Egypt’s Coptic community emerged dramatically onto the public sphere with the release of the film Bahibb Issima in the summer of 2004. The film’s depiction of Copts has created a national conversation between Copts and Muslims with the latter realizing not only how little they know about the Copts, but about how strikingly similar the two communities actually are. The film’s realism has been met with contestation from orthodox factions within the Coptic community while the State’s ability to control the representation of Copts in the public sphere has been challenged by the filmmakers themselves.

It is precisely the State’s anxious intervention to control the kind of image produced of the Copts that has enabled the Coptic community to become a real and active participant in the public sphere. Many elements have converged to re-orient and perhaps re-define both the relationship between the Egyptian state and the Coptic community since the 1990’s, as well as the marginal space that the Coptic community has traditionally occupied in the Egyptian public sphere. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism was accompanied by Coptic fundamentalism during the Sadat era. The ensuing, and perhaps unprecedented, bloody clashes during the 1980’s and 1990’s between Muslims and Copts (with the latter paying the highest toll in lives and persecution), together with the state’s repeated and scandalous mishandling of these crises, have totally exposed the dangers of the Egyptian state’s practices towards the Coptic community. The regime’s inadequate responses to sectarian violence has also called into question its long standing and flimsy official banner of national unity “yaha lil-hilal ma’a ssalib,” (Long live the Crescent alongside the Cross) and exposed to public scrutiny its attempts to cultivate a dual image of secularism (for global consumption) and religious nationalism (for the local one). All this coincided with the birth of the human rights movement in Egypt that started in 1982, as well as the Egyptian state’s increasingly compromising economic and political dependence on the United States. In response to this complex situation, the Egyptian state stepped up its efforts to appear conciliatory towards the Copts; it has remedied the representation of Coptic history in educational curricula, accorded a national holiday for Coptic Christmas, and more importantly, but with more contentious and controversial results, has taken upon itself television and film representations of the Coptic community. Most, if not all, such representations have been didactic and aimed at propagating “national unity” to the detriment of a realistic non-stereotypical image of the Copt. The irony remains, however, that it has been precisely the State’s anxious intervention to control the kind of image produced of the Copts that has enabled the Coptic community to become a real and active participant in the public sphere.

Bahibb Issima is by far the most radical example of the Coptic community’s engagement in and with the public sphere. Its audacious realism was met with contestation from the more orthodox factions within the Coptic community. Bahibb Issima has also entered the labyrinth of State censorship and has ended up in the Egyptian courts for “contempt of religion.” Based largely on autobiographical elements, Bahibb Issima focuses, in an unprecedented way, on the daily life of a Coptic middle class family from the point of view of Naeem, the youngest child in the family. Naeem, like one of his young uncles, loves cinema but is deprived of it because of his father’s fundamentalist religious views. Naeem rebels against his father and ends up blackmailing the adults into taking him to the movie theatre. Bahibb Issima opens with a highly dramatic scene in which Adli, the fundamentalist Coptic father who reviles all forms of art, threatens little Naeem with Hell for his love for cinema. This initial patriarchal image that condemns the freedom of the artistic imaginary is juxtaposed against Naeem’s imaginations of cinema, in an equally dramatic and phantasmagoric scene, where the child imagines cinema as the gateway to Heaven through which he enters and is greeted by many loving angels. Similarly, the father’s cowardly relationship to God that is based exclusively on fear, is juxtaposed against his child’s subversion of that constraining relationship, symbolically rendered through Naeem’s deliberate public pissing in different authoritarian contexts: at home, in his doctor’s clinic, and in the Church. Adli similarly oppresses his wife Nimat whose self-realization is doubly crushed. As a painter, Nimat’s artistic talent is thwarted within her marriage as well as within her public role of headmistress in a primary school. As a wife, her physical and emotional desire is thwarted by a fundamentalist orthodox husband who imposes a relationship of chastity within the marriage leading Nimat to “fall” for an extramarital relationship.

As the film progresses, we begin to make links between Adli’s oppression of his family in the private sphere and his own oppression in the public one. Set in 1966 during Nasser’s increasingly paranoid era, and on the eve of the Arab defeat of 1967, Bahibb Issima translates private oppression into a national one. Adli is denounced to the state authorities as “a communist” by his superior for having dared to expose the corruption that he witnesses in the school where he is a social worker. Adli’s torture at the hands of the state becomes the moment of revelation and reversal in his life. It all culminates in one of the film’s most powerful, moving, and loaded scenes: Adli’s monologue with God where he tells Him, in his drunken stupor: “I do not love you. I want to love you, not fear you.” Adli’s discovery of his heart condition finally brings about a total transformation in his relationship with his family: he buys a television set and takes Naeem to the cinema; he makes love to his wife and dismisses her attempt to confess her betrayal. Adli finally dies, in another highly charged scene, as the sun sets, on the very day that Nasser delivers his abdication speech after the Egyptian defeat against Israel in June 1967. The makers of Bahibb Issima have described their film as one that is against all forms of oppression where “cinema” in the title is synonymous to “freedom.” Such a declaration represented, from the outset, an open invitation to read the life of the Coptic family on the screen as a national metaphor for all Egyptians, both Copts and Muslims, not only during the sixties (when the film is set) but also in present day Egypt. Moreover, the tyranny that Adli exercises over his young son Naeem who loves cinema but is denied it because it is haram i.e. prohibited by religion, is the same tyranny that the Nasser regime exercised over him; the censorship the young child faces at home is simply a reflection of
wider forms of institutional oppression: religious, political, social, and cultural.

Because of its unprecedented audacity—social, religious, and political—Bahibb Issima was subject to both official State censorship as well as street censorship. As the last of four censorship committees demanded scene cuts before the film’s release, a public boycott of the film was orchestrated by members of the Coptic religious authority and the objecting faction within the Coptic community; a campaign that spilled over into the Muslim conservative one. A close look at the scenario of the long-winded censorship procedures undertaken in the case of Bahibb Issima is proof enough of the Egyptian State’s ability to manipulate and control both the secular and the religious wings of the public sphere. However, the role of the State as the guardian of public morality was contested when 40 Coptic priests and Christian and Muslim lawyers wrote a statement to the General Public Prosecutor on July 5, 2004 protesting the release of Bahibb Issima and demanding that legal action be taken against not only the director, the scriptwriter, the actors, the producer, but also the Minister of Culture, the Censor, and the Minister of Interior for “contempt of religion.”

The State’s ability to control the representation of the Copts in the public sphere was equally challenged by the filmmakers themselves who played a crucial role in defining the parameters of the debate surrounding their film. Bahibb Issima aspires to a national, not a sectarian or historically bound, representation. By setting the film in the 1960s and focusing it on an oppressive Coptic father, the film was able to neutralize the State by not representing it in the present, thus winning its silence, if not its support. In addition, the film’s attack on Coptic fundamentalism and its ridicule of religious authorities (in one scene a Protestant pastor is beaten during a rowdy family fight in a Church wedding celebration) are complementary to a larger catalogue of State sanctioned attacks on Muslim fundamentalism in the public sphere (TV serials, films, and plays). Furthermore, the filmmakers knew that they could count on the support of the secular cultural players, both Muslim and Copt who, over the past decade have conducted endless battles against both the religious and political authorities to safeguard the receding space accorded them within the public sphere. Finally, these young filmmakers could count on the new rules governing the visual sphere, ones that are above and beyond the immediate control of the State. The film negatives of Bahibb Issima, like many other films in the industry today, were developed abroad. Creating a scandal for the Egyptian State was definitely a card to be played in the case of severe censorship especially that the director, Osama Fawzi, repeatedly announced that he would not accept the massacre of his film. In this particular instance, the State had limited leverage especially that Bahibb Issima is made by two Copts, about the Coptic community whose situation in Egypt is already under global scrutiny. Last but not least, Bahibb Issima is after all a post 9/11 film that came to light at the same time as the ongoing US plan for the “Larger Middle East,” “democratization,” “reform,” and “good governance” in the Arab world. Given the Egyptian state’s keenness on a good record, it would have been unwise to be heavy handed with a film that can be used by the State as proof of its openness, secularism, and democratic practices.

But the real victory for Bahibb Issima lies with the film’s audiences, Coptic and Muslim alike, for whom this magnificently conceived film has placed the question of representation squarely on the table. The new realistic image of the Copt in Bahibb Issima has actually created a national conversation between Copts and Muslims with the latter suddenly realizing how little they know about the Coptic faith, traditions, and values. Furthermore, Bahibb Issima succeeded, in many instances, in being read as a national metaphor, not just a film about them (the Copts), but about us, all of us Egyptians who identified totally with the freedom loving, mischievous child, Naeem, in his small, daily battles against the father simply because he loves cinema.

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