

An Unknown Lover's Discourse An Ode to Performing Subjectivity in Research

Mandy Merzaban

009_07 / 29 January 2016

Reverberation

retentissement / reverberation

Fundamental mode of amorous subjectivity: a word, an image reverberates painfully in the subject's affective consciousness.^[1]

1.

I feel numb when I remember it. I was crossing the Rue d'Ouessant in Paris one autumn afternoon, listening to Farid Al Atrash's song 'Azab'. Translated as 'torture' or 'misery', the song is about the relationship between love and despair. To get to it, I repeatedly skipped over the other tracks on the album I was listening to: a compilation of tunes from Salah Abu Seif's 1962 Egyptian musical film *Ressala Min Emraa Majhoula* (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*). The film is about a woman's unrequited love for a famous musician in 1950s Cairo and the soundtrack is a central feature in the film's romantic narrative. How many times had I listened to the song that day, that week? I lost count.

Yet, this particular time was different. I heard a sequence of lyrics as though they were newly risen rifts on the song's undulating typography: words that had somehow remained indistinct until then. Since my relationship to Arabic is only aural, listening has been my main lifeline to the language since childhood. The point at which I began to hear 'Azab' differently is when the song's momentum shifts, and Farid Al Atrash sorrowfully confesses that despite being deprived of his once peaceful nights of sleep, he loves the *azab*, or misery, that comes with loving his beloved. I felt an indelible pang inside me when I heard those lyrics: a resounding noise, unintelligible to the world outside my own skin. The sensation was somewhere between a rippling pulse, a ringing, and a whistling wind. The internal reverberation shook me, as I continued walking across the street. It felt almost too slight a moment for such a poignant disturbance. So miniscule, in fact, it feels extravagant to devote so much time, effort, and thought to recording it now in writing.



Ressala Min Emraa Majhoula (Letter from an Unknown Woman), movie still on television.

Courtesy Mandy Merzaban.

However, the occurrence was significant despite its slightness. It influenced a curve in the trajectory of a Masters project I was working on about Abu Seif's musical film for which 'Azab' was written. Until that point, I had not really considered the role of music in the film's central love story. This was an oversight, of course, but it wasn't until I became aware of what I was avoiding that I could reach this moment of self-reflection. It caused me to question my subjectivity; something I was already consciously doing as part of my research. At the time, I was considering how the subjective experience guides the way we read, relate to, and make provisional connections with the objects we encounter in the world. Thus, in looking at the film, I wanted to see how I could use myself as a research probe to reflect on and inspect the series of encounters I had with *Letter from an Unknown Woman* over the course of five years. The more I watched, read and listened, the more aware I became of my own performance as both a spectator and subject of my inquiry.

Even though Farid Al Atrash is one of the central characters of the film, I had unconsciously avoided listening to his songs for much of my first year of research in 2013. This celebrated Syrian-Lebanese musician is famous for romantic ballads, ruminations on love, both lost and found, and his oud playing. Along with many revered artists of his time, Al Atrash practiced the art of *tarab*, a word that is often translated, somewhat inadequately,

as 'enchantment' or 'bliss'. *Tarab* describes a range of traditional vocal and instrumental approaches in Arabic music through live performances that can last for hours. The art form hinges on intuitive improvisation, with the purpose of inducing a state of bliss in its listeners. Attaining this experience depends on what is termed an exchange of feeling – *tabaddul al-shu'ur* – during a performance. Ethnomusicologist Ali Jihad Racy uses what he calls the 'ecstatic-feedback model' to describe how the audience's verbal and gestural response during such a performance influences the improvisation of the singer and musicians.[2] One such technique that engages listeners is the singer's ability to express the same lyrics differently a multitude of times. How a singer repeatedly enunciates and emphasizes the nuances of words during a performance is what enables the trajectory of a song to vary each time it is performed. The way a singer reads the lyrics they are singing also articulates how she or he subjectively illuminates the words. It is through the singer's reading a new interpretation, or *taswir al-ma'ana*, can be expressed.[3]

In many ways, *tarab* performance depends on the sharing of subjective experience through reading and listening. As the singer reads, the audience listens and while the musicians listen, the audience responds. The common denominator in the experience of *tarab* is being receptive to the movement of the song. In this way, each performance and each experience has a specific biography. Yet, though I was familiar with a selection of Farid's tunes that played in the background of my Canadian childhood, I was unfamiliar with the histories of live *tarab* performance and its emotive facets. In fact, it was my gravitation toward Egyptian actress Lobna Abdel Aziz, who plays the unrequited lover Amal in Abu Seif's film, that led me to focus my research on *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Farid just happened to be there.

Until now, I do not feel that I chose *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (which I will call *Letter* from now on) as my subject of study, since my relationship with the story did not begin with a conscious decision. *Letter* simply stumbled into my life, invoking that fitting kernel of wisdom: you do not choose with whom you fall in love.

2.

Since every love story begins with a first encounter, I should begin by speaking about my experiences with *Letter* as a sequence of unexpected events that began in 2011. Over the course of five years, my relationship with the Abu Seif's 1962 Egyptian film, *Ressala Min Emraa Majhoula*, has been transformed by a series of contingent discoveries that include two other films and an original work of literature, all with the same translated name: *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. My encounters inspired me to begin tracking and recording my provisional observations of these different stories in an effort to see how my relationships with each evolved over time. As a result, what began as a pursuit of one *Letter* turned into an exploration of many.

My first encounter with *Letter* was in the spring of 2011 as my mother watched the Egyptian film on television in Dubai. I did not know its title, so I felt compelled to take photos of the scenes as a way to remind myself to look it up later. By 2013, I had forgotten about my archive of screen shots. Yet, a vague memory of the film crossed my mind as something that might be relevant for an impending Masters project in cultural translation. Although I did not know the name of the film, I did remember the actors, and the premise of story: an unrequited love affair. Two years on, however, my memory of the plot was delicately fragmented as a result of my own forgetfulness and my limitations in comprehending the Arabic dialogue. Considering the fact that my

relationship to Arabic was aural and colloquial, I knew the film would fit the academic assignment but would require an unusual process. Rather than translating words from one language to another based on written literacy, I would translate my aural and visual experience of the film.



Instances of curtains in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.
Courtesy Mandy Merzaban.

With this idea in mind, I decided to revisit *Letter* by translating Lobna Abdel Aziz's voice-over narrations, which appear throughout the film. Working from the few details of the film I could remember, I searched for the Arabic film's title for the first time. In doing so, I had unassumingly fulfilled the intent of the future reminder I planted back in 2011. Shortly after finding the title, I discovered a screening of the film uploaded on to YouTube and finally watched it again. Given my linguistic constraints, I was intrigued by what kinds of activities would be activated. My attempt to translate, as I later tested, came through listening, haphazardly transliterating, looking up Arabic equivalents, using Yamli (an Arabic search engine) a great deal, discussing scenes with Arabic speakers, and taking some poetic license in my writing and interpretation. The exercise forced me to deal with my personal constraints and vulnerabilities with the Arabic language in a way that facilitated different ways of reading.

The story of *Letter* is one that weaves together the past and present of an unrequited love affair. On his 40th birthday, Ahmed Sameh, a famous musician played by Farid Al Atrash, receives an anonymous letter accompanying a bouquet of flowers. Up to this point, an unsigned bouquet was sent to Ahmed on his birthday every year, but this was the first time one had arrived with a letter. As he sits down to read, the voice of Amal (Abdel Aziz) begins to narrate the opening lines. She asks him to read her letter with urgency, and not to simply read her words with his eyes, since his eyes are quick to forget. She asks him, instead, to take her words in with his heart, implying that he should be wary of his own memory. In a series of flashbacks from Ahmed's moment of reading, we are shown various pivotal moments of Amal's life that include her few encounters with

Ahmed during her childhood and adulthood.

Entranced by his music and lifestyle, Amal's love for Ahmed blossomed from afar and persisted into her adulthood. She knew his music and followed his life in magazines and newspapers. A troubled artist, Ahmed's affluence, success, and long string of lovers frequently left him unsatisfied and, as he freely admits, also made him forget the people he had met. One night, as Amal secretly lies in wait for him on the street outside his flat, Ahmed encounters her for what he perceives to be the first time. Amal spends the evening with Ahmed after they get stranded outside of Cairo. In the months that follow, she hears nothing from him and subsequently discovers she is pregnant. She decides to stay silent about the birth of his son, fearing that Ahmed in his forgetfulness would assume she was after his money. As he finishes reading the letter about Amal's experiences, Ahmed's memory begins to stir. Her words manage to connect seemingly disparate moments of his past that cause him to remember. He immediately tries to find her.



Screenshot of Amal and Lisa waking.
Courtesy Mandy Merzaban.

Not long after watching *Letter* in the course of my research, I discovered another film from 1948 carrying the same title. I was fascinated. Set in Vienna at the turn of the century, this *Letter* is a nostalgic ode to a bygone era and a hallmark of distinguished German-Jewish director Max Ophuls' stint in Hollywood post-World War II. The film follows the life of Lisa Berndle, played by Joan Fontaine, and follows her love affair with a famous Viennese pianist named Stefan Brand. Unlike the Egyptian film, Ophuls' film offered me a glimpse into the tragic fate of the unrequited lover. In her opening voice-over narration of the letter, Lisa reveals that by the time

Stefan begins to read she may be dead.

This difficult reality was repeated in my next discovery in late-2013, when my probing led me to unexpectedly stumble on another iteration of the story: a 2004 Mandarin film by actress and director Xu Jinglei. Set in 1948 Beijing, a year prior to the formation of the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong., At the start of the film, the unknown woman, Jiang (Jinglei), says this line: 'To you who never knew me'. It is a haunting declaration that echoes a similar one made in the novella of which all three of these films are based: *Brief einer Unbekannten*, or *Letter from an Unknown Woman* written by popular Austrian poet, biographer and author Stefan Zweig in 1922. *Brief einer Unbekannten* is one of Zweig's many widely translated novellas written over his lifetime and before his self-imposed exile from his beloved Vienna, following Hitler's rise to power in 1933.

Although I discovered Zweig after discovering Max Ophul's Hollywood iteration, I finally picked up a recent translation of Zweig's original work in 2014. Written in an omniscient voice, the story begins when a famous Viennese novelist, known only as 'R', returns to Vienna on his 41st birthday to receive a long, unsigned letter. After the words 'And he began to read', Zweig's omniscient prose stops, and the words of the letter, written in the first person, are copied below it.^[4] Unlike the films, Zweig's text shares the man's intimate act of reading the entire letter with the reader. Thus, the reader's pace and performance is, in a sense, in line with that of the character in the story. It was in this moment of silent reading that I became actively involved in the performance of the story. Clouded by my sequence of experiences with the Arabic film, the English film, and the Mandarin film, the unknown woman of Zweig's story became at times, an amalgamation of Amal, Lisa, Jiang and a faceless character of my own imagination. As a result of my different readings, my perception of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is multi-layered and multi-lingual; each iteration in my mind is in dialogue with another. The title has almost become a new object of sorts, comprising of scenes, words, dialogues and characters I've taken in on screens and pages over the course of five years.

3.

Acting on the personal realizations that came out of my research, I strove to articulate my encounters with these iterations of *Letter* in a way that would make my own subjectivity a relevant tool in my project. I became interested in finding ways to hold on to provisional observations, whether through writing, translating, art-making or documentation, to formulate my own history of, and with, these objects. Since the beginning, I was irked by the storyline of *Letter*, everything from the unknown woman's resolute and obsessive desire for a man who forgets her easily, to the all-too-easy forgiveness of Ahmed's obliviousness at the end of the Egyptian film. However, over time, I found my relationship with the films and novella evolving. Each encounter with the different *Letter* objects produced an alternative reading, which gave way to a provisional curiosity, which in turn inspired a new perception. But how could this constant unfolding of *Letter* be reflected in my research? What does this flux tell us about the nature of our relationships to works of art we encounter? Can reading be considered a kind of performance?

To begin tackling these questions, I must return to the experience in Paris of listening to Farid's song 'Azab', and specifically that poignant verse that caused me to rethink the Egyptian film at the centre of my research



Screenshot of Ahmed, Stefan and Xu Ai-You after reading.
Courtesy Mandy Merzaban.

project. If I consider listening as a kind of reading, it took time for me to realize that my readings of the lyrics were continually changing as I continually listened. This relates to the principles of *tarab* music, as outlined above, which are based on the way a new reading of the lyrics can be expressed through repetition and reiteration. As much as singing and musical improvisation are creative acts in *tarab* performance, 'listening itself is a performative and creative act that is equally important to the construction of the musical experience as the performance of the musicians'.^[5] Even though I was listening to a recorded song, my musical experience was continually being performed through my changing responsiveness.

A similar experience to reading is mentioned in Roland Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text* (1973), where he makes reference to being able to reach a state of bliss through reading that is perhaps similar to the way *tarab* music induces bliss in a listener. The term 'bliss' is also used as a translation for the French term *jouissance*, an intense experience of pleasure. Barthes speaks of *jouissance* and pleasure in relation to activities of reading. He distinguishes between two kinds of texts, the first is readerly which can be pleasurable and the other writerly, a text that invites the reader to partake and be implicated in some way with what is written; to be part of the writing's performance.

It was my thesis supervisor and mentor, Dr. Kate Briggs a translator, artist, and innovative thinker, who drew me to the works of Barthes after my first few *Letter* discoveries as a way to explore my affective experiences. I started with *Camera Lucida* (1980), which inspects a series of photographs through a subjective perspective.



Still from *Body Language Subtitles*, 2015. Video 3:29min.
Courtesy Mandy Merzaban.

He mentions that although photography can be discussed through a broad range of disciplinary lenses in academia – be they sociological, historical or technical – the most basic relationship we have with a photograph is how it personally affects us. When we look at photographs, our affective responses range from average to intense. Barthes refers to the former as *studium*, which produces an 'average affect', while the latter as *punctum*, a sudden 'accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' and is provoked by a small detail, its occurrence varying from person to person.[6]

It is this variation and singularity that offers potential spaces for speculation and inquiry. Barthes postulates: 'I had arrived at a curious notion: why mightn't there be, somehow, a new science for each object? A *mathesis singularis* (and no longer *universalis*)?'[7] This statement offers a way of expanding the parameters of inquiry to consider the peculiarities of objects and our specific relationships with them. These singular and undeniably affective experiences that arise from our interactions with objects of study can open up new areas for reading that may not be as apparent if a more distanced, objective, or generalized thematic approach is used.

In what ways could affective experience inform methodology? One example I encountered was in the book *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social* (2014), a sociological anthology exploring ways to rethink research methods that seek to generalize specific objectives. The chapter on 'Probes' by Kirsten Bohner, William Gaver, and Andy Boucher examines an experimental large-scale project called 'The Presence Project', which was undertaken in part by a group of designers from London's Royal College of Art in the early 2000s. The project's broad ambition was to find ways to engage older people in local communities within several



*The Ribbon, 2015. Watercolour.
Courtesy Mandy Merzaban.*

European cities through the use of technology. To begin thinking about the kinds of technologies that would meet this objective, the designers selected a group of volunteers and observed their personal experiences with technology in their homes. The designers provided the participants with a 'probe packet' that included instructions and items, such as a household routine work pad, a digital memo taker for recounting dreams, and a disposable camera. The intention in selecting these objects was to tap into the curiosities, hopes and dreams of the participants by offering a playful way of extracting information. Each object encouraged participants to engage and reflect intimately, and to a certain degree spontaneously, on various aspects of their life and routine. Whether through writing, speaking, drawing or photography, the content the probes generated would in turn provide the designers subjective maps of each person's singular lifestyle.

The varied responses the designers received 'created a textural understanding of a home... one that was multi-dimensional and shifting depending on the concerns of the

time'.^[8] This facilitated a continual exchange of materials between the designers and their participants. In turn, the content both directly and indirectly inspired the creation of prototypes like the 'Drift Table', an electronic coffee table displaying aerial photography of various locations in the UK. The objects created did not necessarily concentrate on being strictly utilitarian, which many household objects tend to be. The designs were thought provoking, and demonstrated how technology in the home could inspire curiosity, reflection, movement and further engagement outside the home. Crucially, the project was 'not intended to support a process of deducing definite truths about target communities.' Rather, 'the designers aspired to find new and unexpected areas in the space of possible designs'.^[9]

The Presence Project demonstrated how exploring singularities helps facilitate more intuitive designs that relate to affective experience. As a methodology designed to be continually shaped and informed by the subjective responses of participants as well as designers, the approach offers the basis for a research environment in which designs are guided by provisional understandings of highly specific situations. Rather than carving out specific ambitions or concrete objectives, the project shows us how provisionality and uncertainty can be transformed into productive states. The method offers an example of how to utilize the varying ways we read, reflect and respond to a defined set of objects. Might we consider our provisional readings of objects as a kind of a performance in subjectivity? This idea of acknowledging and embracing provisionality leads me back to the ways in which my encounters with the various *Letter* stories acted as a probe that demonstrates how reading is not only provisional, but a kind of performance.

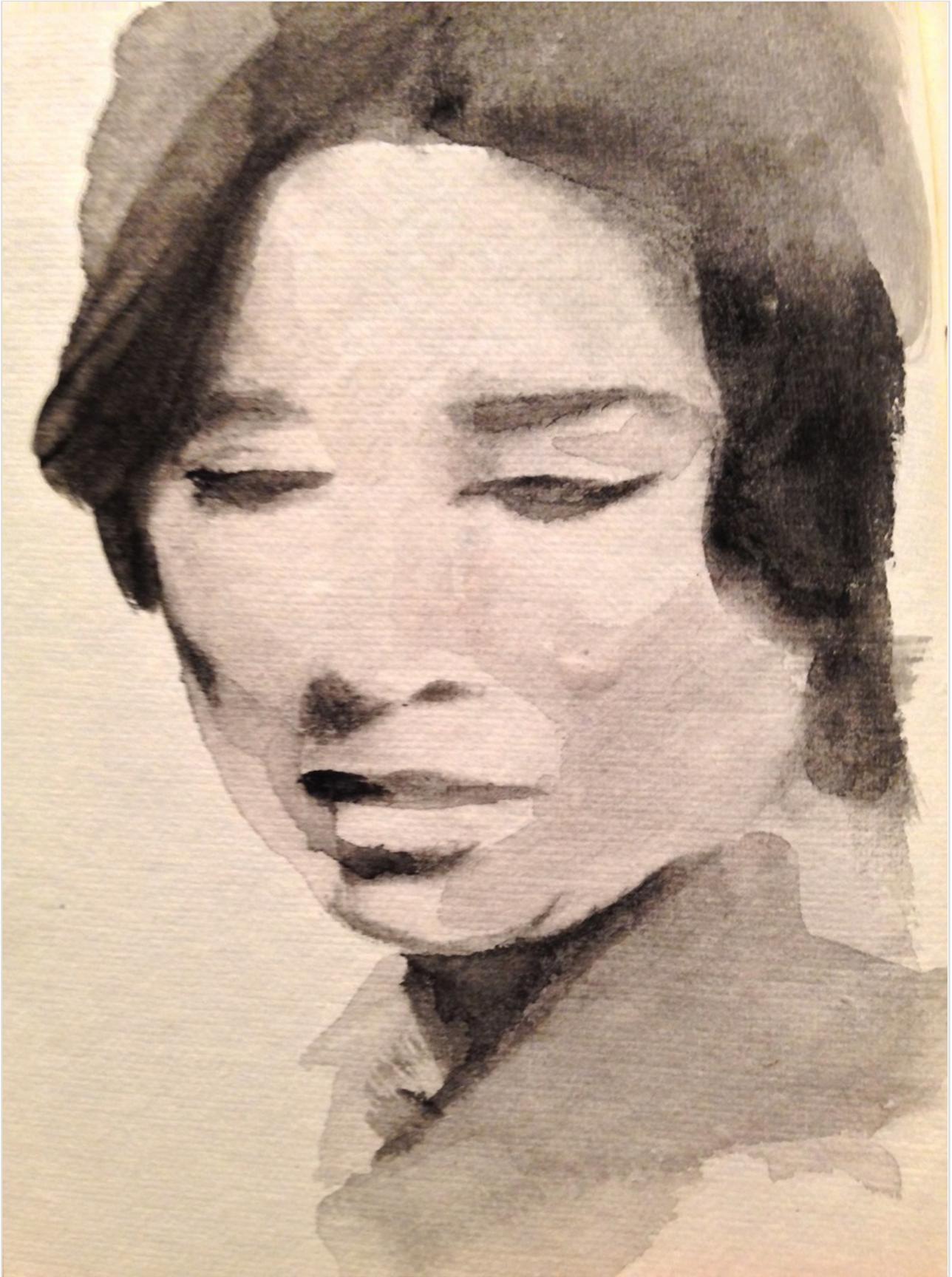
4.

Despite my initial dismissal of Ahmed's character, it was actually through listening to Farid Al Atrash's 'Azab' that I began my readings on the histories of *tarab* music. In a poignant full-circle moment, so to speak, I chanced upon a description during my readings on *tarab* performance that likened its unfolding to Barthes' affective experiences in photography. In his analysis, anthropologist Jonathan Holt Shannon writes, 'repetition of melodic phrases and the overall flow (*sayr*) of the performance establishes the temporal space of the *studium* or contemplation of the performance as a whole'.^[10] In other words, the melodic flow of the entire performance detaches the listener from 'everyday temporalities' and introduces them to another way of perceiving the passage of time. While *punctum*, an intense affective experience provoked by a small detail, can be induced through the introduction of 'novel modulations' in the established flow. It is these 'novel modulations' or changes in the rhythmic flow, such as the way the singer reads lyrics, that influences the listener's experience of a new temporality.^[11]

Thus, as I began my exploration of *Letter* through Barthes' notes on affective experience in *Camera Lucida*, so I found myself turning a corner to find these notes again in a description of *tarab*, where, I suppose, I did not expect to encounter them. I started to realize that *Letter*, in its amalgamated form, was not just about me reading stories about unrequited love, but also about how encountering and reading these love stories were ways of participating in them. As a reader and spectator, my experiences with these works, whether it was through writing, art making, or translating, formed part of the life each iteration had beyond the page or screen.

Returning to the sudden change in my understanding of Farid's musical performance that day in Paris, I was forced into an unexpected moment that reflected on Ahmed's own story arc in *Letter*, itself about unrequited love. I did not realise initially that the other recurring element in the film, aside from Amal's voice-over narrations of her letter, is Ahmed's music. To what extent do Ahmed's lyrics echo Amal's letter? Both alternating threads have each character speaking about the other with a sense of longing, sometimes in very strikingly similar ways. In regards to the music, the masculine form in Arabic is often used as a generic reference in songs, and Ahmed often refers to his beloved as 'him' in the film. Thus, as the song could mean either of the two lovers, 'Azab' seems to cleverly embody Amal's own subjective position as a distressed lover of a man who forgets her. In another song called 'Ishtatilaq', or I miss you, Ahmed performs at the Roman ruins of Baalbek in Lebanon. In what seems to be Amal's reverie as she reads a tabloid magazine story about Ahmed, the viewer is transported to Baalbek as he sings amidst the ruins about a letter he has sent to his lover, which has received no reply. In a way, the songs offer a reflection of Amal and Ahmed's predicament as two lovers who are waiting for the other to recognize them. Both the letter and the lyrics in some way create an overarching discourse between the two, and together they weave an exchange of subjectivities unbeknownst to each lover, yet witnessed by the film's spectators.

Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* offers some insight into the incubated moments of lovers. Arranged as a series of short chapters in alphabetical order, he describes a list of mutable situations a lover often encounters and the inner dialogues that quietly rage within. In his chapter 'Reverberation', which inspired title of this essay, he inspects how the body is a listening device. It is the lover's 'affective consciousness' - their state of being emotionally receptive - that makes them a container for every situation, word, or image that comes from their beloved. Defined as a prolonged or repeated sound, reverberation is often associated with an echo or a



recurring resonance. For Barthes, reverberation is 'the zealous practice of a perfect reception'. He writes that a lover 'cannot keep from hearing everything' and as such experiences a cacophony.^[12] This turns the lover into a monstrous receiver' where listening becomes 'a state of utterance' and 'it is the ear which speaks' to the lover's consciousness.^[13] Thus, if the ear is the mouth and it is speaking to me, then what I see and hear as a reader, listener, and viewer, speaks to me inwardly.

In this case, could it be that I am performing the labour of a lover and thus a 'monstrous receiver?' I discovered, in my developing state of amorous subjectivity, that I was becoming more open to receiving the many letters of *Letter*. By watching, listening, and reading, I embraced love enough to write this unknown lover's discourse.

[1] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Hamilton (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 202.

[2] Jonathan Holt Shannon, *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2006), p. 162.

[3] Shannon *op cit.*, p. 177.

[4] Stefan Zweig, *Letter from an Unknown Woman: And Other Stories*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Pushkin, 2013), p. 7.

[5] Shannon *op cit.*, p. 162.

[6] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Hamilton (London: Vintage, 1981), p. 27.

[7] *Ibid.*, 8.

[8] Kirsten Boehner et al., 'Probes,' in *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social*, eds., Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 192.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 194.

[10] Shannon, *op cit.*, p. 179.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 180.

[12] Barthes (2002), *op cit.*, p. 202.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 202.

TAGS[Film](#)[Music](#)[Sound](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR**Mandy Merzaban**

Mandy Merzaban is an interdisciplinary artist, curator and writer. She is also the founding curator of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, UAE. Currently based in Vancouver, Merzaban is a graduate of the Fine Arts programme at the University of British Columbia and recently completed her MA in Cultural Translation at the American University of Paris.

[FACEBOOK](#)[TWITTER](#)[INSTAGRAM](#)[E-NEWSLETTER](#)[RSS](#)



Initiated by the
Kamel Lazaar Foundation

C
