in Near Eastern and Biblical Texts. However, by republishing and referring to Brunner-Traut's '*Gliederpuppe*' and Assmann's work on connectivity as a way of framing the discourse for Near Eastern and Biblical scholars, JANOWSKI (2012: 13) is fundamentally uncritical in his reception of both. He briefly addresses STADLER (2009) criticism of Brunner-Traut's idea of 'aspective', arguing that 'If, however, "aspective" is used to describe the ability to break down an overall phenomenon into individual aspects and to represent it through these, one can certainly retain the expression, which points to an analytical talent of the Egyptians, and see in it something like a regulative idea' (JANOWSKI, 2012: 13 n. 19). This is, sadly, not further explored. Moreover, since the connected '*Gliederpuppe*' theory was not criticised by Stadler, its problems remain unresolved. Janowski himself uses Assmann's term 'konstellative Personenbegriff' to explain the multidimensionality of the concept of 'human' in the Old Testament: on the one hand a

¹⁷See DUQUESNE, 2002.

body composed of different parts (here the effect of Brunner-Traut) and on the other hand a being connected in a social structure, more à la Assmann (JANOWSKI, 2012: 14). Though this application showcases the applicability of such theories outside of Egyptology, it would be interesting to see whether calling into question the empirical basis of the 'Gliederpuppe' theory destabilises its applicability once and for all.

Andreas WAGNER (2023: 149) likewise applies the broader theory of 'aspective' (by which he means 'additive') ways of thinking, to ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament phenomena. Contrary to Janowski, the critiques of the theory from Egyptology are not engaged with at all, nor are the theories subjected to any critical appraisal of their own accord or based on new source material. The representation of a pre-perspective period of thinking is moreover associated with the pre-axial age (WAGNER, 2023: 162) without engagement with the issues prevailing with Jaspers' theory. The different aspects of 'aspective' theory, from the 'fragmentary' body to an 'additive' mathematical system, are seen as an 'extraordinary convergence' of factors, the breadth of which affords the theory 'comprehensible evidence' (WAGNER, 2023: 168). As for his own evidentiary base, Wagner concentrates on *parallels membrorum*, a rhetorical strategy used in Old Testament (and Egyptian) texts to great effect: the problem I see is taking a highly effective poetic style as an index of a way of thinking. This would be tantamount to us saying that poets think differently to other humans because they occasionally use meter to shape their phrases.

The description of human qualities with reference to individual body parts in the Old Testament is also seen as being different to the systemic clarity of Classical Greek models of the body (WAGNER, 2023: 170–171). This thinking, based on art, religion and literary style, is extended to the entire Ancient Near East and even tied to that most tendentious claim of Brunner-Traut's: that it represents right hemisphere dominance and pre-axial thinking (WAGNER, 2023: 176–178). Rather than contest this claim by making reference to psychological research, he simply throws the question back—is asymmetrical brain development possible (WAGNER, 2023: 177)? As a way of adhering to Brunner-Traut, 'aspective' is likened to a mentality, in line with the historical anthropologist Christoph WULF (1997: 13–14), or to a 'kognitives oder epistemologisches Ordnungsmuster [cognitive or epistemological ordering pattern]' (WAGNER, 2023: 181). Lars ALLOLIO-NÄCKE (2023: 192) reflects on the outdated, *Annales* basis of 'mentality' models, which have been entirely eclipsed by modern anthropology. To this one could add that Wagner's new-fashioning takes on both the ideas of historical development and cultural differentiation that Brunner-Traut's theories imply (WAGNER, 2023: 179), which, one could argue, retains their most problematic aspects. Only at the end is there a reflection on the simplification that these large-scale comparisons bring about, but the doubt is quickly pushed away by saying that it is heuristically useful (WAGNER, 2023: 182).

In the same volume, Lars Allolio-Näcke contests the psychological basis of aspective, suggesting instead that it relates to 'expressions and conventions' different from our own (ALLOLIO-NÄCKE, 2023: 185). Allolio-Näcke claims that Brunner-Traut's manifold examples make the theory plausible (but see §5), but the theory becomes problematic with the application of brain research (ALLOLIO-NÄCKE, 2023: 187). He argues that ancient outputs like list-making are not primitive organisational principles, but particular representational forms; moreover, the lack of abstract terms is insufficient evidence for lack of abstract thinking (ALLOLIO-NÄCKE, 2023: 194), in line with my own statements to this effect above. The pejorative comparisons behind aspective are, he claims, 'inherent' to the theory and not able to be distanced from it (ALLOLIO-NÄCKE, 2023: 194–195).

A response to this paper by Michaela Bauks attempts again to 'divest the terms [aspective and axial] from their originally evolutionary perspective and see its logic in the sense of a cultural-historical feedback loop' (BAUKS, 2023: 201) due to their usefulness as heuristic tools. The basis of this is a complete re-formulation of both concepts, 'axial age' to 'cultural crystallization' (BAUKS, 2023: 203) and 'aspective' to a 'feedback loop' (BAUKS, 2023: 201). One might ask why these paradigms must be retained if not only their judgmental theoretical basis but also their contours and even implications must be changed.

Anglophone Egyptology presents more of a problem when it comes to an appraisal of Brunner-Traut's theory, as no scholar seems to cite it overtly. Some might have come to broadly similar ideas independently,

whereas others may have encountered the theory via **ASSMANN** (2005) and never read Brunner-Traut's work, most of which was never translated into English.¹⁸

James **WALKER** (1993: 83), for instance, presents a very similar idea to Brunner-Traut without referring to a single other scholar. Whether the idea was therefore his own, or simply uncredited is impossible to tell: 'Throughout the entire duration of the civilisation of ancient Egypt the Egyptians perceived the body of a human being or animal as being constructed and functioning not as a complex single organism but more as a corporation, a loose association, of separate anatomical entities.' Since the source base of this statement is connected by the texts known as the *Gliedervergottung*, in which body parts are associated with deities, we can accuse Walker of wildly overstating his sources in relation to ideas of cognition, but not of more problematic ideas. This work may well be an indication of a parallel theory that sees fragmentation as a mythological trope, rather than a conceptualisation of the lived body, in the lines of Alfred Herrmann's work on the religious bases of mummification (**HERMANN**, 1956), which, incidentally, Walker also does not cite.

Similar in theme to **WALKER** (1993), Lynn Meskell and Rosemary Joyce in their study of embodiment in ancient contexts (**MESKELL & JOYCE**, 2003), emphasise the theory of separability and independence of body parts without reference to other fragmentation theories (by the likes of Brunner-Traut, Assmann or Herrmann). They see fragmentation to be the preserve of divinities and the dead: 'through language, member divinization undoes the body and returns it to a fetish' (**MESKELL & JOYCE**, 2003: 16), establishing a clever, if not very apt, allusion to Barthes' *S/Z*, in which a female body is rendered by the male gaze as a disassembled mass of body parts (**BARTHES**, 1974: 112). The Egyptian spells 'ensured the body's intactness and potency', reflecting a view of the body as 'a unity of separately functioning body parts' (**MESKELL & JOYCE**, 2003: 70). This, like Walker, seems to be taking the *Gliedervergottung* at face value without analysis of the source at a deeper level.

Christina **RIGGS** (2010: 3), in her article on the 'Body' for the UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology, also talks about 'the fragmentation of the body in Egyptian thought' without citing Brunner-Traut or anyone else: 'The Egyptians readily conceived of the body as a multitude of discrete parts—hair, head, skin, sensory organs, internal organs, arms, legs, blood, and so on—which must be bound together in both life and death for completeness' (**RIGGS**, 2010: 3). Riggs goes on to say that 'Physical fracture is also at the core of the hieroglyphic writing system, where human body parts (displayed in Gardiner sign-list section D) are even more numerous than animal body parts; the former are chiefly limbs and facial features, while the latter are internal organs' (**RIGGS**, 2010: 3). It might be worth noting here that since the Gardiner codes are restricted to the most frequent forms (**GARDINER**, 1957: 438) and since the D group is mainly comprised of different things being held in the hand, this comment about relative amount might be seen as trivial. In any case, by its (implicit) mention in a highly visible piece of work, a theory relating to the fragmented body, whether attributable to a source or not, has gained canonical status, simply as common knowledge.

We might ask ourselves why, in addition to reflecting on the ongoing currency of works cited favourably by Jan Assmann, the 'fragmentary body' theory was considered good enough to keep alive, whether its progenitor was known or not. Most likely, its popularity is due to Brunner-Traut's premise being good. Though implicit, her position is to acknowledge the historical situatedness of body concepts across a range of cultural outputs, which conforms with contemporary approaches of historical anthropology and theoretical archaeology (**ROBB & HARRIS**, 2013: 4). In other words, it is seen to have uncovered a uniquely Egyptian (i.e. emic) conceptualisation of bodily experience—an ancient 'body world' in short, which takes in 'the totality of human experiences, practices and representations in a specific place and time' (**ROBB & HARRIS**, 2013: 3). However, in addition to the problems it faces due to its implications, the generalising power of the theory is also seriously undermined by the very sources that are purported to support it.

¹⁸The only exception is of course Baines' translation of Brunner-Traut's excursus on 'aspective' in **SCHÄFER** (1974), but the 'fragmentary body' theory was not fully developed at this stage.

5 The empirical basis of the theory

Though the evidence called on to support this theory is multifaceted and multimodal, the nature and quality of this evidence, and its use to support the theory require a more thorough investigation. Much of the evidence is textual and derived from a range of genres and time periods.

From literature, Brunner-Traut draws on a unique text from the Egyptian literary corpus *The Contendings of the Body and the Head* (most recently [MATHIEU](#) (2020) and [DI BIASE-DYSON](#) and [STOCK](#) (2023)). The fact that the Body/Torso¹⁹ and Head are in court fighting for primacy in the bodily hierarchy is seen by [BRUNNER-TRAUT](#) (1988: 9) as an indication that they take themselves for 'two independent beings'. The problem is that Brunner-Traut does not take into consideration the fact that this is a humorous piece, like other, equally humorous 'Contendings' to which genre it belongs (*Horus and Seth; Truth and Falsehood and Wine and Beer*) ([MATHIEU](#), 2011; [DI BIASE-DYSON](#) & [STOCK](#), 2023). The fact that it is funny—and of course physically impossible—that a body would take its head to court, casts doubt on the idea that this text reflects Egyptian ideas about the body and connections between body parts. This is even more likely given, firstly, that this depiction of the body is unique in the textual record and secondly, that it conforms entirely to the 'Contendings' genre in which two paired entities are placed in opposition to each other.

Scepticism is also necessary given that Brunner-Traut's work was written before Frank Kammerzell's ground-breaking translation of the text ([KAMMERZELL](#), 1995). Thus, her reading misconstrues some of the content. She says, for instance, that the Head is represented as having its own belly, arms, and heart ([BRUNNER-TRAUT](#), 1988: 9), which Kammerzell's analysis ([KAMMERZELL](#), 1995) has shown to not be the case (for an overview, [DI BIASE-DYSON](#) and [STOCK](#), 2023). She also claims that, in contrast to apparently later 'versions' from classical antiquity, the dependence of the body parts on each other is not thematised ([BRUNNER-TRAUT](#), 1988: 9). This misses the fact that the (feminised) Body/Torso, trying to prove her pre-eminence, explicitly makes claims about the fact that it is upon *her* and not the (masculine) Head that the other body parts lean and thus depend (tTurin CGT 58004 lines 3–4; in [DI BIASE-DYSON](#) and [STOCK](#), 2023: 68, 61–62). Lastly, a closer textual analysis shows that it is by no means certain that this humorous piece bears any relation to later fables from Greece and Rome ([DI BIASE-DYSON](#) & [STOCK](#), 2023: 58–59). Thus, it is unwise to present it as a less-developed precursor.

The idea of fragmentation is then explored within the language. [BRUNNER-TRAUT](#) (1988: 9) sees specific words for the body as evidence for fragmented conceptualisation. She lists *wt* (pl., 'limbs' and also *h'wt* (pl. 'limbs', which she indicates is 'torso' in the (feminine?) singular, though I think she is actually referring to the masculine *h'w*, *Wb.* III 37.5–39.13). She concludes from this that 'the body is seen as the sum of its parts' ([BRUNNER-TRAUT](#), 1988: 10). However, it is unclear why these examples undermine the body's existence as a whole; in English, the various words referring to 'body' and 'limbs' are often synonymous, as in Egyptian. This synonymy is evidenced by the description in *The Teachings of Ptahhotep* of: *h'w=k df* 'your limbs (i.e. body) are nourished'.²⁰

Some examples are included in a way that is hard to draw conclusions, due to the brevity of their treatment. Brunner-Traut claims that (human) inner organs, limited representationally to hieroglyphic signs, are often depicted with connecting parts ([BRUNNER-TRAUT](#), 1988: 10). The idea here seems to be that the connection is to the neighbouring organs rather than to the whole, but the idea is, honestly, bizarre. If a body part (the heart, for instance) is being depicted, what else would the artist feasibly depict apart from the heart with some of the veins and arteries that protrude from it? The second point, that organs derive invariably from non-human animals ([BRUNNER-TRAUT](#), 1988: 10), is not developed beyond this observation. Does she mean that there is little awareness by artists/scribes about the human body's interior? Presumably this has more to tell us about what might be seen as 'decorum' ([BAINES](#), 2007: 14–17) inherent to Egyptian representation of human

¹⁹The word *h.t* is polysemous via a PART/WHOLE metonymy and could refer to either.

²⁰*The Teachings of Ptahhotep*, pPrisse = pBN 186–194, 8.8, [ŽÁBA](#), 1956: 35 §D241.

bodies than it does about any ideas about body parts and organs being unconnected and not interdependent (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10).

Brunner-Traut argues that the Egyptian conceptualisation of time is also different, with a lifetime seen as being composed of distinct 'phases' of life (childhood, adulthood, old age), rather than as a whole process (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10–11). The apparent lack of awareness of transitory phases is said to be evident in the description of healing, whereby illness is presented as a condition which can immediately be reversed. This is seemingly indicated by statements in the healing texts like 'he will heal immediately' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10–11). However, this generalisation again neglects the finer details: that beyond such statements are other more progressive descriptions of treatments over several days (GRAPOW, 1955: 72; WESTENDORF, 1999: 485; DI BIASE-DYSON et al., 2023).

The fact that the illness is said to be removed 'from all limbs' is allegedly also an indication that bodies are healed 'piece by piece' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 11), though one might think that it could also imply, contrary to Brunner-Traut's claim, that an illness in any limb might affect the whole organism. The source base invoked for this idea is the so-called *Gliedervergottung*, i.e. a list in which body parts are associated with different gods for ritual purposes. However, as Robert K. Ritner has pointed out, (RITNER, 1989; RITNER, 1993: 40 n. 181) listing individual body parts in a *Gliedervergottung* does not necessarily indicate that the body was seen as an 'addition of its parts' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 12): this text might rather have highlighted the eventual functionality of the whole. Such an idea of functionality might be espied in the (Late Period recension of the) Osiris Myth, in which the body parts are mapped onto all 42 nomes of Egypt and show unity of the whole land in a symbolic, potentially metaphorical way (QUACK, 2012a: 25). Nevertheless, even if the *Gliedervergottung* were to be seen as describing the body as the sum of its parts, the circumscribed context in which this depiction appears means that we are far from being able to deduce a whole somatic conceptualisation based around it.

In relation to healing texts, the claim is made that 'their [i.e. healers'] consideration of the individual limbs led (in medicine) via a high degree of specialisation ultimately to rigidity and not to an understanding of the organism' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 11). This situation was apparently only changed 'am Umbruch der Zeiten', in other words, the 'axial age', with Hippocrates (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 11). Without wanting to dispute that medical knowledge developed as antiquity progressed, not least under the influence of Hippocrates,²¹ several ideas require reconsideration. Firstly, medical specialisation is not well-attested in Egyptian medicine after the Old Kingdom (GHALIOUNGUI, 1973: 73). Secondly, the allegedly piecemeal approach to the body ignores the focus in the healing corpus on *connections* within the body, as also mentioned by ASSMANN (2001: 37–38). For this, we can consult the treatise on the *mtw*, the connecting strands throughout the body, and the heart (pEbers 99.1–102.16 [Eb 854–855], WESTENDORF, 1999: 92–93, 691–698), which details the kinds of illnesses resulting from blockages to these vital connectors. Similarly, the representation that the brain was 'ignored' in life and death (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10) insufficiently considers evidence attesting to the importance of the brain for manifold faculties, as seen in a trauma manual (pEdwin Smith 3.2–4.18 [Cases 7 and 8], BREASTED, 1930: 175–216).

Regarding another source of evidence, mummification, it is said that while limbs can fall from the body after death, they can be kept together via mummification in the way they had already been 'joined in the egg', i.e. the womb (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 9, 12, ref. to *Coffin Text* Spell 148, CT II, DE BUCK, 1938: 212b). However, in the passage Brunner-Traut is referring to as evidence of this idea, *tꜥz* is not referring to 'joining limbs' at all, but rather to 'forming' the whole 'shape' of the god: *tꜥz.n-ḏj jr.w ntr m swḥ.t* 'I (Isis) have formed (lit. tied) the shape of the god in the womb'. Thus, the meaning and associations of *tꜥz*, when referring to 'making' a human and bringing them to life, are not tied to limbs, as happens when talking about death

²¹For an overview of Hippocratic innovations, such as patient-oriented treatment, record-taking and holistic approaches, see TSIOMPANOU and MARKETOS, 2013. The authors also point out, however, that Hippocrates was an anomaly in medicine in his time and thus does not represent healing practices in Classical Greece in general.

and revivification after death, e.g. 'his head is tied to his bones' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 12).²² Rather, *tʒ* in relation to a human coming into being is being used in a much looser sense, of 'forming' the whole 'shape'. Thus, Brunner-Traut is conflating two situations unnecessarily and ignoring what is interesting in the example, namely, that 'tying' can be used to create a whole shape. In sum, since sources used to build this theory are routinely misinterpreted, the theory loses its generalising power.

6 The use of comparison via cultural evolutionism

In addition to the poor empirical ballast of the theory, the method itself can also be seen as wanting. The implicit structuring framework of the theory is comparison, employing comparative methods that are frontal (in which a foreign culture is compared to one's own, CANDEA, 2018: 30) and lateral (a comparison of structures across societies, CANDEA, 2018: 31).²³ When used reflexively, both can offer unparalleled occasion to consider both the material studied and the method of studying it (e.g. DESCOLA, 2001: 109).²⁴ However, in the case of Brunner-Traut's analysis, frontal comparison resulted in the conclusion that Egyptians think like 'primitive' and uneducated peoples, children, and people with neurodegenerative mental disorders today (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990: 7). Lateral comparison helped establish the idea that Egyptian thinking was like that of its neighbours of the time: pre-axial cultures vs. axial cultures (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990: 59–60; JASPERS, 1949). Thus, both comparative angles can be used to support evolutionary ideas, when used poorly, as has been already pointed out by other scholars (see NYORD, 2013: 142).

In addition to the specific problems of Brunner-Traut's application of the comparative method, comparison itself is in general rife with problems. For one, the discovery of some 'latent underlying form of a society or culture' is itself an 'imaginative construct' (CANDEA, 2018: 30). Three main problems emerge: 'problems of mapping', i.e. that scholars cannot rid themselves of Western paradigms (CANDEA, 2018: 34–40), 'problems of communication', i.e. that scholars rarely avoid the Western descriptive apparatus (CANDEA, 2018: 40–47) and 'problems of purpose', i.e. that scholars commonly adhere a Western agenda (CANDEA, 2018: 47–51). When it comes to art theory, we can see that this is absolutely the case. Recent studies emphasise, for instance, that contrary to perspective being the default category of representation, perspective is rather the *outlier* in representational style in pan-cultural and pan-historical perspective. Indeed, after its allegedly spontaneous emergence in classical Greece, it only re-emerged in the Renaissance when ancient classical images again gained influence (BOL, 2005: 84). When it comes to languages the same holds: using language to attempt to uncover a cognitive baseline is hindered by the over-reliance of cognitive science on English (BLASI et al., 2022). This makes it hard when comparing other languages or cultures, because it forces the analyst to ask whether divergent outcomes are signs of (cultural/cognitive) uniqueness or whether the features are only appraised as divergent because a robust enough comparative corpus is non-existent (see also §4).

In short, a very 'Us-and-Them' mentality has driven cultural, cognitive and art-historical approaches to how the Egyptian lived body is conceptualised. This mentality is well-expressed (though not uniquely) in the work of Brunner-Traut. Such an approach makes poor use of the comparative method it champions and moreover represses the possibility that an Egyptian conceptualisation of relationality (for which see STRATHERN, 2014) looks different to what our mindsets condition us to expect. Thus, indigenous relationality is ignored in favour of a Eurocentric model of fragmentation. This is not an isolated problem: ontological categories are often poorly translated in historical material (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012: 668), which might lead

²²Brunner-Traut is presumably referring to *Pyramid Text Spell 355*, SETHE, 1908: §572c, though she does not cite it.

²³In lateral comparison, the anthropologist's own perspective is either outside the frame or is the frame itself (CANDEA, 2019: 349). Of course, where it is the former, as in Brunner-Traut's case, the methodology is highly suspect, as it 'others' without awareness of the analyst's own gaze.

²⁴As CANDEA (2019: 368) sees it, '(l)ateral comparison begins and ends with frontal challenges to its ever reimagined framing devices. In frontal comparison we put ourselves to the test. In lateral comparisons we put each other to the test. The two moves are mutually constitutive'.

not only to false categories, but false ‘body worlds’.

7 Is there a future for ‘aspective’?

Egyptologists have long grappled with the idea of ‘aspective’, some, though not all, seeing the necessity of replacing the term. Many Egyptologists, e.g. those mentioning ‘aspective’ in Melinda Hartwig’s edited volume *A Companion to Ancient Egyptian Art* (HARTWIG, 2015),²⁵ and some more recent, theoretical works,²⁶ present ‘aspective’ as what Valérie ANGENOT (2015: 100) calls a ‘depiction mode’. In this benign form, which runs completely counter to Brunner-Traut’s own framework, as we have seen (§3), most scholars have not questioned the validity of the term (also §4). However, in light of what has been presented here, one might ask whether that should continue to be the case. Key to this is the question of whether the term is indispensable, since several alternatives have presented themselves over the years.

Petra VOMBERG (2004: 48) suggested ‘Objektive’, but as VERBOVSEK (2011: 377–378) points out, this sets up an opposition with subjectivity, a tension that is not key to the visual style, whose character can be better characterised as the interaction between form and meaning.²⁷ Verbovsek suggests instead ‘Semantisierendes Gestaltungsformular’ or ‘Semiospektive’, which ‘emphasises the interaction between the visual sign, its referent and its interpretant, through which the actually intended meaning of the Egyptian depictions is generated’ (VERBOVSEK, 2011: 378). One might question the extent to which the interpretant’s/viewer’s perspective should be considered. Such an idea is countered, for instance, by BAINES (2007: 213), who, expanding on the work of Schäfer, presents Egyptian visual culture as ‘object-centred’, ‘because [...] representation should not be presumed to imply a viewpoint unless specific evidence suggests one’.

We could consider more seriously Frandsen’s re-positioning of Egyptian representation as a composition of the salient ‘inalienable’ and ‘interactional’ properties of an entity (FRANDSEN, 1997). Nyord takes this idea further to show how such properties can be linked to sensory cognition that was a feature of its spatial and temporal context (NYORD, 2013: 163–164). Nyord’s inspired integration of Merleau-Ponty’s work on the ‘complete object’ (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962: 79) that reconciles multiple viewpoints to look as if ‘seen from everywhere’ (NYORD, 2013: 144) demonstrates a re-imagining of the conceptual aspect of Schäfer’s work²⁸ and thus provokes the question of why Brunner-Traut’s term ‘aspective’ has any place left in the discussion. Perhaps Axelle Brémont’s term ‘multispective’ fits the gap best, as Brémont, like Nyord, is concerned with the plural perspectives key to Egyptian iconography (BRÉMONT, 2016: 27).

However, short of supplying alternate words for ‘aspective’ itself,²⁹ no scholar has posed a corrective for the ‘fragmentary body’ hypothesis. Thus, I will attempt to sketch one way of approaching the material to hopefully generate a more ontologically informed reappraisal of the concept. Since this analysis is ongoing and beyond the scope of this paper, the results will appear in a future study.

²⁵The exception is VERBOVSEK (2015: 146–147). It is perhaps telling that the only scholar raising this issue in the volume is German, since responses to the theory have predominantly been in German and never translated.

²⁶For an overview of the term in Francophone art theory, see BRÉMONT (2016: 25–26).

²⁷Vomberg’s work (VOMBERG, 2004: 47) somewhat twists the meaning of Baines’ term ‘object-centred’ (BAINES, 2007: 313).

²⁸As discussed above, ‘geradvorstellig’ is a coinage linked to ‘Vorstellung’, or general ‘idea’ (SCHÄFER, 1930: 94; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1974: xvii), though the conceptual basis of Schäfer’s model remained distinctly under-theorised, meaning that it could be easily co-opted by more ambitious middle-range theories like ‘aspective’.

²⁹To which can be added others, for which the list by Baines in BRUNNER-TRAUT (1974: xvi–xvii) can also be consulted.

8 The future of Egyptian body ontologies

Emerging from a critical appraisal of the ‘fragmentary body’ model, one might posit that to understand Egyptian body ontologies³⁰ at all, we need to rid ourselves of imposed interpretive structures and develop completely new approaches to the source material. In other words, we need to consider whether fragmentation and wholeness are even valid concepts within the mindset. Such studies must start *carte blanche* regarding how the body was composed. Was it conceived of as a whole entity, as a mass of discrete parts, as a connected system? Was the body ontology rather multimodal (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012), incorporating numerous perspectives? If so, what kinds of contexts (related to ritual, healing, etc.) led to certain body ontologies being foregrounded?

Such approaches would contribute meaningfully to the so-called ‘ontological turn’: ‘the dual movement towards, on the one hand, exploring the basis of the Western social and intellectual project and, on the other, of exploring and describing the terms in which non-Western understandings of the world are grounded’ (COURSE, 2010: 248).³¹ Ontological perspectives have already been successfully applied in Egyptology: NYORD (2018), for instance, considered what aspects of ancient Egyptian mortuary culture we could ‘take seriously’, drawing on scholars like Eduardo VIVEIROS DE CASTRO (2011). Such an approach involves acknowledging that even words we think can be translated exist in a relationship of what VIVEIROS DE CASTRO (2004: 9) calls ‘equivocation’, which, in an ethnographic context in which living subjects are involved, refers to ‘a communicative disjuncture where the interlocutors are not talking about the same thing, and know this.’ This can be profitably co-opted to talk about translation of Egyptian terms ‘to avoid losing sight of the difference concealed within equivocal “homonyms”’ (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2004: 7).

We can see from this the necessity of conducting research into Egyptian body terminology, without relying on translations that would constrain (and potentially mislead) the analytical process, while keeping sight of how such terms have been translated in the past. To such an end, a favoured approach is lexical semantics, which analyses word meanings and systematic meaning-related connections between words (e.g. CRUSE, 2004).

If looking for groups of lexemes within distinct word-fields, like ‘fragmentation’ or ‘wholeness’, we consult works dealing with relevant meta-categories, if such exist,³² and dictionaries to find the requisite glosses. Words that might cover the ‘wholeness’ semantic field include, for example, *wḏ* ‘whole, intact’ (*Wb.* I, 399.14–401.2), *twt* ‘perfect, full’ (*Wb.* V, 259.13–260.10) and *km* ‘complete’ (*Wb.* V, 128.3–130.2), though not all might be used explicitly to refer to the body.

Taking one of these words as an example, *wḏ* (which has 445 instances in the online corpus, the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* v2), we can see that the gloss alludes to multiple meanings: ‘whole’, ‘hale’, ‘intact’ (physically, also reputationally).³³ Since these meanings might change over time, the examples below are derived from a constrained time period, the New Kingdom to Third Intermediate Period (c. 1550–712 BCE), from a range of genres.

When referring explicitly to the body (and not to the character),³⁴ *wḏ* is used in funerary texts to refer

³⁰An ‘ontology’ has been broadly defined as ‘a cross-connected network of relevant concepts, which makes explicit, classifies and organizes the assumptions and terms of the domain in question’ (SCHALLEY et al., 2014).

³¹The ontological approach is not without its pitfalls, for which see ALBERTI et al., 2011: 901; CANDEA, 2016: 88, 97; HEYWOOD, 2017.

³²The work of ZANDEE, 1960: 147–158 on bodily mutilation might be noteworthy here.

³³The diachronic dimension is also interesting: in Coptic *wḏ* came to be associated with salvation, as well as health (FRANKFURTER, 1999: 82).

³⁴The idea of moral intactness can be found in wisdom literature, such as *The Teaching of Ani* (pBoulaq 4, 22.1, QUACK, 1994: 114–115, 324: *wḏꜥk r nꜣyꜥf wgg(.w) qn.w* ‘You will be (morally) unscathed (lit. hale) in relation to his numerous misdemeanours (lit. harmfulness)’. It also appears in funerary literature to refer to behaviours in life, e.g. *Book of the Dead* Spell 7 (pBM EA 10477, 5, LAPP, 1997: pl. 64) *n.jpꜥj wḏꜥkw* ‘I have not been investigated: I am unscathed (lit. hale)’.

either to ‘wholeness’ or ‘haleness’. Cases in which ‘wholeness’ is foregrounded as a meaning rather than ‘haleness’ proved to be difficult to find. Even the few cases cited here might well be read as ‘hale’. One is the quite rare *Book of the Dead* Spell 161, which reads: $w\bar{d}j\ n.ty\ m\ \bar{d}b\bar{j}.t$ ‘Whole/hale is the one who is in the sarcophagus’.³⁵ The likewise rare *Book of the Dead* Spell 168 [a.k.a. *Book of the Twelve Caverns*] has: $n\bar{h}\ b\bar{j}\bar{f}\ w\bar{d}j\ \bar{h}\bar{j}.t\bar{f}m\ \bar{h}r.t\text{-}n\bar{t}r$ ‘(so that) his *ba* might live and his corpse be whole/hale in the hereafter/necropolis’.³⁶

In healing texts, the meaning of $w\bar{d}j$ is related to ‘haleness’ (which may at times also be related to ‘wholeness’ or ‘intactness’) of the living body (or body parts). The trauma manual in Papyrus Edwin Smith has: $gmm\bar{k}\ gm\bar{j}\bar{f}\ w\bar{d}j(.w)$ ‘It is (in the condition of being) hale/whole that you find his temple’.³⁷ Understandably, the idea of being ‘hale’ or ‘healthy’ is expressed in letters, one of which asks of the recipient: $n\bar{j}\ tw\bar{t}n\ w\bar{d}j\ n\bar{j}\ mwt\bar{t}n$ ‘Are you hale? Are you dead?’,³⁸ which sets up an interesting dichotomy of ‘haleness’ against ‘deadness’.

Several intriguing issues have emerged already from this preliminary study: it does not look like the Egyptians made a sharp distinction between ‘hale’ and ‘whole’, which by turn implies firstly, that the distinction we establish between the mundane and mortuary realms in terms of some body conceptualisations might be non-existent for Egyptians and secondly, that their categories might look nothing like ours.

At the root of this very different idea of ‘wholeness’ might be the mythical dimension. A derivation of $w\bar{d}j$ is $w\bar{d}j.t$, the ‘Udjat eye/Eye of Horus’ (*Wb.* I, 401.12–402.2),³⁹ which, according to myth, was injured by Seth and healed by Thoth (GOEBBS, 2002: 45; GRÄSSLER, 2017: 31). In medicine and mathematics, each piece of the eye corresponds to part of a geometric progression which is also a unit of measurement (1/2, 1/4, 1/8, 1/16, 1/32 and 1/64).⁴⁰ When added—actualising mathematically the mythic precedent—the resulting fraction is 63/64, not 1 (POMMERENING, 2010: 135). It will be interesting to see the interconnection between the mythic and the linguistic in this case, namely, that wholeness as such is not the object—haleness (related to near-intactness?) seems to have been primary focus.⁴¹ A thorough lexical semantic study would thus generate reflection on whether ‘wholeness’ corresponds to an emic category in the Egyptian language at all and take on the cultural and especially mythical weight of each lexeme, considering, for instance, the Eye of Horus myth as well as the Osiris myth (ASSMANN, 2001: 29–34; M. SMITH, 2008). On this basis we can revisit current Egyptological hypotheses about Egyptian ideas of the body, for instance, that wholeness/intactness was aspired to in life and death, but known to be impossible, due to the permeability of the ‘porous phenomenal body’ (MESKELL & JOYCE, 2003: 19) and the inevitability of bodily decay.

In sum, it seems possible that ‘wholeness’ does not even conform with the English category: because Egyptians know that the body is never completely ‘whole’ in our sense of the word, *the word itself does not mean ‘whole’ the way we think it does*. This recharged understanding of ‘wholeness’, additionally entails, when thinking about linguistically-encoded relationality, that ‘wholeness’ potentially does *not* form a clear counterpoint to ‘fragmentation’, which will require us additionally to remodel what the Egyptians might have represented as being partitive or fragmentary in their own bodies. Vivieros de Castro’s idea of ‘controlled equivocation’ (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2004: 7) can thus be seen to be a productive heuristic for these processes of reframing.

This text-based analysis could then be integrated with an archaeological point of view on bodies becoming ‘fragmented’, e.g. losing parts via ritual or accident. How did Egyptians deal with limb loss in life, based

³⁵pLouvre 3092, 504.2–503.2, BUDGE, 1898: 407; RATIÉ, 1968: pl. XIV. Incidentally, a Ptolemaic text witness, OIM E9787J, SCALF, 2017: 244, has *wr* (‘mighty’) instead of $w\bar{d}j$.

³⁶pBM EA 10478 = Piankoff pBM I, 9.1.3b [9th Cavern, offering text H], BUDGE, 1898: 425; (MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ, 2016: 83, 224).

³⁷pEdwin Smith, 7.9 [Case 18], BREASTED, 1930: 271.

³⁸pLeiden I.365, vs. 3–4, KRI III, KITCHEN, 1980: 233.

³⁹Other derivations that may be connected to this are ‘amulets’ ($w\bar{d}j.w$, *Wb* I, 401.10–11) and a ‘udjat-measure’ ($w\bar{d}j.t$, *Wb* I, 402.3–4).

⁴⁰See POMMERENING, 2010: 132.

⁴¹Connected to this is the use of $w\bar{d}j$ in the so-called ‘conceptual triad’ $n\bar{h}\ w\bar{d}j\ snb$ ‘may he live, prosper and be healthy’, as discussed by GRIFFITHS (1992: 224–225).

around what we know about amputation (DUPRAS et al., 2010) and prosthetics (REEVES, 1999; NERLICH et al., 2000)? What about other 'losses' of 'parts', via circumcision (QUACK, 2012b), or even hair loss (e.g. in WESTENDORF, 1999)? How do these phenomena fit with ideas about 'well-being' (QUIRKE, 2015: 177)?

9 Conclusion

To sum up, this paper offers us the opportunity to collectively rethink ancient Egyptian body-worlds, particularly relating to alleged 'fragmentation' of the lived body. Brunner-Traut's theory of 'fragmentation' as a means of modelling ancient Egyptian body awareness and body knowledge(s) has been shown to be too problematic to have currency, both from an epistemological perspective as well as a methodological one. As a middle-range theory, the 'fragmentary body' hypothesis does not hold up; but nor, now we come to look at it again, does its framing theory of 'aspective'. Plausible alternatives for both, either from a theoretical, methodological, even terminological perspective have been offered and now require consideration and further analysis.

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