



# The Power of Close-ups and the Poetics of Silence: *The House is Black* by Forough Farrokhzad

Mona Monsefi

Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest, Hungary)

E-mail: monsefi.mona@gmail.com

**Abstract.** *The House is Black* is a lyrical documentary by a modernist Iranian poet and filmmaker, Forough Farrokhzad. It is a kind of symbolic visual poem about leper patients of a leprosarium in Iran made in 1962, which transcends time and place. This paper describes the ways in which the emphasis on the human body, references to historical and religious sources, and the use of the Biblical verses replace conventional interviews to create a narrative in the film. Utilizing Gilles Deleuze's concept of affect, the paper analyses the camera's focus on hands and feet, in contrast to absent facial expressions, which engages the audience.

**Keywords:** Forough Farrokhzad, Gilles Deleuze, documentary, human body, Biblical poetry.

*The House is Black* (*Khâne siâh ast*) is a poetic short film made by Forough Farrokhzad (1934–1967), an Iranian author of five poetry books, and one of the most significant early contributors to Iranian cinema, who directed, edited, scripted, and narrated the film herself. The film was shot in 35mm in 1962 inside a quarantined leprosarium in Iran. To write the script for *The House is Black* (from here after *THB*), Farrokhzad took the inspiration from Old Testament poetry for a graceful and melancholic representation of human emotions and particularly human suffering. She recomposed specific verses that fit into the narrative of the film, such as Job 10:20 and Job 16:16, which represent death. Moreover, leprosy itself is a repeated theme in the Bible, and so are the miracles performed by Jesus to heal the leper patients.

*THB* is packed with extremely disturbing close-up images of the faces, hands, and feet of patients and there is an absence of conventional elements of documentaries such as interviews. The damage done by leprosy to the faces had deprived most of the patients of the ability to express emotions, therefore,

in addition, images of hands and feet are meticulously selected and arranged in a way to make up for this issue. This essay focuses on the close-up images of the faces, hands and feet of the patients, and the philosophical, religious, and symbolic meanings of these images that help develop a narrative for the residents of this place. It also focuses on the importance of the use of the Biblical verses for such a creative documentary.

## Introduction

*THB* was commissioned to Studio Golestan by a charity organization called Behkade, under Queen Farah Pahlavi's supervision. Studio Golestan gave this opportunity to Farrokhzad who by then was an established poet and was already an employee of that studio (Pahlavi 2004, 142–143). Farrokhzad did not have an academic education in cinema but, as Gholam Heidari explains, she was mentored and trained by Ebrahim Golestan (the owner, writer, editor, and producer in Studio Golestan). She later took filmmaking and editing courses in England, financed by Studio Golestan in 1959 and later in 1961 (Heidari 1998, 19).

*THB* was created after Farrokhzad had already edited and co-directed various films by Studio Golestan such as the trilogy of *Wave*, *Coral*, and *Granite* in 1962 for the Iranian oil company. She also edited *A Fire* in 1961 with Golestan prior to *THB*. Farrokhzad's training in film editing and her skills in poetry make a fine conceptual match for *THB*. Her attention to detail in *THB* is found in every single frame, particularly the frames with still portrait-like close-ups of the faces affected by leprosy.

In *THB*, close-ups of the adult patients achieve various effects including the development of the sense of empathy. In contrast, the cheerful faces of children intensify the stone-like faces of others. The viewers become uncomfortable, not only because of looking at the visible ravages of the illness on the patients' bodies, but also because of the inexpressive faces of the patients. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (1999, 249) explain that conventionally the role of the face in cinema is to give information, convey or hide emotions and send conversational signals, accordingly, a face appears as a complex and ever-changing surface. The absence of facial expressions in *THB* causes confusion in the viewers because it also goes against the natural human reaction to seeing someone else's face. Humans search for clues in each other's faces and respond accordingly, sometimes accompanied with empathy. The term for this state is facial feedback. Facial feedback according to Plantinga is about physically mimicking the emotions of somebody (Plantinga

and Smith 1999, 243). The close-ups of *THB* are quite long and cause the viewers to experience several phases. First, there is the shock of seeing the grotesque faces. Then, the viewers begin searching for clues to be able to understand the person portrayed in the shot by looking for micro expressions or any kind of expressions at all. In the absence of expressions, they look for external clues such as narration, any words by the person, diegetic sounds or even music to interpret the image, but none of them exist in these shots and there is still time left to look at the images. The viewers can interpret the shots based on their own experiences and create their own narrative. The mental effort to produce a narration to comprehend the images makes the viewer an active contributor to the narrative. Moreover, in such dynamics, instead of only one voice, (typically the narrator or the interviewees), multiple virtual voices (of every single viewer) are created for the image. The patients narrate their stories through their bodies, everyday lives, and their routines.

The Iranian critic Shamim Bahar (1994), criticizes the lack of information in *THB*, and finds scenes of animals, children playing, or people eating ineffectively. He suggests that in *THB* “the ugliness” is used for the “sake of ugliness” and does not bring up emotions in the audience (Bahar 1994, 106–109). Bahar fails to recognize that *THB* is in fact about the everyday lives of the patients, and their never-changing routines. *THB* is not about one place or one group of people but represents those who are locked in a space (physically, culturally, or otherwise), and dissociated from their worlds.

The use of the human face as the means of carrying messages of empathy is explained by the expression “scene of human empathy.” According to Plantinga and Smith, the human face is central in cinema, as facial gestures go back to the prelinguistic era and could be internationally recognized. It is used when the narrative slows down and focuses on close-ups of a character and brings out the interior emotional experience of the character. Then, during a single frame, long duration or POV, there are alternations between the close-ups of the characters and what they are seeing to bring out emotion in the spectator (Plantinga and Smith 1999, 239). These still and portrait-like images have a minimum of movement and maximum of impact. This is especially helpful in a documentary, where there are no actors, and the non-actor characters may feel uncomfortable in front of the camera, especially when in the case of *THB*, their bodies are deformed due to an illness.

Nasser Saffarian cites Hushang Golmakani, another Iranian film critic, who believes that “poetic sentences [the poetic script] are an indication of the hesitation of the filmmaker in the effectiveness of her images and are used to amplify or

complete the feeling of the scenes” (Saffarian 2002, 261). Golmakani failed to grasp the importance of these “poetic sentences” and the connection Farrokhzad established in *THB* between poetry and cinema. Golmakani further explains that “because she [Farrokhzad] was a poet, she wanted to create a poetic work but the images themselves were poetic” (Saffarian 2002, 265). The poetic images, as recognized by Golmakani, and the poetic script of *THB* generate emotions in the viewers. Farrokhzad masterfully provokes the viewers by creating feelings such as repulsion by showing gruesome depictions of the patients’ illness, turned to a sense of empathy after learning about them.

*THB* is not a silent film, but the director deliberately does not interview the subjects. Words of uneducated poor patients cannot express their agony, and therefore, Farrokhzad let the shock of the close-ups of their faces do the talking. When necessary, she let the divine words of the Bible match the images of this film. It is hard to imagine a better way to show the images of forgotten people who have no voice, than to be complemented by the eternal Biblical words, recomposed by Farrokhzad herself. This contrast empowers the narrative in *THB*. The stories that the script represents can transcend time, place, and cultures, just like the Biblical verses.

## The Bold Presence of Camera in *THB*

Several distinguished Western films from 1950s to 1970s, around the birth time of *THB*, make their viewers aware of the tangible presence of camera. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), and Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960), for example, present the most dramatic scenes of their stories through the viewfinder of cameras within the represented space (film camera in *Peeping Tom* and photography camera in *Rear Window*). At some point in both films, cameras themselves become literal weapons used by their owners. Their roles evolve from mechanical objects, transformed into a threatening presence that actively gets involved in the action that they are expected to record. In *Peeping Tom*, the cinematographer attaches a knife to the camera to kill a woman who is the subject of his photograph and, in *Rear Window*, when the protagonist is in danger by an intruder, he sets off the camera’s flashbulbs repeatedly to temporarily blind the intruder and escape. These two films are samples of the popular cinema of *THB*’s era: they present the immense fascination with, and the influence of the camera as a capable mechanical object that absorbs narratives, internalizes it, and then projects it on the screen for the viewers to see.

Regarding the power of the camera, *Peeping Tom*, for example, portrays an intrusive presence of the camera as an inspector rather than a narrator. It steps beyond the conventional boundaries by following the characters of the film intimately. The extreme close-ups of the wounded body parts in *THB* build up anxiety in the viewer the same way the viewer feels anxiety as the camera enters the personal space around a female character in *Peeping Tom*. The close-ups in these films disregard the space between us and the images, a space that we are accustomed to, which ends up putting pressure on the viewer.

Likewise, in *THB*, the camera is disturbingly close to the subjects to a point that makes the viewer uncomfortable. In *THB*, in a scene from a clinic inside the leprosarium, when a doctor is examining one of the patients, the camera nearly goes inside the patient's mouth showing an extreme close-up of the patient's and the doctor's faces [Fig. 1]. This may remind the viewer of *The Big Swallow* (1901) by James Williamson, a British silent era short film that shows the interaction between the camera and the subject in a similar way. Williamson uses extreme passive close-up when the subject of inspection, the protagonist, opens his mouth as he gets exceedingly close to the camera and then a darkness appears, which suggests that the subject protagonist swallows the camera. Correspondingly, in the shot from the clinic in *THB*, the camera gets an extreme close-up of the inside of the patient's mouth by actively approaching the patient. The camera tries to show the inside of the patient's body through the mouth, the dark inner part. In the scene from Williamson's film, the camera does not move away and is overpowered by the subject. In contrast, Farrokhzad's scene from *THB* allows the camera to have power over the subject and approach the patient intimately. This camera movement suggests the helplessness of the subject. In all these examples, the camera is meddling in the narration, using its power to influence the viewer. But it is not only the power of the images that is influential, the power of the accompanying text is also critical.

During the times that the camera is less forward, the words take over. In a sequence when the camera is showing the faces of several men and a girl sitting against a wall, the narrator (the voice of Farrokhzad herself) recites a recomposed verse from the Bible as follows: "for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. [...] My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed" (Psalms 139: 14–16, Coogan et al. eds. 2010, 886).<sup>1</sup> This passage

1 The English translations of the Bible are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 2010 edition.

could be interpreted that the speaker's deepest secrets were not hidden from God and were exposed when God was looking at them. There is a visual analogy here that shows a similarity between the dominant role that the camera plays, penetrating the patient's mouth, and the role of God who is capable of the same thing. In the scenes from *THB* in which the camera is dominant, it plays a God-like role in its relationship with the characters.

The use of this verse becomes even more cinematic when the narrator of the film says, "in your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed." Here there is a resemblance between this passage and any film script, in which the creator or the writer uses the power of words to "form" a being that has not "yet existed."

## **Faces, Hands, Feet in the Context of Affect**

In *Early Film Theory* (2010), Béla Balázs discusses the role of the printing press that changed the visual culture into a conceptual culture. Then, cinematography turned this culture back to a visual one and made the same cultural impact as the printing press, since this innovative technology is also capable of multiplying the products of the human mind (Balázs 2010, 9). Farrokhzad, as a poet and a visual artist, was aware of the power of words and images, and in *THB*, she blended the powerful words of the Bible and the intense images of the leper patients.

Balázs explains that the first cultural turn from visual to print empowered words to connect human beings to one another, but made the soul invisible. The soul moved to words and the human body became empty. Therefore, the human face and occasionally hands become a minimal surface to express the soul (Balázs 2010, 10). Farrokhzad's *THB* is her attempt to put the soul back into the body by avoiding focusing only on the faces and instead employing hands and feet to show the souls. The way Farrokhzad portrays her poetic film is in fact a return to the first manifestations of culture through visual effects. The choice Farrokhzad made about making her film characters silent creates minimalistic statues, characters whose bodies can express their souls. Even fragments of these bodies are expressive as seen in the illustration of a doctor and a patient on a simple white background and a perfect composition in the scene from the clinic. This shot from *THB* is reminiscent of Rodin's statues of hands that reveal the souls of the characters behind them [Fig. 2].

The illustration of these hands portrayed in the film is a mimesis of the invisible souls in all their glories. This illustration is what Balázs is longing for.

He says that “the back of a headless Greek torso always reveals whether the lost face was laughing or weeping – we can still see this clearly” (Balázs 2010, 10). A great example for this argument by Balázs could be seen in *Hands: The Life and Loves of the Gentler Sex* (*Hände: Das Leben und die Liebe eines Zärtlichen Geschlechts*, 1927–28) by Stella F. Simon and Miklós Bándy. In this silent short film, the story is narrated by portraying dancing human hands and intertitles. The hands masterfully represent *pars pro toto* the human bodies that are out of sight. In the absence of human faces, the hand gestures redefine the feelings that the viewers are accustomed to.

Balázs, who authored his book during the period of early cinema when the films were still silent, expresses hope that cinema as a new form of visual culture that has limited words only to intertitles can retrain the human beings to remember the “long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions” (Balázs 2010, 10–11). Farrokhzad in *THB* breathes life into the forgotten bodies of leper patients in the same way in which she gives life to the characters of her poems.

One of the most noticeable elements of this film is the lack of emotions in the patients’ faces [Fig. 3]. It is not possible to say if it is because of the damaged nerves of the faces, a request by the director, or simply a result of living a tormented life. In place of stone-like faces, the hands and feet take the role of addressing emotions and bringing them to attention. The importance of hands and feet are linked to Middle Eastern religious and cultural traditions but can also be explained by a philosophical approach to visuality and cinema.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze pulled several disciplines of humanities such as cinema, literature, and fine arts together through his philosophical approaches to them. One of his most celebrated terms is affect, a philosophical concept first used by Baruch Spinoza. Affect can take different meanings in different disciplines. Deleuze’s definition of affect is not about an individual person or object, but it is a complex entity that is expressed in relation to something else. For example, the relation between a face or an equivalent of a face to a role or a character. Even though affects are not individuated, yet they do not blend into their environment (Deleuze 1997, 103). The shape of Deleuze’s affect can be described in terms of a spider web. The affect is the centre of the web, which is the centre of attention and stays out, but only because it is a meeting point of several radials holding on to the centre of the web. Deleuze’s affects are “their own ideal singularities and their virtual conjunctions” (Deleuze 1997, 102) and the affect is made of endless singularities meeting in virtual conjunctions (Deleuze 1997, 102).

For example, *Pickpocket* (1959) by Robert Bresson is an iconic film in which the hands of the protagonist are the centre of the film, the protagonist is the aggregate of several roles in one body. What stands out in *Pickpocket* as well as *THB* is that the characters lack facial expressions and, in the absence of emotions, their bodies, specifically the hands and feet become the central elements to communicate. In both films, hands are deliberately displayed and engaged in a way to express feelings. In *THB*, for instance, the many shots of hands, from the low-angled single frame of a woman's hands in the clinic to the hands of men praying in the same sequence are integrated so perfectly into the narration that without such shots the narrative could not move forward.

The centralized roles of hands and feet replacing the expressions of faces and assisting the creation of emotions in *THB* are the expressions of what Deleuze calls affect. In this film the human body becomes the centre of the narration to deliver the emotion because it is acting as the equivalent of a face. Even though the role of the human body stands out, as explained by Deleuze, this centralized affect in *THB* is the conjunction of several factors such as poverty, illness, social status, religion, culture, and many others. The human body stands for emotions. The human body is where all these factors join each other.

Deleuze argues that “the pure affect, the pure expression of the state of things in fact relates to a face which expresses it (or to several faces, or to equivalents, or to propositions)” (Deleuze 1997, 103). It is important to notice that, in Farrokhzad's film, the deliberate use of stone-like close-ups of faces as opposed to the many close-ups of the hands makes us understand what Deleuze means by the equivalent of faces for showing affect. Two of the best examples from *THB* that are about presenting hands and giving them active roles and applying meaning to them are the previously mentioned woman's hands from the clinic as well as two religious flags that flow down from two decorative metal open-palmed hands above. Open-palmed hands have symbolic meaning in Middle Eastern culture. According to Amira Sonbol, hands represent “the giving of blessing, the exchange of affection and the transfer of power” (2005, 354).

In the first example, the woman who is being treated is shown from a low angle that shows the hands in the foreground and the face in the background. The hands are placed on a glass and the camera is under the glass to help the viewer see their movements. These shots are part of the clinic sequence. There are weights added on the back of the hands as a way of physiotherapy to open the curled nerves and force the patient's hands open [Fig. 4]. As the weights are added there are gradual movements of the hands until they reach a satisfactory stage. The curled palms of



her hands are visible, and they gradually open until they become similar to the open palms of the hands above the flags. Another analogy can be the wounded hands of Jesus in the Bible. What the viewer witnesses here is a replacement for micro-expressions of the faces and transferring these expressions to the hands to create a sense of empathy and hope. In the first shot of this woman, both the face and the hands are visible. In the final shot of this character, the viewer who has become engaged in this progress can barely see any part of the woman's face because it is covered by the weights and hands and then the hands become the centre of the narrative. Even though the viewers cannot see the facial expressions, they can feel the sense of empathy and achievements as looking at fingers of the hands completely extended. The hands overcome the shot and take on the role of a face. This scene can also imply a sense of hope which was the primary reason for this film commissioned by a charity organization to raise funds for the patients. This woman's story is told in just a few shots without any interview. Similar to this scene from *THB*, Tilly Losch in *Dance of the Hands* (1930) by Norman Bel Geddes expresses her story and emotions primarily through her hands. Her face is always portrayed in the background, behind her foregrounded hands, with her eyes closed. The background and her clothes are dark only to intensify the role of the only visible parts of her body, her hands and face. Her face first appears in the first shot with a net pattern over it, behind a close-up of Losch's hands, which highlights the importance of the role of her hands. Eventually, in the final shot, her hands take over her face and body as also seen from the scene of the woman from the clinic. Deleuze says, "it is the face – or the equivalent – which gathers and expresses the affect as a complex entity and secures the virtual conjunctions between singular points of this entity" (1997, 103).

The hands as an active element of affect appear not only in *THB*, but also in Farrokhzad's poetry. In the poem, *Another Birth*, from the book with the same name, Farrokhzad presents hands personified as plants that can grow on their own: "I plant my hands in the garden / I will grow green, I know I know, I know / and in the hollow of my ink-stained fingers / swallows will lay eggs" (Farrokhzad 2010, 111; translated by Susan Sallee and Hasan Javadi).

The hands in this stanza represent the entire body of the speaker of the poem and promote hope for the future and a resurrection. In this stanza and the scene from the clinic, described earlier, in *THB*, the characters' hands are the protagonists which render perceptible the otherwise missing narratives of the patients. Farrokhzad employs this effective way of showing dynamics that reveal the complexity of the patients' issues and uniquely narrate their stories.

Another such illustration of hands is from the previously mentioned prayers' room that shows two flags with two metal hands on top. In this scene, the camera starts tilting downwards following the folds of the flags until it reaches a man who is laying his face on the end of the flag with his hand in the foreground [Figs. 5–6]. It is one of the rare occasions when camera movement is exhibited. The downward movement of the viewpoint in this religious scene presents a different outcome than the previously described scene of the woman in the clinic. For the woman from the clinic scene, the displaying of the hands and their visible recovery due to the medical aids advocate scientific attainment and therefore hope. In that single-frame low-angled scene, the camera is making the woman and her hands who is getting medical treatments the central theme. This is where humans and science are joined to display a healing force.

On the other hand, in the prayers' room, when the camera looks down from the hands above the flags to the man who is praying, the elevated perspective in this high angled scene suggests having faith in a greater power and a divine intervention. The most thought-provoking thing about these two scenes is that they are part of a sequence that juxtaposes the clinic scene, a scientific location and the prayers' room. The logic behind contrasting these two scenes may refer to the filmmaker's opinion about religious belief as opposed to science. Another interpretation could be that the hard medical approach to this illness does not give the desired results without concerning the emotional needs and psychological well-being of the patients.

In another scene from the prayers' room, there are two shots followed by a prayer when a patient recites a prayer that says, "I submit my being to you, O God, and turn my face towards thine and leave my affairs to thy command and leave my fate between your hands." A patient is shown with his amputated hands raised, and then, in the next shot, the recovering woman from the clinic with the weights on both her hands. This is a significant scene in *THB* because it shows the unique way Farrokhzad chose to illustrate the cultural and religious aspect of this community or even, symbolically, a whole class of the Iranian community of the time. Praying to God, asking to put their fate "between God's hands," followed by the actual treatment the woman is receiving from the doctors for her hands makes the viewers think.

Another important religious example from the same sequence is the doctors cleaning the wounds on the feet of the patients. Taking into consideration that the entire transcript revolves around Biblical texts, doctors and nurses who are in white coats, seem to metaphorically perform some divine acts, as seen

in scriptures when Jesus heals the leper patients or washes his disciples' feet. Meanwhile, to amplify this idea, once again the focus of these scenes is on the hands of the doctors, some wearing white gloves, placed in the foreground.

According to Deleuze, affects are power qualities that can be looked at in two ways, regardless of their internal involvements. One aspect of the power quality is embedded and featured in states of things as connected to a specific space and time. This dimension of affect "is essential to the action-image and to medium-shots" since these shots represent things connected in space or time. In its other aspect or dimension, affect has its own "ideal singularity," which allows it to create "virtual conjunctions" with or between other things. This "other dimension constitutes the affection-image or the close-ups" (Deleuze 1997, 103), in which the viewer can understand the affective state of the individual even without the immediate context.

## **Representation of the Body in Different Types of Shots**

There are three recognizable types of shots in *THB* that address affection. First, there are the extreme close-ups that have been described. In these shots, affection is addressed through the affection-image by showing the close-ups of the body parts presented in shots such as the clinic sequence. Second, there are medium shots that are minimalistic but allow more of the body to be visible. In these examples the viewer can see some actions that are done by the subjects such as the men who are praying and holding books in their hands in the sequence from the prayers' room. A medium shot makes it possible for the camera to add some more information to the scene, while it is still focusing on the main issue, the leper patients' bodies. The last groups of shots are long shots shown in the action-images, altering the balance between bodies and their surroundings that show the subjects in relation to their environment. For example, a woman combing a girl's hair, young men playing some form of board game, or musicians playing instruments at a wedding.

In most scenes from *THB*, when the face close-ups are not shown, medium shots of the characters are presented. These waist-up shots show the patients' spatial relationships to each other and to their environment. These medium shots also allow the characters to show their arms or hands in the film. This is crucial, as these body parts are employed to push the narrative of the film forward. The amputated hands of the man that are raised for praying is an example for such emphasis. Considering the importance of hands in this narrative, the lack

of emotions and facial expressions in the face close-ups is understandable. Expressions on the faces, emphasized by close-ups, could have pushed out or overpowered the importance of the body, including hands.

Farrokhzad also employs a few powerful long-shots that turn to medium-shots and eventually, extreme passive-close-ups when the subjects approach the camera. One example is from the treatments of the patients, when two patients approach the camera in a hallway while the camera is disturbingly still. Such scenes that create the feeling of interaction with the subjects are confrontational and provoke a response in the audience. This kind of reaction is remembered from early cinema, famously seen in *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1896) by the Lumière brothers. Although it was not an intentional decision by the filmmakers, the audience felt that the moving train could come close and hit them. Farrokhzad intentionally used similar psychological effects to engage her audience in the plot. The early cinema audience who did not have the knowledge of how the cinema works or the experience of being exposed to large scale moving pictures found the approach of the train towards them overwhelming, invasive, and startling. The same feeling is aroused in a much-experienced audience of *THB* when in a scene showing physiotherapy of the residents, one of the patients is paddling a device designed to engage the leg muscles.

In this scene, the camera is on the floor, directly in front of the affected feet of the patient and as he paddles, his feet get away from the viewer and come back again approaching the viewer. The paddling feet are so close to the edge of the frame that the distance between the viewer and the subject is nearly eliminated. This shot is followed by showing only the feet of a patient walking with the help of another resident in a close-up from the same camera angle and position and in the same hallway. They approach the camera to a point that they cover the entire frame until there is complete darkness. This confrontation of the viewer with the treatment first and a patient under treatment being able to walk in the next shot could be the reason behind these series of images. This once again puts the principal body parts of this documentary (hands and feet) in the foreground and makes them interact with the viewers.

In another major scene, presenting the third type of shot, a long-shot of a patient walking with crutches due to an amputated leg, takes about forty-five seconds. In this scene, the patient walks towards the threshold of a room, where the camera is waiting for him. While approaching, the long shot eventually turns into an extreme close-up of his body that takes over the camera and creates an absolute darkness. In this scene, the outlook that the camera offers to the viewers

is breached by the approach of the patient. Moreover, here, there are two frames, one inside of the other. The camera's viewfinder that is the primary frame, is placed inside a room showing the threshold of the room, which works as the second frame. Doors, windows, mirrors, eyes, or even gravestones are examples of frames in Farrokhzad's poetry that can be compared to the viewfinder of the camera. Consequently, when she introduces any open frame in her poems, the reader can only envision what is displayed within that opening. For example, the last stanza of *I will Greet the Sun Once Again* from her book *Another Birth* resembles the above-mentioned shot, where the camera is waiting for the patient at the threshold: "I arrive, I arrive, I arrive /And the threshold is filling up with love / And I, on the threshold, will greet again those who love / And will greet again the girl who is still there, / Standing in the threshold filled with love" (Farrokhzad 2003, 297).

Apart from visual similarities in this poem and this scene regarding the use of frames, one could also draw similarities between the use of repetition in her poetry and film. One of the techniques that Farrokhzad used to put her signature on her poems is repetition. In the same poem, when the poet says, "I arrive, I arrive, I arrive," the repetition is used as a device to create an illusion of extended time. Then she continues, "and will greet again the girl who is still there/Standing in the threshold filled with love." Using the adverb "still" and the gerund "standing" adds further depth to this sensation of the immobility of time.

Farrokhzad employed a similar method to extend the time in *THB*, in the forty-five-second-long scene of the man with crutches. This is the longest shot of the film, where the audience hears the repeated sound of the crutches that get louder as he approaches the camera. Then he arrives at the threshold, where the camera (and the woman behind the camera) is patiently waiting for his arrival to greet him, which is similar to the poem. The speaker of this poem comes towards a threshold where it is filled with love by a girl who is "still" waiting for him to greet him again.

These two examples display two opposite perspectives. In the poem, the speaker announces his own arrival. In the film, on the other hand, it is the camera that has the active role and shows the man's arrival. This is not unexpected, as in *THB*, the camera is an active participant that can invade personal spaces or stubbornly stay in the way of its subjects. In this scene as well, the camera stays still, and the man comes so close that his body merges with the camera until the picture turns black. For six seconds in absolute darkness, the viewer continues hearing the crutches that create a repetition that continues the illusion of extended time.

This scene is inserted between two sequences, each six seconds. First, a young boy who is happily playing runs towards the camera, crossing the comfortable distance between the viewer and the camera, similar to the next scene. In the next scene, the man with the crutches is shown while the voice over (Farrokhzad) recites verses recomposed from Jeremiah 8:20, followed by Isaiah 59:9, ending in “we wait for light and darkness reigns,” continued by six seconds of darkness overlapped by the voice of another child from a classroom sequence. This child reads from a study book, “Venus. Sometimes at twilight we see a bright star. The name of this star is Venus.” He recites a hopeful message, promising a “bright star” at the end of a “twilight.”

The scene of the man who walks between two rows of dry trees by the sides of the road creates contrasting imageries in two ways. First, all the trees and the wooden crutches that are standing overemphasize the missing leg of the patient. Second, the cheerful and hopeful children overwhelmingly contrast the darkness from the man’s image and the verses from the Bible. In this example, everything from using close-up of a missing limb, the use of Biblical verses, and Farrokhzad’s own techniques of poetry, come together to accompany the clever use of framing in order to tell the story of this leprosarium.

*The House is Black* is visual poetry that shares many elements, themes, and styles with Farrokhzad’s poems. Amongst them, the importance of frames, human body, references to historical and religious sources, and the use of repetition stand out. This is the way Farrokhzad used a camera instead of a pen to create poetry.

## Conclusion

The script of *THB* is creative writing that connects the text to the visual effects of the images to tell a story of human suffering. The strategic use of melancholic verses of the Bible, recomposed in a poetic way for the script, contrasts with the voicelessness of the patients. The universally familiar and timeless Biblical narratives lend power to the forgotten residents of the leprosarium. Moreover, in the absence of the patients’ voices and facial expressions, and the impact of the images of human body help carry the message of the film. For this purpose, the close-ups of the patients’ bodies not only create a shocking reaction in the audience, but the ways of presenting these images also make the audience active participants in this film. One major way to create the participatory sensation is the use of camera as an independent agent that adds another layer to a short documentary.

Farrokhzad provokes the audience's senses to broach many social, psychological, and emotional subjects as well as in order to achieve the ultimate reason for making the film, raising funds for the leprosarium.

## References

- Bahar, Shamim. 1994. *Khâne siâh ast [The House is Black]*. *Naqd-e Sinemâ* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring): 106–109.
- Balázs, Béla. 2010. *Béla Balázs. Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film*. Edited by Erica Carter. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Coogan, Michael D. et al. eds. 2010. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: with the Apocrypha: an Ecumenical Study Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1997. *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Farrokhzad, Forough. 2010. *Another Birth & Other Poems*. Washington: Mage Publishers.
- Farrokhzad, Forough. 2003. *Majmu' -e âsâr-e Forough Farrokhzad [The Complete Collection of Forough Farrokhzad's Poetry]*. Tehran: Našr Negâh.
- Heidari, Gholam. 1998. *Forough Farrokhzad va Sinema [Forough Farrokhzad and Cinema]*. Tehran: Našr 'Elm.
- Pahlavi, Farah. 2004. *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah; a Memoir*. New York: Miramax.
- Plantinga, Carl and Greg M. Smith, eds. 1999. *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Saffarian, Naser. 2002. *Âye-hâye âh [Verses of Alas]*. Tehran: Našr Ruznegar.
- Sonbol, Amira. 2005. *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

## List of Figures

**Figure 1.** The camera nearly goes inside the patient's mouth. **Figure 2.** A shot reminiscent of Rodin's statues of hands.



**Figure 3.** The lack of emotions in the patients' faces. **Figure 4.** Weights added on the back of the hands.



**Figures 5–6.** The camera starts tilting downwards following the folds of the flags until it reaches a man who is laying his face on the flag.

