

“The Language of the Eyes”

Speech Acts and the Gaze in a Monologue by Badīʿah Maṣābnī¹

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Abstract

The script of a short film from 1932 by the cabaret star Badīʿah Maṣābnī features the voice of a woman holding forth on the subject of women’s eyes and the effects they have on male onlookers. The characteristics of the text, a monologue entitled “Lughat al-ʿuyūn,” or “The Language of the Eyes,” are analysed in the light of speech act theory, with a view toward understanding the dynamics of gender and subjective agency that permeate it. Special attention is paid to the gaze, both the gaze emanating from the depicted women’s eyes and the gaze of the presumably male spectator. Structures of gender and agency as they apply to eyes in the film script are then compared to formulations of the beloved’s eyes in the classical Arabic poetic tradition, as well as to depictions of eyes in a contemporary colloquial poem by Bayram al-Tūnisī. The comparisons reveal the relatively subversive nature of the film. The piece concludes with reflections on the film’s feminist impulse.

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Keywords

Badīʿah Maṣābnī, Egyptian cinema. *mūnūlūj*, speech act theory, gaze, eye, Bayram al-Tūnisī

Introduction

Preserved in the New York State Archives at the State Museum in Albany, NY, is the script of a short film from 1932 by the cabaret star Badīʿah Maṣābnī. A monologue entitled “Lughat al-ʿuyūn,” or “The Language of the Eyes,” it features the voice of a lone woman holding forth on the theme of women’s eyes and the powers they have over male onlookers. This woman figures necessarily as the object of the spectator’s gaze. As such, the script captures a moment of simultaneously divergent postures: we have, on the one hand, woman as pictured object and, on the other, woman as speaking subject. In the present article, whose topic I have chosen because it reflects Professor Pierre Cachia’s interest in Egyptian popular culture, I analyse the characteristics of the monologue’s text in the light of speech act theory, with a view toward understanding the dynamics of gender and subjective agency that permeate it. I pay special attention to constructs of the gaze, both the gaze emanating from the depicted women’s eyes and the gaze of the presumably male spectator. The latter gaze exists as a function of the monologue’s cinematic context, and it would see women described, or represented on screen, as objects, while the former gaze stems essentially from poetry, harking back to the ancient trope of the beloved’s debilitating glance. Therefore, structures of gender and agency as they apply to eyes in the film script are then compared to formulations of the gaze in poetic contexts. First, I situate the eyes that Badīʿah Maṣābnī narrates with respect

to traditional depictions of eyes in classical Arabic poetry. Then I explore a contemporary colloquial poem by Bayram al-Tūnisī. Entitled “al-ʿUyūn” (The Eyes), it closely resembles the text of the monologue in its conceit and lexicon. The comparisons with these poetic pieces reveal the relatively subversive nature of the film. In it, woman’s agency is sustained throughout, rather than representing a momentary intrusion on the masculine order. The piece concludes with reflections on the film’s feminist impulse and the extent to which it is representative of the early Egyptian cinema.

The Language of the Eyes

A certain phrase recurs with some frequency in the musings of the early Egyptian film critic al-Sayyid Ḥasan Jumʿah: “the language of the eyes” (*luḡat al-ʿuyūn*). In the silent era, it is this language, or the language of eyes and lips, as opposed to the language of the voice, that catapults some actors to film stardom. He writes:

The talented actor nowadays is one who is good at expressing all the emotions and feelings that mingle in his inner life through his eyes and lips. One finds now throughout the world of cinema a number of stars who have attained glory and fame for no reason other than that they have triumphed over others in their mastery of expressing with their eyes and lips.²

² Farīda Marʿī (ed.), *Kitābāt al-Sayyid Ḥasan Jumʿah*, vol. 2: 1930-1934 (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Qawmī li-l-Sīnimā, 1997), 162. Translation mine.

Eyes and lips continue to play a crucial role well after the introduction of sound in the 1930s. Note that the first feature-length Egyptian sound films, Yūsuf Wahbī's *Awlād al-dhawāt* (Sons of Aristocats) and Mario Volpi's *Unshūdat al-fuʿād* (Song of the Heart) date from 1932, though the technology to produce synchronized sound did not exist in Egypt itself until the founding of Studio Miṣr in 1934. (Before this, Egyptian filmmakers often travelled to Paris to record the sound.)³ In any case, acting in early sound films sometimes partakes in the exaggerated facial expressions that characterised the silent era. There are dialogue-free sequences in Muḥammad Karīm's *The White Rose* (*al-Wardah al-bayḍāʿ*, 1933/34), for example, where actors 'gaze' their intentions and emotions, rather than speaking them. Observe the naughty neighbour-woman of the lascivious Shafīq Bey, who flirts with him from her balcony across the alley to a tune from Manuel de Falla's *El Amor Brujo*. Observe, too, the virtuous Rajāʿ, who heartbreakingly and blankly stares into the foreground having just glanced at a photo of her beloved, believing that he has run off with another woman, her gaze aligned with that of a ventriloquist's doll slumped on the sofa behind her. The emotions in these two scenes are expressed at least in part through "the language of the eyes" (See figures 1a and 1b).

³ See Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1988), 12. According to Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab & African Film Making* (London: Zed, 1991), 29, *Song of the Heart*, the second sound film, was the first to be actually shot with sound.

<p>Figure 1A: Naughty Neighbour Screenshot from Muḥammad Karīm's <i>The White Rose</i></p>	<p>Figure 1B: Heartbroken Rajā? Screenshot from Muḥammad Karīm's <i>The White Rose</i></p>
	

One wonders if this phrase, in a kind of meta-cinematic twist, inspired Badī'ah Maṣābnī's choice of titles when she produced her musical short "The Language of the Eyes" (Lughat al-Ḥuyūn, 1932).⁴ This short is described as a "monologue"

⁴ Both Jum'ah's phrase and Maṣābnī's title may be seen as symptomatic markers of what Walter Armbrust has identified as a cultural shift from the predominantly audio-centric traditions of the book to the increasingly visually-oriented media of the modern era, such as magazines and the cinema. See his "Audiovisual Media and History of the Arab Middle East," in Israel Gershoni, Amy Singer and Y. Hakan Erdem (eds), *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 288-314.

(*mūnūlūj*)⁵ followed by a dance.⁶ I have not seen this film and doubt that it is extant, but impressions of it may be garnered from its script, which is found in the New York State Archives in Albany.⁷ If one cannot envision precisely from the manuscript what the visual content of the musical short would have been, one can nevertheless imagine it, as the words repeatedly evoke a woman's face (undoubtedly that of

⁵ The song form known as the monologue (*mūnūlūj*) was the signature performance genre of Badī'ah Maṣābnī, and she would regularly sing monologues in her stage acts. See Roberta L. Dougherty, "Badī'a Masabni, Artiste and Modernist: The Egyptian Print Media's Carnival of National Identity," in Walter Armbrust (ed.), *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 243-68.

⁶ Munīr Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, *al-Sīnimā al-Miṣriyyah fī al-thalāthīniyyāt*, 1930-1939, vol. 1 (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'ālā lil-Āthār, 2002), 41. Ibrāhīm cites *al-Ṣabāḥ* no. 324, dated 9 December 1932 as his source. He states that she had six singing and dancing sketches made and lists them in three pairs, the third being "*Mūnūlūj Lughat al-ḥuyūn ma'a al-raḡṣah al-fallāḥah yā ānī.*"

⁷ Between the 1920s and the 1960s, any party wishing to screen a film in New York State had to apply for a license. These applications necessarily included film scripts, and, in the case of foreign films, their translation into English. As such there is a sizeable collection of Egyptian film scripts—upwards of 130—at the New York State Archives at the State Museum in Albany. There is an online database at the following link:

<http://iarchives.nysed.gov/mpd/search>

Badīʿah Maṣābnī) engaged in a kind of seductive banter with her onlooker.⁸ A female voice promises a male interlocutor that she will teach him “the language of womanly eyes.”⁹ “Look at me and watch my signs,” she tells him, as she has him focus his gaze on her while she speaks in Egyptian colloquial Arabic of the allure of women’s glances. With this phrase, she conflates the voice of her persona as subject with that of her topic as object, inviting the spectator to objectify her at the same time that she exerts power over his gaze, controlling it as it objectifies both *her corporeality* through the camera and *women’s characterization in general* through locution. It is my intention here to explore the nature of this feminine agency as embodied by Badīʿah Maṣābnī by analysing the monologue as a series of ‘speech acts’. In this endeavour, I will draw on speech act theory by John R. Searle and Daniel Vanderveken and their grammar of illocutionary logic.¹⁰

⁸ A contemporary review by al-Sayyid Ḥasan Jumʿah confirms that she would have been the performer in the film. He writes, “We have observed that in all the sketches that Madame Badīʿah has directed (*akhrajat*), she appears by herself and we see her deliver a monologue or a song...” See Marʿī (ed.), *Kitābāt al-Sayyid Ḥasan Jumʿah*, vol. 2, 247.

⁹ A socio-cultural portrait of this male interlocutor and a summary of discourses of masculinity prevalent in Egypt at the time may be gleaned from Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870-1940* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ John R. Searle and Daniel Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985). I should mention here my indebtedness to Beatrice Gruendler, who introduced me to speech act theory

Badīʿah Maṣābnī and the Monologue

Born in Syria in about 1894, the actress, singer, dancer, choreographer and businesswoman Badīʿah Maṣābnī established her celebrity in the 1920s and, with her legendary nightclub on ʿImād al-Dīn Street in Cairo, dominated the Egyptian cabaret scene of the 1930s and 40s. Maṣābnī, or “Madame Badīʿah” as she was often known, is credited with several successful innovations in belly-dancing,¹¹ and her shows catered to female as well as male spectators by, for example, instituting women-only matinees. She had risen to fame after a childhood fraught with trauma and financial and social instability. After she was raped at a young age by an acquaintance of her older brother, her family chose to emigrate to Argentina for a time to escape the ‘shame’ of her violation.¹² Hence she had a cosmopolitan, if somewhat tortuous, upbringing.

through her engagement with it in her scholarship on the classical Arabic panegyric.

See her “Abbasid Praise Poetry in the Light of Speech Act Theory and Dramatic Discourse,” in B. Gruendler and V. Klemm (eds.), *Understanding Near Eastern Literatures* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000), 157-69.

¹¹ These innovations include an elaboration of arm movements, an engagement with space across the stage, and the use of veils. See Wendy Buonaventura, *Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World* (London: Saqi, 1994), 149-51.

¹² Her life story is serialized in a series of unsigned articles on al-jarida.com. See http://www.aljarida.com/news/print_news/404685 for the first instalment. (Last accessed 3 December 2014.) See also Nāzik Bāsīlā, *Mudhakkirāt Badīʿah Maṣābnī* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ḥayāh, n.d.), which I have not been able to consult.

The monologue was a form with which Badī'ah Maṣābnī was intimately associated. It came in a range of genres, from the comical to the sentimental,¹³ but the brand enacted by Maṣābnī was primarily urban, light, and theatrical. Sayyid Darwīsh developed the form in the 1920s, composing many for the musical plays of Najīb al-Rīḥānī, to whom Maṣābnī was briefly married and in whose theatre she performed, sometimes cast in male roles. According to Saed Muhssin, "Darwish's monologues were songs of a narrational nature, often expressing and explaining the emotional state of the singer. They were forward-moving and had no refrains or musical repetition."¹⁴ Many of the pieces Badī'ah Maṣābnī sang in the early 1920s were composed by Darwīsh,¹⁵ as the memoirs of Palestinian amateur musician

¹³ On the sentimental genre of the monologue, see Victor Saḥḥāb, *al-Sab'ah al-kibār: fī al-mūsīqā al-ʿarabiyyah al-muʿāṣirah* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm lil-Malāyīn, 1987), 83-85 and 169. I am grateful to Frédéric Lagrange for this reference.

¹⁴ Saed Muhssin, "The 'People's Artist' and the Beginnings of the Twentieth-Century Arab Avant-Garde," in Thomas Burkhalter, Kay Dickinson and Benjamin J. Harbert (eds.), *The Arab Avant-Garde: Music, Politics, Modernity* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 121-144.

¹⁵ Maṣābnī worked with other composers as well. For example, a Gramophone catalogue from 1924 features the lyrics to two new *ṭaqṭuqaḥs* she performed which were composed by Dāwūd Ḥusnī. See Mansour Awad, *Première série de disques double face égyptiens et syriens* (Gramophone, 1924), 53-5. I thank Frédéric Lagrange for sharing this catalogue with me.

Wāṣif Jawhariyyah confirm.¹⁶ His testimony also provides us with a portrait of her as a performer. Here he describes her performance of the popular genre of short song known as the *ṭaqṭūqah*, highlighting her face and movements as well as her voice:

She was indeed excellent at this kind of light singing. Her movement and dancing were just as impressive. Her perfect body, stunning beauty, gracious smile, her face and kindness, all made listeners and viewers feel like they were in paradise. [...] When she sang a song, particularly famous monologues, she uttered the words in a powerful, expressive way.¹⁷

Jawhariyyah, who had the opportunity to see Maṣābnī while she was visiting Jerusalem in 1920, also depicts her performance as titillating, with a “bewildering” effect upon her audience:

It was indeed a bewildering evening. Badi’a was dressed in a see-through costume made for the purpose of dancing on stage only and was wearing finger cymbals. As she danced among us, every part of her body shook while various instruments were playing, particularly the qanun.¹⁸

¹⁶ Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar (eds), Nada Elzeer (trans.), *The Storyteller of Jerusalem: The Life and Times of Wasif Jawhariyyeh, 1904-1948* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2014), 133.

¹⁷ Ibid., 133.

¹⁸ Ibid., 134.

The Question of Authorship

Maṣābnī was not known as a songwriter, yet the manuscript at the New York State film script archives attributes the song to Badīʿah Maṣābnī, and no other author is cited. To be more precise, it attributes the film short as a whole to her (*shūrt... min*) and specifies nothing further. It is not unreasonable to assume that the song lyrics themselves were composed by someone else. However, as the quality of the lyrics and their metre are inconsistent and uneven,¹⁹ it is also quite possible that Badīʿah Maṣābnī wrote the song herself or that she altered the lyrics of a song already in her repertoire to suit the purposes of her film, which she made on a trip to Paris in 1932. It is also worth mentioning that “The Language of the Eyes” bears an at times striking similarity in its conceit, tone and lexicon to a poem entitled “al-ʿUyūn” (Eyes) by Maḥmūd Bayram al-Tūnisī.²⁰ These similarities will be explored further in the analysis below, but suffice it to say in the meantime that I would not be surprised if al-Tūnisī, a contemporary of Maṣābnī’s, was either directly involved in the composition of the monologue, or if Maṣābnī unintentionally ‘sampled’ him; for the echoes of his poem are very strong, assuming his poem predates her film script.

¹⁹ It is possible that the inconsistent metres are deliberate and reflect the influence of Sayyid Darwīsh. According to Muhssin, Sayyid Darwīsh used “assymetrical phrase lengths” in his monologues, for “confronting his audiences with unpredictable phrase lengths further enhanced the dramatic effect of Darwīsh’s compositions, building tension and delaying its resolution by playing with the expectations created by their stylistic literacy.” Muhssin, “The People’s Artist,” 136-7.

²⁰ Bayram al-Tūnisī, “al-ʿUyūn,” *Mudhakkirātī wa-l-dīwān al-awwal* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, nd), 54-56.

Another factor to bear in mind when considering the question of authorship is that in this nascent period of Egyptian cinema, filmmakers often assumed multiple roles in the process of film production, as a way to keep down costs. Hamid Naficy has called this, in the context of Iranian cinema, ‘artisanal multifunctionality’ where “many above-the-line production personnel of commercial movies were multifunctional, sometimes simultaneously serving as producers, directors, writers, and on-camera talents of a single film.”²¹ This multifunctionality was certainly characteristic of the nascent Egyptian film industry, where acting stars often directed and/or produced their own movies, and it was a trend that was particularly prevalent among female filmmakers such as ʿAzīzah Amīr, Bahījah Ḥāfiẓ and Fāṭimah Rushdī.²² After making six short films in 1932, Badīʿah Maṣābnī herself would go on in 1935 to produce a feature film, *Malikat al-masāriḥ* or “Queen of the Theatres,” in which she also starred.²³

Speech Act Theory

²¹ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2011), 203.

²² For some profiles of early female filmmakers in the Egyptian film industry, see Rebecca Hillauer’s *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), especially “Pioneers of Arab Silent Film,” 27-32. See also Marianne Khoury’s excellent 2006 documentary *Women Who Loved Cinema* (ʿĀshiqāt al-sīnimā).

²³ Jalāl al-Sharqāwī, *Risālah fī tārikh al-sīnimā al-ʿarabiyyah* (Cairo: al-Sharikah al-Miṣriyyah li-l-Ṭibāʿah wa-l-Nashr, 1970), 264.

Because the 'authorship' of the text of "The Language of the Eyes" is uncertain, I would like to analyse it not so much as a product of a specific individual in a particular social milieu but rather as a series of 'speech acts' performed by Badī'ah Maṣābnī. Speech Act theory is in any case particularly applicable here because the film script reads as a conversation, or more specifically and more accurately, it has a conversation-within-a-conversation format: what we may call a 'framing communication' in which a female speaker addresses a largely silent male interlocutor and 'embedded communications' in which a series of women's eyes address that same hearer. Therefore, as I explore gender dynamics and woman's role as subject and object of the gaze within the piece, I will refer to speech act theory and especially the *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* by Searle and Vanderveken. There they argue that every act of communication contains not only a propositional meaning but also an illocutionary force which governs the course of a conversation, contextualising that meaning in relation to interactions between the speaker and the audience. They discuss five categories of illocutionary acts,²⁴ according to which most communicative utterances may be classified:

- 1) Assertives: these attest to the truth-value of a proposition (e.g. "It is raining.")
- 2) Directives: these require the hearer to take a particular action (e.g. "Give me your umbrella.")
- 3) Commissives: these require the speaker to take a particular action (e.g. "Let me give you a lift.")

²⁴ Searle and Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic*, 38-40.

- 4) Expressives: these reveal the speaker's feelings about a proposition (e.g. "I enjoy a little mist on my face.")
- 5) Declaratives: these are speech acts that change the state of affairs by virtue of their having been said (e.g. "I baptise you," or "I pronounce you man and wife.") These are also called performatives and were first elaborated by Austin.²⁵

In "The Language of the Eyes" we find a complex interaction of communicative forces even if, materially, only Badī'ah Maṣābnī is speaking. This is because she is acting out several roles, including that of her addressee/hearer and the women whose eyes strike various poses, in an illocutionary tapestry:

شورت لغة العيون من السيدة بديعة مصابني

1	يا خفيف وعايز تتعلم	لغة العيون الستاتي
	خليك معايا حاتكلم	وبص لي وشوف اشاراتي
	دا سر تاني ما يعرفهوش	الا اللي راسي على اصوله
	راح افهمك خد مني دروس	وعلمك مش عاوزة فلوس
2	ستات كتير لسانهم ملك ايدهم	ولا يعرفوش ان عيونهم لها فضل عليهم
	وتبوح لها من نار حبك	تبص لك وتقول باردون هاها

²⁵ J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.)

- انا احبك وحبك في قلبي مدفون
وعينيها تبص وتبحلا لك
- تعالى شوف وتحقق
دي يبقى كده عيون غزلان
- 3 وعنين تلاقيا بتضحك
والرمش طالع نازل
بدها تتمحك وتقولك
اتفضل غازل
ولما تبوح لها من نار حبك
تبص لك وتقول باردون هاها
- 4 ستات كثير تلاقي لسانهم ملك ايدهم
ولا يعرفوش ان عيونهم لها فضل عليهم
وعنين تسبل كده على الخد
اهي دي اللي اقولك حاذر منها
دي طبعها ما تكلم حد..²⁶
الاغصب عنها
- 5 وعنين تبص وسهتانة
ان خد بالك منها حقيق
تلاقيها صفرة وبهتانة
وهي دي اللي تحط الخوازيق
- 6 اما العيون الدبلانة
دا سرها يخليك محتار
ما تعرف زعلانة
ام عندها كبشة اسرار
- 7 وعنين تلاقيا تبريق
انت دايماً ما تحبش
اهي دي اللي تقول بالمحسوس
يظهر عليك انك ملحوس

²⁶ This orthographic peculiarity is found in the manuscript.

يلي حاجة حلوة جنان

ادي درس من عندي

8

تملى اشكال والوان

وبكره راح اوريكم

The Language of the Eyes

1. O darling, so you want to learn
The language of women's eyes
Stay with me, and I will speak
Look at me and watch my signs
It's a secret unknown to all
Save those with a firm foundation in its principles
I will make you understand, take a lesson from me
Mind you I don't want money
2. Many a woman has a grip on her tongue
Not realizing that her eyes have the upper hand
To her you confess some of your burning love
And she looks at you and says, "Pardon me? Ha-ha."
"I love you, and your love is buried [deep] in my heart."
Her eyes gaze and stare at you,
"Come, see, realise."
These are the eyes of a flirt.
3. And there are eyes you find that laugh

Lashes rise and fall

She leads you on, saying, “Come on, make love²⁷ to me.”

But as you reveal the fire of your passion,

She looks at you and says, “Pardon me? Ha-ha.”

4. You find many a woman with a grip on her tongue

Not realizing her eyes have the upper hand

Eyes falling just so over the cheek

These are the ones—let me tell you—to watch out for

Her nature is to speak to no one unless coerced

5. And there are eyes that gaze coyly

Really be careful of those

You find them pale and faded

They are the ones that set snares

6. As for languid eyes

Their secret is that they leave you confused

You don't know if she is angry

Or if she has things to hide

7. And you find eyes that glisten

These are the ones that speak perceptibly

²⁷ In the sense of “speak amorously.”

You don't look like one who wishes

To be taken for a fool

8. That is it for my lesson

Which is a pretty fantastic thing

And tomorrow I shall show you

How to learn from shapes and colours²⁸

The piece opens with the vocative particle *yā* (ô), establishing the text as a conversation between the star of the film and her spectator. That spectator is singular and male—grammatically at least—and she knows him very well, as she is able to make assertions about his feelings and emotional reactions. Thus, in the first line we find two expressive forces: the first is that the speaker, by addressing her listener as *khafif*, demonstrates that she likes him, for this is certainly a term of endearment, even if she simultaneously condescends to him. As the first term of many complimentary unreal *idāfahs*,²⁹ such as *khafif al-dam* ('light of blood' i.e.

²⁸ File 33315/Box 543, Logat El Eown/ The Eyes' Language. New York State Film Script Archives, Albany, NY. Translation mine, an alternative translation is included in the file. I am indebted to Adam Talib for his insightful comments and edits.

²⁹ It should be noted that some unreal *idāfah* constructs involving *khafif* are disparaging, for example *khafif al-ʿaql* means 'dim-witted'. See *kh-f-f* in Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979) and Martin Hinds and El-Said Badawi, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1986).

amiable) and *khafīf al-rūḥ* ('light of spirit', i.e. charming), it is almost as if, by suppressing the second term of the construct, she is suggesting she likes him in an infinite variety of ways. The second expressive force applies to the feelings of the hearer, who wants or is keen to learn (*ʿāyiz titʿallim*). Though the speaker is projecting that emotion onto the listener, the act of continuing to listen, as a captive film audience would surely have done, serves as a confirmation of the validity of its expression. The second line, too, has a double edge to it, for here we find directives (Stay with me...look...watch) as well as a commissive (I will speak), a mixture which repeats itself in the fourth line with the commissive "I will make you understand" and the directive "Take a lesson from me". Together with the assertion of the third line, we find four out of the five illocutionary forces—assertives, expressives, commissives and directives—all at work in the first stanza. Thus the frame conversation has been established in all its complexity. Note the pleasing inverse symmetry of desire and/ or need: in line 1 the hearer/you (masc.) want (*ʿāyiz*), and in line 5, the speaker/I (fem.) do not want (*mush ʿawzah*).

With the second stanza comes the first, and perhaps the most important of the embedded conversations. *Badīʿah Maṣābnī*'s first-person recedes and we have instead a conversation between the male interlocutor and women's eyes—these eyes necessarily being represented by *Badīʿah Maṣābnī* on screen, as if her first-person pronoun has *transformed* into a third-person narrator who makes assertions *about* a third woman's attitudes, about your attitude towards her, about what she says to you, about what you say to her, and about what her eyes say to you. The quotations within the stanza contrast meaningfully. The unspecified woman who is the object of the gaze, when you reveal your love to her, speaks in foreign words and

nonsensical interjections (Pardon? Ha-Ha!), whereas the male interlocutor/spectator has words put into his mouth in what could be read as a high register of Arabic (*fuṣḥā*). Unlike the wedding vow “I do,” Austin and Searle and Vanderveken do not discuss “I love you” as a performative or a declarative, but here it reads as such; with this utterance, the reality of the speaker (who is actually the addressee) changes, the high register of the language reinforcing the sense that it is a public pronouncement: The male spectator is made to say *uḥibbuki*³⁰ not *baḥibbik*. When the object of his admiration replies, it is her eyes that speak, and they speak in directives, imperative verbs that conjugate in more or less the same way be they classical or colloquial (*taʿālā, shūf, tiḥaqqaq*), thereby serving as a bridge between his sentence in high Arabic and the highly colloquial interjection of Badīʿah Maṣābnī that is to follow (*dī yibʿa kidah*).

The next five stanzas present a kind of catalogue of eyes—laughing eyes, languid eyes, glistening eyes, etc., and what each kind conveys in terms of communication to the onlooker. The third stanza, about laughing eyes, picks up on the embedded conversation of the second, by repeating the “Pardon? Ha-ha!”, this time after the male interlocutor reveals his love to her. That his performative “I love you” in its high linguistic register is sandwiched between this foreign and broken phrase

³⁰ Without listening to the soundtrack, it is hard to be sure that the script reads *uḥibbuki* rather than the lower-register *aḥibbik*, but since the rest of the hemistich is similarly ambiguous in that it could be read as *fuṣḥā (wa-ḥubbuki fī qalbī madfūn)*, I like to think that Badīʿah Maṣābnī utters these words of the male admirer in a high register.

indicating incomprehension is a sure sign that his performance has failed.³¹ The fourth stanza, about eyes whose gazes rest on the cheek below, which closely resembles Bayram al-Tūnisī's poem in theme and vocabulary³² if not in illocutionary structure, also picks up on this conversation because it is introduced with the same assertion, but here there is an impossibility of dialogue altogether, since the eyes in question communicate extreme aloofness.

The fifth, sixth and seven stanzas are shorter and less complex in their illocutionary content. The coy, languid and glistening gazes each pose a particular threat to the hearer. The speaker (Badī'ah Maṣābnī) is thus objectifying women in general, and herself as their exemplary embodiment, at the same time that she is objectifying her hearer as the victim of 'snares' (*khawāzīq*), as 'confused' (*muḥtār*) and as potentially 'foolish' or 'imbecilic' (*malḥūs*). The final stanza then returns us to the frame ("This is a lesson from me") and to the primary communication between Badī'ah Maṣābnī and her cinematic spectator. It is noteworthy that the latter has

³¹In order for a performative statement to work and thus count as an action that changes reality, certain 'felicitous' conditions must apply. See Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, 15, where he states "The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely."

³² Al-Tūnisī, *Mudhakkirātī wa-l-dīwān al-awwal*, 55.

وعيون تسبل فوق الخد دي جد ف جد
وعمرها ما تكلم حد عيون أحرار

Both this stanza and the one above equate the eye lowering its gaze over the cheek with a sign of aloofness—such a woman does not deign to speak to anyone.

transformed into a plural entity, as she promises to show *you plural* (*rāḥ awarrīkum*) other tips of the trade, so to speak.

Eyes, gender and agency: the Glance in Arabic Poetry

The power of the beloved's gaze is an ancient trope of Arabic poetry; the glance of a beautiful eye is frequently compared to a sword or an arrow penetrating the heart of the poetic persona, who stands powerless before it.³³ This 'piercing' beloved is typically female, though s/he may be grammatically masculine or biologically male. Nevertheless, whatever subjective agency is granted to the beloved, it is limited to that which animates the beloved's description. In other words, the power of the beloved's eye is often tempered by the poet-lover's objectifying gaze. Even in the case of Fāṭimah, whose agency extends over several lines in the *muḥallaqah* of Imru' al-Qays, well beyond her arrow-like eyes, one could argue that she is objectified by virtue of the fact that she is but one beloved in a lengthy erotic catalogue.

أفأظم مهلاً بعضَ هذا التدلّل
وإن كنتِ قد أزمعتِ صرّمي فأجملِي
أغركِ مني أن حبّك قاتلي
وأنتك مهما تأمري القلبَ يفعلِ
وإن تكُ قد ساءتِك مني خليقة
فسنلي ثيابي من ثيابك تنسلِ

³³ See the examples from the corpus of the mystical poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235) set down by A.J. Arberry in his *Arabic Poetry: A Primer for Students* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 20.

وما ذرفت عينك إلا لتضربي بسهميك في أعشار قلب مقتل³⁴

Suzanne Stetkevych translates these lines as follows:

O Fāṭimah, don't try me, with your teasing

[Or] if you have resolved to cut me off, then do it gently

Are you deluded about me because your love is my slayer

And whatever you command my heart it does?

If something of my character has hurt you,

Then pull my clothes away from yours, they will slip off

Your eyes do not shed tears but to pierce

With your two shafts the pieces of my slaughtered heart³⁵

In the above lines, Fāṭima acts on the poetic persona in a number of ways, teasing him, cutting him off, undressing him, and casting eye-arrows at his heart. But no sooner does Imru[?] al-Qays speak of his injured heart than he turns his attention to a multitude of other women (*wa-bayḍati khidrin...*)

³⁴ Imru[?] al-Qays, "Muṣallaqa," in Marlé Hammond (ed.), *Arabic Poems* (London: Everyman, 2014), 14-16.

³⁵ Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 251.

Its wounding powers notwithstanding, the beloved's eye is usually described in terms which evoke its beauty.³⁶ The quality of *ḥawar*, or the contrast between black and white in the dark-eyed, is particularly appreciated. One also reads of sleepy, languid eyes, as in the following line in a *Mufaḍḍaliyyah* by al-Ḥādira:

وَبِمَقْلَتِي حورَاءَ تَحْسِبُ طَرْفَهَا وَسُنَانِ حُرَّةٍ مَسْتَهْلٍ الْأُدْمُعَ

And with the eyes of one whose pupils are deepest black—thou
wouldst think her gaze heavy with slumber—one fair in the place where
the tears flow down³⁷

The eye of the beloved is described. The beloved may be male or female but is always the object of the poetic persona's gaze and the poetic persona's desire. As the poetic persona is nearly always male, femininity is not associated with subjective

³⁶ One finds a list of qualities that are found to be beautiful in eyes in Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī (d. 1333), *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1924), 42. For an English rendition, see Elias Muhanna (ed. and trans.), *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 59. They include large, black eyes, eyes with a strong contrast of black and white, darkness of the eyelid in the absence of eye shadow, and long eye lashes.

³⁷ Charles James Lyall (ed.), *The Mufaḍḍaliyyāt: An Anthology of Arabian Odes*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918-21), original Arabic 1:53, translation 2:17.

agency but rather with objectivity. Typically, woman is described, not describer; woman is desired, not desirer.³⁸

In the “Language of the Eyes,” Badī‘ah Maṣābnī is most definitely the object of the spectator’s gaze, and presumably his desire as well, yet the text that she utters does not collude in her objectification. It does not describe her. It is fascinating how, in a text which is clearly celebrating beauty, and in a context where an individual performer is showcasing her own attributes in exemplary fashion, there are relatively few adjectives deployed. Instead, attention is repeatedly drawn to what

³⁸ An important exception to this rule is found in the *muwashshahah* by the twelfth-century Granadan poet Nazhūn. There, woman is describer and desirer, man described and desired. It begins with a reference to the beloved’s eye sapping the poetic persona’s body of strength:

طرفه الأهور

بأبي من هد من جسمي القوى

As cherished as my father is the one

whose black eye debilitated me

Translation Marlé Hammond, *Beyond Elegy: Classical Arabic Women’s Poetry in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 158. The original Arabic poem is found in Alan Jones (ed.), *The ‘Uddat al-jalīs of ‘Alī ibn Bishrī* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1992), no. 239, 360-1.

the eyes *do*: they are animated with verbs and active participles, and there is little evaluation of how they look. We have few references to colour and size, and we are told instead how they move and what positions they assume, how they signal to us and what these signals mean.

Moreover, woman's gaze is, in a sense, embodied. Women think that their tongues "are what their hands possess," that is, that their tongues are powerful and under their control, and they do not realize that their eyes are even more powerful and need even greater control. This thought occurs twice so there is no doubting its centrality. The three body parts—tongues, hands and eyes—lend a corporeality to these women whose eyes speak for them, and they are all presented as having authority. True, women and their eyes often form the object of a verb, but no sooner are they objectified than they burst forth with activity, as for example in *ʿinayn tilāʾihā bitidḥak* ("and there are eyes you find that laugh").

Note that the one stanza that contains multiple descriptors for the eyes, the fifth stanza, where the eyes are described as being *sahtānah* (coy) and *bahtānah* (faded) and having *ṣufrah* (pallor), is also the stanza where the action engaged in by the eyes, 'setting snares' is the most stereotypically sexist segment of the poem at the same time that it is the most physically threatening.³⁹

³⁹ Just as *sahtānah* and *bahtānah* appear together with *ṣufrah* in one stanza (namely the fifth) of Maṣabnī's monologue, so too do their variants *sāhitīn* and *bāhitīn* coincide in the penultimate stanza of al-Tūnisī's poem with the word *ṣufr*. Ibid, 56.

وعيون كده ييقم ساهتين صفر وباهتين
بالشكل دا عيون الخائنين تضرب بصفار

Finally, it is worth pointing out that masculinity frequently manifests itself in grammatical objectivity and passivity. This masculinity rests solely in the addressee/spectator, who is a rather helpless figure whose neediness is established in the first stanza with *ʿāyiz*—in contrast to the narrator’s self-sufficiency (*mush ʿawzah*). He remains first of all in the narrator’s grasp (*khallīk maʿāyā*), then he finds himself the object of the laughing eyes’ teasing (*titmahḥak*), then the potential object of the coy eyes’ snares, then he is dazed by the languid eyes, appearing as both the object of a verb and a passive participle (*yikhallīk muḥtār*), then he is warned against the possibility of seeming imbecilic (*malḥūs*)—a passive participle, and lastly, transformed into a collective ‘you plural’, the addressee/spectator appears as the object of the verb ‘to show’ (*awarrīkum*). In both the first and final examples from the poem, it is the narrator who is the subject objectivizing her audience.

What is more, feminine agency pervades the vocal registers employed in the text. The language of the piece is highly cosmopolitan; not only is there a mix of colloquial Egyptian and *fuṣḥā*, but there are echoes of European languages and Levantine dialects.⁴⁰ This versatility of language, however, disassociates itself from the male voice, which speaks only in *fuṣḥā*, with its declaration of love for womanly eyes. The narrator’s voice speaks primarily in Egyptian, but in the second line of the third stanza she employs a Levantine colloquial construction where *bid-hā* (*from bi-*

⁴⁰ Given her life’s journeys, it is not surprising that she would exhibit this linguistic flexibility. Indeed, Dougherty (“Badi’a Masabni,” 251) cites a review from *al-Ithnayn* dated 3 June, 1935, in which Maṣābnī is praised for incorporating Tunisian dialect into her show.

widdihā) is used to mean ‘she/they want’.⁴¹ Other echoes of Levantine occur with the negative construction at the end of the fourth stanza and in the use of the relative pronoun *yallī* in the eighth. We also have the voice of the gazed-upon-woman who utters the European loan word, “Pardon,” and laughs with the very English-sounding onomatopoeic interjection, “ha-ha.” This linguistic sophistication in this piece, perhaps somewhat unusually, lies squarely within the domain of the female.

An Illocutionary Comparison

A return to Bayram al-Tūnisī⁴² and his poem “al-ʿUyūn” allows us to reflect on constructions of gender and illocutionary force within it by way of comparison. The poem consists of fourteen rhyming, metrical couplets. The first stanza reads as follows:

من العيون يا سلام سلم شوف واتعلم

تحت البراقع تتكلم والدنيا نهار

From eyes, goodness gracious look and learn

⁴¹ This construction is not unknown in Egyptian, but it is far more common in Levantine Arabic.

⁴² Bayram al-Tūnisī (1893-1961) is an Egyptian author of Tunisian descent who is known for his vernacular poetry and satirical works. See M. Booth, ‘al-Tūnisī, Maḥmūd Bayram (1893-1961)’ in Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (eds), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2010), 784-5.

Don't you have something better to do?/ O man, ô ass

وعيون تقول لك أنا عارفاك والنبي ما انساك

من يوم ما شفناك م الشباك يا جدع يا صغار

And there are eyes that say to you, I know you/ By the prophet I won't forget
you

From the day I [first] saw you from the window, ô brave one ô youth⁴⁵

These stanzas give voice to the object of representation, namely the women in burkas who address the listener with directives, such as “what do you want?”,⁴⁶ and assertives, such as “I know you.” Their statements are always framed by the narrator’s assertive “[and there are] eyes that say.” To the extent that the poem reads as a framing communication, with a series of embedded conversations, the communication feels incomplete, because the listener never speaks back. The illocutionary structure is also simpler, lacking commissives—neither the poem’s narrator nor the embedded subjects commit to anything—and declaratives. What seems very similar, however, is the grammatical passivity of the male listener, who stands as the object of prepositions, verbs and insults throughout the poem. In both pieces, in other words, the male is brought down to size.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 54. Translation mine.

⁴⁶ Questions are always directives, because they commit the hearer to respond.

Concluding Remarks

Now that we have taken note of the lessons Badīʿah Maṣābnī gave her early twentieth-century Arab spectator on “The Language of the Eyes”, let us consider what lessons this film script has for us, early twenty-first-century scholarly consumers of Egyptian popular culture. When I first chanced upon the film script, it struck me as gold, not only because of its early date and the likelihood that it is the only trace of a film that is now lost, but also because it was made and directed by a woman. This nascent period of Egyptian cinema was an empowering one for women, and a number of female theatrical stars, such as ʿAzīzah Amīr and Bahījah Ḥāfiẓ, produced and directed films as vehicles for their own performances.⁴⁷ The power and authority of Badīʿah Maṣābnī’s stance, her repeated assertives and directives, her commissives which are uttered from a position of strength as she boasts that she is in no need of remuneration, and her gradual disabling of her spectator, whose passivity increases with each stanza, stand as a celebration of her powers as a woman who casts glances and a performer who re-enacts them. Badīʿah Maṣābnī may or may not have composed the text, but she certainly ‘owned’ it. The text therefore serves as a reminder of a feminist impulse in early Egyptian cinematic culture too often overlooked or forgotten.

⁴⁷ See note 22 above. See also Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 189-91.