

Elizabeth Harrington on Laura U. Marks's *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2010)

In *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, Laura U. Marks is concerned with images as they enfold and contain information. Drawing on the scholarship of Gilles Deleuze and Charles Sanders Peirce, she argues that Islamic art and philosophy contain the deep sources of contemporary information culture and art. She defines new media art as works with a common "basis in code, an algorithmic process, and a database-interface relationship" (32). As she frames it, the work is, "mainly intended to introduce Islamic art to readers more familiar with contemporary art," but is also directed at scholars of Islamic art, in the hopes that the comparative approach she offers will be a generative one for new curatorial and scholarly insights (29).

Marks begins by locating the theoretical underpinnings of her research in Deleuze (*What Is Philosophy*, 1994; *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, 1993; *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 1989) and Sanders Peirce (*Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 1955). Deleuze predicted a shift from visual to information culture, which Marks believes has arrived with the advent of computer and digital art, and she borrows Deleuze's diagram of unfolding/enfolding from his theory of signs. At the meeting of the "virtual, infinitely enfolded" and the "actual, the unfolded," Deleuze describes two planes - the image and the infinite - that constantly unfold and enfold and form the boundary between the virtual and the actual (6). Marks' critical intervention is to insert a plane of information between the planes of images and the infinite. In Marks' diagram, these three planes (image, information, and the infinite) are continually unfolding and enfolding. The addition of the information plane enables Marks to bring in Sanders Peirce's concept of triadic relationships between world/God (the infinite), the code/word (information), and perceptibles (image) that correlate to the expanded Deleuzian theory of signs. This tripartite system correlates to new media art, with the material world (the computer interface) serving as a bridge between the immaterial world of the infinite and the computer code. The critical intervention of the book is to argue this phenomenon appears in Islamic art, wherein imagery and artifacts correspond to the code of the Qur'an, that in turn relates to a deeper, infinite truth.

To support such a sweeping correlation takes a great deal of careful work. Marks does note that the categorization of "Islamic art" is problematic, and defines Islamic art for her purposes as "art made for Islamic religious and ritual purposes; motifs and themes developed in that art that spread to courtly, state, and popular art; and art that, while its purpose was not strictly religious, was produced in accordance with the Muslim religious mores of its particular culture" (31-32). This categorization allows her to incorporate many works and philosophies from a wide swath of the Islamic world (from Morocco to Iran), and to examine the works without becoming entangled in discussions of the religious and the secular. Later, she uses examples of lines derived from decorative Arabic script, illuminated manuscripts, and prayer carpets. The reader might wonder about the motivations

behind linking Islamic art to information-based art and vice versa. Marks does make a compelling assessment of the stakes involved in uncovering the Islamic roots of new media art, suggesting that this heritage can render information culture more “meaningful” and “responsive.” It is not always made clear, however, in what ways this could occur beyond simply the act of recognizing the poetic symmetry of parallel and consonant structures (32).

After introducing her central argument in the opening two chapters of the book, Marks elaborates seven main lineages of Islamic thought and art in new media art. These include unity, or the concept of *tawhid*. Her second lineage is the concept of unity generating infinity, drawn from debates in Islamic thought about the unity of God and transcendentalism or emanationism. Marks also includes the ideas that unfolding is directional and performative, aligned with the Islamic belief that all unfolding is oriented toward God and that Islamic art is often the trace of a performative, religious act. Aniconism, her fifth parallel, comes from Islam’s avoidance of figurative representation, and is the first parallel that can be argued is uniquely Islamic, as the first parallels can also be linked to Judeo-Christian thought. From aniconism comes an additional precept that both Islamic and new media art are characterized by abstract lines and haptic spaces. Marks’ final parallel is that both involve embodied perceptions (meaning that the work plays out in time, animating viewers as it enacts its algorithmic code), which Marks believes mirrors Islam’s focus on embodied behavior by which Muslims demonstrate adherence to Islamic principles.

As an example of new media art’s inclusion of these lineages, Marks discusses the work of artist-programmer Mauro Annunziato. Annunziato’s work, *Migration* (2000), is a computer-animated algorithm based on natural, organic patterns that produces many intersecting vectors and curling, abstract lines. For Marks, works like these unfold in time and space and are thus performative. They are fundamentally based on abstract lines, algorithms, and underlying concepts of unfolding in a directional fashion. Additionally, the image seen by the viewer contains a complex underlying code – in this case, a computer code. Annunziato’s work also demonstrates the concept of unity generating infinity (i.e., when the algorithm is applied, one line generates many). This work is aniconic and nonrepresentational, its lines drawing the eyes of the viewer along and into the work to create a haptic, continually unfolding space. Marks’ continued analysis elaborates the seven common features of Islamic and new media art, applying them to calligraphy, abstraction, atomism, pixels, text-based art, contemporary films that focus on fragmentary, nonlinear stories, and art based on data (such as GPS or mathematic patterns). Thus Marks tracks Islamic art and philosophy and correlates them to new media art, attempting to show that “the Islamic quality of modern and new media art is also a latent, or deeply enfolded, historical inheritance from Islamic art and thought” (5).

Perhaps the least satisfying and most troublesome aspect of the line of analysis pursued in *Enfoldment and Infinity* is the continued recourse to the medieval period as the location for a robust framework of Islamic art and thought. While Marks’ thorough and detailed analysis includes brief mentions of contemporary

artists from the Islamic world, each chapter nonetheless anchors its analysis in historic Islamic art and philosophy, comparing it in depth to new media art from the contemporary West. This approach confines Islamic art (and philosophy) to the past, rendering it timeless and falling prey to Orientalist notions of a romanticized golden age of Islam and a static world that is no longer generative. Incorporating more recent accomplishments and contributions of Islamic scholars, artists and architects as they continue to interpret Islamic law and philosophy, and explore new media art, would easily remedy this oversight. Furthermore, she herself admits that her approach could be faulted as universalist, and thus she takes special care to identify the multiple strains of Islamic thought or style, be they Isma'ili, Mu'tazila or Kufic, throughout the book. These influences come from distinct and different geographic and temporal backgrounds, and naming them in this specificity contributes to the reader's understanding of the immense range under the umbrella of "Islamic." Yet to draw commonalities across such a diverse range inevitably remains a homogenizing, reductive endeavor. In spite of these infelicities, the volume is an intriguing look at the intercultural crossings that Marks herself finds interesting, a sincere endeavor to realize the notion that "intercultural traffic is a force of transformation." Because it is a serious if not always successful attempt to bridge two seemingly disparate but linked philosophies and styles of art, and to transform the way new media art is understood and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the long, complex relationship between the Islamic world and Western cultures, it makes for fascinating and surprising reading.

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