

# Ana Hourra: A Case Study

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The music starts, the curtain opens, she is slowly revealed to you, with her translucent gown, and the trinkets on her bracelets and anklets softly glowing, and the long thick hair gracefully falling on her shoulders. The camera follows the sensual curves of her body as she slowly moves to the rhythm of the music. And as the lens closes up on her face, every smile and every glance of the eyes feels as if she was flirting with you. The movement of her arms gently casting shadow on her velvet skin, she's there, all woman, ready to ignite the deepest passions in you. "You" being of course the viewer, supposedly a man, who is gazing at her, making her his ultimate fantasy and his wildest dream.

Is she coming out from man's deepest imagination, or could she be just an image of the faithful wife, the wise mother, the passive partner in a relationship, always succumbing to the rules of the phallogocentric society she's living in, the naive little girl who gets caught in the tangled web of those who want to deceive her, or better yet, the rebellious character who is rejecting everything around her. No matter the role she played, woman was always an object of contemplation, an image to be looked at, and man was always the bearer of the look. Laura Mulvey expands this idea in an essay she wrote entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", where she studies the way film "reflects, reveals and even plays on the socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle." She relates this fact to concepts in psychoanalysis which she uses as tools to explain cinema's reflection of woman as body and beauty. But no matter the causes, the fact remains

that pleasure in looking has been divided between the active male and passive female. Women held a traditional exhibitionist role, "with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact ... they held the look, played to and signified male desires".

## Appendix I Synopsis

### "I Am Free" by director Salah Abou Seif (Egypt, 1959)

Amina, a young beautiful stubborn young girl, is living with her aunt, uncle and their son. Her parents are divorced and her father sent her to live with his sister with an agreement that he shall pay for her expenses.

Following an argument with her aunt, Amina decides not to go to school that day and taste the joys of 'freedom', as she understands it, which she assumes is objection and refusal to do as told. Later that day she encounters Abbas, a young man who lives next door and who serves as the voice of reason, making Amina aware that freedom has a deeper meaning than not wanting to do as told and staying out late etc...

After a series of fights and arguments, her uncle and aunt decide to leave her alone, and it is only then that she feels she has accomplished something and that she should prove herself capable of managing her own life. After refusing to marry a man that her uncle arranged for her to meet, she realizes that it is only through work that she will be able to have complete economic independence and that seeking a higher education is the right track to follow in order to acquire that kind of 'freedom'. So she decides to live with her father and to study hard in order to earn a university degree which she does and begins work in a petroleum company.

She learns one day that Abbas is editing a political magazine and she decides to visit him, confident that he will be more than impressed with the amount of freedom she has achieved. But against all her expectations, and serving again as the voice of reason, Abbas tells her that freedom is the means by which you reach a goal and that her freedom should be placed in service of a good cause to have any meaning at all.

After this meeting, they engage in a romance through which she starts serving the cause that he dedicated his life to, which is to plan for a revolution against the corrupt political system. Aware of their activities, the political intelligence puts them under surveillance. After that, they get caught red handed while distributing political leaflets and are both sentenced to five years imprisonment.

Realizing how much her dedication to the cause has enriched her and made her feel free even in prison, she decides to marry Abbas in jail. And for the director not to leave it at that dramatic end, we are shown that the date on the wedding certificate precedes the date of the great revolution of 1952 by three days, as if to tell us that they will get out of jail and eventually "live happily ever after".



Egyptian cinema is filled with representations of woman as glamorous, sexualized and on display. In a patriarchal culture, she is always tied to the various emotions she provokes in the male hero and makes him act the way he does: the love or fear she inspires, the concern he feels for her etc..., her individual character thus having nothing to do with the progression of the narrative. That's why it is always intriguing to look at films that have shifted from this cannon and tried to offer another way of looking at woman.

The film I have decided to deal with is **I am Free** (*Ana Hourra*) directed by Salah Abu Seif (refer to Appendix 1 for synopsis). This film traces part of the life of an Egyptian young woman and her struggle to gain her freedom. At each stage of her life, the concept of freedom that she is constantly seeking has a different meaning and represents that which is lacking from her life at that specific stage. The film is based on a novel written by Ihsan Abdul Kouddous in the fifties. His mother Rose El Yussef was the editor of a liberal leftist weekly magazine in which "I Am Free" appeared in episodes before being published as a book. The book was published during an interesting period of Egyptian history since it occurred at a time when Nasser's revolution was the manifestation of the people's aspirations and hopes for a better way of life and an answer to the previous unexplained and unaccepted defeats and downfalls of the old regime. Director Salah Abu Seif took the script a step further by omitting parts of the novel and giving it a different ending than the one in the book.

Produced in 1959, the film was considered avant gardist in the treatment of the subject matter: portraying the contemporary life of a female protagonist, with all the turbulence that came along the path she decides to follow. This film belongs to a series of Egyptian films made between the late 1940s to the early 1970s. During that time many socio-polit-

ical changes occurred that influenced the way the Egyptian family was represented in general and more particularly the way women were represented. At that time a large number of writers began using existential themes in their writings and were therefore the pioneers of the realist movement that soon found its means of expression in the cinema; these same writers started adapting their stories into scripts and sometimes wrote scripts directly for the screen, always collaborating with the same directors. This period marked the birth of a cinematic genre with films described as "author" films, that gave way to more realistic plots, leaving behind belly dance musicals and happy romances.

Women were portrayed as housekeepers, child bearers and objects of desire, and no importance was given to their intellectual potentials. So to attempt to do a whole film about the journey of a single woman who not only achieved what she conceived of as freedom, but also shocked the audience by her involvement in the political upheavals and revolutions that were at their peak during that time, through a romantic adventure with her nationalist boyfriend, all that was the innovative factor in that project. In the film, the main character is constantly looking for the meaning of her existence, and while doing that she discovers that knowledge and work can liberate her from ignorance and financial dependence, which allows her to aim for her objectives by fighting the traditions that were standing in her way. Such new roles for women which were shown on the screen and which gave the woman an emotional and intellectual dimension were an integral part of the new way of life that Nasser's revolution was striving for.

So at a first glance, and from what I've described above, it is clear that this film seems to have given women's issues a new impetus, seemingly adopting feminism as one of its themes and is therefore considered a classic because it is

*Pleasure in looking  
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female*

*scene 1*





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scene 2

thought of as one of the movies that approached women's representation from that modernist angle. But, this being said, a closer analysis of the signs embedded in the narrative of the movie and its film grammar reveal other issues that are worth noticing.

It is interesting to note that there was a shift between the various signifieds<sup>1</sup> of the word freedom as the narrative progressed. Just after the title sequence, the director chooses to quote a caption from the original text (Abdul Kouddous' story) that the writer has included as a prologue to the story: "Freedom does not exist as an independent concept, and those of us who claim they are free are nothing but mere slaves to the principles they believe in and to the aims they are after. We constantly fight to win our freedom in order to sacrifice it to the causes we are serving, and before you demand to win your freedom you should ask yourself what purpose will you dedicate it to." Although written in the book, this statement doesn't take its full meaning in the film until we are faced with the inclusion of the political issues involving the revolution of 1952 in the storyline, the same political issues that made the director/scriptwriter Abu Seif aim to have a totally different end than that of the book. A social sign by itself since politics was part of everyday life back then and merging it with the





scene 3  
and 4

philosophical statement above is nothing but a mere portrayal of the blind passion that drove people, women included, to get involved in politics. We are being exposed thus to a kind of preferred reading that the director is imposing on us, a way for him to leave his imprint as an author in the way we digest the narrative and see it progressing towards that end.

Of particular interest to me are two scenes that I would like to compare. The first scene takes place in the beginning of the movie (refer to scene 1); Amina, getting ready to go to school, sees her aunt crouching on the floor, cleaning her husband's shoes while he sits above on a chair, waiting for her to put them on for him. As she does that, she asks him to leave money for them before he goes. As he complains angrily about how she always asks for money, the director cuts to a close up of Amina, watching the scene with an air of sarcasm. Then the director cuts again to a shot of the aunt and uncle, but this time using a point of view shot (POV) or in other words a shot made from a camera position close to the line of sight of Amina who is supposedly watching the action. In the POV shot we see the uncle angrily pushing away his wife's hand off his foot and completing the knot on his shoe by himself. The close up used focuses attention on Amina's feelings and emotions as she watches what she thinks is a complete slavery of her aunt. The binary oppositions are at work in this scene : male/female, floor/chair, money provider/money spender. The POV shot makes the camera treatment subjective because it imitates the viewpoint of the character Amina thus conveying to us not only her state of mind but also the reality that she wants to see. Semiotics teaches us that denotation and connotation are terms describing the relationship between the signifier and its referent. Denotation tends to be described as the literal, obvious or common sense meaning of a sign; connotation refers to its socio-cultural and personal associations whether ideological, emotional, etc.. For Barthes, there are different orders of signification (levels of meaning). The first order of signification is that of denotation: at this level there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a second-order of signification which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. (Barthes 1972, 'Myth Today').

But this separation of the levels of signification is only for analytical purposes; signs are always perceived with both levels of signification. But "it is at the connotative level of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification. At this level we can see more clearly the active intervention of ideologies in and on discourse." (Hall 1980, 132-3). To get back to our scene, it is quite clear that in order for us to understand the connotation of the signs used we should acknowledge the importance of codes. Every text is a system of signs organized according to codes and sub-codes which reflect certain values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices. Understanding such codes, their relationships and the contexts in which they are appropriate is part of what it means to be a member of a particular culture. (Chandler 1994, 'codes'). Codes are interpretive devices used by both the producers and the consumers of signs, and the codes used in that particular scene are social codes that display very clearly the role playing formulas and gender relations. The use of the POV is interesting though because it makes the connotation not so hidden, as if the director wanted us to realize the meaning behind the use of the sign without us making a great effort. This fact reveals itself very useful when we compare that scene to another one that occurs later in the film (scene 2); Amina and Abbas are in his apartment, he just went out of the shower and she asks him if she can help him choose his clothes. She opens the closet and picks a suit, shirt, socks and shoes, while he sits on the edge of the bed waiting for her. She puts the clothes on the bed and crouches on the floor to help him wear his shoes exactly the same way her aunt used to do it. As she does that, the camera tilts up, offering us a high angle<sup>2</sup> to the scene. A sign of defeat? Maybe so, especially when the scene that precedes this one is a dialogue between Amina and Abbas where she admits that he made her discover a whole new meaning of freedom, one that she never encountered before loving him. She thinks that her love has made her believe in him and the cause he's fighting for, and it is only when you completely believe in something that you are willing to sacrifice your freedom for it. Clearly the sign here is subject to the political codes that the director is trying to infiltrate: the fact that there could not be freedom for the individual but rather a freedom for the brotherhood through which revolution will find its means of expression.





scene 5



finally when she stays in her office working late. The scene takes the form of a vision (scenes 3 and 4). A specific music is played at the beginning of each time, the camera moves from an eye-level medium shot of her lying in bed to a high angle from one of the corners of the room. Then the shot dissolves slowly to another shot of a black space; a door opens from the rear end of the frame and a hard projector light is cast to emphasize the surrealness of the experience, and we have the impression that we crossed over to another space. A black small silhouette (Amina supposedly) is shown walking towards the camera. This shot being a representation of her guilty state of mind, Amina starts answering questions that a male voice asks. The voice is recognizable as that of Abbas, and it is given a sort of supernatural quality because of the echoing effect that has been added. The voice always seems to disagree with her acts and challenges her constantly by dismissing her shallow conception of the idea of freedom. The scene ends with the door closing, total blackness, and Amina left disturbed and worried. A question comes to mind directly: why did the director decide to have a male voice representing her own conscience? Maybe the director wanted to draw a strong parallel between the male voice in the vision and the character of Abbas, who signifies the voice of reason all through the film, and whose conversations with Amina always question her desire to attain freedom. Although he is not the protagonist, he nonetheless controls the main events and the progression of the narrative. Whether consciously or unconsciously he plays a vital role in the decisions she takes. He triggers doubt within her and causes commotion in the sweet aftertaste of the challenges she wins, making her call into question her understanding of the way she should live her life. A particular scene (scene 5) that reflects this is when she stays late at work, and she starts looking around her and notices the various signs displayed in the room: "no

So again we find that the main meaning that the director wants to produce would be that dedication to the political cause helps us find our freedom, an ideological sign by itself since it mirrored the upheavals that were at their prime at the time when the story was written. Another series of shots are quite interesting to analyze since they repetitively occur at specific moments in the narrative. They consist of an abstract representation of Amina's conscience. This conscience appears each time she takes a step towards reaching the freedom she is aiming for, so the first time would be when she decides not to go to school, then when she comes back home late from a party, when she decides to refuse to go through the arranged marriage and



visitors allowed”, “don’t use phone for private calls” etc... It is as if the goal that she had aimed so hard for, that of financial independence, has made her nothing but a slave to the work she is doing. It is then that she has a vision again, making her almost disappointed with what she thought freedom could provide for her. Could it be that even in her ability to conceive of events occurring around her and the consequences of the decisions she takes, she realizes that woman is subjected to the male character just like her eroticism and displayness were? Eroticizing is represented by the author in a dancing scene (scene 6), the most common way of putting woman on display in Egyptian films, and subjecting the heroine to the male gaze of Abbas. This confirms the fact that the representation of woman always gives her a spectacular characteristic, considers her a “body” to look at and an object of desire even in her questionable ability to think, and this image finds in narrative Egyptian cinema its most complex expression and widest circulation. And here I would like to look into a notion that Teresa de Lauretis developed in her book **Alice Doesn’t feminism, semiotics, cinema** where she talks about the two different notions of women and woman. Woman is the set of ideological ideas bound with the notion of woman and the series of myths that revolve around it, whereas women is the actual real beings, the historical subjects.<sup>3</sup>

All through the film, the representations of the female character using both these notions sometimes appear sharply focused and clearly articulated and other times appear excessive, ambiguous and repressed. And the depiction of the life journey of the heroine appears to be nothing but a meticulous study of the ways in which the relation between the two notions or the two signs is set up, and an analysis of the presuppositions that are at work in each of these representations.

It is also important to look into various aspects of modernization that influenced the Egyptian way of life back then. A phenomenon of reordering of culture occurred that was being more and more visible in modes of representation<sup>4</sup>, namely the cinema. The modern themes and the ideological signs behind them once reflected in the culture in a subdued way now emerge as very clear devices used to portray a new way of life. The emergence of the new novel is reflected in the heroine’s reading of books that appeal to her because she is witnessing (Taha Hussein and Taoufik El Hakim). Authors were striving to be faithful to their era by writing as realistically and accurately as possible; therefore, establishing the particular hopes, anxieties, fears and aspirations of that same era. Instead of wedding the perfect doctor, she decides to go to university and pursue a higher education, precisely at the moment where this kind of education is no longer restricted to a tiny elite.

What is also worth noticing as well is the portrayal of the conflict that the central character is exposed to because of the modernization of life in Egypt in general at that time.

Although she looks modern and dresses modern and knows foreign languages, yet what is expected of her is a complete and unquestioned adherence to the traditions and conventions of the society. So there she stands stuck in between the two extremes that affect her daily life and create a certain duplicity in her character, almost a schizophrenia that gets hold of her whenever she tries to define her identity and look for a freedom that she misunderstands. “Freedom” as a signifier becomes so controversial as an ultimate aim that even she can’t help but get severely disappointed every time she takes a step to bring her closer to that aim. But in the end, the director finds a way to solve that confusion and to settle the uneasiness inside her by making her realize that devotion to the political cause gives her the only true taste of freedom, a freedom that even being in jail can’t take away. This is clear in the very last scene (scene 7), where she is shown climbing the stairs of the prison that lead her to her cell. While she does that, a superimposition of the words **I am Free** appears marking the end of the movie.

Although showing a bit of the modernity that was being established, the film doesn’t escape, however, from the use



*scene 6*

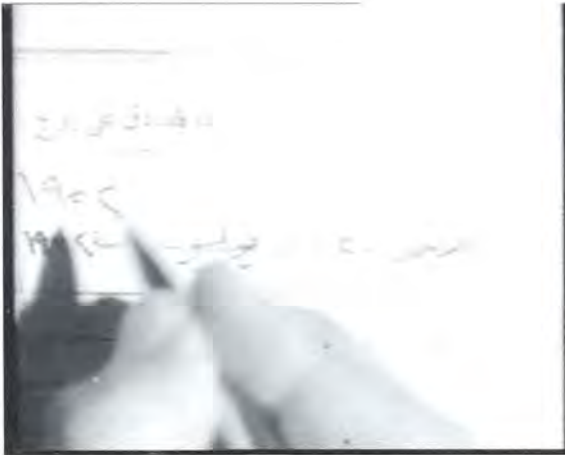


of widely known clichés that serve as signs showing the dominant conventions and ruling ideologies of Egyptian society as traditional and oriental. The most recurrent themes are those of gender relations and sexual imbalance. A particular scene (scene 8) displays the ridiculous and shallow concerns of women depicted in a social gathering. So whether it is fortune reading in the cup of coffee, or gossip about the most recent scandals, all serve to make Amina's interest in work and independence noteworthy. Another theme is the dominance of the male in the household, and another depicts the fact that song performing and instrument playing was considered a low brow occupation.

What this film offered at the time of its production and, perhaps, at any time is a rich amount of social signs open to analysis and interpretations. Maybe one of the most satirical criticisms of the semiotic analysis is the fact that it states the obvious using complicated jargon ... Not a completely accurate criticism because when we go through all the work that has been done to enrich the various ways in which semiotic analysis helps us understand a text, we soon realize that we are in a privileged position because we can understand where the richness of semiotics lies: to realize that signs have more than one dimension and that they don't constitute

*The cause has enriched  
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even in prison*

static systems, but that they are in perpetual movement especially when we are dealing with a culture like ours. A semiotic reading of the text offers new insights in considering the importance of the role of the reader/viewer, and the fact that a text isn't imprisoned by a single, author-given meaning, but that it exists in a state of open boundaries, welcoming more than one interpretation: "the director-author becomes not a great individual genius, but the mediator of many different voices, many different systems of cultural conventions, and the product, the art work, is regarded as a text which is no longer an organic whole but is able to accommodate contradictions: indeed, moments of paradox, opacity and resistance to interpretation are seen as feature of the most interesting texts". (Cook 1985, 224).



*scene 7*



scene 8



*... there she stands  
stuck between the two  
extremes that affect her  
daily life and create a  
certain duplicity in her  
character, almost a  
schizophrenia that gets  
hold of her whenever  
she tries to define her  
identity and look for a  
freedom that she mis-  
understands.*

ENDNOTES

1. Semiology may be defined as "A science that studies the life of signs within society as conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from the Greek semeion 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them." (Wollen 1998, 79). It was first brought to life by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his **Course in General Linguistics**, where he identified a sign as made of two parts: a signifier, the form which the sign takes, and a signified, the concept which it represents. Other than Saussure, key figures in the early development of semiotics were the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce who offered a taxonomy of the different classes of signs thus dividing them into Symbol/symbolic: a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is 'arbitrary' or purely conventional - so that the relationship must be learnt (e.g. the word 'stop', a red traffic light, a national flag, a number); Icon/iconic: a mode in which the signifier physically or perceptually resembles or imitates the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) - being similar in possessing some of its qualities (e.g. a portrait, a diagram, a scale-model, onomatopoeia, 'realistic' sounds in music, sound effects in radio drama, a dubbed film soundtrack, imitative gestures); Index/indexical: a mode in which the signifier is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified - this link can be observed or inferred (e.g. smoke, weathercock, thermometer, clock, spirit-level, footprint, fingerprint, knock on door, pulse rate, rashes, pain). Drawing on the writings of these two pioneers of semiotics, numerous thinkers attempted to employ the tools of semiotic analysis to various modes of visual communication, namely film.

2. Refer to the paragraph above for the connotation of the high angle shot.

3. "Woman, the other-from-man (nature and mother, site of sexuality and masculine desire, sign and object of men's social exchange) is the term that designates at once the vanishing point of our culture's fictions of itself and the conditions of the discourses in which the fictions are represented. By women, on the other hand, I will mean the real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside of those discursive formations, but whose material existence is nonetheless certain." (de Lauretis 1984, p:5)

4. A similar case to look at is the reordering of French culture in Kristin Ross' **Fast Cars Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the reordering of French Culture**.

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