CHAPTER 6

Affective Listening, Sonic Intimacy, and the Power of Quiet Voices in Rakhshan Banietemad's *The May Lady*: Towards a Cinema of Empathy

Laudan Nooshin

INTRODUCTION

In one of the opening scenes of *Bānu-ye Ordibehesht* (*The May Lady*, 1998), the central protagonist, documentary filmmaker Forugh Kia, travels with her film crew from the affluent north of Tehran to the poorer south of the city. This affluence is marked in the establishing shots of modern apartment blocks and building sites, indexing the opening up of the economy in the 1990s, following more than a decade of austerity and war, all set against the imposing backdrop of the Alborz mountains to the north. But not everyone has benefited from economic recovery. As the car journeys south, it approaches a set of stop lights and we see street children from the provinces dodging the traffic in an attempt to reach the occupants of temporarily stationary vehicles in order to sell their wares. One group crowds around Forugh's front passenger seat window, and she asks where they are from and why they are not in school, finally urging them to move out of the way for their own safety as the lights turn green. This short scene establishes Forugh as an empathetic presence, something that is reinforced in the course of the film, and which is most obviously marked through the act of listening, and in particular a kind of empathetic listening that will be explored in this chapter. As Forugh continues on her journey, the social divide (crudely conceived as between north and south) is marked both visually by the more traditional, low-lying mud and brick architecture, and sonically by the more open acoustic of spaces without high-rise architecture, and by the regular overhead sounds of airplanes, marking the area of Tehran close to the (until 2007) international Mehrabad airport. Forugh

and her team arrive at the filming location and we see them filming a group of children, as Forugh asks them what they want to be when they grow up. This elicits a range of responses—teacher, engineer, lawyer, actor, filmmaker, and finally, as everyone's gaze is drawn by the camera to firstly the sounds and then the image of a plane overhead, pilot. The contrast between these aspirations and the enormous obstacles that stand in the way of these children achieving their ambitions is marked by a quality of attentive listening and empathy that sets the tone for the whole film and that is communicated through Forugh's performative act of empathetic listening. There is a great deal in this opening sequence that speaks to Banietemad's concern with social justice and inequality. In particular, the car journey and the sounds of the planes reinforce the contrast between Forugh with her social and physical mobility, and the children who are largely trapped in the cycle of poverty that successive governments have failed to tackle. This contrast is made even more stark in the scene that follows, as Forugh returns to her comfortable (north Tehran) apartment and has dinner with her teenage son, Mani, who she feels takes his many social privileges for granted.

This chapter explores the act of listening in *The May Lady* and attends both to what the characters in the film listen to, and to what that listening means. I am particularly interested in how the act of listening lays bare aspects of the materiality of sound that have, by and large, been under-theorized and often overlooked in the literature on Iranian cinema with its almost exclusive focus on the visual. Despite the centrality of sound to the post-1979 film aesthetic, most obviously in arthouse cinema, an almost fetishist preoccupation with the visual and other dimensions, such as political and social commentary, has largely obscured the role of sound and, by extension, the labor of sound engineers and sound designers. But what might an attention to sound reveal about the work of Banietemad, and in particular the kinds of message that lie hidden within the sonic? This chapter will explore these questions with specific reference to a single case-study film, *The May Lady*, in which sound plays a strategically central role. I focus on three interrelated themes, outlined as follows. First and foremost, *The May Lady* is a film about *listening*, both physically and metaphorically, about who listens to whom and who has the authority to listen and to be listened to. Through Forugh's performative act of listening, the audience is invited to pay attention to the voices of the women from all walks of life that she interviews and films. Indeed, the structure of the film itself amplifies these through a kind of "double listening" as we listen to Forugh listening. Further, Forugh's authority and position as a respected professional are largely marked through the ways that her colleagues and others listen to her. However, *The May Lady* goes beyond the purely metaphorical deployment of female voice as a symbol of agency and actively foregrounds the intensely material and embodied sounds of women to an extent rarely heard before in Iranian cinema. Alongside the questions above,

then, the chapter asks what kinds of subjectivity are engendered through the foregrounding of such voices? The tendency to fetishize the visual, both on the part of censors and among scholars, has left the empowering potential of sound largely unacknowledged. Drawing on a range of literature, on the voice in cinema and on voice as a site of female agency, I examine how the purely sonorous material qualities of the spoken voice, such as timbre, texture, and contour—often presented as being outside of referential meaning—in fact communicate a great deal to the listener "beyond words." In this way, *The May Lady* facilitates a new kind of filmic intimacy, affective subjectivity, and embodied listening rarely experienced before in Iranian cinema.

The final aspect of sound that I will consider is how, almost as voyeurs, the audience is invited to listen in on and share the sonic intimacies of Forugh's daily rituals. Since the film follows her in a largely linear way, we hear the world almost entirely from Forugh's perspective as we are enfolded in her listening experiences, which include the sounds of domestic work and exercising, as well as the liminal spaces that connect her public and private lives, such as the car and the stairwell of her apartment block. We are also admitted into the most intimate spaces, where, in the absence of sanctioned physical contact, Forugh's communications with her lover are entirely sonic, by way of love letters and telephone conversations. In particular, through the poetic letters, Banietemad aestheticizes strategies designed to circumvent restrictions on the visual portrayal of intimacy.

It is perhaps no coincidence that a film about listening should have been made at a time when the national discourse in Iran increasingly promoted notions of civil society, to which listening to others is central, and to the "dialogue among civilizations," which requires a listening sensibility between nations. Such discourses were particularly associated with the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), during which time Iran experienced a cultural flowering. *The May Lady* is thus very much of its time, capturing something of the national mood in the late 1990s.

LISTENING (AND FEELING) THROUGH THE LADY: TOWARDS A CINEMA OF EMPATHY

One of the many interesting aspects of *The May Lady* is the sheer number of voices and perspectives that are heard, primarily through Forugh's work as a documentary filmmaker and her encounter with voice after voice through interviewing, filming, editing, transcribing, and so on. Thus, the structure of the film allows for an amplification of these voices through what I term "double listening": the audience experiences the voices through Forugh's performative act of listening and we attend to them in ways that are shaped by her responses

to what she hears. Due to the nature of the project for which Forugh has been commissioned (identifying and making a film about "exemplary mothers"), almost all of the voices are those of women, largely from disadvantaged sectors of society. Much has been written about the ways in which Banietemad's work blurs the boundaries between documentary and feature films, representing the two sides of her professional life, and *The May Lady* is no exception (indeed, there is a strong element of autobiography in the film). What is particularly striking is the sheer number of women we encounter, each with her own story. There can have been few, if any, Iranian films previously in which so much of the voicetrack is dominated by the sounds of women. Banietemad is known for "giving voice" to the disenfranchised through her films, but what the double listening arguably facilitates is a concentrated attention on these voices as they are put into a listening "frame," a frame that accords value to those being listened to. The message is that we may learn something from those whose voices barely register in the cacophony of national debate. This focus on listening also draws attention to the subtle power relations at play in terms of who has the authority to be listened to. We hear these voices because Forugh has selected them; our listening is contingent on her mediating role as gatekeeper. As an educated, middle-class professional, Forugh commands a level of authority and respect which is, in large part, marked through the ways that her colleagues and others listen to her. But her status is also precarious and provisional: the moment her voice is detached from that status, she is just the sound of another woman, as in the scene where she is making telephone calls to arrange interviews with government and other public figures. One office she calls immediately assumes that she is a secretary calling on behalf of a male filmmaker, as Forugh responds: "Does anyone who calls you who is a woman have to be a secretary?" (41′22″). Whilst disembodiment can in some contexts be empowering, it can also work to fetishize, in this case the female voice as the only defining feature of the sound-producing body.

There has, of course, been considerable scholarly attention to notions of listening, most obviously in sound studies and associated areas, but also in many areas of music studies, including those related to film and media. From Pauline Oliveros's concept of "deep listening" to Anahid Kassabian's "ubiquitous listening" (2013) and Michel Chion's (1994) work on cinematic listening, there have been various attempts to identify and categorize different kinds of listening and types of listener. Tom Rice provides a useful overview of theoretical approaches to listening, including culturally and historically shaped modes of listening: cultural–historical, technological, sociological, and multisensory/corporeal (2015). Michelle Langford considers Chion's three modes of listening in the context of Abbas Kiarostami's film *Shirin* (2008), to which she adds a fourth, "a kind of affective listening in which we listen with our bodies and through which a range of sense perceptions are also activated"

(forthcoming: 8). I would argue that something very similar is taking place in *The May Lady* where there is an intense identification of the viewer–listener with Forugh's "earpoint" as we become drawn into her sound world. This kind of listening shares much with that discussed by Winters in relation to representations of concert listening in films, where music creates "a shared subjectivity between film audience and character" (2014). We listen through Forugh but we also listen *together* with her as one body.

The fact that Forugh is ultimately unable to fulfill her brief in identifying an exemplary mother also sends another message: there are many voices which need to be heard. The individual stories of suffering proliferate and consume Forugh, such that she becomes overwhelmed as she listens repeatedly, to the point of obsession. From the single mother married at sixteen and divorced at twenty-five, with three children; to the woman widowed in her twenties with three children, who has educated herself through night school and is now aiming to go to college; to the mother who lost one son to the Iran–Iraq War and who has for many years devoted her life to caring for the paraplegic son who was wounded in the same conflict; to the woman queuing every week to visit her son, in prison on charges of drug smuggling; and on and on. What is most striking from the first interview that we hear (20′21″) is the quality of listening, as Forugh sits at her living-room table in the privacy of her apartment, sifting through photographs of the women she has talked to, whilst listening to an interview with one Behjat Bordbar Azari. At first, we see her making notes; she then pauses and stops writing to listen more intently, placing one hand under her chin and the other against her head, then sighing as she brings her closed fists up to her mouth.

It is significant that we first hear Behjat's disembodied voice before the film cuts to a flickering, low-quality video recording of her as the setting shifts to the more public space of Forugh's workplace editing room (the unbroken voice providing a smooth transition between the two spaces). The camera cuts between images of Forugh, deep in reflective listening with her hands under her chin, and the screen that she is watching. What is of interest here is not just how Forugh's intense performance of listening invites the audience to share the aural experience with her, but through the embodied listening conveyed through her body language, the invitation extends to a sharing of Forugh's emotional journey. What I want to argue here is that Forugh engages in a very particular kind of empathetic and affective listening, encountered repeatedly throughout the film: one that facilitates a new kind of filmic intimacy and embodied subjectivity that had rarely been experienced before in Iranian cinema and which might be termed a "cinema of empathy."

From the interview with Behjat, Forugh fast-forwards to the sounds of another on the editing machine, and within seconds we are transported to the "actual" interview on a terrace, in or close to the interviewee's home. Once again,

Figure 6.1 *The May Lady* (21′47″)

the unbroken voice-over of the interviewee provides the transition between "on-screen" and "live" presence, and again Forugh is placed as the immersed and empathetic listener, without the barrier of the camera. Now in direct dialogue with her interviewee, we see Forugh respond and smile (Figure 6.1).

There are some interesting class and ethnic issues at play. The interviewee starts by introducing herself as "Taghizadeh" in Azari, marking her as being from Iranian Azerbaijan, most likely a first- or second-generation migrant. Forugh asks her to continue the interview in Persian, but the opening serves to alert the audience to the sounds of ethnic otherness. Taghizadeh's *chador* clothing indicates her lower social class, but she is not so religiously fervent as to don a black *chador*. It turns out that Taghizadeh is a formidable woman who, despite social and financial hardship as a widow and single working mother, not only has managed to ensure the education of her three children, but has herself attended night school and is preparing to take college entrance exams. At this point, Forugh cannot resist exchanging a glance with Mani, who she had previously admonished for taking his (privileged middle-class) educational opportunities for granted. Education as a route out of poverty and dependence for women is a central theme in Banietemad's films, seen, for instance, in *Zir-e Pust-e Shahr* (*Under the Skin of the City*, 2001), where the illiterate protagonist Tooba is taught to read by her son.

It is interesting that, in the course of these two interviews, the film moves seamlessly from the privacy of Forugh's apartment, to the more semi-public space of the editing suite and out into the more public world (but still within the

confines of Taghizadeh's home), marked by the "audience" of curious onlookers from an opposite window, who are presumably not privy to the sounds that the film audience hears. This movement marks the different degrees of privacy and publicness that are so integral to conceptions of space in Iran, and is also mirrored by the equally seamless move from audio only (in the apartment) to video recordings (in the editing room) and the final live interview. Significantly, what stays constant is sound, in the form of the narratives of the two women, which arguably serve to mediate the blurred boundaries between the "real" and the "documentary" aspects of the film.

One of the most emotionally charged early scenes in the film is a visit to a family which lost one son in the Iran–Iraq War (1980–8), the other returning paralyzed. Forugh and Mani approach the family's home via a narrow passage and are admitted into the room where Mohammad lies, tended to by his mother. Mani takes photographs whilst Forugh films and interviews the mother and other family members. The experience of listening to their story takes on heightened emotional weight as we see Forugh and Mani struggling with their tears. We hear the click of the camera over the voice of the mother telling her son how much she loves him. The on-screen image shifts from the room itself into Forugh's viewfinder; this is the first time that Forugh is shown behind the camera and is coincidentally one of the passages that feels most uncomfortably voyeuristic (Figure 6.2). The image then shifts to the editing

Figure 6.2 *The May Lady* (26′03″)

room as we hear the voice of Mohammad's physiotherapist; we observe the blurred screen from behind Forugh's head but are unable to see her reaction. Moving back to "viewfinder" mode, Mohammad's mother explains that her other son went to the front and was killed the following day. As she describes kissing her dead son's body, we see Mani listening and responding emotionally, the first time in the film that the audience listens through someone other than Forugh (Figure 6.3). Switching again to the editing room, a side-shot shows Forugh lost in thought; as the mother says, "May God never expose any mother to such a scene" (the death of her son) and starts to cry, we see Forugh respond by moving her hand up to her mouth.

There are messages within messages here. Just as we listen to Forugh listen, so Banietemad hopes that those in positions of power will take notice of the many whose lives were destroyed by the war, left to deal with their loss as best they can. Once again, class issues come to the fore, since it was largely young men from poorer, religious backgrounds who went to the front. This passage segues into a transition scene with Forugh in her car and the voice-over of another war-bereaved mother talking about receiving the news of her son's death, as the visuals transition to a cemetery and we see *chador*-clad women tending the graves of their loved ones. The camera pans across row after row of graves, with another voice describing being asked to identify her son, and we connect voice to body as the camera focuses on Forugh at the end of one of

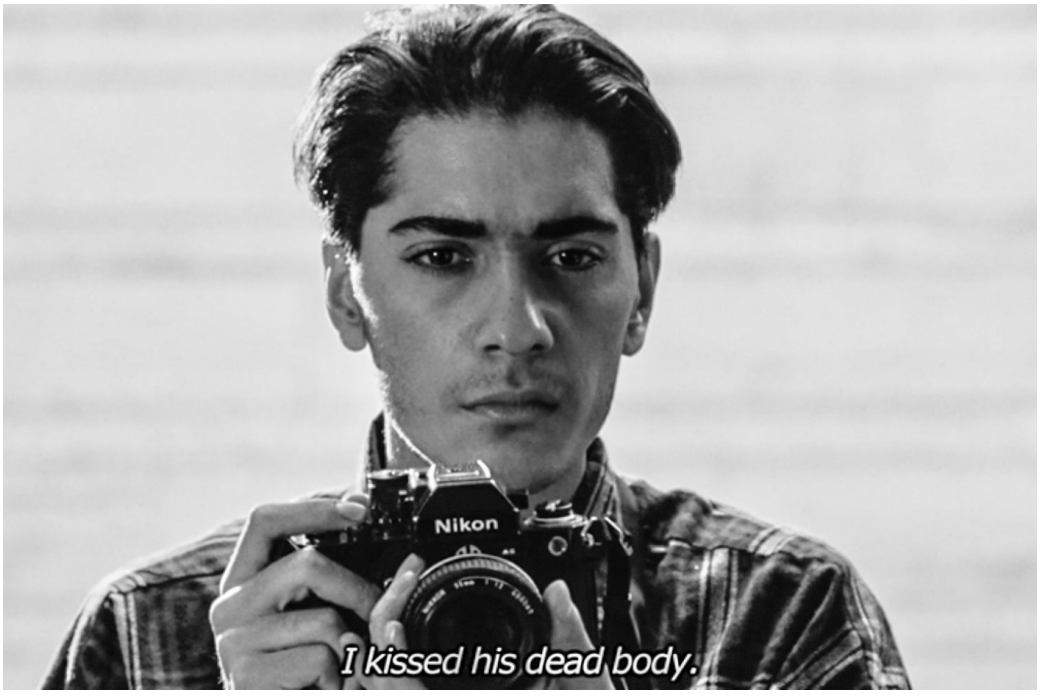

Figure 6.3 *The May Lady* (27′06″)

the rows filming the mother. At the exact point of extreme traumatic memory, where the mother describes collapsing at the sight of her dead son, the film cuts to a grainy image of an intense close-up of her face through the viewfinder; as she wipes her tears with the corner of her *chador*, the camera cuts to Forugh with the camera to her eye, struggling to contain her own tears. As with the earlier scene, the cutting back and forth between the two women—Forugh responding empathetically to the intense emotion of the moment—allows the audience to listen both with and through Forugh and to enter her own subjectivity as a mother of a teenage son who, had he been born ten years earlier, might well have met a similar fate. Finally, Forugh crouches down and embraces the woman. Once again, her empathetic listening becomes a medium through which to project these largely marginalized voices and unheard stories onto the national consciousness.

Throughout the scenes described above, the audience experiences something akin to what Najmeh Moradiyan Rizi (writing about the film *Shirin*), describes as "the circulation of the female look" (2016: 51). Moradiyan Rizi draws on the work of Laura Mulvey, who outlines different cinematic "looks"—that of the camera, of the audience, and of the characters looking at each other (2002: 208)—to which Moradiyan Rizi adds the "'look at the viewer,' which is an imaginary look" (ibid., quoting Willemen 1986: 216). In *The May Lady*, the seamless and continual shifting from camera (viewfinder) viewpoint to Forugh's viewpoint, to the audience observing Forugh observing (or listening to) another woman's viewpoint, lends a multi-perspectival quality that resonates with the multiplicity of voices in the film. Discussing the notion of "voicing" (2015: 232), Amanda Weidman argues that:

> Voicing emphasizes the strategic and politically charged nature of the way voices are constructed both in formal and everyday performances . . . a spectator may be inhabiting others' voices and words and artfully orchestrating a multitude of voices to tell his story. (ibid.: 238)

In a similar way, Forugh inhabits the voices of others and becomes figured primarily as a "listening body": her central role is arguably to listen, and indeed, she practically becomes a technology of "listening in" like a stethoscope or a headphone. Interestingly, her lover (Dr Rahbar) is also positioned as a listening body but in a much more passive manner. The audience encounters him visually only once, briefly, through Forugh's eyes, as she watches him hesitantly from an upper level at her workplace. Our main encounter with Dr Rahbar is through the sound of his voice, again as received by Forugh: in telephone conversations or through love letters, as discussed below.

This section has offered just a few examples of Forugh's empathetic listening. What becomes evident is that this listening and Forugh's always attentive body

language are bound up with the portrayal of her general character. Further, time and again, Forugh's act of listening is presented as an embodied act; thus, for the audience, sound serves to generate a physically experienced shared affect and embodied empathy with the characters on screen .

LISTENING TO THE LADIES: ACTIVATING THE FEMALE VOICE

Having considered the significance of Forugh's performative role as a listener in *The May Lady*, I now turn now to the sounds that Forugh (and, through her, the audience) listens to. As the film progresses, Forugh becomes increasingly weighed down by the stories she hears, gradually reaching a point of overload with one heart-wrenching narrative after another. This generates an ever-expanding bricolage of voices, which Forugh struggles to contain. Sonically, a large proportion of the film's voicetrack is given over to the sounds of the female voice; the only male voices heard regularly are those of Forugh's teenage son and his friends, and the disembodied voice of Dr Rahbar through telephone conversations or letters, plus very occasionally one of her co-workers, an interviewee, or some other brief encounter. The foregrounding of the female voice in *The May Lady* thus operates not just metaphorically as a well-worn index of agency, but in very tangible and material ways through a form of sonic saturation. This arguably facilitates a powerful means of projecting particular kinds of female subjectivity, which fly under the radar of those seeking to control such subjectivities for reasons discussed below. This section will consider both the sheer quantity of female vocal sound in *The May Lady* and the very particular qualities of voice and their significance. I argue that the proliferation and "excess" of female voices offer a sensorial experience that works alongside, but is subtly subversive in comparison with, other more overt projections of female agency.

There is a considerable literature exploring issues of voice, agency, and gender, including in relation to film (Doane 1980; Silverman 1988; Chion 1999; and Whittaker and Wright 2017). Whittaker and Wright offer a useful overview of the latter, addressing a number of issues that are relevant here, including the voice as a site of political agency, the material and embodied properties of voice, and questions of affect, with a chapter on the voice in Iranian cinema (Mottahedeh 2017). In Iran, there are particular sensitivities around the alleged power of the female voice, which has generated a set of official discourses and controls in the public domain; they are also rooted in traditional social and cultural norms and expectations of gendered behavior. Whilst not unique to Iran, such discourses have, since the 1979 Revolution, focused particularly on solo female singing, which has been prohibited in

public, other than to all-female audiences. Group singing is permitted but with certain and variable stipulations about the number of singers. Several commentators have noted that such controls, argued in the name of religious propriety, are in reality assertions of patriarchal power structures; restrictions on female singing are one of a number of controls, but have taken on particular significance due to the myriad ways in which it can and has been challenged, and also because of its symbolic silencing of women. The reasons given for prohibiting solo singing but allowing groups are revealing and pertinent to this discussion: group singing, it is claimed, cancels out the individually heard vibrations and nuances of the female voice, which are considered *haram* (religiously forbidden) due to their potential to arouse lustful thoughts and invoke bodily desire. Whilst there is, no doubt, some element of arbitrariness in these restrictions, evidenced also by inconsistencies and contradictions in restrictions elsewhere in the public domain, such discourses tap into deep-rooted anxieties about the power of the female voice that go well beyond Iran and which can be found in stories such as those about the Greek Sirens and other such femmes fatales who lure men to their doom. In other words, there is something about the timbral and other qualities of the sung voice at play in these widely circulating ideas about the power of the female voice. Indeed, it is interesting to note that restrictions on female singing in Iran do not extend to the spoken voice; on the contrary, it is quite normal to hear the spoken female voice in all arenas of public life, including on national media (there are many female television announcers and news presenters, for instance), and there are no restrictions on the voices of female actors. Only solo singing is marked as potentially dangerous and requiring control. In the absence of any official sanctions on the spoken voice, then, *The May Lady* operates within a perfectly legitimate framework and Banietemad is able to push this sonic dimension to its limits, such that the audience experiences an excess of female vocal sounds. This subtle and understated provocation reveals the myriad ways in which quiet voices can speak back to "larger structures of power" (Weidman 2015: 237).

I pause for a moment to consider what it means to attend "only to sound" in relation to human speech. Weidman has written about the ways in which dominant discourses have separated voice into its signification and the sound "itself," with the former privileged over the latter in discussions of meaning. She traces the history of such discourses and considers how the "binary set up in Western philosophical and linguistic thought between the signifying authorial voice and bodily, material vocality was closely articulated with a social project central to Euro-Western modernity" (2015: 234), most evident in the work of Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau and Locke, and later in structural linguistics, the result "privileging referenciality over other functions of language, creating an opposition between content and form and privileging the former" (ibid.: 233).

This view "treats the sonic, material aspects of voice as secondary and as potentially disruptive to the sovereignty of the subject." One possible response, Weidman suggests, is to "valorize the second term of the binary, the sounding, material voice." In other words, the significance of voice in *The May Lady* is as much about the materiality of sound—its timbre, texture, contour, and shapes—as the words themselves. This is what Roland Barthes refers to as "the voice within the voice" (1977: 182), expressed primarily by what he termed the "grain" of the voice, originally in an essay of the same name, written in 1972 and published in *Image–Text–Music* (1977). Whilst the original essay focused on singing rather than speech, Barthes's oft-quoted (but much less often theorized) term is useful here for an understanding of what one hears "beyond (or before) the meaning of the words" (ibid.: 181), and for the attention it draws to the materiality of sound and the always already embodied quality of the vocal grain:

> something which is directly the cantor's body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages. . . . Above all, this voice bears along *directly* the symbolic, over the intelligible. . . . The "grain" is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue. . . . The "grain" is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. (ibid.: 181–2, 188)

The concept of vocal grain thus serves as a useful shorthand to indicate the quality of voice at the meeting point of timbre, texture, contour, vibrancy, and the many other things that contribute to the uniqueness of each voice. In attending to voice, then, we may miss a great deal if we focus solely on what is being said. As Whittaker and Wright (quoting Steven Shapiro) note, "the voice always stands *in between*: in between body and language, in between biology and culture, in between inside and outside, in between subject and Other, in between mere sound and noise and meaningful articulation" (2017: 3). There are two aspects to voice which are of particular interest here: the very real material aspects of sound and the embodied nature of the voices that we hear. As Langford observes of the film *Shirin*,

> the acousmatic dimension of the film foregrounds not just women as spectators, but emphasizes another veritable blind spot of Iranian cinema by foregrounding women's bodies among other bodies in ways that far exceed the allowable visual representation of women's bodies and their desires. (ibid.)

So, too, in *The May Lady*, women and their bodies are centered through sound. And Banietemad is able to do this in large measure because the attention of the

gatekeepers of Iranian cinema have been so focused on the visual and on what is being said that they have paid little attention to what the materiality, sound quality, and timbre of film sounds communicate to the listener.

As well as her central role as a listener, Forugh is also the most important voice in *The May Lady*. The film adopts a first-person narrative that follows Forugh chronologically from start to finish. Hers is the first voice that we hear, as a quasi-whisper as she writes poetry in the opening scene. Shot from behind, with the viewer peering over Forugh's shoulder, it is unclear whether the sound is a voice-over or diegetic whispering as she writes. Forugh's is also the final voice of the film as she picks up the telephone receiver and dials Dr Rahbar's number. Her "*Salaam. Man Forugham*" can be understood in Persian as a straightforward greeting—"Hello. This is Forugh"—or as an assertion of being—"Hello. I am Forugh." Naficy describes the symbolic significance of this moment:

> in which the lead character faces the camera and names the unnamed, herself, "I am Forugh," is the triumph of woman over women, of the individual over the collective, of modernity over premodernity. (2012b: 163)

A similar use of voice as a statement of personhood can be seen in the film *The King's Speech* (2010), as discussed by Weidman. When:

> the stuttering Bertie [British King George VI] declares "I have a voice!" we hear this as a profound moment of self-realization and self-assertion, not simply a declaration of fact. With such a declaration, Bertie activates a host of culturally salient associations between voice and individually, authorship, agency, authority, and power. . . . (2015: 232)

Similarly, Forugh's final words are a confident voicing of both individual and collective female agency, a fitting ending to the film. *The May Lady* makes extensive use of reflective voice-overs spoken by Forugh, including poetic love letters exchanged with her lover (see below); indeed, even where there is no voice-over, the structure of the film conveys a sense of first-person narration. Referencing the work of Alexander Fisher, Whittaker and Wright note that first-person voice-over can serve as a "political statement when afforded to those otherwise denied platforms from which to speak" (2017: 12). But I am also interested in how the actual *sounds* of Forugh's voice make such a statement. Weidman reminds us of the "always-constructed relationship between voices and bodies, particularly in media contexts" (2015: 236). Forugh's voice is not just any kind of voice, and it is important to ask what kind of voice she is given and why: what do the sonorous and material qualities of Forugh's

voice—its timbre, texture, contour, and so on—communicate to us "beyond words"?

One of the most striking features of Forugh's voice, that sets the tone right from the start, is its calm and quiet, understated quality that contrasts with many earlier female protagonists in Iranian cinema; her voice is also pitched relatively low in the female vocal range. All of these arguably help to construct Forugh as a character who is well grounded, stable, and reliable, as well as contributing to her aura of authority and empathy, as already discussed. Such qualities are shared by many of the other female voices in this film, including those who have much reason to feel aggrieved at life and whose emotions of sorrow, anger, resignation, and so on take on a particular embodied sonic form through the process of voicing. But there are also voices that project something starkly different in their excess and overflow of emotion, particularly anger. We first encounter this during Forugh's visit to a prison, where she talks to and records family members, mainly women, who are waiting outside to visit their male relatives. For reasons that are likely related to the difficulties of filming actual prison visitors, the interviewees at this point are played by actors. This may not be immediately evident, but viewers familiar with Banietemad's work would recognize characters from her earlier films such as *Nargess* (1992) and the reference to Nobar from *Rusari Ābi* (*The Blue-veiled*, 1995); later, we encounter Tooba, who appears in *Under the Skin of the City* (2001) and Ghesseh-hā (*Tales*, 2014). This, together with the introduction of recognizable actresses such as Golab Adineh (Tooba) and Banietemad's daughter, Baran Kosari (here playing Senobar, Nobar's child sister), inserts a new element into the film at this point, reflecting strategies more generally characteristic of Banietemad's work: firstly, the blurring of boundaries between "fiction" and documentary/"reality"; and secondly, the reappearance of characters from earlier films. If recognizable actors are now "posing" as interviewees, does this reframe our understanding of the veracity of earlier voices? This scene starts from within Forugh's camera viewfinder and then moves outside the viewfinder frame to show Forugh talking with Senobar. What is noticeable about this scene, which self-consciously shifts the frame of representation along the reality–fiction spectrum, is that the women's voices *sound* different and contrast with those heard so far: these are openly angry and agitated, and reveal a level of desperation that was much more contained in earlier scenes. They are also noticeably higher in pitch. It is interesting, then, that this excess of emotion should be voiced by actors rather than "real" interviewees, although the audience may not necessarily distinguish between them (particularly audiences outside Iran). Presumably, Banietemad was able to exercise directorial authorship over their voices in a way that was not possible with non-actors. Perhaps the latter felt constrained by the camera and unable to express themselves fully. Unlike the scenes described earlier, the film audience does not see Forugh, since she is behind the camera, but hears her talking to the women with the same calm

and empathetic grain of voice, now providing even more of a contrast with the voices heard through her and which arguably demand our attention because they have to fight for a space to be heard in a way that Forugh's, through her relative privilege, does not. Her ability to command attention affords her the capacity (and luxury) to retain her aura of patient calm. In this way, class and privilege are arguably etched into the sounds of her voice. As Forugh's internal conflict increases, so the voices she is in dialogue with become increasingly distraught and unstable, and marked by emotional outbursts. As she scrolls through film clips in the editing room, we observe and hear the increasingly desperate and overwrought voices: a woman grieving at a lost (married) daughter, with implications of domestic violence: "If the law had protected my daughter, she would be alive now." Another tries to gain access to her children: "I tried hard to see my kids for six years but couldn't. O God, you know how hard I tried. I went to the court, the welfare, everywhere." It is not clear whether this is "real" footage or played by actors. The emotional impact of these voices is made even more powerful by being framed—preceded by and interleaved with—interviews with three well-known public figures: writer Shahla Lahiji, (then) member of parliament Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, and lawyer and human rights activist Mahrangiz Kar, the voice of the latter continuing over images of the law courts. These women all speak with a grain not unlike that of Forugh: calm, authoritative, in control of their destiny. The accumulation of voices and emotion is too much for Forugh at this point and she turns off the screen and stands in silence, exhausted, resting her head against her arm. She then turns the screen on again and starts to click through many images of women, but now, significantly, "silenced," with the volume muted. For thirty seconds, all we hear is Forugh clicking on images, focusing in on single faces, and then back to multiple images (Figure 6.4). This "crisis" scene directly precedes her decision to resign from the project.

There are two scenes in the film where Forugh's voice changes, taking on some of the same qualities as the women she has been listening to: in both, her voice loses some of its authority in the face of forces beyond her control, whether her absentee former partner (now abroad), who has made what she views as empty promises to her son, or the government official to whom she is obliged to plead after her son is arrested following a raid on a house party (Figure 6.5). Asking where Mani's father is, he points to Forugh as a divorcee and single parent as responsible for her son's allegedly "immoral" behavior (attending a party with music, members of the opposite sex, and most likely alcohol). These scenes present different faces of social and state patriarchy, against which Forugh's professional authority counts for little as she becomes defined solely through her gender and marital status. There is a marked change in Forugh's vocal tone in these scenes, particularly in the higher pitch and volume as she veers towards a loss of control, at the same time intensely aware that this would likely disempower her further.

Figure 6.4 *The May Lady* (45′50″)

Figure 6.5 *The May Lady* (55′40″)

Soon after the scene with the government official, Forugh encounters Tooba, a woman she had interviewed for an earlier project. This encounter lifts Forugh's spirits, despite the misfortunes that have befallen Tooba's family since they last met, and prompts her to look for the old photographs of Tooba and watch her interview footage, filmed in the textile factory where Tooba works.

At the start of the interview, Tooba attempts to assume the serious manner that she believes is expected of her, but is unable to keep a straight face in front of the camera and dissolves into laughter, covering her face with her headscarf. This generates a mirroring and embodied response from Forugh (watching the recording on her television at home), not dissimilar from the empathetic responses described earlier. Tooba recomposes herself and offers short answers to the questions, as if reading from a script. Finally, as Tooba explains that her husband is not able to work any longer, Forugh asks how the family manages to make ends meet and Tooba responds with "life proceeds somehow," before being overwhelmed by the situation and breaking into laughter again. Tooba's is an interesting voice: it carries the same emotional weight as some of the earlier interviewees, but is marked by a candid and often irreverent straight-talking, as well as being imbued with an element of humor which seems to offer a glimmer of hope in the face of adversity (bearing in mind that Tooba is played by an actor and her voice could presumably be crafted by the filmmaker in a way that is less feasible with real interviewees). This optimism, however, is almost immediately set against a very different kind of voice. Fast-forwarding the video, Forugh plays later footage, shot in the factory after Tooba has discovered that her older son has sold the family home without her knowledge and that as a result they are now homeless. She shouts angrily at Forugh, gesturing and mimicking her filming, asking "What? Why do you keep shooting a film of me? My life is no good for a film." Tooba is shouting both from anger and in order to make herself heard over the noisy factory looms, another sonic indicator of the social difference between Forugh's privileged and quiet working environment and those of the mainly female workers shown in this scene. Tooba's words are finally drowned out by the factory clamor, symbolic of the voices that become silenced and which this film seeks to make audible; all we hear at the end is "Go after your own life" (Figure 6.6).

As the camera shot alternates between the footage of Tooba and Forugh watching, we hear (through Forugh) the voice of a woman trying to hold her family together in the face of multiple social and personal pressures. The footage then shows Tooba and Forugh in the alleyway outside Tooba's home. She is apologetic for having taken out her anger on Forugh, and when Forugh urges her to tell her what has happened, we hear the story of a single family that encapsulates many of the social pressures faced by Iranians, including homelessness, unemployment, and addiction. Forugh listens, then turns off the video and sits in reflective silence, resting her face on her hands.

Whilst there is a great deal in this film that speaks to Iran's social divides, Banietemad also seeks to promote empathy and understanding across those divides. This becomes most evident in a passage towards the end of the film, the second time that Mani finds himself in custody, following an earlier scene where he storms out of the apartment (angry at the unexpected arrival of Dr Rahbar) and speeds off in the car, eventually driving through

Figure 6.6 *The May Lady*

a checkpoint of unofficial voluntary *basij* militia. Once again, Forugh has to plead for his release, but this time it is not a government official that she has to talk to, but Mr Sadegh, a young *basiji* and survivor of the Iran–Iraq War, who Mani punched when challenged at the checkpoint. This scene is visually and sonically marked as located in the poor neighborhoods of south Tehran, as Forugh first goes to the young man's home and is directed to find him at the local mosque. She waits outside in the shadows of the alleyway to the sounds of religious chanting broadcast from the mosque loudspeakers. Rather than adopt a confrontational vocal tone, as she did with the government official, Forugh instead advocates understanding and reconciliation between the two men, and by extension across social communities, and appeals (successfully) to Mr Sadegh's empathy by asking him to forgive her son so that he does not end up in jail "with thieves and smugglers" (Figure 6.7). Mr Sadegh's voice, in turn, is soft-spoken as he makes his case: "When your son was playing with toys, I was with my brother at the battlefield playing with bullets [that is, safeguarding the nation]. Now I guard day and night the same streets your son speed drives." To this, Forugh responds by invoking common values and a shared youth: "You are talking of values that are shared by all. My son is a youth like you. Differences in your outlooks should not make you stand against each other." As in her exchanges with Tooba, Forugh here addresses the whole nation: a small, quiet voice

Figure 6.7 *The May Lady*

delivering the most powerful of messages. In the scene that follows, we see Mani, now released, waiting outside the courthouse, with Forugh watching from a distance as the two men shake hands.

This section has explored the significance of the female voice in *The May Lady*, both metaphorically and literally. Listeners experience a multiplicity of female perspectives and an excess of female vocal sound that together arguably generate a form of agentive subjectivity that was quite new to Iranian cinema at the time. An important aspect of the sonic materiality of *The May Lady* is conveyed through vocal "grain," which I argue plays an important role for Forugh in constructing her as an empathetic listener.

SONIC INTIMACIES

The discussion of this chapter has so far has focused primarily on voices in Forugh's professional life; in this final section, I turn to the sonic intimacies of her private life. Throughout the film, the audience is invited to experience aspects of Forugh's daily life and rituals, including the sounds of domestic labor such as cooking and cleaning. Early in the film, we see her return from work and start to prepare the evening meal. Sound becomes a truly visceral experience through the gushing faucet water as Forugh washes the carrots, the sharp click of the knife on the chopping board as she slices mushrooms and then scrapes them into a bowl, and the frying of onions and tomatoes. For much of this passage, Forugh's visual presence is reduced to her hands

and there are no other sounds or verbal interaction. I suggest that this focus on domestic sound serves to frame Forugh (once again) as a listener, as well as drawing attention to her juggling of her professional life and her domestic responsibilities as a single parent. The film is punctuated by further scenes that foreground the sounds of the home and of domestic work, including the particularly satisfying swish of curtains as Forugh opens them in the morning, at the same time setting off a wind chime; the spraying of plants; and the bubbling of tea brewing and then being poured into small glasses. Domestic labor returns later in the film when we see and hear Forugh vacuuming and shaking out bedsheets whilst also making work telephone calls. As well as the sounds of domestic spaces, we hear Forugh's exercise routine as she jogs and walks in the hills around her home, each of these passages following on from a scene of reflective intimacy in which Forugh reads a love letter, writes in her journal, or talks with Dr Rahbar on the telephone. Though short, these exercise scenes are important in providing Forugh with a quiet space for reflection, a space that is largely devoid of sounds other than those generated by her own body. We hear her footfall on the path, crunching the fall leaves, and her panting as she stops and doubles over to catch her breath; the second jogging scene concludes with Forugh wiping sweat from her face with the end of her shawl and looking up to the sky, still breathing heavily, as she finally makes a decision about her future life. Arguably, the entire personal narrative "thread" of the film has been building up to this point.

It is notable that whilst Forugh's professional sound world is dominated by the voices of women, the more personal narrative involves much more engagement with male voices: most obviously her son and her lover, and more briefly with Mani's adolescent friends, the government official, Mr Sadegh, and her downstairs neighbor, to whom one might add the unsounded presence–absence of Mani's father. Like many of the women interviewees, the government official and Mr Sadegh are marked as being of a lower social class than Forugh, but they are also in positions of relative authority, and this can be heard in their vocal grain, which conveys a sense of power and entitlement, particularly that of the government official. There is also comparatively little male–male interaction in the film, other than between Mani and his friends, the scene at the mosque, and the reconciliation between Mani and Mr Sadegh that follows. By contrast with the male voices in Forugh's private life, there are relatively few women: the friend that she walks with and confides in, and one of Mani's friends, but no relatives or extended family, other than her mother-in-law, who she visits with Mani. These are all somewhat muted in comparison with the male voices in her life.

Like many Iranian arthouse directors (and for reasons that I have discussed elsewhere; Nooshin 2019), Banietemad tends to avoid non-diegetic music in her films. In *The May Lady*, other devices are used by way of a substitute

soundtrack, particularly in transitional scenes where music might have played a continuity role. Almost every transitional scene is accompanied by a voice-over of Forugh's reflective thoughts, extracts from letters, the voices of interviewees, and/or scenes and sounds of driving. Music, where it is heard, is always diegetic and always in domestic settings or spaces that link Forugh's public and private worlds, most notably the interior of her car and the stairwell of her apartment block. The first time we hear music is Mani's loud rock music spilling into the stairwell as Forugh returns home and encounters her downstairs neighbor throwing his wife out of the apartment. When Forugh tries to help, he tells her to mind her own business and suggests that she attends to her own son and gets him to turn his music down. Forugh hurries up the stairs and enters the apartment, as the music blares ever more loudly from Mani's bedroom. The significance of this scene goes beyond the case of a teenager annoying others with loud music; in the context of the Islamic state and government restrictions on popular music, rock music becomes a marker of middle-class privilege, as well as a site of danger, with the threat of neighbors reporting it to the police. Indeed, this precisely what happens in the later scene, when Mani and his friends attend a party which is raided after complaints by a neighbor. Here, the "unsounded" party music is understood by the audience. The scene that directly precedes this, in the car as Forugh drives Mani and his friends to the party, begins with the sounds of the teenagers singing the popular folk song *Mikhām Beram Kuh* ("I Want to Go to the Mountains") at the top of their voices. When Forugh asks them to quieten down, one of Mani's friends responds, "Guys, let's sing with soundproofing" and they start to (mock-)sing in whispers. This leads to a conversation about the right of young people to enjoy themselves, as part of which sound becomes a trigger to critique government discourses and restrictions. The friend complains, "When you're young, they object to whatever you do. The way you walk, your hairstyle, your dress . . . your glance," and another responds "We might as well die and be born as forty-year-olds." In all of these scenes, music becomes a signifier of a particular Western-oriented youth culture that the government had sought to contain and silence, and for which restrictions became more relaxed, particularly for locally produced pop music, in the late 1990s, around the time that *The May Lady* was released (Nooshin 2005). The reference to "sound proofing" speaks both to the fact that popular musicians have, since the Revolution, mainly worked underground and had to soundproof their music-making spaces, lest any sounds leak out, and to the symbolic silencing of young people. After Forugh drops Mani and his friends at the party, she goes to a café to work until it is time to collect them. This scene offers a parallel and contrasting musical experience to the implied party music, and is the only example of non-diegetic music in the entire film: indeed, the somewhat abrupt appearance of a heavily orchestrated Italian ballad seems rather incongruous, given the marked absence of any non-diegetic music elsewhere in the film.

Perhaps the most striking and effective example of sonic intimacy in *The May Lady* is in the communication between Forugh and Dr Rahbar. In the face of censorship rules that prohibit physical and eye contact between male and female actors—rules that present particular challenges for portraying close relationships—Banietemad has, like other Iranian filmmakers, "found ways of indirectly suggesting moments of tenderness, intimacy and even eroticism through allusions, metaphorical, allegory and other forms of suggestive imagery" (Langford forthcoming: 2). In *The Blue-veiled*, for instance, she plays with such rules, using shadows creatively to suggest intimate contact between lovers. In *The May Lady*, almost like voyeurs, we are admitted into the most intimate spaces of Forugh's life, where her contact with her lover is entirely by way of telephone conversations and poetic love letters. It is as though Banietemad responds to the challenge of the state censors by taking the restrictions to an extreme and avoiding any simultaneous physical presence, and yet still managing to create a sense of intense sensuality by shifting intimacy into another domain, the sonic. Forugh and Dr Rahbar never occupy the same physical space and, as noted earlier, the viewer only sees Dr Rahbar once, fleetingly, and from a distance. Instead, they are transformed into "acoustic bodies" (Langford forthcoming). In this context, the voice-over of poetic love letters and Forugh's own writings take on immense significance, with thinly veiled allusions to her namesake, Iran's foremost female poet, Forugh Farrokhzad (1934–67). Appearing regularly and at points in the film where we might have expected music, the voice-over arguably comes to function as an alternative soundtrack. In using poetic writing in this way, Banietemad draws on a centuries-old tradition of poetry as a vehicle for hidden messages, one that has found its way into Iranian cinema—unsurprisingly, given the centrality of poetry to Iranian culture. This intriguing aspect of *The May Lady* has attracted the attention of a number of scholars. Naficy (2012b), for instance, notes the weaving together and shadowing of the two voices in ways that interestingly parallel some of the structures of Iranian classical music, particularly *āvāz* sections, where a solo instrument typically shadows (and embellishes) the vocal line at a short distance. The most extended example of this is where Forugh is first shown at home reading a newly arrived letter from Dr Rahbar; the scene then shifts to her driving, to the continuing sound of his voice, to which hers joins, reciting the same words, her voice weaving in and out of his, usually slightly behind, sometimes slightly ahead, occasionally dropping out entirely; finally, Dr Rahbar's voice fades out and we hear Forugh repeat the final lines of the letter. In the context of Iran's censorship regime, and for audiences that can read its significance, the effect of two voices, one layered over the other, opens up possibilities of iconic eroticism that go well beyond what would be permitted by legal and social modesty rules,

generating a suggestive sensuality that is arguably as powerful as any open display of intimate relations. The lovers may be prohibited from touching or looking directly at one another, but that does not stop them from becoming metaphorically bonded through sound; indeed, sound here arguably become fetishized as a symbol of physical love. Discussing Banietemad's poetic–filmic device, Naficy notes the "unequal veiling rules" by which censorship focuses almost exclusively on the visual. Interestingly, sound *per se* appears not to evoke the same sensitivities and level of anxiety as music, and therefore largely evades censorial scrutiny. And yet, as noted, there is a not unproblematic and complex network of significance in the poetic voice-over in *The May Lady* whose subtlety makes it invisible/inaudible to the moral gatekeepers. Further, modesty rules that fetishize the visual ignore the very materiality of sound discussed earlier, thus missing the point that the sonic is as much a form of physical penetration as the visual gaze—arguably, more so. Banietemad thus cleverly makes of use of poetic prose to aestheticize a hidden transcript of subversion as she confronts the normative privileging of (patriarchal) vision. Langford's concept of the "aural gaze" (discussed in relation to *Shirin*) seems apposite here, as the audience is "encouraged to listen with the attentiveness of a fully embodied spectator, surrounded by a rare scene of female desire in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema" (forthcoming: 17), and which would have been ever rarer when *The May Lady* was released (ten years before *Shirin*). Where the visual gaze is limited or prohibited, the lovers listen to one another: earthly love is made audible when it cannot be made visible. In this way, the all-enveloping poetic sounds arguably become an extension of Forugh's and her lover's bodies, allowing for the expression of desire in ways that fly under the censorial radar.

As well a vehicle to communicate with Dr Rahbar, Forugh's voice-over provides a space for reflecting on her relationship with Mani and the central theme of the film: the tension between the codes of modesty and social expectations of her as a mother, and her desire to embark on a romantic relationship. It is interesting that, whilst Forugh's character is very much defined through her role as a listener, Mani is unwilling to listen to his mother, and she patiently waits until he is ready. Towards the end of the film, Forugh makes her decision to talk to Mani, explaining to her friend as they walk in the hills, "My son has to listen to my unspoken words." This is followed directly by a scene in which, having decorated the apartment with candles for her birthday, Mani leads Forugh into the living room, sits her at the table, and gives her a gift. She reciprocates by handing him her diary and photographs from his childhood, and then proceeds to articulate the "unspoken words" that she needs him to listen to. But it seems the words are too difficult to address to him directly: instead, we hear a voice-over of Forugh telling Mani about her marriage to his father in the heady days of the Revolution and what followed as their marriage

fell apart. She describes her feelings of being defined by society almost exclusively through her (single) motherhood:

> Forugh remained and fell into oblivion in a place where other women of the same condition did, who leave a part of themselves behind. No-one remembered or bothered to consider that woman isn't a mother only. She's a human being in need of love.

Finally, Mani listens to his mother, as he looks at the photographs and weeps silently. But just as this listening is about to lead to understanding, the doorbell sounds and Mani storms out of the apartment at the (presumed) arrival of Dr Rahbar. Even after Forugh collects Mani from the courthouse (following his "pardon" by Mr Sadeghi), he resists her attempts to talk to him in the car. In the final scene, we see Forugh and Mani back home, sitting silently in the living room, with diegetic music playing in the background. The telephone rings and Mani deliberately turns the music's volume up to mask the sound. It seems he is not yet ready to become an empathetic listener, but Forugh's wry glance towards him indicates that she has hopes that he will. The scene cuts to her phoning Dr Rahbar and the closing declaration of personhood: "This is Forugh/I am Forugh."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As I hope to have shown in this chapter, sound and listening play a strategic and significant role in *The May Lady*. I have argued that a key theme of the film centers around listening, about who listens to whom and who has the authority to listen and to be listened to. In particular, the female voice is foregrounded to an extent rarely experienced previously in Iranian cinema, as the audience listens to Forugh and, through her performative act, to voices and stories that would normally struggle to be heard. In particular, listening in *The May Lady* becomes a somatic experience, in which audiences engage with the very materiality of sound through their listening bodies. That materiality is experienced most directly through vocal "grain," and in the case of Forugh I argue that this is central to her construction as an empathetic character. In the final section, we entered Forugh's private sound world and explored the sonic intimacies of her personal life. In particular, the discussion considered the aestheticizing strategies by which Banietemad circumvents restrictions on the portrayal of sensuality and eroticism by capitalizing on the fetishization of the visual, which has left the immense power of the sonic largely unscrutinized. Sound thus becomes a playground for trying out new ideas away from the panopticism of the state: we hear this both in the proliferation and excess

of female voices and in sound as a site of sensual pleasure. In all of the above, sound becomes a vehicle for creating (to quote again from Winters), "a shared subjectivity between film audience and character" (2014), which in turn generates a sense of filmic intimacy, affective subjectivity, and embodied listening. In this way, sound is implicated in creating a cinema of empathy, of which *The May Lady* is an outstanding example. Above all, the central message of the film is about listening as a first step towards personal and social reconciliation and change. Without that, nothing else can follow.