

**You, Name
a Few
Beautiful Things:
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To look upon the body in pain and in disease is a frightful thing. This is the point of view implied by the male narrator of Forough Farrokhzad's *The House is Black* (*Khaneh siyah ast*) (1962). The film opens with a blackened frame over which this voice (provided by filmmaker Ebrahim Golestan) warns us that we are about to see an image of ugliness. Echoing much of the critical and audience response to *The House is Black* (the only film made by Iran's most important modern poet), the voice suggests we shouldn't have to endure watching such images. Striking forth as a counterpoint to this admonition, the next shot is a medium close-up of a woman looking at herself in a mirror. Leprosy has affected her face, creating valleys of scarred skin and a failing eye that is barely open. Her *hejab* wraps around her hair and across her mouth, leaving the damage to her nose visible. She looks intently at herself, the etched flowers on the mirror running up one side of her face. On the far right, a teapot shares the mantel with the mirror. The woman is framed among these everyday objects, at an oblique angle. Through its composition, camera movement, and placement of the mirror, this shot stages what Fatimah Tobing Rony calls 'the third eye' – the experience of viewing oneself as an object. But the film proceeds to push back against any ethnographic impulse. As we witness the woman's awareness of her participation in this gaze, the male voiceover reverberates. The camera zooms in for a close-up while she continues to look. The ringing warning of ugliness to come, spoken just a moment prior, sits confusingly with the woman's calm, persistent look at her own image.

Forough, as she is known in Iran, travelled to the Bababaghi leper colony near Tabriz under the guise of making a film to increase awareness of leprosy. *The House is Black*, her document of that visit, won several significant international prizes, including the top award at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival. Much of the film's acclaim rests on the notion that Forough took what was too ugly to consider, too horrific to see, and humanised it. She accomplished this, critics suggest, through the use of voiceover, which places her poetry in an unexpectedly intimate relation with the ostensible subject of the film. The male narrator, who speaks with a clinical tone reminiscent of conventional documentary film, is but one of three elements of the film's soundtrack. We also hear Forough herself, relaying verses from her poetry and the Hebrew Bible, and an array of voices and sounds from the colony. Forough's affecting readings dominate the aural track of the film. At times, they offer a solemn commentary on the limits of life in the leprosarium: 'Oh, the time-forgotten one, dressing yourself in red and wearing golden ornaments', she mournfully reads, as another leper woman clumsily applies kohl eyeliner to her bottom eyelid, indifferent to the ways her diseased face resists her attempts to mould it. Elsewhere in the film, the relation between words and images is less congruous. Forough reads verses that evoke the wind, time, animals, desire and restlessness. A sequence depicting a routine lunch of small bowls of rice is accompanied by Forough speaking of taking refuge in the desert. The rhythm of Forough's narration often lags behind the tempo of the cutting. The jarring contrast between the images and Forough's words has been read as key to the film's poetic quality. At the height of her literary powers, nothing was more beautiful than Forough's poetry. How could anything in such close proximity to it not be affected by its splendour?

To read the presence of poetry as central to the film's alleged humanism is to imply that the leper body is not human, whereas poetry is very much human, anchored as it is in the realm of the mind and its capacity to articulate and judge. Poetry, taken as the ultimate expression of the human, is positioned as the farthest thing one can imagine from the diseased body. 'Poetic realism', the category under which *The House is Black* is often subsumed, is thus produced by the proximity of poetry to that which is frightful and real: the body in pain. But the poems do not make the images beautiful or even bearable.

The power of Forough's voiceover emerges from the act of juxtaposition. Via poetry, Forough's own sense of pain and trauma sits beside a space defined by the pain and trauma of others. When Forough repeatedly names the days of the week, her words perform a duet with the images, suggesting that neither she nor the camera brings a neutral eye; they too have been absorbed by the colony. Her voice does not explicate the image; it accents the image with her own experience of internal exile. Despite the positive reception of her work, both during her life and posthumously, Forough wrote often of loneliness and isolation. Her success did not protect her from the misogynist scorn aimed at a divorced woman of letters. Writing about sex and sensuality in the direct voice of the New Poetry movement, she was the object of much undesired attention. In her widely beloved poem, 'Bad ma ra khahad bord' ('The Wind Will Carry Us'), Forough asks, 'Can you hear the darkness howling?/The dark hell wind scything its way towards us?' The narrator of the poem looks behind her shoulder, always thinking of who is watching her. The dark hell wind, like the third eye, is the reminder of one's status as an object. It is the affiliative line from the woman in the mirror to Forough. With *The House is Black*, Forough understands her own experience while recognising the complexity and autonomy of others. The relationship of image to sound often presents contradistinction, as Forough's voiceover rarely narrates the image. When the images and words do cohere, they chime in harmonisation. The images and the poems meet each other in a vital relation of recognition.

The House is Black rejects the conceit of 'humanising'. Here, the third element of the soundtrack – the voices and sounds from the leprosarium – emerges as a participant in the world constructed by the film. Visually, the film displays everyday images: an orderly doling out medicine, men praying at the mosque, a woman nursing a baby. But it sears into our sense memory the indelible sounds that speak the vitality of the leper colony: the raucous drumming and clapping at a wedding celebration, a man's exuberant song-and-dance performed for no one, a child who, when asked to name a few beautiful things, answers, 'moon, sun, flower, playing'. It is an experimental film that gives us an exhilarating sense of the encounter between Forough and the people she met at Bababaghi.

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