“Money and Chandeliers”: Mass Circuits of Pilgrimage to Coptic Egypt

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In this review essay, I make the case that the mass medium of cinema introduces novel practices of holy pilgrimage which turn upon faculties of perception and place-making. In his reproduction of the shrine and relics of St. Marina the Martyr in old Cairo, film director Magued Tawfik creates the conditions of bodily movement and communion for Coptic Christians in Egypt and abroad. Thus, the viewers of his film participate in circuits of saintly obligation which render them up to radically divine possibilities for change.

MASS CIRCUITS OF PILGRIMAGE

TWICE A YEAR, IN JULY AND AGAIN IN DECEMBER, ritual celebrations for Marina the Martyr light up the Church of the Virgin of Relief and St. George in Harat al-Rum, a residential quarter of old Cairo, Egypt. On these evenings, the conversation of Coptic Christians suffuses the courtyard, where saintly oils, icon cards, framed portraits, and medals pass through their festive hands. The centerpiece of the pilgrimage

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is the relics of St. Marina, the third-century teenage heroine from Antioch (in present-day Turkey). Ribbons of pilgrims inch forward to pay their respects to her reddish, desiccated right hand, enjoying the intimate proximity of her very special presence. Some of them also journey in search of a miracle, bodily healing in a touch, or what anthropologist James Frazer characterized as the gift of “spiritual electricity” (2002 [1922]).

Coptic Egypt is a land of ancient memory, filled with physical traces of the Holy Family and bodily remnants of the glorious martyrs, like St. Marina, who died under the Roman era of persecution in the third and fourth centuries. In this modern age of mass transit, Copts navigate routes of transportation to get to holy shrines, many arriving in buses and cars, at times after long flights and train rides. For those who cannot make the trip, there are plenty of souvenirs to be sought from relatives who can, such as print replicas of saintly figures and their bodily likenesses. According to Victor Turner and Edith Turner, pilgrimage as a “kinetic ritual” involves the circulation of “sacra” which issue from a holy place understood “to vibrate with supernatural efficacy” (1978: xiii, 206). Pilgrimage is not so much a type of ritual act as it is a “system” analogous to an “organism-environment field” which encompasses circuits of communication and transportation, among other mass structures of belonging (Turner and Turner 1978: 22). To the extent that pilgrimage is an institution of creating holy sites, it involves a variety of elements that communicate the location of divine presence, offering “a sense of place” (cf. Christian 1989 [1972]; Basso 1996).

This review explores one of these elements available among Copts today: cinema. In 2006, I enjoyed the opportunity to meet Magued Tawfik, the Coptic pioneer of hagiographic film in Egypt and the director of over forty movies since 1987 on the lives and deaths of holy saints. From villages in Upper Egypt to the diaspora abroad in North America, Europe, and Australia, his films reach a global audience of Copts interested in learning about figures like St. Simon the Tanner of Muqattam, St. Moses the Black, Barbara the Martyr, and many more. In our interview, he summed up his professional objective: “to bring people nearer to our Lord” (qarrub al-nās ‘ar-rabbinā). Through the medium of film, Tawfik seeks to strike the hearts of his viewers, so that they might repent, give praise and thanks, and experience miracles of all kinds. Following Turner and Turner further, if pilgrimage is a journey of “extroverted mysticism,” then those who are inwardly touched by Tawfik’s films might also be understood as initiates of an “introverted pilgrimage” (1978: 33).

Scholars of religious pilgrimage in Egypt have illustrated the experience of nearing shrines and divine presence in spatially dynamic terms. Visiting the tombs of Muslim saints in late medieval Cairo was being “in
the vicinity of the righteous” (Taylor 1999). Beholding apparitions at the relics of Coptic martyrs in ancient Egypt was one “conduit for the compassionate beings of heaven” (Frankfurter 1998: 4), in places where “the joining of Heaven and Earth” availed the holy dead (Brown 1981: 1). Such centuries-old practices of journeying to holy bodies may not be so far away from Tawfik’s understanding of modern filmmaking and cinematic practices of visualization. In the ethnographic accounts which follow, I wish to consider Tawfik’s goal of “nearness,” not as a metaphor for spiritual intimacy or communion, but as a very practical sensibility of navigating space, one which draws out faculties of perception and recruits senses of place. In different ways, scholars of cinema have also investigated the spatial infrastructures and orbits of mediation, particularly in studies of sensory-bodily interaction with images and screens. Whether it be the “tactile eye” (Marks 2002) or the “screen as prosthesis” (Buck-Morss 1994), the key idea is that cinematic vision contributes to the making of felt, immediate distance, or alienating shock. As media theorist Samuel Weber notes, it is the “overcoming of distance” which technologies like television are construed to achieve, in their triumph of spatial limits commonly associated with the body (1996: 114).

At the end of almost all his hagiographic movies, Tawfik exhibits the historical shrines and bodily images of saints throughout Coptic Egypt. In addition to availing coordinates of proximity and distance, these films also shape senses of what bodies are capable of doing and becoming, of how they travel distances and transform landscapes of accessibility as a result. These horizons of imagination might thus conceivably give rise to “miracles” (al-muʿgizāt). My broader interest lies in exploring the circuits of mass media which not only transmit knowledge of saints, but also serve as conduits for dispensing their vibrant, powerful presences attained in pilgrimage. As foci of pilgrimage, relics also stimulate the kinetic activity of touch and sight, forging new arrangements of bodily belonging, through parts that belong to a heavenly, distant whole. By better grasping the ways in which cinema and television institute senses of holy place, we might understand how relics, in variously re-mediated forms, generate radically new possibilities for bodily communion with the saints.

“BLESSED IS EGYPT MY PEOPLE”

For Coptic Christians, Egypt is a special land, topographically replete with places where heroic figures once lived and died. “Blessed is Egypt my people” is the oft-cited scriptural prophecy (Isaiah 19:25) that confirms the status of Egypt as the repository of divine favor. According to general scholarly consensus, Copts currently compose 6–12% of the
The demographics of the Copts in Egypt are a topic of much controversy, with accurate figures notoriously unknown. Scholars frequently invoke the benchmark of 10% out of over 80 million in the national population. I have heard some Copts assert as high as 20%, and others as low as 5% in light of Coptic emigration flows out of Egypt after the Arab uprisings. The Coptic Orthodox Church, frequently characterized as “anti-Chalcedonian,” marking its split from the Roman Catholic Church in 451 C.E., understands itself to be the “True Church” (al-mustaqim, “straight”) in its commemorative faithfulness to earthly revelations of divine authorship. Much of this faithful relation to the past entails a deeply mediated landscape of presences, understood as dwellings of vital contact to be searched for and sought after. These include the places where the Virgin Mary and Christ child took refuge during their flight out of Israel into Egypt, often blessed by bodily impresses and traces of divine generativity: Christ’s handprint on Gabal al-Teir or Gabal al-Kaff (“Mountain of the Palm”), the miraculous wellspring of Musturud, the stone crypt underneath the Church of Abu Serga (Meinardus 1963; Gawdat 2001). They also include the places where martyrs met their deaths in heavenly communion, leaving their bodily relics behind as portals for communing with others in the future. “The True Egypt,” understood as a dynamic relation of approximating presences of the past, is fundamentally a geography of truthful memory.

When I visited St. Marina’s relics in December 2006, the Church of St. George across the courtyard was screening Tawfik’s film Marina the Martyr (Al-Shahida Marînâ 1993) on its television monitors (Figure 1). Remember my name! Fame! I’m gonna live forever! While the soundtrack to David de Silva’s 1980 American musical Fame pulsed in the background, images of a colorfully robed heroine holding a cross appeared on the screens suspended from the ceilings. The film narrates the story of St. Marina’s life, beginning with the details of her upbringing in Antioch and ending with the stages of torture that she endured toward receiving the crown of heaven.

In the meantime, Coptic pilgrims go to visit St. Marina’s hand, frequently seeking some kind of response from her. Resting foreheads, pecking kisses, swiping fingers against her altar of wood and glass, they indeed remember her name, bringing prayers and petitions in search of her efficacious presence (Figure 2). On the appointed feast days when they can see her relics, the electric desire for tactile contact intensifies. On the day I visited, for example, one young mother wiped her palm back and forth between the glassy cover and the skin of her son’s face, as she mouthed inaudible prayers. St. Marina’s right hand, offered outward underneath the transparent vitrine, is a visual invitation to participate in
the extensibility of divine power. In this place of seeking strength, seeing and touching are part of the same material operation of comfort. To echo the words of one pilgrim whom I met, “If I could, I would be closer.”
Bodily relics are the organic traces of eternity, the metonymic parts which correspond to a resurrected, future whole. Reaching for resurrection is thus a thoroughly spatial enterprise. The truthful space of Egypt also involves the mimetic desire to “live forever,” the momentary approach of salvation through the contact of body parts on body parts. In their recovery of livelihood, the ailing bodies of pilgrims fulfill the divine promise of blessing, upon Egypt and its people. This echoes Coptic pilgrimage practices of late ancient Egypt, when “bodies and territory transformed into ritual sites where the earthly and heavenly came into creative contact” (Davis 2008: 113). Such linkings of flesh and land also forge new opportunities for bodily longing and miraculous re-arrangement, all on the divinely expansive grounds of journey.

“MONEY AND CHANDELIERS”

There are always those who are not quite able to make pilgrimage to the shrine. In some cases, others might embark on their behalf, conveying
prayers to the saint and then taking back home portable souvenirs and blessings. The blessings of the saints (*al-baraka*) often assume materially fluid form, such as holy oils, water, and light (I have even heard of dust).² In this economy of circulating divine presence, there are also certain moral obligations in maintaining these circuits of movement and replication.

In our interview, Magued Tawfik provided me with a behind-the-scenes peek at the making of his film *Marina the Martyr* (1993). Toward the end of the movie, the priest and caretaker of the shrine, Father Antunius, elevates the relic of St. Marina for full view. Tawfik recounted to me his negotiations for getting the image of her holy body part in the film:

> And of course, in the film—I know you didn’t see the film—there was the relic of the hand (*al-kaffa*) with all its nails intact. It was there in the box, and I told Father Antunius “Take it out and we will film it.” He didn’t want to. He told me that it is one-thousand, seven hundred and fifty years old and if it is held, it will become powder. I told him, “No, Father, we must take it out.” So he took it out with great vigilance and it didn’t fall apart (*mat-hallilsh*). I filmed a very good image of it.

In his living room, surrounded by videos and DVDs, Tawfik played for me the final clips of *Marina the Martyr* on his television screen. After delving into the history of St. Marina’s relics at the Church of the Virgin in Harat al-Rum, Father Antunius approached the open reliquary, kissed the relic, and then lifted it up (Figure 3). Tawfik’s techniques for framing the relic included the suspense of electronic music and slow motion, the artificial stretch of time. As he laid the relic on the table, Father Antunius rotated it counterclockwise with his thumb (Figure 4). Then, the frame zoomed in on St. Marina’s hand, magnifying its scale and texture. Its outward orientation made for a newly created site of memory.

After showing me these cinematic images of the relics, Tawfik narrated the story of a miracle which occurred through tactile–visual interaction with St. Marina’s relics. The subject of the miracle, a Coptic man living in Australia, had sent a letter to Father Antunius, describing what

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²The traditional medium of conveying the fame of saints is a material “blessing,” known as *baraka* (cf. *virtus* in Latin Christian tradition, *Westermarck* 1916). In the Islamic tradition, *baraka* is characterized as an “innate force” (*Meri* 1999, 2002) and a “spiritually beneficent power” (*Schielke* 2012).
FIGURE 3. MAGUED TAWFIK, AL-SHAHIDA MÄRINÄ (MARINA THE MARTYR). VIDEO STILL.

FIGURE 4. TAWFIK, AL-SHAHIDA MÄRINÄ (MARINA THE MARTYR). VIDEO STILL.
had happened to him after he walked in on his two sons watching Tawfik’s film. Tawfik relayed the somewhat complex sequence of events:

And then, the hand appeared. This means that the man came in, and the hand was extended on the television screen (bit-‘arrad ‘ash-shasha). And he went to pause the video. And he put his eye . . . his eye was weak, and he had come from the doctor. He put his eye on the television, and he said to Saint Marina: “I must travel to Egypt, so that you will heal me.”

At that moment, the electricity and the light went out. After a little bit, the light came on again and the man’s eye healed. Later on, he learned that his younger son had been playing with one of the electricity pads in the house when the light had been turned on. Meaning that [the son] should have died. His son didn’t die, even though he had put his hand in the electricity. The man’s eye placed on the screen was healed, and the light came on. . . . So he sent a letter and said, “I am ready to give any amount of money and chandeliers (mabālīgh wa nagaf) to Marina.”

According to this testimony of causes and effects, two people are saved: the father from a weak eye and the son from near electrocution. Far from the shrine of St. Marina in Harat al-Rum, the father in Australia sought physical, spatial proximity at the screen. In the moment of double salvation, St. Marina shut off the electricity to prevent the naughty child from death and to extend life to his father in desperate need. The entire thread of events is recognizable as a “miracle,” insofar as the causes are perceived as originating from a divine source.

The televisual apparatus also introduces discontinuity to material relations of distance and proximity, physical, and sensory. As a virtual pilgrim, the supplicant at the screen is a member of the diaspora, seeking return to the originary body of St. Marina. He searches for physical accessibility at a distance. Following Samuel Weber’s writings on the television set and screen, “far and near are no longer mutually exclusive but rather converge and overlap” (1996: 125). The set and screen are conduits of transmission, which as objects of motion establish “a movement of displacement.” For this particular household of father and sons, the divine power of St. Marina, in the mobile form of electrical current and light, also presented new dangers associated with proximity. Excessive exposure to transmissive charge can produce accidents of injury and death: electrocution kills. At the same time, it is through the illuminating metamorphosis of the eye on the screen that the re-arrangement of bodies takes place: light enables sight.
Furthermore, it is not merely that visual activity at the screen is “tactile”; rather, organs of “eye” and “hand” are woven together in near interchangeability. Interfaces of hand–eye contact are manifold: holy hand extended on the screen, weak eye place on screened hand, curious hand to socket eyes, shock of light to paternal eye. Here, touching and seeing belong to an interactive network of disorientation and disruption. Isolated and re-sutured, the body parts (and parts of whom?) were confused together, with the openings and closures of bodies, so central to the divine communication of memory, generating relations of transformation through new media. As bodies were miraculously redeemed in the process, they forged connective ties between the resurrected future and the present. This testimony is therefore conceivable and reportable as an outcome, however novel in its technical form, of the same creative power enshrined in St. Marina’s relics.

In the wake of cinematic redemption, there are also new forms of obligation and response. As many pilgrims who are healed through the saints do, this viewer from Australia pledged to send money toward the building and upkeep of St. Marina’s shrine in Harat al-Rum. His is not only an
offering of money, but also one of vibrantly spectacular light, of “chandeliers” (al-nagaf). For it is through light, once again, that St. Marina’s body can be rendered available to others, in the traveled pursuit of relief (Figure 5).

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

In his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin approaches the experience of an aura: “What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (2008 [1936]: 23). This aura, he explains further, is the special quality of authenticity conferred on images, through ritual and tradition. Benjamin continues to propose that the decaying of an aura results, in part, from the technological capacity of reproducing images through mass media like photography and film. By introducing an industrially altered environment of image-making, mass reproducibility re-structures the human sensorium, thus creating new forms of experience and memory, alienation, and distraction. As a version of capitalist commodification, the aesthetic forms of mass mediation thereby force the retreat, to the point of erasure, of the aural imaginary.

Tawfik’s miraculous account—of how St. Marina healed a man’s eye through the tactility of film—encourages reconsideration of the ways in which mass circuits of reproduction are understood to avail the special capacity of divine bodies to redeem. Of course, this endpoint was exactly what Benjamin sought to avoid, in its re-instantiation of “creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery” (which risks appropriation by fascist interest). At the same time, it is worth pointing out that Tawfik’s account also serves as an important reminder that histories and practices of mass media emerge as byproducts, not only of industrial modernity but also of very deep histories of religion, and more specifically of religious styles of imitation and mobility. What I have thus sought to do in this review essay is to begin with the practice of pilgrimage as a dynamic process of experientially making space through the interaction of bodies, bodily images, and mass technology. My attention to the “sense of place,” rather than the stationary locus of the shrine, is an attempt to seize this dynamic in the desires of pilgrims for contact and the obligations to spectacularize them. It is my hope that this review makes more “imaginable” various bodily capacities to belong to a holy topography of mediation, in some places named as “miracles.”
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