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BETWEEN IMAGE AND ESSENCE

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BETWEEN IMAGE AND ESSENCE: A SUFI LITERARY READING
OF METAPHYSICAL LOVE IN *TIME TO LOVE*

A Master's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the metaphysical dimensions of love through a Sufi literary lens, focusing on Metin Erksan's 1965 film *Time to Love* (*Sevmek Zamanı*). It examines the protagonist Halil's refusal of lived love in favour of an idealised image, situating this narrative choice within a broader Sufi metaphysics of form (*surat*) and meaning (*ma'na*), and the transformative journey from *'ishq majazi* to *'ishq haqiqi*. By weaving together Turkish Sufi poetry with close cinematic analysis, the study reveals how *Time to Love* both echoes and critiques a native tradition where love is not possession but unveiling. Through comparative readings of Turkish literary and folk motifs of image-based longing, this work argues that Halil's love remains stalled, suspended in stillness, and thus becomes a cautionary tale about modernity's spiritual inertia. The thesis ultimately proposes a poetics of cinematic ontology: a visual language of silence, repetition, and longing that gestures toward the Real but never fully arrives.

Keywords: Sufi literature, metaphysical love, *Time to Love*, poetic ontology

ÖZET

SURET İLE MANA ARASINDA: *SEVMEK ZAMANI*'NDA METAFİZİK AŞKA TASAVVUFİ EDEBİ BİR YAKLAŞIM

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Bu tez, aşkın metafizik boyutlarını tasavvufi bir edebî perspektiften incelemekte ve Metin Erksan'ın 1965 yapımı *Sevmek Zamanı*'na üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Karakter olan Halil'in yaşanmış bir aşka değil, idealleştirilmiş bir surete yönelmesi ele alınmakta; bu anlatı tercihi, suret (*surat*) ile mana (*ma'na*) arasındaki tasavvufi metafiziğin ve *aşk-ı mecaziden aşk-ı hakikiye* doğru dönüşüm sürecinin geniş bağlamı içinde değerlendirilmektedir. Türk tasavvuf şiiri ile sinematografik çözümlemenin iç içe geçtiği bu çalışma, *Sevmek Zamanı*'nın, aşkın bir mülkiyet değil, bir keşif olduğu yerli geleneği hem yansıttığını hem de eleştirel biçimde yeniden yorumladığını ortaya koyar. Suret merkezli aşk anlatılarının edebî ve halk anlatılarındaki yansımalarının karşılaştırmalı okuması yoluyla tez, Halil'in aşkının hareketsiz kaldığını, durağanlık içinde askıya alındığını ve böylece modernliğin ruhsal ataleti hakkında bir uyarı niteliği taşıdığını öne sürmektedir. Sonuç olarak tez, sinematik ontolojiye dair bir poetika önerir: Gerçeğe işaret eden ama ona tam olarak ulaşamayan; suskunluk, tekrar ve özlemle örülmüş görsel bir dil.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tasavvuf edebiyatı, metafizik aşk, *Sevmek Zamanı*, şiirsel ontoloji

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	v
ÖZET	vi
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.0 Love and the Image: From Literary Illusion to Ontological Longing	1
1.1 Background and Research Question	6
1.2 Rationale and Significance	7
1.2.1 Turkish Sufi Literature: A Native Context of Love and Image.....	10
1.3 Methodological Approach.....	12
1.4 Key Sufi Terminology: Navigating the Path from Form to Essence	14
1.5 Echoes of Longing: Classical Turkish Love Narratives and Their Cultural Afterlives.....	15
1.6 Metin Erksan, Turkish Cinema in the 1960s, and the Search for a National Cinematic Language	20
1.7 On the Limits of Survey: Why This Thesis Does Not Offer an Exhaustive Reading of Image-Love in the Literary Canon	24
CHAPTER II. METIN ERKSAN'S <i>TIME TO LOVE</i> : A SUMMARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMING	30
2.1 Narrative Overview.....	30
2.2 Aesthetic Minimalism and the Image as Metaphysical Object.....	30
2.3 Halil's Inner Stasis: Character, Time, and Spiritual Inertia	33
2.4 Istanbul as a Spiritual Topography.....	35
2.5 Love at the Edge: Death, Detachment, and the Threshold of Transformation	37
CHAPTER III. SUFI THOUGHT AND THE CONCEPT OF APPEARANCE IN LOVE	40
3.1 Love as a Path: Sufi Thought and the Search for the Eternal	40
3.2 'Ishq Majazi and 'Ishq Haqiqi	41
3.3 The Role of the Beloved in Sufi Poetry	44
3.4 The Veil and the Gaze in Sufi Aesthetics	45
CHAPTER IV. THE ROLE OF VISUAL PERCEPTION AND IDENTITY IN LOVE..	47
4.1 The Illusion of Love: Image, Identity, and Objectification.....	47
4.2 Possessing vs. Perceiving: The Gaze in Love and Cinematic Seeing.....	50

4.3 Meral, Ovid, and the Gendered Knowledge of Love.....	53
4.4 Beyond the Image: Sufi Love, Projection, and the Failure to Transcend Form.....	55
4.5 Love, Illusion, and the Missed Ascent	59
4.6 Sufi Dichotomies and the Paradox of Poetic Embodiment.....	61
4.7 Why a Sufi Reading is Not Necessary	64
CHAPTER V. TOWARD A SUFI CINEMATIC LANGUAGE OF LOVE: SYNTHESIS AND COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS	67
5.1 Seeing Beyond Form.....	67
5.2 The Illusion of Stillness	69
5.3 The Sacred and the Profane: Meral as the Catalyst of Halil's Crisis	73
5.4 Cinematic Love as Failed Initiation: Between Erksan and Bresson	76
5.5 The Mirror of the Beloved: Sufi Ontology and the Question of the Real.....	77
5.6 The Death of Stillness: Ontological Fracture.....	78
CHAPTER VI. CINEMATIC IMAGERY VS. POETIC IMAGERY: FORM AND ESSENCE	83
6.1 Love Through the Frame and the Verse	83
6.2 The Beloved as Symbol and Subject	84
6.3 Philosophical Mirrors: Platonic and Aristotelian Echoes in <i>Time to Love</i>	87
6.4 Derviş Mustafa: Ethical Witness and the Absent <i>Telos</i>	92
6.5 Transcendence and Disappearance: Time, Annihilation, and the Cinematic Sublime	94
6.6 Ethics of Representation: Seeing without Possessing.....	97
CHAPTER VII. TOWARD A POETIC-CINEMATIC ONTOLOGY	99
7.1 Art as a Medium of Ontological Revelation	99
7.2 Sufi Poetics: Metaphor, Negation, and Ontology	100
7.3 Cinematic Ontology: Time, Space, and Perception	103
7.4 Between <i>Surat</i> and <i>Ma'na</i> : The Tension in Image and Essence.....	104
7.5 Experiencing Poetic and Cinematic Ontologies	106
7.6 Silence, Ineffability, and the Beloved	109
7.7 Ethical and Spiritual Implications of a Poetic-Cinematic Ontology.....	112

CHAPTER VIII. CONCLUSION: LOVE BEYOND THE IMAGE: A RETURN TO ESSENCE	114
REFERENCES	117



CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

1.0 Love and the Image: From Literary Illusion to Ontological Longing

There is a long history of desire that does not begin with presence, but with appearance. A gaze that arrests, a face glimpsed too long, a photograph left open on a table; each marks the inception of a love that is not grounded in touch or time, but in the shimmer of an image. Such love does not begin in reality. It begins in projection. And yet, this projection is no less real. It wounds. It builds worlds. It lingers.

The idea of *falling in love with an image* has haunted both Turkish and Western literature for centuries, not only as a mere aesthetic trope, but as an existential condition. Whether in Namık Kemal's *İntibah* or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in Sabahat's reflection in *Sergüzeşt* or the photograph of Maria in *Kürk Mantolu Madonna*, the beloved appears first as a surface. Love, in these works, unfolds not as recognition, but as obsession. It begins not with knowing the other, but with imagining them.

In Turkish literature, the motif of loving the image, loving not the person, but what they come to represent, recurs with poignant force, especially in the late Ottoman (Bağcı, 2011) and early Republican periods. Namık Kemal's *İntibah*, often considered the first Turkish novel, begins with a young man's idealised infatuation with a woman whose social status and past are unknown to him. What draws him in is not her selfhood, but the spectacle of her beauty. "Zihninin kurabildiği ne kadar düşünce ve hayal varsa hepsini birer birer gözünün önünden geçirdi."¹ (2020: 21) ("He went through all the thoughts and visions his mind could create, one by one, before his eyes.") Kemal writes. The line is deceptively simple, but it holds the root of the literary problem: to see is not merely to observe, but to project.

¹ Citations given in Turkish translated into English by me if it is not stated otherwise.

That projection becomes satire in Rezaizade Mahmud Ekrem's *Araba Sevdası*, a novel that ridicules the shallow Westernization and empty romanticism of its time. The protagonist, Bihruz Bey, falls desperately in love with a woman he sees only fleetingly during a carriage ride. The moment passes, yet the image lingers and expands. His love is not for the woman herself, whom he barely knows, but for the vision she becomes in his mind. He constructs a fantasy so elaborate that it collapses under its own fiction. The imagined beloved outruns the real, and love becomes a theatre where the self performs its longing.

In a different register, Samipaşazade Sezai's *Sergüzeşt* presents a more tragic meditation on the gaze. Celal falls in love with Dilber, a Circassian slave girl, not through interaction, but by watching her silently. His love, like Halil's in *Time to Love*, unfolds across thresholds: glimpses, reflections, half-heard songs. In one scene, Celal watches Dilber sleep: "Arkaüzeri yatarak derin bir uykuya dalmasından halinde takatsizlik görünüyordu. Yanında yanan kandilin ışığıyla görünen gözlerinin etrafındaki bir iki ince çizgi, bu genç kalbin gizli bir ıstırabını açıkça söylüyordu. Sevgi dolu bakışlarının koyu gölgesi olan uzun kirpikler yaş içinde." (Samipaşazade Sezai, 2018: 37) ("Lying on her back, she appeared exhausted, as if slipping into a deep sleep. The faint light of the candle burning beside her revealed one or two fine lines around her eyes, plainly showing the hidden suffering of this young heart. Her long eyelashes, the dark shadows of her loving gaze, were moist with tears."). He does not touch her, not because he respects her agency, but because he has made her into something untouchable. The image becomes sacred, and thus, unreachable.

This withdrawal is intensified in Sabahattin Ali's *Kürk Mantolu Madonna*, perhaps the most evocative Turkish novel about image-based love. Raif Efendi, a meek and invisible man, finds purpose only through his infatuation with Maria Puder, a woman he first encounters in a painting. Before she is a person, she is pigment and pose. "Bir tablonun bu kadar tesiri altında kalmak ... Sonra oradaki kadının gece vakti karşıma çıktığını zannetmek, sonra ayak seslerine ve kürküne göre hüküm vererek rasgele bir kadının peşine düşmek ..." (Ali, 2020: 67) ("To be so deeply affected by a painting... Then to imagine that the woman from it appeared before me in the night, and to chase after a

random woman based solely on the sound of her footsteps and the feel of her fur coat...”). This confession does not signal delusion, but a truth about the architecture of his desire: it is safer to love a representation, a stillness, than a living, changing human.

Like Halil’s love for Meral’s photograph, Raif’s devotion is less relational than devotional. It is not dialogic, but hermetic. And in both cases, the beloved’s reality threatens to dismantle the fantasy. When Maria steps out of the frame and into Raif’s life, the asymmetry is laid bare. What he loves is not her, but the stillness she once offered, the silence in which he could place his longing, without interruption.

This tension between image and reality, between desire and the difficulty of knowing, is also central to Orhan Pamuk’s *Gizli Yüz* (The Secret Face). Originally written into a novel (Kara Kitap) and later adapted into a screenplay, *Gizli Yüz* tells the story of a man hired to photograph strangers for a woman he barely knows. The narrative becomes a slow meditation on identity, surveillance, and the impossibility of fully grasping the other. As in *Time to Love*, the camera does not reveal. Each photograph deepens the mystery. The woman he serves remains just beyond reach, and her image, which he reconstructs piece by piece, becomes more compelling than any truth could be. ““Bu boş suratlıların, bu anlamsız bakışlıların, bu ifadesiz yüzlerin fotoğraflarını boşu boşuna bana getirme!” diyormuş. “Hiç bir anlam, hiçbir harf göremiyorum onlarda!”,” (2021: 168) (“Don’t bring me photos of these blank-faced ones, these meaningless gazes, these expressionless faces for nothing!’ she said. ‘I see no meaning, no letter in them at all!’”) Pamuk writes.

Nazım Hikmet, too, returns often to the illusion of presence. In his poem he writes (Hikmet, 2008: 1735):

Seviyorum seni ekmeği tuza banıp yer gibi
geceleyin ateşler içinde uyanarak
ağzımı dayayıp musluğa su içer gibi...

(I love you like dipping bread in salt and eating,
waking up at night in flames,
pressing my mouth to the tap to drink water...)

His metaphors are tactile, domestic, but nowhere does the speaker grasp the beloved.

Love here is not direct contact, but approximation. It is warmth imagined, a presence not

held but evoked through gesture, ritual, image. In another poem, *Ceviz Ağacı*, he describes himself as an unseen figure watching the woman he loves (Ibid. 1618):

Ben bir ceviz ağacıym Gülhane Parkı'nda,
Ne sen bunun farkındasın, ne polis farkında.

(I am a walnut tree in Gülhane Park,
Neither you nor the police are aware of it.)

Here again, love becomes unilateral, suspended in invisibility. The self watches, but cannot be seen. The beloved, like Maria Puder, like Meral, exists at the centre of attention but outside of intimacy.

The idea of loving the image is not unique to Turkish literature; it is embedded in the Western canon as well. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents a terrifying twist on the theme. Dorian does not fall in love with someone else's image; he falls in love with his own. When Basil unveils the portrait, Dorian exclaims: "How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young." (Wilde, 2006: 25). What he desires is not youth itself, but youth preserved, beauty untouched by change, life uncorrupted by time. His love becomes a kind of narcissistic mysticism, where the image holds the promise of immortality. In his descent, Wilde exposes the danger of aesthetic devotion detached from ethical reality. The image seduces, but it also disfigures.

Similarly, in Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Oval Portrait*, the narrator encounters a painting so lifelike that it seems to breathe. The story culminates in the revelation that the artist's wife, the subject of the portrait, died as the painting reached perfection. Poe writes: "She was dead!" (1984: 484) when he had finished. Art arrests life. Love of the image becomes parasitic. The desire to preserve destroys what is living. Like Halil's photograph or Dorian's painting, the image achieves its allure through the erasure of change, of decay, of the very things that mark real presence.

In Goethe's *Faust*, the protagonist's fall is precipitated not only by metaphysical thirst but by the desire to possess the eternal through appearance. When Faust sees the image of Gretchen in the mirror conjured by Mephistopheles, he is immediately undone: "A woman's form, in beauty shining! / Can woman, then, so lovely be? / And must I find her body, there reclining, / Of all the heavens the bright epitome?" (Goethe, 2005: 90). He

loves not Gretchen, but her mirror-double. As in Wilde, as in Poe, as in *Time to Love*, the beloved first appears not in flesh, but in framed vision. Love is born not of encounter, but of fantasy.

Even Dante's *La Vita Nuova* begins not with spiritual union, but with a glance. Beatrice passes by, and Dante is undone. "From then on, I say that Love dominated my soul," (Dante, 2012: chapter 1) he writes. He constructs her not as a woman, but as a figure of salvation, his personal access to the eternal. She dies, and still he speaks to her. The body disappears, but the image persists, deepens, becomes radiant. In *The Divine Comedy* (Dante, 1997), it is Beatrice who guides him to Paradise, not as woman, but as light. Love here does not seek possession. It seeks transfiguration.

Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* offers perhaps the most delicate rendering of this phenomenon. Love, in Proust, is a chain of associations, images, interruptions. Swann's love for Odette begins not in compatibility but in the shape of her face, which reminds him of a figure in Botticelli's frescoes. He does not love her for herself. He loves her because she resembles something else. "To think that I've wasted years of my life," he says, "longed to die, that I've experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn't appeal to me, who wasn't even my type!" (Proust, 1992: 521).

Proust understands what so many of these works articulate: that love, especially when born of the image, rarely concerns the object itself. It is a theatre for the self, a stage where memory and desire fold into one another. And yet, despite the illusion, it is no less real. The longing wounds. The fantasy constructs cathedrals. What is unreal still hurts. As Proust writes, "We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the full." (1961: 105).

Across these narratives, from *Intibah* to *Proust*, from *Maria Puder* to *Beatrice*, the beloved begins as an image, but that image is never stable. It seduces, it guides, it betrays. Sometimes, the lover wakes from the dream. Sometimes, he refuses to. In *Time to Love*, Halil refuses. His love does not evolve; it remains static, sealed in glass. In this way, he mirrors and resists the literary tradition. He stands at the end of a long lineage of lovers, those who mistook the painting for the presence, the form for the source, the glance for the ground, and chooses not to move.

Yet perhaps that refusal is itself a kind of recognition. A mourning. A silent acceptance that the real, with all its decay and dialogue, cannot match the stillness of the image. And yet, the image cannot hold the soul. It reflects, but it does not reach.

To fall in love with an image, then, is not simply to err. It is to reveal something essential about the way the human heart operates. We love first what we imagine. And often, we keep loving it, long after the real has arrived.

1.1 Background and Research Question

Metin Erksan's *Time to Love* (*Sevmek Zamanı*, 1965) is not just a love story, it is a quiet, haunting reflection on how we see, what we desire, and the fragile line between illusion and reality. Set against the rain-washed, melancholic backdrop of Istanbul, the film follows Halil, a reticent house painter who falls not for a living woman, but for her photograph. When Meral, the woman in the picture, confronts him and offers a real connection, Halil remains steadfast: "I loved your picture" (Erksan, 1973: 25) he insists. Halil's stubborn refusal, his claim that he loves only the image, lies at the very core of the film, turning what could have been a straightforward love story into something far more complex, almost like a contemporary fable.

It raises uncomfortable questions that linger long after the credits roll: What does it truly mean to fall in love? Is it possible to love just a reflection, a surface, without ever really knowing the person underneath? And if so, is that still love or something else entirely? What happens when love is directed not at a living soul, but at a form frozen in time, untouched by change or complexity? These are not just abstract questions. They are dilemmas at the heart of both modern alienation and classical Sufi thought.

So, here is the question I keep circling back to: What does *Time to Love* actually say about falling for an image? Not just any image, but one that never blinks, never speaks, never touches back. And what if we place that idea side by side with how Sufi literature handles appearance and love? Not just as a poetic curiosity, but as a real tension. Halil's obsession is not some random artistic whim. It cuts deeper. It brushes against something Sufi thinkers have wrestled with for centuries, that uneasy pull between '*ishq majazi*, the

love tied to the visible, and *'ishq haqiqi*, the love that reaches for something far beyond it.

This film does not move in straight lines. It circles, stalls, contradicts itself like someone pacing in the dark, unsure if they are chasing a person or a reflection. Halil's love is slippery. One can call it delusion, but then it starts to feel oddly familiar. Maybe it is not madness at all. Maybe it is a cracked mirror, showing us how easily desire slides between flesh and something we cannot name.

1.2 Rationale and Significance

At first, it sounds like a strange mix, a mid-century Turkish film and the mystical writings of long-gone Sufi thinkers. What could they possibly have in common? But the more time I spent with *Time to Love* and these old texts, the more I kept bumping into the same question: When we fall in love, what are we really falling for? Is it the surface, the flicker of an image, a face, a form or something underneath it?

This is not just a poetic question. It is the kind of thing that unsettles you. Can love stop at what the eye sees, or is it always chasing something just out of reach? That tension shows up again and again in the film's quiet frames, in Sufi poetry, in pages written centuries ago. They are asking similar things, just in very different ways.

Sufi writers, especially, do not leave beauty alone. They poke at it, circle it, sometimes treat it like a kind of trap. Why does it have such a hold on us? What is it hiding? And then some verse stops you: "Let go care and become wholly clear of heart, like the face of / a mirror without image and picture—" (Rumi, 2010: 83). No build-up. Just that. A simple line and yet, it holds entire galaxies of meaning.

In *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, Ibn al-ʿArabi praises the physical charm of the beloved, not for its own sake, but for the way it gestures toward something greater. To him, outward loveliness hints at a deeper reality, something ungraspable but real all the same (1978: 66-67). His doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being) further elaborates this idea: all apparent forms are expressions of the single Divine reality (Aladdin, 2012). In this light, Halil's love of the image can be seen not as delusions but as an imperfect grasping toward

a metaphysical ideal, though one that becomes problematic when arrested at the level of form.

As Baki similarly echoes by saying (Andrews et al. 2006: 91):

The heedless one who is witness to your cheek
becomes a crazy drunk
It is impossible not to adore you, you are impossible
not to love
No matter how hard, the heart breaks and turns
towards you in the end
I didn't love you, but you bewitched my heart
and mind!
The fool who blames me for my love will know shame
when he sees your shining face!

In his *Masnavi* and *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, Jalaluddin Rumi uses the imagery of the beloved to symbolise Divine majesty and mystery. His verse, “You are every image, and yet / I’m homesick for you.” (1997: 93) signifies a wound that prompts the soul to seek beyond the image toward its source. The process of *‘ishq majazi* (metaphorical love) can thus be a starting point for *‘ishq haqiqi* (true love of God), provided the lover is willing to pass through the image rather than remain transfixed by it.

In parallel Yunus Emre signifies this notion by saying (Halman, 2009: 13):

I have these eyes of mine to see your face;
I have hands only to seek your embrace.
Today I shall set my soul on the road
So that tomorrow I can reach your place.

Al-Ghazali also offers a valuable framework in his *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, particularly in his discussion of the heart’s veils (*hijab*) (2011: book 21, chapter 6) and the hierarchy of knowledge (Ibid.: 57). He argues that sensory perception is the lowest form of apprehension, and true knowledge lies in the heart’s unveiling of reality through spiritual purification (Wensinck, 1941: 206-208). In *Time to Love*, Halil’s refusal to acknowledge Meral as a living, dynamic presence could be seen as a failure to lift such veils, suggesting a spiritual stagnation, rather than ascent.

In Turkish scholarship, Ahmet Karamustafa, in *Sufism: The Formative Period*, notes that love in Sufism is both destructive and creative, obliterating the ego while revealing the Real (2007: 49-50). This sense of movement, of love growing and transforming, is

missing in Halil's story, where love feels stuck and lonely. Similarly, Annemarie Schimmel points out in *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* that the Sufi journey often starts with a physical or emotional attraction, opening the way to something higher and more transcendent (2011: 98-108). In this sense, Halil's love for the image may represent the initial spark, but his unwillingness to evolve beyond the visual realm points to a failure in mystical transformation.

Meanwhile, film scholars such as Asuman Suner (2015: 30) and Savaş Arslan (2011: 130) have highlighted *Time to Love's* departure from Turkish melodramatic conventions and its engagement with existential questions. Still, something keeps getting missed in how this film gets read; something small, maybe, but important. *Time to Love* might be carrying a kind of spiritual undercurrent, one that does not announce itself right away. But if you start looking at it with Sufi philosophy in mind, the whole thing shifts. Suddenly, you are not just talking about modernism or psychology anymore. You are somewhere else entirely, pulled into a worldview shaped by centuries of Islamic metaphysics.

And this is not just theory. It is personal. It is cultural. It is about the kinds of stories that teach us what beauty means, how love works, how the unseen makes itself felt. Sufism is not some old, dusty tradition boxed away in a museum. It is still alive in Turkey, in the turning of Mevlevi's, in Rumi's verses people still memorise, in the folk songs that carry a kind of ache, and in the ghazal, where words lean toward something beyond the visible.

On the surface, *Time to Love* might look like a product of secular modernity, all muted tones and quiet restraint. But when you listen closely, beneath that hush, there is something older breathing. A metaphysical undercurrent, distinctively Turkish, hums just beneath the imagery. The film never names it, never spells it out. And yet, it is there, not in doctrine, but in feeling. It trusts silence. It leans on rhythm. It lets mood and movement stir something inward. Without ever saying so, it gestures toward the mystical, allowing that wordless pull, that yearning, to do the talking.

This thesis moves in the same direction. It does not end with an answer so much as it opens into an image, or a set of them. Visual language, drawn from both cinema and poetry, becomes the ground where thought and emotion meet when words fall short. In

Time to Love, I see a delicate tension playing out: between the image that enchants and the essence that slips away. That tension, between what we see and what might lie beyond, is where this whole thing keeps landing. Though maybe it does not land at all. Maybe it just hangs there, unsettled. Is love ever really content with appearances? Or does it always end up pushing against them, reaching for something it cannot quite name?

While Persian and Arabic sources offer a rich metaphysical background, the Turkish Sufi tradition grounds these questions differently as they offer a more immediate, vernacular and embodied approach. The verses of Yunus Emre, Kaygusuz Abdal, and Niyazi Mısri serve as central interlocutors in this thesis. Their presence shifts the interpretive frame into a more native poetics of form, desire, and failure.

1.2.1 Turkish Sufi Literature: A Native Context of Love and Image

Though the architecture of Sufi metaphysics was largely scaffolded in Arabic and ornamented in the poetic excess of Persian verse, the Turkish Sufi tradition carves its own path; less ornate, more immediate, spoken not in the majlis but on the lips of villagers and dervishes. It is a language not of abstraction, but of breath. In the hands of Yunus Emre, Niyazi Mısri, and Kaygusuz Abdal, love ceases to be a symbol. It rather becomes the sentence itself, the rhythm of the everyday spoken with mystical urgency. Where Persian poets might ascend through metaphorical palaces, Turkish Sufi poets begin in the dust: in the aching plainness of what is said simply.

Yunus Emre declares: “Ben gelmedüm da’viyiçün benüm işüm seviyiçün” (1943: 212, xlv), (“I did not come to quarrel; my work is love.”). No allegory here, only naked motive. Love is not likened to anything. It is not a symbol, a device, or a veil. It is the point. Clarity, in this context, does more than embellish. And when *Time to Love* is filtered through the metaphysical currents of Turkish Sufi thought, something shifts. The emotional charge of the film feels shaped by a deeper inheritance, something old and unspoken in the Anatolian air. Niyazi Mısri’s line, “Niceler sûretâ cellâd olurlar, / Hakîkat ehlinin olmaz nişânı.” (2009: 411) (“Many play the executioner for the sake of appearances, / Yet those who walk in truth leave behind no mark.”), lands heavily in the quiet of Halil’s gaze. The photograph doesn’t lead him forward; it holds him in suspension. What looks like love soon starts to feel stalled, circling the surface, never

quite crossing into lived relation. The mystics weren't unfamiliar with this state. For Yunus Emre or Mısri, such a posture isn't yearning. It's more like a drift. A kind of devotional hesitation that never deepens, never risks surrender.

The film's visual language echoes that tension. The sparseness, the silence, the deliberate framing. It does seem more than aesthetic restraint. There's a kind of metaphysical weight to it, as though the film itself can't breathe. Stillness, here, doesn't invite peace so much as it holds something back. The spirit hovers, unsure whether to move. This isn't quiet as calm, it's quiet as arrest. Form becomes sticky. The sacred gets mistaken for the beautiful, and Halil, caught in the loop, can't see past what's in front of him. Love starts folding inward, feeding itself. There's no outward motion, no crossing of thresholds. Just a gaze that stays fixed, and a truth that never quite arrives.

Yet Turkish Sufi poetry does more than name this impasse by offering an intervention. It does not merely describe the veil but teaches how to lift it. Through its paradoxes, repetitions, and layered metaphors, the tradition insists that love, if it is to be more than longing, must journey inward. It must pass through *surat* to reach *ma'na*, through the beloved's image to the Real that animates it. This is not a rejection of beauty, but a refusal to be arrested by it. To remain at the level of appearance is to mistake the sign for the signified, the moon for its light.

In this way, Sufi poetry functions not only as cultural backdrop but as metaphysical critique. It offers a native ontology, a spiritual grammar, through which Halil's stillness becomes legible not merely as personal melancholy but as *nefsani* inertia: the soul clinging to illusion rather than opening to the divine. His refusal is not enigmatic; it is a failure to love in the Sufi sense; to love as passage, as transformation, as unveiling.

Some have interpreted *Sevmek Zamanı* as a successful cinematic reflection of Sufi aesthetics, suggesting that the film modernises the Divan poetic tradition by framing love of the image as a spiritually resonant experience (Keskin, 2019). However, such interpretations risk conflating formal resemblance with metaphysical fulfillment. While the film undoubtedly borrows from the visual language and symbolic nature of Ottoman mysticism, ultimately suspends the journey at the level of *surat*. Halil's love does not

evolve toward *ma'na*. In this light, the film may be seen not as a modern continuation of the Sufi tradition, but as a meditation on its failure to take root in the secular self.

1.3 Methodological Approach

This study does not follow a straight line. It drifts a bit, on purpose, moving between two places that seem far apart at first: film analysis on one side, and the slow, meditative pull of Sufi writing on the other. I am not trying to squeeze *Time to Love* into some rigid religious mold. That is not the point. What matters is the way certain images echo across both the way questions keep resurfacing, quietly, in the background. What is love really drawn to? What does it overlook?

What starts to take shape is a picture of love that does not stay where it begins. In the film, it slips away from the surface, not in a dramatic rush, but slowly, almost uncertainly. And in that movement, it starts to lean toward something else. Something harder to name. Maybe something closer to the soul. The images are not just pushing the story along; they seem to hum with an unseen frequency. They suggest, without ever saying, that there is a metaphysical thread running beneath the frame. You do not need sacred terminology to sense it. It's just... there. Understated. Felt more than understood.

And then there is how the film looks, how it breathes. The stillness, the quiet pace, the way the camera lingers just a moment longer than expected feels deliberate. Almost like the lens itself is seeking, trying to look past surfaces and into something more elusive. Something harder to name. As if the form of the film mirrors an inner journey, a search not just for love, but for meaning that shimmers just out of reach.

At some point, the visuals stop behaving like parts of a narrative and begin to resemble something else entirely. They start to feel like poetry. In this film, silence and repetition do more than create mood, they echo like the refrains of a Sufi poem. They call for stillness. They do not just ask the viewer to look, but to stop, to breathe, and to feel something stir beneath the surface. In this sense, the film does not draw a hard line between cinema and mysticism. Instead, it lets those worlds bleed into each other, quietly, almost imperceptibly, until the line between secular storytelling and spiritual experience starts to fade.

Ultimately, the thesis brings these threads together to consider the film's wider philosophical setting. *Time to Love* becomes more than a love story, it emerges as a quiet critique of modern secular life, and at the same time, a gentle invocation of lost mystical sensibilities. It moves between tradition and innovation, appearance and essence, leaving behind a layered cinematic expression that invites contemplation.

1. Looking at the Film

This part of the study gets into the nuts and bolts of *Time to Love*; how it is built, how it moves, how it holds emotion. I focus on things like framing, repetition, stillness, and how the film uses silence and space. Some scenes, like when Halil sees Meral, or when the photograph keeps showing up, do not just move the story along. They hit a deeper nerve. They seem to ask: What is memory made of? Where does feeling live in a moment? To make sense of all this, I pull from the work of Laura Mulvey (1999) and Gilles Deleuze (1986; 2005). Mulvey's ideas on visual pleasure (1999: 6-18) and Deleuze's thoughts on cinematic time (1986: 1-11) help crack open the film's strange, quiet rhythm.

2. Reading with Sufism

The second approach draws from Sufi thought, not just as background, but as a way of reading. I work with some key ideas: the split between *majazi* (earthly) and *haqiqi* (real) love, the notion of *jamal* (beauty) as something more than skin-deep, *tajalli* (divine manifestation), and *wahdat al-wujud* (oneness of being).

These concepts come from classical sources like Ibn Arabi, Rumi, and Al-Ghazali. But I also lean on modern interpreters, William Chittick, Sachiko Murata, Carl Ernst, to help navigate the meanings in context.

Taken together, these two ways of reading, one visual, one mystical, help trace something bigger. Not just a story, but a conversation between form and meaning, between the image on the screen and something harder to see.

In this study, I consider *Time to Love* both as a filmic experience and as a scenario. The script's sparse dialogue, repeated motifs and symbolic structure provides a plane for close textual analysis. Reading the film both visually and literally offers a layered interpretation, especially in parallel with classical Sufi literary traditions.

1.4 Key Sufi Terminology: Navigating the Path from Form to Essence

Getting to the heart of the mystical undercurrents in *Time to Love* helps first to understand a few key concepts from Sufi thought. These terms are not just background, they shape the film's inner landscape and frame many of the spiritual questions this thesis explores.

At the heart of Sufi thought on love lies the distinction between '*ishq majazi*' and '*ishq haqiqi*'. '*Ishq majazi*', often understood as "metaphorical" or worldly love, describes a kind of attachment to physical beauty, forms, or symbolic representations. It is real love, but it stays on the surface. In Sufi thought, it is seen as the starting point on the path, not something to dismiss, but something that has to be outgrown. In contrast, '*ishq haqiqi*' signifies "true" or "divine" love, an all-encompassing, transcendent devotion directed toward the divine essence itself, beyond all forms and illusions (Schimmel, 2011: 62-63).

The seeker's journey from '*ishq majazi*' to '*ishq haqiqi*' involves moving beyond *surat* (form or appearance), the visible and tangible layer of existence, toward *ma'na* (meaning or essence), the deeper truth underlying all manifestations (Ernst, 1997: 81-84). This movement parallels the spiritual process of unveiling the *hijab* (veil), a metaphorical barrier concealing the divine reality from ordinary human perception (Murata & Chittick, 1994: 178, 188). The lifting of the *hijab* reveals *tajalli* (divine manifestation), where God reveals Himself through myriad forms without being limited by them (Chittick, 1984: 298-299).

Integral to this spiritual path are the inner faculties of the human self: the *nafs*, *qalb*, and *ruh*. The *nafs*, often translated as the "lower self" or ego, embodies base desires, egoism, and attachment to the material world. It is the source of the soul's unrest and distraction and is regarded as the primary obstacle to spiritual purification (Schimmel, 2011: 112-114). The *qalb*, or heart, is divine perception's spiritual centre and organ. It is through the *qalb* that true insight and knowledge (*ma'rifa*) are attained, allowing the seeker to perceive realities beyond the intellect (Murata & Chittick, 1994: 53). At the highest level is the *ruh* (spirit), the divine breath or essence breathed into the human, which connects the individual directly with God and serves as the locus of ultimate spiritual realisation (Ernst, 1997: 81-97).

Another key term is *jamal* (beauty), which in Sufi cosmology is not merely aesthetic but a manifestation of divine attributes. The experience of *jamal* invites the lover to glimpse the sacred through the beloved's form, a reflection of God's infinite beauty (Schimmel, 2011: 132). However, the danger lies in becoming trapped at the level of form, an attachment to *surat*, which obstructs the passage to *haqiqa* (ultimate truth or reality) (Chittick, 1984: 249).

Relatedly, *haqiqa* denotes things' inner reality or essence instead of their outward appearance. It is the realm where divine unity (*wahdat al-wujud*) is realised, the oneness of all existence in God (Ernst, 1997: 98-119).

Finally, this path often involves stages of spiritual experience and purification known as *maqamat* (stations) and *ahwal* (states), which describe the evolving relationship between the seeker and the divine, marked by trials, insights, and transformations of consciousness (Chittick, 1984: 12).

These ideas trace the seeker's path, starting from a fascination with outward beauty and moving toward a deeper kind of seeing that comes from the soul. In this thesis, they help make sense of Halil's love, the film's visual language, and the larger questions the story raises about desire, truth, and the nature of what we are really looking for.

1.5 Echoes of Longing: Classical Turkish Love Narratives and Their Cultural Afterlives

There is a certain ache that runs through Turkish literary and oral tradition, a yearning that bends time, blurs form, and burns with the impossibility of union. Long before *Time to Love* turned cinematic stillness into a meditation on unattainable beauty, the stories of *Leyla ile Mecnun* and *Ferhad ile Şirin* were already tracing the contours of a love that refused closure. These tales are not simply romances; they are poetic ontologies, where desire functions less as fulfillment and more as spiritual dismemberment. In these narratives, love does not resolve. It expands, disperses, and devours. It hollows the self until only longing remains, and through that absence, a different form of presence begins to emerge.

In *The Age of Beloveds*, Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı explore this paradox within Ottoman poetic and courtly culture: "In the context of the court and the court-

dependent elites, the beloved (the desired object) is more powerful in an ascending scale up to the ruler and God. The poetic script tends to naturalize this powerful boy by using him to embody or manifest the power of love itself.” (2006: 266). This entails that the beloved is an active, even divine, object. It is this metaphysical and political structure of asymmetry that sustains the open wound of love in classical narratives.

What makes tales like *Leyla ile Mecnun* endure is precisely this: they do not present love as a solved equation but as an open wound that reveals deeper truths. This notion aligns uncannily with the metaphysical structure of Erksan’s *Time to Love*, where Halil’s fixation on Meral’s image is not the result of a conventional romantic trajectory but a spiritual impasse echoing centuries-old literary dilemmas. The beloved is not only the object of love, as it is also its generator.

Perhaps no story captures this tension more intensely than *Leyla ile Mecnun*. First told by Nizami in the twelfth century and later absorbed into Turkish oral and written forms, the tale centers around Kays, who becomes Mecnun, literally “possessed” or “madman”, after falling hopelessly in love with Leyla. His love, denied and deferred, eventually consumes him, pushing him into the wilderness, into solitude, into the unraveling of the social self.

Mecnun’s madness is not mere heartbreak; it is spiritual combustion. As Andrews et al. notes, “For the mystics, the story of Mejnun has a special resonance. It is read as an extended allegory of the spiritual progress toward abandonment of self and the final rejection of the worldly, physical object of passion in favor of annihilation in the unity of existence, which is pure passion’s true object.” (2006: 70). What begins as human longing is transfigured into divine thirst. Leyla becomes a veil, a cipher, a threshold. Mecnun’s failure to possess her is not a narrative tragedy but a necessary step in the Sufi logic of transformation. The self must dissolve before the Real. As Fuzuli writes, “you can’t hope for release / until you burn like a candle with love’s flame.” (Ibid.: 75). To cross this bridge, Mecnun must die to himself, and to Leyla.

This transformation is mirrored in *Time to Love*. Halil, like Mecnun, cannot integrate the beloved into the order of the everyday. He withdraws. He stares. He preserves the image not because it is real, but because it does not change. His gaze arrests time, and in doing

so, seals love off from life. Just as Mecnun flees society, Halil retreats from the living Meral into a metaphysical space where only appearance remains. The difference is that while Mecnun's madness cracks open the self to something divine, Halil's stillness risks becoming sterile. He arrests the image, but the ascent never happens.

If *Leyla ile Mecnun* explores the inner unraveling of love, *Ferhad ile Şirin* dramatizes its external, Sisyphean dimensions. The tale, famously reworked by the Ottoman poet Fuzuli, tells of Ferhad, an artisan-turned-lover, who is tasked with the impossible: to carve through a mountain and bring water to Şirin's village in order to win her hand. Ferhad takes up his chisel not merely as a tool of labor but as an extension of love itself. His act of carving becomes sacred, an eros that inscribes itself on the landscape.

In one of the most haunting moments in Fuzuli's version, Ferhad, believing Şirin dead, throws himself from the mountain. It is not failure, but completion. What Ferhad chisels becomes not the stone but his own soul. Again, love is not satisfied with touch or speech. It asks for dismemberment. It demands a totalizing fidelity that remakes the self through ordeal. The task is infinite, but it sanctifies.

This sense of infinite striving finds eerie resonance in Halil's repeated pilgrimages to Meral's photograph. Though less physical than Ferhad's labor, Halil's repetition carries similar weight. Each return to the image is an act of chiseling: he is etching longing into himself, carving desire into the space of silence. But unlike Ferhad's struggle, which ends in transcendence through death, Halil's gestures loop without release. They bear the echo of effort without the rhythm of transformation. The image does not yield. It does not open. And so, while Ferhad dies completing the impossible, Halil dies never having begun.

There is a bitter symmetry here. Ferhad breaks rock; Halil stares through glass. Both face an impassable boundary, but only one attempts to cross it. The mountain in *Ferhad ile Şirin* is solid yet porous as it responds to devotion. But the photograph in *Time to Love* is impermeable. It invites the gaze only to enclose it. Halil's crisis is thus uniquely modern: he is faced not with a natural obstacle, but with a simulacrum. He does not confront the beloved; he confronts her absence, dressed as presence. His tool is not a chisel, but distance. And distance, unlike stone, cannot be shaped.

It is no coincidence that in all three stories, *Leyla ile Mecnun*, *Ferhad ile Şirin*, and *Time to Love*, the beloved remains largely voiceless. She is seen, longed for, interpreted, but rarely heard. The beloved in Ottoman literature functioned less as a character and more as a mirror. This absence of speech is not a narrative oversight; it is the condition of projection. The beloved becomes a surface onto which the lover's inner drama is etched.

This dynamic echoes the verse: "...we are ever abandoning the visible presence of our selves / We are hidden in the absolute brilliance of the perfect mirror." (Ibid.: 131). Here, the mirror is not simply reflective. It becomes more as it dissolves the individuality. The lover, like the beloved, vanishes into abstraction. The mirror absorbs both rendering them dissolved in idealised form. Thus, the beloved's silence mirrors the lover's own effacement. In loving the image, he loses himself in it.

Meral, is initially silent, first as a photograph, then as a woman who enters the frame with her own will, only to find Halil indifferent. Even when she speaks, her voice does not penetrate Halil's economy of love. He has already closed the circuit: image to desire to silence. Her actual presence becomes disruptive. She complicates the perfection of his longing. And so, like Şirin observing Ferhad from a balcony, or Leyla watching Mecnun from behind the veil, Meral remains suspended, always on the threshold of the lover's recognition but never fully inside it.

Yet this silence is not weakness. In *Ferhad ile Şirin*, Şirin chooses her own death. In many tellings of *Leyla ile Mecnun*, Leyla dies of her own longing, not to reunite with Mecnun, but to escape a life where her name has become a myth beyond her body. And in *Time to Love*, Meral throws the mannequin into the lake. She breaks the image Halil clings to. She intervenes in the myth of herself. In that gesture, quiet as it is, she speaks a truth Halil cannot bear: that love must move, must breathe, must break.

The persistence of these stories in contemporary culture is not a matter of tradition. It is more like a resonance. In the postmodern chaos of screens and speed, something about the slowness and futility of these old loves still calls. The *Leyla ile Mecnun* (2011-2023) television series, created by Burak Aksak and Onur Ünlü, reanimates the epic in absurdist tones, yet its heart is uncannily faithful to its source. Mecnun still wanders, this time

through surreal neighbourhoods and bureaucratic limbos, but he still cannot find Leyla. Each episode ends in distance. Each punchline echoes with a bruise.

This absurdism is not parody. It is ontology re-encoded. Just as the classical tales used allegory to evoke the Divine, the series uses irony to name the unnameable. “Mecnun değil miyim ben,” Mecnun asks, then adds “Mecnun olduğum konusunda düşüncelerim var ama” (Ep. 44, “Mecnunluk İstidadı”, 1:15:20) (“Am I not Mecnun? I have my thoughts about being Mecnun.”). This inversion is not comic, it is mystical. The identity dissolves, the line between the seeker the sought blurs. It is a television line, yes, but it would not be out of place in a ghazal by Fuzuli or a verse by Rumi. The pain is real. Only the setting has changed.

What Metin Erksan accomplishes in *Time to Love* is, in this light, not a rejection of tradition but its continuation in altered syntax. The film speaks Sufi grammar through cinematic silence. Halil does not recite poetry, he performs it. His stillness becomes a kind of ghazal, each return to the photograph a refrain. Like the lovers of classical lore, he orbits the beloved without landing. Like Mecnun, he cannot return. Like Ferhad, he cannot climb.

But unlike them, Halil does not transform. His is a love without arc, a longing without exodus. That is where the film departs from the classical mode: it dramatizes the risk of spiritual inertia. The path from ‘*ishq majazi* to ‘*ishq haqiqi*, so carefully traced in Sufi narrative, is here interrupted. Halil sees the veil, but never lifts it. He dwells in the metaphor, never finding the ma‘na.

This makes *Time to Love* not just a retelling, but a meditation on failure, the failure to love fully, to see clearly, to cross over. And in that, it becomes strangely faithful to the tradition it mirrors. For even in the oldest stories, the lovers often die before they arrive. Perhaps this is not failure at all. Perhaps this is the point. As Layla, in her acceptance of fate, says ““I was grief stricken and you made me glad; you set me free from love of this world” (270/212). You made me glad.” (Kalpaklı & Andrews, 2000: 48). She resonates with peace in relinquishing worldly love.

Halil, in contrast, is wounded and internalizes this wound. His love neither culminates nor ascends, becoming a tragic echo of Layla's acceptance, yet lacking her liberation. In this way, he becomes not just a character but a symptom or a symbol of the modern condition, where images multiply but essence recedes. The photograph replaces the presence. The love persists, but without ground. And yet even in this, something sacred lingers. A residue. A shimmer. Like Mecnun whispering into the desert. Like Ferhad striking stone. Like a viewer watching a black-and-white film and forgetting the world beyond the screen. Like someone falling in love, not with a person, but with the image of a person, knowing full well that the image will never speak.

A similar echo appears in Muhsin Macit's short story "Vitrinde Leyla" (2020), where a man falls in love with the photograph of a woman displayed in the window of a neighborhood photo studio. The image, detached from biography or context, becomes the sole object of his desire. Like *Time to Love*, the story constructs a love that unfolds entirely in the realm of the visual where projection overtakes encounter, and surface is mistaken for presence. There is no dialogue, no exchange, or no past. Only the still image, suspended behind glass, quietly gathers the full weight of the lover's longing. That both narratives hinge on the love of a photographic face suggests not a shared plot device, but a recurring metaphysical dilemma: when does the image cease to represent, and begin to replace? Whether in literature or cinema, the beloved remains behind the glass unreachable, uninterrupted, and unreal.

1.6 Metin Erksan, Turkish Cinema in the 1960s, and the Search for a National Cinematic Language

Metin Erksan stands as a singular figure in Turkish cinema, not merely for his technical mastery but for his relentless inquiry into the metaphysical possibilities of film. His work transcends national labels and conventional genre classifications. And yet, to understand how his cinema emerged and how it arrived at the ethereal stillness of *Sevmek Zamanı*, one must begin with history: not only the history of Erksan's life, but of the cinematic and intellectual world in which he intervened. To follow Erksan's trajectory is to follow Turkish cinema's own troubled dialogue with modernity caught between imitation and invention, between mass appeal and spiritual depth.

Born in 1929 in Çanakkale, Erksan received his degree in art history from Istanbul University; a discipline that might be interpreted offering him a unique theoretical background among Turkish filmmakers of his time (Dönmez-Colin, 2008: 29). His understanding of visual composition was not the product of apprenticeship in film studios, but rather the result of sustained engagement with Ottoman art, Islamic metaphysics, and Western art theory. This academic foundation made him particularly sensitive to the visual language of cinema, to the weight of composition, the symbolism of spatial structures, and the potential of image to become an ontological argument (Arslan, 2011: 130-131).

Erksan's early career in the 1950s included short documentaries and early features. But it was in the 1960s that he began to shape the direction of Turkish cinema itself. With *Yılanların Öcü* (1962) and *Susuz Yaz* (1963), both adaptations of rural stories, Erksan was at the forefront of what would later be called the "social realist" trend in Turkish cinema. *Susuz Yaz*, in particular, achieved international acclaim, winning the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival as a first for a Turkish film (Dönmez-Colin, 2008: 36; 49). It seemed, for a moment, that Turkish cinema might step onto the world stage through films that depicted its social realities with unflinching clarity.

However, Erksan would not remain within the confines of social realism. He broke away from that trajectory, not out of rebellion but out of a metaphysical necessity. The sociopolitical injustices portrayed in *Susuz Yaz* gave way to the metaphysical tensions in *Sevmek Zamanı*. And in this transition, Erksan left behind not only a genre but an entire way of conceiving cinema. He rejected the dominant paradigms of Turkish filmmaking: the formulaic emotional structures of Yeşilçam, the instrumentalism of political cinema, and even the ideological constructions of the emerging "national cinema" discourse (Ibid.: 56). Instead, he proposed an inquiry into visuality, temporality, and the conditions of love.

Erksan's position as an intellectual was central to this project. He was not simply a director but a public thinker. He wrote extensively about cinema, arguing that Turkish films should reflect indigenous aesthetics and intellectual traditions. Yet, he was skeptical of simplistic nationalism. The call for a national cinema, particularly articulated by Halit

Refiğ in the mid-1960s, was grounded in the belief that Turkish cinema needed to break away from Western models and express the moral and communal values of Anatolian culture (Arslan, 2011: 129-130). Refiğ's vision was rooted in nostalgia for village life, oral storytelling, and collective belonging. Erksan, however, pursued another kind of essence. Where Refiğ sought to retrieve the national soul, Erksan sought a different approach to improve Turkish cinema.

This is not to say Erksan stood in opposition to the search for a national cinema. Rather, he complicated it. He believed that national identity, if it were to be cinematically expressed, had to go deeper than folkloric motifs or epic narratives. It had to touch the metaphysical conditions of being in the world. For this reason, Erksan never adopted the label of *Milli Sinema*, even while sharing its dissatisfaction with Yeşilçam and its commitment to cinematic autonomy (Dönmez-Colin, 2008: 37). His films diverged from the rural morality plays and didactic realism of his peers. He embraced ambiguity, formal rigor, and metaphysical paradox.

This stance had consequences. While Erksan had achieved global recognition with *Susuz Yaz*, his turn toward allegorical and metaphysical cinema met resistance at home. His films became increasingly misunderstood (Ibid.: 49). *Sevmek Zamanı*, upon its release, was met with confusion and indifference. Critics and audiences accustomed to melodrama or social realism found its visual restraint and philosophical abstraction alienating. The film quickly disappeared from theaters. Its slow rediscovery, decades later, would reveal it as one of the most conceptually rich and visually innovative works in Turkish cinema.

Yet Erksan did not retreat. Instead, he doubled down on his commitment to cinema as thought. He continued to direct films that challenged narrative expectations and aesthetic conventions. *Kuyu* (1968), for example, pushed even further into the realm of psychological darkness and moral ambiguity. Erksan developed a style that became unmistakable: sparse in dialogue, rich in symbolic framing, and marked by long, contemplative silences. These were not simply matters of form. They revealed a filmmaker preoccupied less with sentiment and more with thought and drawn to the weight of ideas rather than the pull of narrative. Yet to see him only as a stylist would

miss the mark. He remained attuned to the political currents of his day, often speaking publicly about censorship and the constraints placed on artistic expression by both the state and the industry.

Even as his work came under pressure, he held fast to a vision of film as something more than reflection. He resisted the tendency to turn cinema into a tool for ideology or sentiment. That refusal set him apart, not just aesthetically but philosophically, from the dominant modes of his era. He did not belong to Yeşilçam, nor to the national cinema movement, nor to the socialist realist vanguard that would emerge with figures like Yılmaz Güney.

Güney, in particular, represented a different kind of break from Yeşilçam. His films, from *Umut* to *Sürü*, captured the plight of the rural poor, the violence of the state, and the tragedy of revolution. Güney's cinema was raw, urgent, and political. It addressed the audience not as contemplative subjects but as political agents (Ibid.: 42). In this sense, Güney's realism diverged sharply from Erksan's metaphysics. And yet, both shared a rejection of formulaic narratives and a refusal to submit to industrial dictates. They imagined different roles for cinema, but both saw it as a space for serious confrontation with truth.

In contrast, Lütü Akad's contributions centered on visual realism and ethnographic attention to spatial dynamics. His "Migration Trilogy" chronicled the dislocations of rural families drawn into urban life. While formally more conventional than Erksan's work, Akad's films also resisted the melodrama of Yeşilçam. His influence would shape the aesthetics of later directors, particularly those interested in urban alienation (Arslan, 2011: 153-157). Still, Akad did not pursue the philosophical abstraction that defined Erksan's path.

What Erksan created was a cinema that thought. His aesthetic resembled, at times, the spiritual austerity of Bresson, the metaphysical alienation of Antonioni, or the formalism of Tarkovsky. But these comparisons risk obscuring the cultural specificity of his vision. Erksan's cinema emerged from the Turkish experience: not merely its politics, but its poetics. His images were shaped by Islamic metaphysics, Ottoman visual symmetry, and

the elliptical structures of Divan poetry. He found within his own tradition a set of visual and conceptual tools that allowed cinema to become a space of metaphysical encounter.

Erksan's resistance to narrative closure, his embrace of slowness, and his focus on repetition can all be read through this lens. Rather than leading the viewer toward resolution, his films dwell in states of suspension. They refuse catharsis. They reflect a world in which meaning is not given, only approached, again and again, through the act of seeing. In this way, Erksan aligns with a deeper Sufi tradition: one in which the image always an interval.

In the years following *Sevmek Zamani*, Metin Erksan continued to work, but his position in Turkish cinema steadily declined. As the industry moved toward more commercially driven productions, Erksan shifted to directing literary adaptations for TRT, the state broadcaster. These works, while more restrained and didactic, lacked the formal and conceptual innovation of his earlier films. His reputation waned, and he became increasingly isolated within the changing landscape of Turkish cinema.

Today, Metin Erksan's place in Turkish cinema is secure, not because he was embraced by the mainstream, but because he made visible the very limits of that mainstream. He demonstrated that cinema in Turkey could be more than melodrama, more than nationalism, more than politics. *Sevmek Zamani*, and the broader project of Erksan's career, becomes crucial for this thesis precisely because it pushes cinema to its ontological edge. It asks not only what can be seen, but what seeing itself desires. It transforms the image into a threshold.

1.7 On the Limits of Survey: Why This Thesis Does Not Offer an Exhaustive Reading of Image-Love in the Literary Canon

It would have been both tempting and conventional to cast this study as a historical survey of the love for images across Turkish literature. Such a motif is anything but marginal. From Divan poetry to early modern prose, from painted miniatures to shadow plays, the theme of loving a face, an image, a silhouette, something seen but never fully possessed, threads through the tradition with remarkable consistency. The gaze is not merely a perceptual act; it becomes metaphysical. The beloved is not simply encountered but constructed, held not in time but also in projection. This study, however, resists the

gravitational pull of that archive. Instead of tracing a lineage, it chooses to dwell, attentively, and perhaps stubbornly, on a single cinematic expression of that motif.

This narrowing of focus is not the result of oversight but of fidelity: a fidelity to the intensity of one image, one gaze, and the metaphysical implications it draws. *Time to Love* is not merely a continuation of the tradition. In its deliberate slowness and visual minimalism, the film does not offer a modernised version of classical motifs. Rather, it stages them in a contemporary grammar. The image of the woman in the photograph, unmoving and mute, is not symbolic of love. It is more like the ground upon which love is misrecognised, reconstituted, and delayed. This is no coincidence. The tradition the film draws upon, implicitly or otherwise, is one in which form is always charged with more than it discloses.

To understand why this thesis avoids an exhaustive literary survey, one must also consider how the image operates in the broader Islamic and Ottoman aesthetic tradition. Serpil Bağcı (2011) has shown that in classical Ottoman miniature painting, the beloved is rendered with a stillness and formalism that defies narrative immediacy. Figures are front-facing, emotionally withheld, their bodies positioned not for expressive dynamism but for meditative clarity. These images are not designed for affective realism; they are meant to be contemplated, not entered. The image in this tradition is not a portal but a wall, a veil that gestures to what lies beyond form, never within it (Ibid.: 284).

This resonates deeply with *Time to Love*, where the protagonist's attachment is not to a living, speaking woman but to her photograph. Like the miniature figures Bağcı (Ibid.: 273-276) describes, the woman in the image is framed, silent, and unknowable. His love is not for her, but for what she becomes under his gaze: pure surface, untroubled by reciprocity. This is not a pathological deviation. The lover does not fall short of real love; rather, he dwells in a different register of it, one that prioritises projection over encounter, appearance over essence. In this, the film echoes rather than merely illustrates classical motifs.

But why not trace these echoes more thoroughly? Why not build a comprehensive intertext that links this film to its poetic ancestors? The answer lies in method. This thesis privileges depth over breadth, resonance over enumeration. The decision to remain with a

single cinematic artifact is not due to a lack of materials but due to the abundance of meaning that emerges when attention is sustained. Sufi metaphysics, which inform much of the theoretical scaffolding of this work, does not unfold chronologically. Its logic is vertical, not linear. Insight comes not through accumulation. To look at one image deeply is, in this context, more fruitful than to catalog many.

Furthermore, the figure of the beloved in classical literature and visual art often functions less as a character. She is seen but rarely heard. Her presence is iconographic, fixed, idealised, and laden with symbolic weight. As Bağcı (Ibid.: 274) notes, the miniatures were not designed to reproduce reality but to organize it aesthetically, to flatten narrative into form. Likewise, in Divan poetry, the beloved is rarely a speaking subject. She is rendered through hyperbolic metaphors: the candle, the moon, the rose. Her silence is not a narrative oversight. It allows the lover's voice to echo unchallenged, to define the scene.

This unidirectional structure finds a profound analogue in *Time to Love*. The protagonist speaks; the woman in the photograph does not. When he eventually meets the real woman, her vitality unsettles him. It disrupts the metaphysical enclosure he has built around the image. What he seeks is not presence. Her actuality is a threat. This inversion, where the real becomes intrusive, and the image becomes sanctuary, is central to both the film and the tradition it draws from. And yet, the film does not reduce this to psychological disturbance. It stages it as a question: what does it mean to fall in love with a form that does not answer back?

In Islamic aesthetics, and especially in the mystical writings that run parallel to it, the form (*surat*) is always shadowed by its meaning (*ma'na*). To become fixated on the form is an unavoidable stage in the soul's journey. The lover must first fall in love with the appearance in order to be shattered by it. Only through the collapse of the image can the deeper reality be glimpsed. Bağcı's (Ibid.) observations on the function of visual stillness in miniature painting, its refusal of time, action, and psychological interiority, mirror this mystical tension. The image is never an end. It is a barrier, a lure, a veil.

This is why the photographic still in *Time to Love* is so potent. It does not simply update the miniature; it replays its metaphysical challenge in cinematic terms. The motionless

woman in the photograph invites the same kind of projected devotion the miniature once did. But in cinema, a medium defined by motion, this stillness becomes even more jarring. The photograph halts the flow of narrative, creates a pocket of suspended time. Love, here, is not a progression.

This temporal and formal disruption invites reflection on how the image functions as an epistemological problem. Zeynep Gemuhluoğlu (2013) argues that Turkish cinema has long struggled to think in images rather than merely use them illustratively, a problem she traces back to the post-Tanzimat flattening of classical literary forms. In that context, metaphysical concepts such as *suret* and *ma'na*, once treated as open-ended sites of tension, were increasingly turned into closed symbols. Rather than being experienced as thresholds, images became narrative tokens: the beloved as code, not as crisis. Gemuhluoğlu suggests that *Time to Love* marks a rare moment in Turkish cinema where this symbolic reduction is reversed. The image is not there to deliver meaning. It insists on its surface and its silence.

This refusal to resolve the image into either narrative function or emotional realism brings *Time to Love* closer to the aesthetics of the *mesnevi* than to the melodrama or novel. As Gemuhluoğlu notes, classical poetic structures often positioned the beloved not as a character, but as a moment of interruption, as something that disturbs the flow of meaning without dissolving into it (Ibid.: 40-41). The image becomes a *berzah*, a metaphysical isthmus, neither presence nor absence, neither reality nor symbol. Halil's fixation on the photograph, then, can be understood as a return to this unresolved viscosity: he does not desire what the image represents; he desires the image's refusal to represent anything at all. His love is suspended in a space that the classical tradition once knew intimately, but that modern narrative often seeks to bypass.

In that sense, *Time to Love* is not simply revisiting classical motifs rather it is rediscovering the ontological condition behind them. The film's pacing, framing, and sonic minimalism all contribute to a poetics of stillness, not to signify purity or devotion, but to stage a different kind of looking. Gemuhluoğlu sees this as a critical gesture. She argues that the temporality of Divan poetics was not linear but rhythmic, grounded in cycles of return and delay, something that cinema is uniquely capable of enacting through

montage, repetition, and visual stasis (Ibid.: 44-45). Where Tanzimat-era storytelling leaned on teleological progression, such as journey, resolution, and marriage, the classical tradition and films like *Time to Love* locate meaning in the refusal to move forward. This resistance to narrative movement is not necessarily regressive.

By drawing on the logic of formal interruption, rather than character development or cause-and-effect resolution, the film activates a deeper metaphysical structure that predates the novel and persists despite it. Halil's love does not grow or evolve. The photograph does not open toward a future. This kind of time is a different register of duration where perception and memory merge, and where love, rather than being a journey toward union, becomes a suspension of will. In that framework, the image is not a veil hiding the real; it is the site where the real falters. And this faltering is not a flaw in the image, it is its very condition.

What *Time to Love* offers, then, is not an allegory of mysticism but an experiment in cinematic metaphysics. Its use of the photograph, far from symbolising the classical motif of aşk-ı mecazi, radically questions what it means to see, to project, and to endure the silence of a form that does not yield meaning. Rather than historicising the image or moralising love, the film returns us to the uncertainty at the heart of both. And that uncertainty is precisely where a visual grammar of thinking begins.

To analyse this film alongside a thousand poems would be to dilute its singular resonance. This is not to suggest that the broader tradition is irrelevant. On the contrary, its presence is what makes the film legible in metaphysical terms. But the mode of reading adopted here is not genealogical; it is contemplative. It seeks not to position the film within a lineage rather it seeks to listen to how the lineage reappears within the film, distorted by the grammar of the screen. A full literary survey would risk flattening the specificity of that moment.

In the end, the refusal to pursue a comprehensive literary mapping is a methodological stance. It emerges from the recognition that some works do not expand outward, instead they deepen inward. *Time to Love* is such a work. It gathers within its sparse frames the residues of a vast tradition and distills them into silence, repetition, and delay. The image

does not need context to speak; it needs stillness to echo. That is why this thesis listens not to the canon in its entirety, but to the single photograph in which the canon trembles.



CHAPTER II. METIN ERKSAN'S *TIME TO LOVE*: A SUMMARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMING

2.1 Narrative Overview

Metin Erksan's *Time to Love* (*Sevmek Zamanı*, 1965) follows a deceptively simple plot: Halil, a quiet and solitary house painter, becomes transfixed by a photograph of a woman named Meral that he finds in a home he is painting. He begins to return solely to gaze at the image, forming a strange, silent bond with it. When Meral eventually discovers him and initiates contact, a romance begins, but only partially. Halil, curiously unmoved by her real presence, insists that his love is reserved for her image. Their relationship slowly falls under the weight of everything they cannot reconcile, what they feel, believe, and fear. In the final moments, Halil and Meral are shot by her former lover, and just like that, their story ends, abruptly, violently.

Even so, beneath the film's sparse conversations and minimalist approach, something else keeps moving. A quiet tension runs through it all, never quite named but always present. It stirs up deeper questions about what it means to see, to exist, and to truly love. Essentially, the film is not merely about romantic love but about "how we construct reality." (Akbelen, 1966: 10-12). At the centre of the story lies a strange paradox: Halil is drawn to Meral's image yet turns away from her in person. This is not just an odd trait, it opens up a broader question about love, how we see, and what we take to be real. The narrative's simplicity is a mask for more profound ontological questions: What is the beloved? Is it the form we see, or something hidden beneath that appearance?

2.2 Aesthetic Minimalism and the Image as Metaphysical Object

Erksan's style breaks away from the usual rhythms of Turkish melodrama. He leans into silence, lingers with long takes, and strips the dialogue to a minimum, inviting us to slow down and really look. How the scenes are framed and held draws attention to what we

see and the very act of seeing itself. Drawing comparisons with Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), film critic Atila Dorsay notes that *Time to Love* "demands a contemplative attention from its viewer, not unlike a meditative act" (Dinçer, 1996: 213-214). This contemplative tone aligns well with the introspective orientation of Sufi thought.

Mengü Yeğin's black-and-white cinematography deepens this feeling of abstraction in the film. Recurring images like rain-streaked windows, reflections, and carefully framed interiors work together to build a fragmented and veiled atmosphere. The surface becomes a threshold: what is seen hints at what is hidden. Halil's solitary gazing scenes, often positioned through layers of glass or shadow, echo the mystic's contemplation, not of the object itself, but of the reality behind it.

Laura U. Marks, in *The Skin of the Film*, introduces the concept of "haptic visuality" (2000: xi-xii), a way of seeing that resembles touching, where the eye lingers on texture, surface, and emotional weight rather than scanning for narrative information. *Time to Love* exemplifies this mode. Meral's photograph becomes a tactile surface of affect, and Halil's love becomes as not passive but embodied in repetition and silence, recalling the Sufi practice of *muraqaba*, a meditative contemplation that seeks not possession, but presence.

This visual minimalism places the photograph at the heart of *Time to Love* as a single, haunting object. It functions as more than a narrative device, it becomes a metaphysical threshold. Halil's affection is not directed at Meral the person, but at her frozen likeness. This distinction is not trivial. It echoes one of the oldest dilemmas in Sufi metaphysics: the tension between *surat* (form) and *ma'na* (meaning). But whether that beauty elevates the soul or ensnares it depends on the depth of the lover's vision. Can Halil see through the image, or does it blind him?

Ibn Arabi warns in *Fusus al-Hikam* that attachment to form, unless transmuted into knowledge of essence, leads to spiritual error. "Thus it is your wealth in which you have seen your form. So whoever among you imagines that he has seen Him, does not have gnosis, and whoever of you knows that he has seen himself, he is the gnostic." (2006: 17; Chittick, 1982: 37-38) he writes. In his view, form is not the destination but the threshold,

a necessary yet dangerous starting point. Annemarie Schimmel, writing in *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, builds on this insight. She describes how the beloved in Sufi poetry often appears as a physical or aesthetic attraction at first (2011: 105). However, this passion becomes a ladder under spiritual guidance; each rung a station on the path to divine realisation. The face, body, and glance are not the ends of love but veils concealing its true source. For Halil, however, that ladder never materialises. He does not climb toward the Real. He remains motionless, arrested before the surface. His is a love of stasis, not transformation, an aesthetic fixation mistaken for transcendence. In order for Halil to complete his transformation he needs to “Learn how to burn from the moth” (Andrews et al. 2006: 100).

This frozen attachment also resonates with Jacques Lacan’s notion of the “mirror stage” (2005: 4). Halil does not truly see Meral; he sees the reflection of his own fantasy, an image of pure, untouchable beauty unmarked by time or contradiction. Lacan’s mirror is not a neutral surface; it is a site of misrecognition, where the self confuses the idealised image with reality (Ibid.: 2-4). Halil’s beloved is such a projection: unchanging, compliant, and ultimately mute. Zeynep Sayın offers a powerful formulation of this phenomenon. The image in modernity becomes a surface upon which the self inscribes its deepest fears and desires (Sayın, 2020: 125). Halil’s relation to the image exemplifies this inscription. His love is not dialogic but one-directional. It does not reach outward; it loops inward. He desires not connection but control, not the beloved, but the safety of his projected ideal.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger argues that “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (1977: 47). This sharp asymmetry forms not only the basis of Western art’s portrayal of femininity, but also the inner architecture of desire in a world ruled by images. Halil’s gaze, however, subverts even this dynamic. He does not look at Meral as a living woman, nor does he engage in any relational performance. Instead, he withdraws into a kind of monastic solitude, choosing not possession but distance. Yet even this distance does not liberate the image from objectification. It renders it sacred, untouchable and thus, doubly objectified. Berger writes that “to be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet

not recognised for oneself” (Ibid.: 54). Meral’s image, while not nude in the literal sense, is stripped of context, voice, and motion. Halil’s love functions as a kind of aesthetic nudity: she is seen, framed, adored, but never truly known.

2.3 Halil’s Inner Stasis: Character, Time, and Spiritual Inertia

Halil resists conventional character analysis. He is best understood not through classical character development but as a symbolic figure, a site of philosophical and spiritual tension. His refusal to love Meral as a living, changing person is often read as pathological detachment. Julia Kristeva’s notion of “abjection” (1982: 1-2) in *Powers of Horror* provides a frame for understanding Halil’s withdrawal. Kristeva sees the abject as something that disrupts identity and the system (Ibid.: 6-8, 12-13). Halil’s idealisation of the image avoids precisely this threat posed by the living woman’s agency and changeability. In this sense, Halil’s behaviour is not an illness, but a metaphysical resistance, a refusal to reduce love to the mutable, contingent reality of human interaction.

From a Freudian lens, Halil’s fixation could be viewed as narcissistic cathexis, a redirection of libidinal energy onto a safely distant and non-threatening object, preserving his sense of control. As outlined in Freud’s *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, this form of cathexis often arises as a defence against the instability of real relationships (1957: 98-99). By choosing the photograph over the embodied Meral, Halil avoids vulnerability, loss, and contradiction. But this reading does not quite cover it. Erksan’s choices, the way he frames each scene, the film’s steady rhythm, suggest something more reflective. The silence, the slowness, the gestures that keep looping do not just point to some buried trauma. They suggest something else. Not repression, exactly. More like a kind of quiet search. A wanting that holds itself back. It feels like Halil is not chasing love in the usual sense. He is looking for something that will not vanish; something solid, something that holds even when everything else slips away.

Susan Sontag called photographs “tiny element of another world.” (2015: 178). In a way she seems to be indicating that they are like tiny embalmments of time. In this sense, a photo does not just show someone, it traps a moment, locks it in. It signifies that that moment will not change. Halil’s drawn to Meral’s photo for exactly this reason. Not

because it is her, but because it is her without change. No mess, no loss, no future. It is a still point in a moving world. And while you could call that escapist, there is also something sacred about it. Like he is not just afraid, he is also devoted. Almost like he is praying to the idea of permanence.

In this way, Halil is not alone. He reminds me of other quiet, searching figures in spiritual cinema; Tarkovsky's Andrei in *Nostalghia* (1983), or those hushed, inward souls in Bresson's films². These are not people running away from the world. They are trying to hear something deeper under all the noise. James Morris, in *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn Arabi's Meccan Illuminations*, suggests that stepping back from the visible world can be the start of awakening (2005: 31-47). It is not about giving up but about redirecting love toward what lasts. Halil, though, never quite reaches that threshold. He hovers near it but does not cross. His detachment is not a portal but a prison. He lingers at the veil, mistaking the surface for what it hides. Unlike the Sufi lover who passes through appearance to find essence, Halil remains spellbound by the image, unable, or unwilling, to move beyond it. This seems to be offering a rejection of movement itself. Consequently, Halil's love becomes suspended outside of the flow of time and untouched by change.

Relatedly I think that the film's title, *Time to Love*, signifies an irony. What time is being referred to, and for whom? Halil's notion of love denies ageing, contingency, and the unpredictable flux of relational life. His emotional world is frozen, suspended in a single image. This temporal stasis reflects what Sufi philosophers describe as *ta'alluq*, or clinging, not to the beloved's essence, but to a particular form, a fixed moment, an illusion mistaken for truth. As William Chittick observes in *The Sufi Path of Love*, true spiritual progress involves movement through *maqamat* (stations), each demanding loosening the self's grip on illusion (1984: 12). Halil, however, never leaves the threshold of appearance. He remains spiritually inert, a lover who mistakes stillness for depth.

Cinematically, this fixation is found to be parallel to Gilles Deleuze's theory of the time-image. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze suggests that modernist cinema abandons

² See *Pickpocket* (1959), *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), and *Au hazard Balthazar* (1966).

action-driven plots in favour of temporal fragmentation; emotions stretch, time dilates, and meaning emerges not through what happens, but through how time is experienced (2005: 30-33). Halil's repeated visits to the photograph are not narrative progression. He exists in a suspended temporality, where feeling displaces action, and desire circles back on itself, thus creating a loop in itself.

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han, in *The Agony of Eros*, also critiques the erosion of genuine erotic encounter in contemporary life, where love becomes a mirror reflecting the self, rather than a portal to the other (2017: 1-2, 11-12). Desire, increasingly aestheticised and mediated, collapses into consumption. Halil, in this light, is an eerily modern figure. His love is entirely visual, untested by presence or mutuality. What he longs for is not Meral, but a curated version of her, untouched, unchanging, and ultimately, unreachable. His is a love that does not risk itself, and therefore, never truly arrives.

2.4 Istanbul as a Spiritual Topography

The Istanbul of *Time to Love* is empty, reflective, and eerily silent. Unlike the textured, socially grounded cityscapes of directors like Ertem Eğilmez³ or Lütü Ömer Akad⁴, Metin Erksan's⁵ Istanbul in this film feels metaphysical, evacuated of historical specificity, detached from social urgency. This version of the city is not a living metropolis but a contemplative space, an interior projection. Something in *Time to Love* echoes what Edward Said called "late style". He wrote about how, in their final works, artists often abandon tidy endings and straightforward messages (Said, 2006: introduction). Instead of aiming for resolution or clarity, they lean into ambiguity, fragments, silences, and a kind of stripped-down formality.

You can feel that same sensibility in the film. Its voice does not offer comfort or harmony; it is withdrawn, almost resistant. This is not a work that tries to tie things up neatly. Instead, it slows down and turns inward. Where another film might build momentum or chase emotional climaxes, *Time to Love* holds back. It loops through recurring images and moments, inviting you not to rush toward meaning, but to sit in the

³ See *Hababam Sınıfı* (1975), *Mavi Boncuk* (1974), *Arabesk* (1989), and *Canım Kardeşim* (1973).

⁴ See *Gelin* (1973), *Düğün* (1974), *Diyet* (1975), and *Hudutların Kanunu* (1966).

⁵ Metin Erksan has also films that are socially grounded, so in these films Istanbul isn't like this. See *Susuz Yaz* (1963), *Yılanların Öcü* (1962), and *Beyaz Cehennem* (1974).

quiet uncertainty of it all. The city it shows is not bustling with action; it is quiet, soaked in rain and silence. Time seems slowed, suspended. Erksan's Istanbul becomes a psychological and spiritual mirror, not a social document. In this sense, the film's "lateness" is less chronological than ontological. It stages a world where meaning does not unfold through action but must be discovered in pause, stillness, and what remains unsaid. In this sense, the film seems to echo what Said says about late style; it does not try to tie things up neatly, politically or aesthetically. Instead, it dwells in the uneasy space between what we see and what lies beneath.

Moreover, even though the city in the film feels empty, it still carries a kind of spiritual weight. Turgut Cansever, the Turkish architect and thinker, once described the traditional Islamic city as a reflection of divine order, where the layout of gardens, courtyards, and repeated forms was beautiful and meaningful, gently guiding the soul toward harmony and something beyond itself (2010: 24). Erksan's Istanbul, by contrast, is a city stripped of these symbols. It does not offer the geometry of paradise, but the starkness of abandonment. Still, this empty, hollow space forms the ground where Halil's ascetic longing takes root. The silence is not simply there for atmosphere, it opens up a space for a deeper, spiritual struggle to play out. The rain-soaked streets and echoing rooms do not soothe the soul; instead, they sharpen its restlessness.

In this way, Istanbul in the film acts much like the desert does in early Sufi writings, not as a place of clear revelation, but as a harsh landscape of trial, emptiness, and inward searching. Halil moves through the world like a kind of postmodern *salik*, not seeking revelation, but trying to protect a delicate idea of love from the disruptions of real life. His path does not follow the usual stages of spiritual progress. There are no crossings, no stations. Instead, he stays still. Refuses to move. The city around him becomes part of this stillness. It does not challenge him; it watches with quiet sympathy. In its silence, it gives him space to hold onto his longing, even as it quietly reveals how empty that longing has become. What is left behind is not union or transcendence, but a solitude that lingers, just beneath each image, just beyond reach.

2.5 Love at the Edge: Death, Detachment, and the Threshold of Transformation

Time to Love ends on a quietly devastating note, laying Halil's inner turmoil bare for the first time. When he learns that Meral is being married off, his decision to take a mannequin dressed as a bride says more than words could. That lifeless figure becomes more than a prop; it stands in for the woman Halil has lost. It embodies his return to *'ishq majazi*, a love bound to the surface, to what can be seen and controlled, rather than what lives and shifts. This is not just theatrical drama. It marks a turning away. Halil retreats into the comfort of a static image.

What emerges is a deeper kind of failure: not just the fear of love, but the inability, or unwillingness, to meet it on its own terms. Halil cannot surrender to what breathes and breaks. His is a love of containment, not communion. The Sufi thinker Ibn Arabi cautions against just this in *Fusus al-Hikam*: remaining fixated on the form cause failures to perceive the essence and captivates in illusion (2006: 53-54). This is exactly where Halil finds himself, enchanted by the promise of permanence, blind to the deeper truth that love is always in motion, always asking us to yield.

Then Meral steps onto Halil's boat, dressed in her bridal gown, and the film shifts. It is not just another scene; it is a quiet rupture. Her arrival feels like an intrusion into Halil's suspended world, a frozen space ruled by memory and idealized images. And yet, her presence carries the hint of something new. That simple gesture, stepping into his solitude, suggests the fragile beginnings of *'ishq haqiqi*: a love that looks past the form and seeks what endures beneath.

When the painting and mannequin sink into the lake, the act carries the weight of ritual. These are not just discarded objects; they are illusions being let go. Their descent into the water feels like a quiet purification, a private *taharah*. In that still moment, the lake becomes more than a setting. It becomes a vessel of meaning, a mirror of the soul finally releasing what it clung to in fear. It reflects and cleanses. It becomes a witness to the shedding of illusions. Rumi's words echo here: "Be melting snow. / Wash yourself of yourself." (1997: 13). In letting go of representations, the two seem, if only briefly, to reach toward something raw and real.

This also resembles a verse by Nevi, “The sea is stormy, tormented and distraught / by love / While the still mountains complain of silence / and of patience” (Andrews et al. 2006: 87).

But reaching comes too late and silence and patience are disrupted. Their deaths, sudden, violent, carried out by Başar, bring any hope of transformation to a brutal halt. The story does not close with union or transcendence. Instead, it leaves behind a sharp rupture. Love never moved past the surface, and the result is spiritual stasis. Halil and Meral remain suspended between illusion and reality, unable to cross the threshold into true connection.

In this way, the film becomes a kind of Sufi cautionary tale. Where mysticism sees love as a path to what is Real, *Time to Love* turns the vision on its head. It shows what happens when love stalls at the image, when it avoids risk, avoids depth, and folds back in on itself. Instead of rising, it collapses. And what could have been a passage into the sacred becomes a closed loop, ending not in union, but in silence.

Although, the film’s ending does not only offer despair. Death can be understood as a dissolution as also in Sufi thought, death does not simply signal an end. It marks a turning, a movement from selfhood into surrender. The path leads through *fana*, the dissolving of the ego, and opens into *baqa*, where the soul rests in unity with what lasts. This shift is not about disappearance but about presence, real presence. It is in this transformation that love reaches its highest form: *‘ishq haqiqi*, the love that draws the seeker into the heart of the eternal.

Ibn Arabi captures this movement with piercing clarity in *The Meccan Revelations*: “Love is a divine attribute; through love, the lover ceases to exist as other than the Beloved.” (Chittick, 2013: 82-84). These words describe a real undoing, a stripping away of illusion that leads to a deeper kind of life. Through this lens, the deaths of Halil and Meral may hold more than sorrow. They suggest a passage, a loosening of the hold that the world of forms had over them.

Halil’s theft of the mannequin, for example, feels like a desperate clinging, a final grasp at a version of love that does not change. It is love arrested in image. By contrast, Meral’s

act of casting the mannequin and the painting into the lake marks a painful release. She lets go. It is not easy, but it is honest. Her gesture reflects what the Sufi path demands: detachment not as abandonment, but as clarity. As Yunus Emre echoes “I was born with divine love. / Death is for beasts, it is not the lover’s destiny. / I love you, so the hand of death can never touch me.” (Halman, 2009: 15).

Rumi also offers comfort in this process of shedding: “Don’t grieve. Anything you lose comes round in another form.” (1997: 272). The lake, too, plays a part in this unfolding. It becomes more than a setting by turning into a kind of mirror. A quiet space where things are relinquished and something else might begin. It holds the in-between. The water reflects and receives, washing away attachments and pointing toward renewal.

When Meral steps onto Halil’s boat in her wedding dress, the moment lands with quiet intensity. It is not just a narrative closure; it feels like a crossing. The boat floats in stillness, removed from the world’s rush. Her movement into this space feels ceremonial. Something sacred. Here, love begins to slip free of form. It edges closer to something that does not fade. In *The Conference of the Birds*, Attar writes: “The Way is not easy... You must lose everything. Strip yourself of all your belongings, your name, your reputation—everything. Enter the desert of annihilation with nothing.” (2005: 219). The veil here is the self. The separation. What is shed is illusion.

And so, their deaths, when they come, feel like a closing, but also, possibly, an opening. Not simply an end, but a release from the surface, ego, and fear. The love that never fully arrived in life perhaps moves, in death, into another kind of space, one where essence might finally be met.

CHAPTER III. SUFI THOUGHT AND THE CONCEPT OF APPEARANCE IN LOVE

3.1 Love as a Path: Sufi Thought and the Search for the Eternal

In Sufi philosophy, love is not treated as a passing emotion or simple longing. It carries deeper weight. Love, in this context, is a current, something that draws the soul beyond itself. It is not confined to the personal or the emotional. Rather, it functions as a kind of compass, guiding the seeker away from self-interest and toward what cannot be grasped through reason alone. In this way, love becomes a path in itself, one that asks for surrender, not possession. It calls for the letting go of ego and the loosening of attachments to the transient world. What remains is a slow movement toward what lasts, toward the Real, the unseen, the eternal.

The relationship between the lover and the Beloved is not symbolic, it is real, lived, and deeply transformative. The journey is rarely easy. It involves a kind of burning away, slowly letting go of everything that is not essential. However, through that process, the soul becomes clearer, more open, and more able to reflect divine light.

Rumi put it in simple, unforgettable terms (1925: book 1, line 110).:

Love is the astrolabe of God's mysteries.

In this single line, he captures the heart of the Sufi view: love is not just a feeling, it is the very substance of connection. It moves through all things, erases the illusion of separation, and guides the seeker toward unity with the source of all being. In the end, love becomes the path, the companion, and the destination.

In his work *The Sufi Path of Love*, William C. Chittick analyses how humans can connect to the divine (1984: 29). One must escape its body, form, to make a connection with the spirit. Even if body is a prison, one should not consider the relation between body and the

spirit as a “fundamental duality or dichotomy” (Ibid.) as the body only an outward manifestation (Ibid.):

The spirit cannot function without the body, and the body without the spirit is withered and cold.

Your body is manifest and your spirit hidden: These two put all the business of the world in order. (M V 3423-24)

In this sense, love can be seen as the only way to create a connection between them without creating a dichotomy as it can be interpreted as an inward force, often experienced as an overwhelming pull towards something beyond the material realm.

This view resonates with *Time to Love*, in which Halil’s intense fixation on Meral’s image represents the confusion of seeing love only as a physical and material longing. By focusing on Meral’s external form, her photograph, he fails to perceive the deeper connection that love in the Sufi tradition would suggest. Meral’s photograph is not intrinsically bad; it is just another form. However, it still works as a tool for Halil’s spiritual disconnection since Halil gets stuck in the form, refusing a connection with the spirit. In this sense, Halil’s love reflects an incomplete understanding of the Sufi notion of *ishq*, love that binds the lover to an image, rather than the divine essence beneath it.

3.2 ‘Ishq Majazi and ‘Ishq Haqiqi

Central to Sufi mysticism is the distinction between *‘ishq majazi* (earthly or symbolic love) and *‘ishq haqiqi* (divine or true love). *‘Ishq majazi* refers to the love directed towards worldly objects or physical forms, such as a lover’s attachment to another person’s beauty or characteristics. While this kind of love is valid, Sufi thinkers see this kind of love as only a stepping stone towards *‘ishq haqiqi*, the deeper, spiritual love that leads to union with God.

The Sufi poet and philosopher Ibn Arabi discusses this distinction at length in his *Fusus al-Hikam*. He explains that while earthly love may bring the lover closer to the divine, it can also become a veil if the lover becomes attached to the material beauty, rather than using it as a reflection of the divine (2006: 40-42). Ibn Arabi writes (Ibid.: 42):

The Real is, in relation to a particular shadow, small or large, pure or more pure, as light is in relation to what veils it from the onlooker through coloured glass which tints it.

The challenge within this philosophical framework is the temptation to get stuck in the worldly, material. This is precisely the dilemma Halil faces in *Time to Love*. Halil's fixation on Meral's photograph, his love for her image rather than the person herself, keeps him trapped on the surface. It is a kind of love that never gets past appearances, never reaches into the soul of the other. In Sufi terms, he remains caught in '*ishq majazi*, the love of form, and never crosses over into '*ishq haqiqi*, the love that sees with the heart rather than the eyes.

Rumi speaks to this paradox beautifully in the *Divan-e Shams* (Lewisohn, 2014: 78):

Close your eyes so the heart may become your eye,
and with that vision look upon another world.

It is not through ordinary seeing that one reaches the truth, it is through surrender, through the kind of vision that comes only when the self lets go. Halil lacks not love itself, but the depth that transforms love into something sacred.

Rumi's verse speaks to the idea that love's true nature often requires the lover to be blind to the external, material form to see the inner light. Halil's fixation on Meral's image is a clear sign of his inability to look past the surface, to recognise the deeper, spiritual truth that lies beneath her outward appearance. This kind of blindness to what truly matters is central to his struggle. It becomes painfully evident in a key moment in *Time to Love*, where Halil is frozen by his overwhelming yearning, trapped in a silent stare at her face. He remains caught in this one-sided longing, unable to break free from the grip of an image that ultimately keeps him from experiencing love's fuller meaning. He does not move forward and connect with Meral as a whole person. This obsession with surface beauty is emblematic of '*ishq majazi* that Sufism critiques as a barrier to true spiritual enlightenment. Although, an encounter with '*ishq majazi* might not be eliminated in this process as beauty (*jamal*) considered to be a reflection of the Divine. The important thing here is to learn how not to get stuck at gazing this surface and avoid any entrapment within it.

In Turkish Sufi literature, the tension between form and meaning does not erupt. It murmurs, solemn and persistent, like a prayer repeated under one's breath. Yunus Emre, whose words rise not from courts but from village thresholds, speaks in a stripped vernacular where mysticism loses ornament and becomes ache. "Âşık kişi bilmez öğüt

zira assı kılmaz öğüt” (1943: 130, lvii) (“The lover does not heed advice, for advice holds no value to them.”) he says, not as a proverb, but as a verdict: do not speak to the loveless, for the words will not land. Love here is not a feeling, but an aperture. It is an opening into the Real. In Yunus’s vision, ‘*ishq majazi* is not error; it is ember. It is not condemned, but it cannot hold. The fire it gestures toward burns elsewhere.

Niyazi Mısri, writing with deeper shadow, warns of the same veil;

“Ger mecâzî ger hakikat her kesin kârı değil” (2009: 118) (“Be it symbolic or real, not everyone is capable of it.”). The love of the visible is a season, a gust of wind. True love stays. Their verses do not intoxicate as Rumi’s do; they darken. They hush. Turkish Sufi poetry is not drunk, it is bruised. And it is from this silence that one might regard Halil. His love for Meral’s photograph is not merely idiosyncratic; it is symptomatic. His gaze halts at *suret*, the outer contour. He lingers at the veil, never tearing it. Where Rumi might cry out for his movement, Yunus would lower his eyes in sorrow; not at his passion, but at his pause. He has mistaken the beginning of the path for its end.

In Sufi aesthetics, beauty is regarded as one of the divine attributes, with earthly beauty seen as a reflection of divine perfection. Beauty (*jamal*) in the Sufi tradition is not merely external or superficial but is a manifestation of the divine essence. Rumi articulates this in his poetry, describing beauty as a divine reflection that both captivates and guides the lover (1973: 122, section xxi, lines 7-10):

The heart entangled in the Beloved’s tresses typifies,
Man bewildered and held captive by worldly illusions and
as here, the lover spellbound in contemplation of the mysterious beauty of
God.

Rumi here reflects beauty’s powerful effect on the lover, leading them beyond their worldly attachments and into a higher state of consciousness. The beauty of the Beloved is a doorway that opens into the divine; however, the lover must learn to see through this beauty, rather than remaining attached to it.

In *Time to Love*, the photograph of Meral is a powerful symbol of beauty, as *jamal* represents an idealised form of beauty. However, it traps Halil in a superficial attachment. Halil’s attachment to the image of Meral reveals more than just romantic longing. It signals a deeper failure to move beyond what the eyes can see. In the Sufi tradition, this

kind of fixation is seen as a spiritual misstep. To become enamoured with outward beauty while ignoring the inner reality is to fall into illusion, mistaking the reflection for the source. Sufi teachings constantly warn against this: the outer world is full of signs, but they are not the destination.

A verse by Hafiz captures this beautifully (1952: 61):

But when will you reveal your face to the drunkard,
O you who hold the mirror of the sun and moon.

Here, Hafiz reminds us that what truly matters is not the surface, but the light that shines from within. In this view, real beauty is not skin-deep, it is soul-deep. And it is only when the seeker learns to look with the heart, rather than the eyes, that they begin to glimpse the truth behind appearances. The material world may reflect this inner beauty. However, the lover must look past the surface to experience the deeper essence. Halil's failure to look beyond Meral's photograph captures a central struggle in the Sufi journey: he remains caught in the reflection of her outward form, unable to perceive the divine spark that lies beneath. His obsession with the image traps him, anchoring him to a version of love that fears the real, shutting him off from the deeper kind that demands presence, not illusion.

3.3 The Role of the Beloved in Sufi Poetry

In Sufi poetry, the Beloved often speaks in double tones. On the surface, it may be a person, flesh and blood, familiar and near. But beneath that, something more is at work. The Beloved becomes a symbol, pointing toward what lies beyond the physical. The Divine, in this view, is not distant or abstract but revealed through form. The lover's task is to see with more than the eyes to recognise a deeper light behind the beauty.

Physical allure can pull the seeker closer, but it can also mislead. It is a kind of test. What appears beautiful might simply reflect the surface, not the source. In this tradition, true love demands more than admiration; it asks for vision. The surface must be pierced. The heart must learn to see through the veil.

Saadi writes (2010: 46):

Perhaps thou mayest have seen the firefly / shine like a lamp in the garden
at night.

“O, night-illuminating moth!” Someone / said, “Why comest thou not in the daytime?”

The firefly gave an answer full of wisdom, / “Because I am not visible before the sun.”

This is no decorative metaphor. It carries a central insight. In Sufi thought, love becomes a mirror, showing not only the other but what lies within. The Beloved stands as both image and invitation. Not merely a person to be desired, but a glimpse of what endures. To step toward that vision, the lover must shed ego, loosen the grip on form, and let go of the wish to possess. Only then does something real begin to shine through.

Halil’s inner conflict in *Time to Love* captures this tension with unsettling clarity. He clings to Meral’s image, not just as something beautiful, but as something he cannot let go of. The pull is strong, yet shallow. Instead of guiding him toward something deeper, his longing circles the surface. It offers no doorway, only a loop. What could become a path toward spiritual awakening instead becomes a dead end.

There’s a Sufi verse, simple but full of weight (Attar, 2005: lines 1506-1507):

Thick clouds of dust have been allowed to blow
Between his sight and Truth – those clouds have gone

That “dust” points to the noise of the world that fades, distracts, and binds. For Halil, Meral’s photograph becomes just that. It enchants him but also keeps him still. He does not step past it. He cannot. The image seduces, but it also blocks. What he loves is not Meral, not really, but an idea of her, frozen and safe from change.

This speaks to something larger. In the modern view of love, appearances often take centre stage. What is seen is mistaken for what is. The body stands in for the soul. Halil’s failure to go further, past form, into essence, mirrors a wider loss: the forgetting of love as a spiritual act, not just an emotional or visual one. The Sufi tradition reminds us that true love demands more. It asks for depth, surrender, and a kind of seeing that goes far beyond the eye.

3.4 The Veil and the Gaze in Sufi Aesthetics

In Sufi mysticism, the idea of the veil, the *hijab*, holds deep meaning. It is not just cloth or cover. It stands for the things that get in the way: pride, desire, the clutter of the world.

These veils can be subtle like a thought or an image. A feeling that pulls too much attention toward the surface and away from the truth. The seeker's task is not to destroy the veil outright, but to see through it to recognise what lies beneath. As Ibn Arabi notes (Chittick, 1984: 44):

The man veiled from the Attributes sees His handiwork, while he who has lost sight of the Essence is with the Attributes.

Since those who have attained union with Him are drowned in the Essence, oh youth, how should they gaze at His Attributes? (M II 2812-13)

In *Time to Love*, Halil stares and stares at a photograph. That image becomes everything. Yet it blinds him. He never sees past it. The photograph becomes his veil. It captures Meral's beauty, but it also freezes her, holds her still. He never meets her essence. He never truly sees.

This does not feel accidental. Erksan seems to be pointing at something larger: a quiet critique of modern love, perhaps, or a portrait of how we often mistake looking for knowing. Halil's desire is intense but narrow. It does not evolve. His love never deepens and remains tethered to surface charm, unable to reach the core.

In the Sufi path, this is a familiar danger. Love that stops at the face, or the form, risks becoming a trap. True love, *'ishq haqiqi*, asks the lover to keep going, past what is visible, into the unseen. And Halil? He does not make it that far. He lingers at the edge, caught in a gaze that never breaks through.

CHAPTER IV. THE ROLE OF VISUAL PERCEPTION AND IDENTITY IN LOVE

4.1 The Illusion of Love: Image, Identity, and Objectification

The tension between appearance and identity in *Time to Love* is not just thematic, it is the emotional core of the film, a quiet struggle that runs beneath every frame. Halil's obsession with Meral's photograph is not just a personal quirk, it reveals a deeper kind of paralysis, both psychological and spiritual. He falls for a safe version of Meral. And in that safety, something shuts down. The image becomes a kind of wall, beautiful, but cold. It keeps him at a distance. He is not connecting; he is hiding.

Sufi thought frames this attachment through the idea of the *nafs*, the part of the self that clings to illusion, that gets stuck on the surface of things. You can see it in Halil. He does not, or maybe cannot, move past what he sees. His desire stays flat, caught in appearances. The heart, in Sufi terms, is supposed to see through the form, to what is real underneath. But Halil will not go there. Or maybe he is afraid to. The Sufi path insists that love, to be true, must rise above this trap. As Rumi writes (1973: 60):

The earthly frame he flung to the earth, / Soul and intellect he bore to
heaven.

The pure elixir mingled with the wine-dregs / Came to the jar's surface,
and the lees settled apart.

The second soul which the vulgar know not / I protest by God that he
surrendered to the Beloved.

Here, love is reflection, not possession. Yet Halil does the opposite, he clings. He does not reflect Meral's essence; he clings to an ideal she cannot embody. This resembles a misdirected mystical longing. Where Yunus Emre declares, "Your love tore me away from me: / It's you I need, it's you I crave," (Halman, 2009: 13) his pain signals a

transformation. Whereas Halil's love becomes self-referential, more about preserving his internal fantasy than encountering another soul.

Turkish Sufi literature returns to this caution again and again, often in tones more incisive than tender. In the paradox-laden clarity of Kaygusuz Abdal's verse, the peril of an untransformed gaze is laid bare: "Cân göziyle bak hayâli terk it / Ta ki göresin cümleyi mahbûb" (Gaybi, 2021: 245) ("Gaze with the soul's eye and forsake illusion, / That you may behold all as the Beloved."). It is not the eyes that see, he reminds us, but the one who sees through them. Were vision merely the work of the eye, would the blind not also find their beloved? The irony cuts deep: to see without insight is not perception but delusion. It is illusion masquerading as clarity.

Yunus Emre echoes this with luminous simplicity (1943: 32):

Anunçün gözleri Hakk'a açıldı
Hudâ'dan cânına rahmet saçıldı
Nesi kim var ise terk itdi yola
Bu yol ile varan ma'sukı bula

(And so his eyes were opened unto Truth,
God's mercy rained upon his soul in sooth.
He gave up all he had and chose the Way —
For only thus the Lover finds Beloved's ray.)

The eye worth naming is the one that sees the Divine. These are not metaphors for mystics alone; they are instructions for lovers. To perceive truly is to let form dissolve into meaning, to let the visible open toward the Real. Halil's failure lies here: his gaze is full of Meral's image, yet he sees nothing. He does not look through her. The photograph reflects but does not reveal.

What these poets offer, then, is more than critique; they extend a hand. They suggest a different mode of seeing, not as possession, not as control, but as surrender. In their vision, the beloved is not an object to be held, but a threshold to be crossed. It is a figure that gestures not toward herself, but toward the Infinite she veils. It is this gesture that Halil misses. His eye is awake, but his heart remains unlit.

Judith Butler's theory of identity as performative provides a striking parallel. According to Butler, identity is not fixed, it is shaped by repeated acts and roles we inhabit (1999:

33). Halil performs love, but only within a tightly controlled frame. His repeated gestures toward Meral's image are like ritual acts reinforcing his constructed sense of self. As Butler puts it (Ibid.: 43-44):

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.

In this sense, Halil's identity is not just fragile, it is staged. His love is a kind of performance, always directed at an object, never engaging a subject. The more he repeats this performance, the further he drifts from any authentic encounter with Meral or himself.

This emotional paralysis is where *Time to Love* touches something deeper. It echoes the Sufi journey inward, where the seeker must confront the illusions of the self and strip away what is false. Halil cannot do this. His refusal to look beyond the image reflects a broader spiritual failure: the inability to dissolve the ego, to release the *nafs*, and to move toward the divine essence that love, in its truest form, reveals.

Moreover, this paralysis that signifying an emotional and ontological stasis can extend into how one perceives and treats the other. The dynamic between Halil and Meral in *Time to Love* is shaped, at its core, by the machinery of objectification. Meral becomes a frozen image, mute and compliant, reflecting nothing but his private longings. His gaze turns her into a canvas, a quiet screen onto which his internal world is projected. This recalls Martha Nussbaum's argument in *Objectification: A Feminist Theory of Human Dignity*, where she warns that reducing someone to an object strips them of agency, flattening their subjectivity into something passive (1995: 257). For Halil, the photograph does not just stand in for Meral. It replaces her. He looks at her image, again and again, but never really meets the woman. There is no risk, no friction, no conversation. Just a still surface to project onto.

Martha Nussbaum put it clearly (Ibid.: 257-258):

The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes... as lacking in autonomy and self-determination... as lacking in agency.

This is exactly what happens here. Halil is not in love with Meral, not the living, unpredictable person. He falls for a version of her that does not speak, shift, or interrupt. The photograph gives him something smooth, quiet, and undemanding. It promises a kind of perfection that does not get messy or talk back.

But there is a cost to that illusion. He flattens her. Turns her into a screen for his own longing. Whatever complexity she holds, her moods, thoughts, contradictions, it all gets stripped away. What's left is just a shell: beautiful, but empty.

From a Freudian angle, this is classic repression (Freud, 1963: 147-148). He trades reality for control. Instead of facing the chaos that comes with real love, its timing, risks, and pain, he builds a fantasy that is tidy and contained. But the irony is cruel. That same fantasy becomes a prison. He does not find peace. He circles around it, stuck in a loop where the thing he wants is always out of reach, because it was never real to begin with.

In the end, Halil's objectification of Meral wounds both. It isolates him in a solitary fantasy and prevents her from being recognised in her full humanity. The tragedy of *Time to Love* is not just that their love fails, but that it never had a real chance to begin with. Not until the image is shattered and the veil is lifted can love, or even selfhood, begin to take root. But for Halil, that moment of awakening never fully arrives. He remains tethered to a mirage as a form of self-protection.

4.2 Possessing vs. Perceiving: The Gaze in Love and Cinematic Seeing

The concept of the gaze is central to *Time to Love*, particularly in the way Halil interacts with Meral's photograph. His fixed stare does not merely express affection; it constructs a power dynamic that speaks to broader philosophical concerns. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, famously unpacks the gaze as a subtle but potent tool of control. He writes (1995: 202-203):

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.

In Halil's world, the photograph serves exactly this function, or so it seems. His fixed stare holds mastery over the moment, Meral's image, and time itself. The stillness of the photograph gives him the illusion of dominion. He is not just looking; he is also possessing. Yet that control is hollow. The moment he seeks to contain slips through his fingers. Instead of granting him power, the photograph cages him. It renders him motionless, emotionally and spiritually. He becomes ensnared by his own gaze, unable to break free from the image he has projected. It is not Meral he loves, but the fantasy he has etched onto her silence, a reflection spun from longing, not truth. The power he thinks he wields turns inward, revealing the hollowness of a love based only on projection.

This is not love in dialogue; it is more like love in monologue. His gaze is not reciprocal. It does not invite Meral in, it only imposes. It maps his fantasy onto her image, erasing her subjectivity and autonomy in the process. In this sense, Halil is not so much relating to another person as he is gazing into a mirror, one that reflects his needs, longings, and his carefully constructed illusions.

Against this, Sufi mysticism proposes an alternative way of seeing. The Sufi gaze is not one of possession but of surrender. It looks not to master, but to dissolve the self in order to truly encounter the other. In this tradition, the gaze becomes sacred, a bridge between the soul of the lover and the divine essence shining through the beloved. Rumi offers a powerful reorientation of the act of looking (1961: 15-16):

The light that shines through the windows of the eyes and ears—if those windows did not exist, the light would not stop. It would find other windows to shine through.

What Halil fails to realise is that his gaze remains tethered to the surface. It is flat, literal, and ultimately self-serving. It seeks neither communion nor understanding. Rather than lifting the veil, it reinforces it. He cannot pierce the illusion to find the essence; he cannot move from form to meaning. The photograph, far from being a window into the beloved, becomes a wall. This does not seem like love in the traditional sense; it is something filtered, flattened, watched from a distance. Halil does not fall for a person so much as for an image he keeps returning to. What looks like longing is actually disconnection. He

stares and waits, but nothing real ever takes root. The real loss is not that his love goes unanswered. It is that he never gets close enough to know who she is in the first place.

This tension between gaze and a possible more perceptive seeing can be traced in the film. In *Time to Love*, visual elements, photographs, mirrors, glassy surfaces, carry more than aesthetic weight. They do not just populate the frame; they interrupt it. Each reflection serves as a kind of breach, a small rupture through which the characters' inner disquiet slips into view. Metin Erksan uses imagery not to embellish, but to dissect. The camera does not just observe, it reveals, often uncomfortably. What unfolds is not simply a love story. It is a slow, deliberate attempt to see clearly, and to reckon with what seeing actually entails.

Christian Metz once pointed out that mirrors highlight the gap between how we appear and who we are (1982: 46-49), an idea that shadows nearly every scene Erksan composes. For instance, the image is fixed, safe, obedient. The woman behind it, however, resists containment. The discrepancies between them suggest that the image itself work as a mirror. The film's reflective surfaces underline this tension: Halil does not engage with Meral as a person. He circles around an idea of her, locked into repetition. The visuals do not chart transformation. They freeze him in place, reducing him to a man looking, but not moving. In this sense, the image, working as a mirror creates its own space that Halil prefers to employ over the real.

Moreover, Halil's gaze does not seem to work as a tool to relate. Instead, his gaze turns inward, becoming less about connection and more about defence. He assigns meaning to Meral from a distance, projecting desire without ever risking proximity. The tragedy is not that she eludes him. The more likely source of this tragedy seems that he never really tries to reach her. The image becomes a buffer, a substitute for presence. What we see is not connection, but containment.

Then how mirrors and photographs function? They are not just cinematic flourishes. They seem to be more like provocations. They ask us, the viewers, to look closer at what we believe we see, at what we choose to ignore. How often do we stop at the surface? How often do we confuse what is visible with what is real? Halil's desire, confined to the

image, becomes a cautionary tale in this sense. We are also invited to question our own habits of perception.

By the film's end, the visual textures of *Time to Love* echo Halil's fragmented interior. His inability, or unwillingness, to look beyond Meral's beauty leaves him emotionally stranded. The gaze becomes a prison, but also a test. And Erksan leaves us with a whisper of a question: Can love survive without vision, not the gaze of the eyes, but the insight of the heart? In charting Halil's descent into illusion, the film gently insists that only the love that dares to see fully, messily, and perhaps vulnerably, has the power to endure.

4.3 Meral, Ovid, and the Gendered Knowledge of Love

One of the most easily missed, yet richly loaded moments in *Time to Love* occurs when Meral is briefly shown holding a Turkish translation of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, titled *Sevişme Yolu* (*The Way of Making Love*). She is not reading it outright, but the book's subtle presence, paired with her posture, which echoes the sensual female figure on that edition's cover, offers an intertextual gesture that deepens our reading of her character. I do not think that this is just a background detail. It seems deliberate, almost confrontational. The book is not there to fill space; it pushes us to see Meral differently. Not as a symbol. Not as a projection. As someone who resists the quiet fantasy Halil builds around her. Her presence breaks his rhythm. She does not fit.

Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* plays by completely different rules. It is bold, sly, unapologetically physical. Love, for Ovid, is not some transcendent mystery, it is a skill set, a game with tactics, a scene where bodies matter and performance is part of the point. "Love is a kind of warfare," he says. "In this tender warfare, night, and wintry storms, and long journeys, and cruel pain, and every kind of toil, have their part." (2014: 2nd book, parts 933-934). Ovid recognizes love as a warfare, consequently that no one can avoid being wounded. This is his advice in the face of this warfare. Make eye contact. Flirt. Say what you want out loud. In Ovid's world, love moves and talks back. It is messy, visible, always in motion.

Halil could not be more out of sync. He does not touch. He does not speak. His version of love stays still, almost sacred, locked in a loop of imagined purity. So, when Meral holds

that book, *that* book, it is cutting. She becomes a kind of echo of the cover image, but the irony is sharp: she lives in a world Ovid would recognise and Halil does not.

Whether staged or unconscious, Meral's gesture collapses the distance between reader and representation, she becomes the image and the interpreter at once. In contrast to Halil's static, idealised love, locked in a photograph, Meral signals a different mode: one rooted in play, recognition, and a kind of grounded eroticism. She inhabits a love that speaks, touches, moves, a love of the world rather than a withdrawal from it.

From a Sufi vantage point, the tension becomes even more acute. Ovid champions the craft of love, while Sufi mysticism dissolves craft in the fire of annihilation. For the Sufi, true love is ego-death; the *nafs* must be burned away in order to see the beloved as divine reflection, not separate other. Rumi reminds us, "I am filled with you / Skin, blood, bone, brain, and soul. / There's no room for lack of trust, or trust. / Nothing in this existence but that existence." (1997: 131), a love that consumes, purifies, and transcends the self entirely. There is no technique here, only surrender.

Viewed through this lens, Meral's *Ars Amatoria* functions as a gentle but unmistakable critique of Halil's detachment. It offers something else entirely. A counterpoint. Love, here, is not about distance or obsession. It is more about contact. About showing up. Not staring, but risking something; being seen, and seeing back. It is messy, exposed, and active. It is a verb, not a relic.

Halil stays with the image. Frozen. Safe. But Meral reaches for something more human, a connection that breathes, moves, and answers. And this gap between them is not just a stylistic choice. It is a question of ethics. Of what it means to treat another person not as a symbol, but as someone real. Love that demands no return, that silences the beloved, risks becoming idolatry. The Sufi poet Attar warns (2005: lines 839-843):

The secrets of the sun are yours, but you / Content yourself with motes
trapped in its beams.
Turn to what truly lives, reject what seems – / Which matters more, the
body or the soul?
Be whole: desire and journey to the Whole.

Halil, bound to a shadow, never crosses into substance.

Meanwhile, Meral quietly hints at another possibility: a love grounded in action and agency, not disembodied worship. Her holding of *Ars Amatoria* is not a wholesale rejection of spiritual love of course, but it offers a counterbalance to remind that love, to be real, must be lived. Ovid's philosophy asks for reciprocity, for an eye to meet the eye that gazes and not to remain passive under it. It brings love down to earth, conversation, and motion.

In this way, the book is more than a literary reference. It becomes a visual argument, a wordless yet pointed rejoinder to Halil's aestheticized longing. It lets Meral reclaim her image and her meaning, if only briefly. It suggests she is not just being watched, she is also watching back. And it asks the audience to reconsider what kind of love is truly transformative. Perhaps it is not the love that gazes in silence from afar, but the love that speaks, listens, and dares to be present.

4.4 Beyond the Image: Sufi Love, Projection, and the Failure to Transcend Form

In Sufi thought, seeing is a deeper form of perception that moves beyond the veil of appearances toward the truth that lies within. To see, truly, is to witness with the heart. The Sufi gaze seeks the essence hidden beneath form, piercing through surface beauty to glimpse the divine spark that dwells in all creation. As Ibn Arabi write (1978: 40, section xii, excerpts 4-7):

My Beloved is three although He is One, even as the
(three) Persons (of the Trinity) are made one Person
in essence.
So be not displeased, friend, that I speak of gazelles
that move round the marble statues as 'a shining sun',
Or that I use metaphorically the necks of the gazelles,
the face of the sun, and the breast and wrist of the
white statue,
Just as I have lent to the branches (spiritual) endowments
and to the meadows moral qualities, and to the
lightning laughing lips.

In this sense love just not act as an emotion It is also a form revelation and unveiling. It is a kind of mode of knowing that dissolves the illusion to get behind the veil.

In contrast, Halil's gaze is tethered to the outer shell. His love for Meral never rises above '*ishq majazi*', the love of form, surface, and image. He does not move through

appearance to arrive at truth. Instead, he remains caught in the visible, clinging to an idealised photograph that offers beauty without breath, presence without risk. His eyes see but they do not perceive. In Sufi terms, this is a failure of vision, a blindness of the spirit that prevents him from encountering Meral not just as a face, but as a soul. What unfolds is not simply a personal impasse. It is actually the film's central spiritual wound.

The difference between these two forms of love, '*ishq majazi*' and '*ishq haqiqi*', is not subtle, but seismic. The former stirs longing; the latter demands transformation. The former desires; the latter annihilates the self in devotion. Halil, unable or unwilling to cross that threshold, remains stranded in stasis. His love, arrested at the level of the image, becomes a loop with no exit. Emotionally, he stalls. Spiritually, he starves. And so, the film renders its most profound critique: love that cannot transcend the surface is not only incomplete, but also, ultimately, empty. In this way, the film subtly critiques a broader cultural tendency to reduce love to appearance, to confuse desire with depth.

In contrast, Sufi love calls the lover to surrender the ego (*nafs*), to dissolve self-centred craving and find unity with something greater. It is a love that sees truly beyond beauty, form, and into essence. Halil's failure to make this inner journey becomes his quiet downfall. By clinging to the surface, he forfeits the very thing he yearns for. The film thus offers a quietly devastating insight: that love, if it never deepens into presence and understanding, cannot fulfil. It remains only a mirage, a reflection of what it could have been.

This connects to the insights shared by both Sufi mysticism and depth psychology that love acts as a mirror reflecting not only the beloved but also the inner world of the lover. The image is not just a portrait. It turns into a screen that is flat and silent where Halil casts everything he cannot express: his want, unease, and his refusal to move forward. His love for Meral, filtered entirely through this idealised image, reveals more about his own inner emptiness than it does about her.

In Sufi tradition, love is not just emotion. It is more of a discipline, a way of shedding the self to move closer to the divine. Rumi encapsulates this in his metaphor of the mirror (1997: 106):

We are the mirror as well as the face in it. / We are tasting the taste this minute
Of eternity. We are pain / and what cures pain, both. We are
The sweet cold water and the jar that pours.

True love, then, is not fixation but reflection; it requires looking through the beloved to see the divine essence and, in doing so, discovering one's own soul. Halil, however, clings tightly to the surface. His gaze is not a means of connection but an act of possession. Rather than engaging with Meral as a living presence, he remains entangled in a static image that conforms entirely to his longing. In this way, his love becomes solitary and unreciprocated, more like a monologue projected onto a mute surface.

From a psychological perspective, Halil's obsession reflects a narcissistic objectification. When an individual is unable to form a stable sense of self, they may use idealised others as mirrors to stabilise their internal world. Halil's fixation on Meral's image operates in precisely this way: she becomes less a person and more a vessel for his unintegrated emotions. The photograph allows him to avoid the risk of intimacy, keeping him at a safe distance from vulnerability and mutual recognition.

True love (*'ishq haqiqi'*) demands that the lover see through appearances to the divine spark within the beloved. Halil, however, remains caught in *'ishq majazi'*, a love bound to form, surface, and illusion. His failure is not just emotional but spiritual: by loving the image rather than the person, he closes himself off from transformation, surrender, and the deeper truth that Sufi love invites.

In this sense, the film offers a poignant critique: love that remains tied to illusion, whether through photographs, projections, or fantasies, fails to touch the living essence of another human being. It becomes a kind of idolatry, not of the beloved, but of the lover's own yearning. *Time to Love* shows us that true connection requires the courage to see clearly, to move beyond appearances, and to encounter the beloved not as an object, but as a mirror in which the divine, and the self, can be glimpsed.

Then Halil's fixation offers a metaphysical reading. It functions as a subtle yet pointed critique of the spiritual tension between idealised love (*'ishq majazi'*) and true, divine love (*'ishq haqiqi'*), a central concern in Sufi mysticism. This seems to be signalling a

metaphysical failure to engage with love as a path to transformation. For poets like Ibn Arabi (1978: 89, commentary 16) and Rumi (1973: 40; 1925: proem 300), love is a ladder: its first rungs may sparkle with beauty and desire, but its purpose is ascent. The heart must learn to see differently, to recognize that the beloved's outer form is only a vessel for something far greater. As Ibn Arabi writes with luminous precision (1978: 86, xx, 4):

She rose, plain to see, like a sun, and when she vanished
she shone in the horizon of my heart.

Halil, however, never makes this passage. His attachment remains bound to *'ishq majazi'*, the love of form. Even when Meral enters his life, alive and present, he cannot meet her as she is. Instead, he continues to filter her through his interior projections, images fixed by fantasy, not shaped by presence. His devotion does not open into encounter; it turns inward, feeding on illusion. This is not the love that Sufism praises. They see love as a force that breaks the self open and draws it toward unity. On the other hand, Halil's longing does not indicate this dynamism. His longing becomes a kind of stasis. He stares but does not see. He desires but does not transform.

What results is a spiritual standstill. Halil's fixation on the visible obscures the truth that love, in its highest form, demands vision beyond the eye, a vision that can apprehend the divine spark in the other. His inability to perceive this spark in Meral is more than a failure of imagination; it is a failure of spiritual movement. He clings to a still image, rather than stepping into the unfolding reality of love as a path. In doing so, he reveals not only an emotional impasse, but a deeper rupture: a refusal, or inability, to surrender the ego and move toward the divine. Within Sufi thought, this stage is acknowledged but not celebrated; it marks the beginning of a longer spiritual journey, not its end. The lover is called to move beyond *surat*, the outward form, and unveil the *haqiqa* hidden beneath. Halil, however, remains arrested at the threshold. His devotion, while intense, is trapped within the realm of appearances. He gazes, but he does not see. What seems like love is, in fact, an attachment, a reluctance to let go of the known, the fixed, the safe.

This kind of attachment is not merely aesthetic; it is existential. Halil clings to an image of Meral that does not change, does not challenge, and does not risk intimacy. His love is

preserved in stasis, precisely because it avoids the unpredictability of real encounter. Even when Meral herself enters his world, his longing remains directed not toward her living, breathing presence, but toward the unchanging ideal she momentarily fulfils. He is unable to accept her as a subject with agency and imperfection. His attachment is thus not to Meral, but to what she represents which is a projection of beauty untainted by time or complexity.

This contrasts sharply with the Sufi conception of love, which requires surrender and transformation. The lover must be willing to lose the self, to pass through the veils of illusion and confront the beloved as a reflection of the Divine. As Rumi teaches, love is not about holding on, but about being emptied out (Vaughan-Lee, 2014: 200):

Love has come and it flows like blood beneath my skin,
through my veins.
It has emptied me of my self and filled me with
the Beloved.
The Beloved has penetrated every cell of my body.
Of myself there remains only a name, everything else
is Him.

Halil cannot be emptied. He cannot let go, not of the photograph, the mannequin, or even the physical Meral. His love remains one of possession, not transcendence.

The film's portrayal of this attachment speaks to the limitations of desire when it remains earthbound. It offers a spiritual warning: love that clings, that fears change, that seeks only the image, cannot ascend. It becomes a mirror, endlessly reflecting the self back to itself. Halil's tragedy is not only that he cannot have Meral, but that he cannot let go of needing her to remain an image. The love he offers is not a path to the Beloved; it is a closed loop. In Sufi's view, the path only begins when that loop is broken.

4.5 Love, Illusion, and the Missed Ascent

Sufi philosophy views love as a transformative process, a journey through which the lover moves beyond their individual desires and ego (*nafs*) to reach a union with the divine. In the Sufi context, love is seen not only as a path to spiritual growth but also as a way of dissolving the ego and experiencing a deeper connection with the universe. Rumi captures this truth plainly (1997: 260):

We are the night ocean filled / with glints of light. We are the space
between the fish and the moon, / while we sit here together.

In *Time to Love*, Halil's resistance to change is painfully evident in how tightly he holds onto Meral's image. Rather than allowing love to open his heart, transform his inner world, and elevate his spirit, he remains emotionally frozen. His love does not evolve; it spins in endless loops, caught in repetition instead of moving toward renewal. He is caught up in the image itself, stuck on the surface, and unable or unwilling to connect with Meral as a real, living person who grows and changes. The love Halil experiences is not liberating, it is a form of quiet captivity. Rather than freeing him, it tethers him to illusion, holding him in emotional stasis. From a psychoanalytic angle, his paralysis closely echoes Freud's concept of fixation, introduced in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Freud defines fixation as a developmental arrest, a psychic impasse in which the subject becomes emotionally lodged at an earlier stage of growth, often due to unresolved unconscious conflicts (1949: 140). Instead of moving forward into deeper relational engagement, the individual fixates on a symbolic object that offers safety without risk. For Halil, that object is the photograph: still, idealised, and utterly predictable. Halil's love never turns into a relationship. It stays trapped in his head, sealed off in a private loop of fantasy. He does not love Meral, not really. He loves an idea of her, one he controls, edits, and protects from the messiness of real connection.

But this is not just a failed romance. It is self-protection. By clinging to an image, Halil dodges what intimacy actually demands: openness, risk, discomfort. His love feels pure because it is never tested. It stays intact precisely because it stays imaginary. In fantasy, desire circles itself. There is no rejection, but no real growth either. Freud called this fixation, a pattern we cannot break, a repetition that ends up wounding us (Ibid.: 242-243). That is Halil: stuck, safe, and stalled. What comforts him also cages him.

Sufi thought pushes hard against this kind of stasis. Love, in that tradition, is not meant to preserve the self, it is meant to undo it. The journey moves from the surface (*surat*) to the real (*haqiqa*), burning through illusion along the way. It is not a gentle process. It strips the ego (*nafs*), breaks control, and pushes the lover toward something larger than themselves. It is movement, not stillness. Risk, not retreat.

Halil resists all of that. He wants beauty without change, desire without disruption. He does not let love shake him, which is why it never transforms him. He walks in circles. The same image, the same longing, over and over.

Time to Love does not shout this critique though it whispers it. But it still cuts deep. It points to something we see often: love turned into a surface. Love made stylish, distant, safe. We curate it. Filter it. Try to own it. And in the process, we drain it of its power to change us. Halil's tragedy is not that he loved too much. It is that he never let that love do anything real. He confused perfection with presence and missed the whole point.

Contrastingly Sufi perspective offers a path of transformation. Halil's love remains trapped in '*ishq majazi*', a love of form, not essence. He clings to surface, to the visible, to something he can frame and keep still. But real love, in Sufi thought, does not stop at appearances. It is meant to burn through illusion, to strip away ego (*nafs*), and to move the lover toward '*ishq haqiqi*', a deeper, sacred union. That path demands surrender. Halil never takes it. His desire stays untested, and so it stays unchanging.

Erksan does not romanticise this. Instead, the film offers a slow, layered critique, not just of Halil, but of the way vision itself can distort love. What happens when desire is filtered through the eye alone? When the beloved becomes a concept, framed and fixed, rather than a person we are brave enough to meet? *Time to Love* does not offer easy answers. But by placing Sufi mysticism beside psychoanalytic thought, it makes one thing clear: love without presence is a performance. And obsession, no matter how beautiful, is not the same as connection.

This analysis has followed Halil's gaze as it loops around the image he cannot release. And in doing so, the film becomes something more than a story about fixation, it becomes a mirror itself. It turns its questions on us. What kind of love do we seek? One that comforts us, or one that changes us? To love with depth, *Time to Love* suggests, we must be willing to look past what we want to see and actually see.

4.6 Sufi Dichotomies and the Paradox of Poetic Embodiment

Sufi literature is fundamentally structured around a series of oppositions, *suret* (form) and *ma'na* (meaning), *zahir* (outer) and *batın* (inner), '*aşk mecazi* (metaphorical love) and

‘aşk hakiki (true love), *rind* (the spiritual libertine) and *zahid* (the ascetic legalist). These pairs are not static binaries to be resolved into one or the other. Rather, they form fields of tension that define the metaphysical and ethical drama of the Sufi path. The seeker must pass through the *suret* to reach *ma‘na*; must love metaphorically before recognizing the divine source of that love; must confront outward law in order to be drawn inwardly to meaning.

But in Sufi poetry, the situation is often more complicated. The poet who articulates a commitment to *ma‘na*, *‘aşk hakiki*, and *batın* may appear to speak, act, or even live in allegiance to their opposites. This paradoxical performance is not accidental. This is central to the Sufi method of knowledge. It is why the lover appears intoxicated, why the verses seem to praise wine and worldly beauty, and why the figure of the *rind*, one who defies religious piety yet embodies deeper sincerity, becomes a recurring voice.

This tension is vividly seen in the works of Rumi, Hafiz, Yunus Emre, and Fuzûlî. Rumi, whose *Mathnawî* forms one of the central texts of Islamic mysticism, frequently couches metaphysical truths in stories of lovers, fools, and outcasts. He warns: “The painting on the wall is like Adam: see from the (pictured) form what thing in it is wanting. / The spirit is wanting in that resplendent form: go, seek that jewel rarely found!” (Rumi, 1925: vol. 1, verse 1020). The reader must decode the symbols, discerning *batın* from the disguise of *zahir*.

His own transformation, from scholar to poet, from jurist to lover, emerged through the radical influence of Shams al-Tabrîzî. Shams’s entrance into Rumi’s life was “like a storm,” overturning his intellectual attachments and reorienting his inner world (Lewis, 2003: 138–145). Yet after this mystical upheaval, Rumi’s outward behavior became more ambiguous, not less. He whirled, sang, wept, and abandoned conventional markers of orthodoxy. He wrote of wine, beauty, and longing, not because he returned to illusion, but because he now saw through it. The metaphors served as a cloak for truths that words could not express directly.

The same applies to Yunus Emre. Though remembered for his simple Turkish hymns about divine love, Yunus often spoke in the voice of a mystic rebel. “Bir kez gönül yıktın ise / Bu kıldığın namaz değil” (“If you have broken one heart, your prayer is no prayer at

all”) (Öztelli 1997: 57) expresses an interior ethic that displaces external ritual. While his biography emphasises his long apprenticeship under Tapduk Emre, his poetics embrace the voice of someone perpetually burning with *‘ishq*. He walks the path not as a saint, but as a yearning soul. “Ben yürürüm yana yana,” (Ibid.: 54) he writes: “I walk burning, burning.”.

This spiritual contradiction, living outwardly in *suret* while writing of *ma‘na*, is not a flaw. It is method. As Ernst explains, Sufi pedagogy often relies on paradox and layered meaning precisely because the Real cannot be flattened into doctrinal clarity (in Baqli, 1997: xii-xiv). Language must gesture without seizing. Form must both reveal and conceal. The poet thus becomes a trickster-guide, one who appears lost in metaphor but is leading the reader to something unsayable.

Yet these paradoxes, while spiritually charged, must also be understood in context. The contradictions in Sufi poetics are not only mystical, they are also rhetorical, social, and political. The symbolic language of wine, beauty, longing, and transgression in Sufi poetry functioned as a meaning-making vocabulary designed to hold multiple truths, esoteric, ethical, even subversive. These metaphors did more than conceal the sacred, they protected the poet from criticism, religious authority, and being silenced. In this view, the Sufi poet’s rind-like persona, his apparent irreverence and erotic or intoxicated imagery is itself a survival strategy, enabling critique of religious rigidity and allowing him to address both initiated and general audiences.

While Dabashi does not use the term aesthetic dissent, his concept of a “theological language of discontent” (2017: 5-6) closely parallels this reading. He argues that symbolic and rhetorical expression becomes a form of ideological resistance when direct confrontation is constrained. Shi‘ism, in his account, is a religion of protest and its language shaped by a discursivity that remains deliberately ambiguous in order to articulate truth beneath structures of power (Ibid.: 24-31). In this light, the same verse may operate on multiple registers: mystical and political, sincere and strategic. When Hafiz extols wine, he is not merely seeking spiritual intoxication; he is also ridiculing the performative piety of the *zahid*. When Yunus rejects outward ritual, it is not a turn from religion, but a deeper insistence on what true worship requires.

This does not reduce the mystical to the political. Rather, it shows how the Sufi tradition, especially its poetic expressions, embeds divine longing in forms that are deliberately unstable. The Real is too vast for one voice. And so the poet plays both sinner and saint, lover and skeptic, *rind* and *'arif*. I think, in this, contradiction is not a failure. It is the only language truth permits.

4.7 Why a Sufi Reading is Not Necessary

Throughout this thesis, a Sufi lens has offered a metaphysical vocabulary for thinking about love, desire, and the image in *Sevmek Zamani*. Concepts such as the distinction between *suret* and *ma'na*, the veil, the annihilation of the self (*haq al-fana*), and the paradox of longing have served as interpretive tools to listen to the logic it articulates. And yet, it is important to emphasise, especially in closing, that *Sevmek Zamani* does not require a mystical or doctrinal reading. The Sufi lens is generative, not foundational. One does not have to invoke Yunus Emre or Rumi to apprehend what the film performs. The film does not demand mysticism; it simply tolerates it.

To say that the film can be read mystically is not to say it must be. The philosophical terrain it inhabits, one in which presence is deferred, where the object of desire is unresponsive, and where love clings to the image rather than to the real, is not exclusively Sufi. These concerns emerge in phenomenology, in psychoanalysis, in existentialism, and in post-structuralist theories of the gaze. The stillness of the photograph, its resistance to interaction, its capacity to displace the real woman are not necessarily spiritual symbols. They are more like structural effects. The film stages an encounter with a form that refuses to reciprocate. That refusal could be read as divine concealment, or simply as the limit of desire itself.

The protagonist's rejection of the living woman in favor of her photograph may remind us of the soul's inability to endure divine presence, but it may just as easily be understood as a defense mechanism, an existential impasse, or an aesthetic fixation. The longing in *Sevmek Zamani* is real, but its object is suspended. This suspension is not inherently religious. It could be read through Maurice Blanchot's (1989) notion of the image as absence, or Roland Barthes' (1982) idea of the photograph as a moment of death. In both, the image does not represent the real, it only replaces it.

A viewer unfamiliar with Sufi metaphysics would still encounter the film as strange, melancholic, and philosophically unsettling. The pacing, the monochrome palette, the abstraction of space contribute to an atmosphere in which direct access to meaning is denied. Love is not consummated; it is performed in deferral. This is not a uniquely Sufi gesture. It is also a cinematic one. The very language of the medium with its cuts, frames, and temporal disjunctions is already predisposed to such postponements. What seems like mysticism may simply be form.

There is also a risk in reading too much mysticism into the film. Such a reading can obscure the historical and material realities of its production. *Sevmek Zamani* was made during a period of rapid modernisation in Turkey, when questions of identity, modernity, and representation were pressing cultural concerns. The film can be read as a modernist meditation on those tensions. The protagonist's rejection of the real world in favor of a static image might be understood not only as spiritual allegory, but also as a critique of mediated experience, or even a political allegory of detachment. To interpret it solely through mystical terms is to risk flattening its ambivalence.

Indeed, the strength of *Sevmek Zamani* lies in its openness. It does not explain its own symbols. The woman is not developed psychologically. The narrative resists psychological realism, and the dialogue is sparse. This refusal to anchor meaning invites multiple readings. The Sufi one is compelling because it offers a language for what the film does not say. But that silence could also be read through other vocabularies such as existential, psychoanalytic, and aesthetic. The image does not require religion to resonate. It requires only attention.

In this way, the film anticipates its own interpretations. It stages love not as a matter of moral or spiritual elevation, but as a confrontation with the limits of the self. Whether that limit is understood as the veil of the divine or the opacity of the Other is left undecided. The Sufi tradition certainly offers a framework for the former, but the latter belongs to a much broader philosophical tradition. The encounter with the unresponsive image is not only mystical; it is also modern.

Moreover, Erksan himself never claimed to be making a mystical film. His formalism, his interest in repetition and framing, and his narrative minimalism were part of a broader

cinematic ethos influenced by European art cinema. The slowness of *Sevmek Zamani* is closer to Antonioni than to Attar. Its silence resembles that of Bresson more than that of Yunus Emre. To read it as Sufi is to read against the grain of its cinematic genealogy. This is not a flaw, it is rather a choice; a speculative layering rather than an interpretive obligation.

Indeed, there is something powerful in resisting over-symbolisation. To treat the photograph merely as a metaphor for divine beauty may be to miss what is most radical in the film: that the image does not point beyond itself. That it is not a sign, but a site. The protagonist does not love through the image. He loves the image. That collapse of reference, that refusal of transcendence, might be the film's most modern move. The image is not a gateway to the Real. It is a substitute for it.

This is where the Sufi and non-Sufi readings converge and diverge. Both acknowledge the insufficiency of appearance. But while the Sufi seeks to move beyond it toward a hidden essence, the film's protagonist remains within it. He does not use the image to ascend; he uses it to withdraw. There is no unveiling, no *fana*, no ecstatic merging. There is only quiet persistence, a fidelity to surface.

To say that *Sevmek Zamani* can be read mystically is to say it resonates with the structures of Sufi thought and its poetics, metaphors, paradoxes. But it does not require them. The film's metaphysical quality is not borrowed from mysticism; it emerges from the conditions of its form. Its ontology is cinematic before it is spiritual. Its silence and stillness are not marks of doctrine. They are more like properties of style.

In the end, the Sufi lens serves as one way of naming what the film withholds. It offers language for its ambiguities. But it does not exhaust them. *Sevmek Zamani* does not need to be read through mysticism to matter. It matters because it stutters. Because it lingers. Because it lets the image remain undecided. Whether that undecidability is spiritual or simply cinematic is not for the film to answer. It is for the viewer or the reader to risk.

CHAPTER V. TOWARD A SUFI CINEMATIC LANGUAGE OF LOVE: SYNTHESIS AND COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS

5.1 Seeing Beyond Form

Metin Erksan's *Time to Love* (*Sevmek Zamani*, 1965) is not just a story about romantic fixation. It works quietly, almost meditatively, as an allegory for how love evolves or fails to. At its core is a spiritual tension drawn from Sufi metaphysics: the movement from *surat*, the visible form, to *ma'na*, the hidden, essential truth. In Sufi thought, this is not just a metaphor. It is a way of seeing. A way of being. Love, in this view, is not static. It remakes the lover from within. It does not just alter how we see the beloved; it also shifts the entire structure of the self.

This chapter explores how *Time to Love* gives shape to that inner journey. Halil does not fall in love with a person, not at first. He falls in love with a photograph. A still image. A projection. What follows is a slow, jarring confrontation between that ideal and the unpredictable, embodied presence of Meral. His struggle maps onto the stages of Sufi love traced by figures like Rūzbihān Baqlī and Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī and later unpacked by scholars such as William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata. But these references are more than theoretical frames. They help illuminate how the film imagines love as a movement from illusion to truth. From control to surrender.

And this shift is not just psychological. It is ontological. To love, in the Sufi tradition, is to dissolve the boundaries of the ego, to enter *fana'*, a kind of annihilation of the self before the Real. Erksan does not spell this out, but he does not have to. His cinematic language does the work. The stillness of the frame, the constant use of mirrors and reflective surfaces, the strange distance between characters suggests a deeper drama playing out beneath the surface. The screen itself becomes a kind of meditative zone,

where the image is slowly stripped of its power, and something more truthful, and more alive, starts to break through.

In a sense what lingers is not just the story; it is the quiet, almost austere way it looks and moves. Erksan strips the film down to essentials. The frames feel still, the cuts come slowly, and there is space, lots of it. This minimalist style does not seem like just an aesthetic choice; it shapes how we watch, even how we think while watching. The pacing slows us down. It invites reflection. But more than that, it becomes the film's way of doing philosophy. Through long, unhurried takes and the careful isolation of characters within space, Erksan builds a visual language that echoes the inner transformation the film traces. The surface stays calm, but underneath, something's shifting. Each frame resists distraction, drawing attention to absence as much as presence, surface as much as depth. In this way, the minimalism is not decorative but philosophical: it mirrors the stripping away of illusion central to the film's Sufi-inflected vision of love. Through his formal choices, Erksan lays out the internal geography of his characters, especially Halil, whose perception of love unfolds as an inner drama. The viewer is thus not asked to observe love as action, but to contemplate it, echoing the way Sufism privileges introspection and *kashf* (unveiling).

This inward cinematic language recalls what Andrei Tarkovsky calls "sculpting in time," a term that suggests cinema should reflect the rhythms of inner experience rather than external spectacle (1986: 63-64). In *Time to Love*, time itself becomes dilated, mirroring Halil's static emotional state. The long sequences where Halil stares at the photograph are not meant to advance the plot, but to let us contemplate within his suspended world of fantasy, projection, and longing.

Here, Erksan resonates with Carl Jung's theory of the "anima projection". Jung argued that men often project their unconscious feminine archetype, the *anima*, onto women they admire, falling in love not with the real person, but with a psychic image: "Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman...which is fundamentally unconscious, an imprint or 'archetype' of all the ancestral experiences of the female" (1981: 78-79).

Halil's obsession with Meral's photograph is not love for Meral as she is, but his own

internalised ideal of femininity. “We can only suppose that his behaviour results from patterns of functioning, which I have described as images.” (Ibid.: 88).

Erksan reinforces this psychic enclosure through *mise-en-scène*. Interior spaces dominate the film, often tightly framed and empty, with characters physically separated or isolated in the shot. These spatial choices reflect the solipsism of Halil’s gaze: even when Meral appears in real life, she remains distant, often obscured or silent, as if she were still a projection. This echoes philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that the ethical relation begins not in seeing the other as an object (*visage*) but in recognising their absolute alterity, their unknowability (1991: 50-51). Halil fails in this task; he loves the image, not the Other.

Thus, Erksan’s cinematic language dramatises a central Sufi dilemma: Can the lover ever love beyond the self? Or is the beloved always a mirror for egoic desire? As the film unfolds, this question becomes more urgent, and Halil’s world becomes more claustrophobic, suggesting that to remain fixated on the form is to become trapped within one’s own illusions.

5.2 The Illusion of Stillness

The tension between visual desire and spiritual restraint lies at the heart of both *Time to Love* and Sufi mysticism. In Sufi thought, beauty (*jamal*) is not rejected; far from it. Beauty is recognised as a reflection of the Divine, a signpost that can guide the seeker. However, there is a warning woven through this recognition: attachment to physical beauty, *surat*, can easily become a trap, distracting the seeker from the deeper essence, *ma’na*. It is a delicate paradox. The beauty can lead you to God or astray.

Erksan’s direction captures this paradox with remarkable subtlety. The camera lingers on Meral’s image almost like a devotional act, yet it never crosses into eroticism. There is no voyeurism here, no indulgence in desire. It is a form of visual discipline, echoing the Sufi practice of *ishara* (allusion) and *ta’wil* (interpretation), a spiritual discipline “to restore the initial meaning to [the verse],” that is, to its true origin, or from its form to its essence.” (Geoffroy, 2010: 41) in which the seeker learns to restrain the gaze to avoid being pulled into worldly distractions. But in Halil, we see a distorted mirror of this. His

gaze is disciplined, but it is fixed on the wrong thing. Instead of using beauty as a doorway to the Divine, he becomes stuck in the doorway itself; mesmerised by a photograph, symbol, or still surface that offers no path beyond.

Ahmad Ghazali, in his *Sawanih*, writes that love begins with beauty, *jamal*, but the true lover is one who follows that beauty inward, past the form, toward annihilation in the Beloved. “The lover becomes so close, so intimate with the beloved,” he says, “that he loses his self in her, and in fact, he becomes part of her.” (2014: chapter 19). But Halil never reaches that annihilation. There is no *fana*’, no dissolution of self, no crossing into deeper union. His love remains suspended in form, unable to risk the uncertainty of the real, living Meral. And in that refusal, everything collapses.

Seen through a film-theoretical lens, Erksan’s restrained style also critiques the visual habits of classical cinema. Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze” where the woman is a passive object of male desire, is subverted in *Time to Love* (1999: 808-809). Meral, though beautiful, is never eroticised. Instead, the camera observes Halil observing Meral. The viewer is kept at a distance, forced to question the ethics of looking. There is no seductive pleasure in the gaze; there is scrutiny, quiet tension, and withheld intimacy.

Halil’s obsession with Meral’s photograph can also be understood through Roland Barthes’s reflections in *Camera Lucida*, where he writes, “What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.” (1982: 4). Halil loves a moment, frozen and untouchable rather than a person. There is no space for growth or relationships. What he cherishes is, quite literally, lifeless. Moreover, this aligns closely with the Sufi critique of idolising *surat*: what appears beautiful can, in truth, become a veil, a block on the spiritual path.

Simone Weil offers yet another perspective that deepens this tension. In *Gravity and Grace*, she writes: “Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” (1963: 117). Attention, for Weil, is a sacred act. But Halil’s attention, however intense, is not pure. It is tangled with ego, projection, and the need to control and preserve. He does not offer his gaze in surrender; he uses it to maintain the illusion. Furthermore, in both Sufi and Abrahamic traditions, this is precisely what idolatry is, mistaking the image for the truth.

In this sense, Erksan's visual style reflects this entire struggle. The film is sparse. It refuses spectacle. There are no grand declarations, no sentimental indulgences. Instead, we get stillness, restraint, and ambiguity. Beauty is there, but it is not touched. Love is there, but it is not consummated. What the film offers is not resolution, but reflection. It invites us to ask: What do we really see when we look? And how often do we stop at the surface? In that sense, *Time to Love* becomes a meditation on *ma'na*, on the quiet difficulty of perceiving what truly matters.

To understand this better, Sufi thought that the self is not fixed but a layered being in constant motion can help. The *nafs*, the ego or lower self, must first be disciplined. The *qalb*, the heart, must be purified. Only then can the *ruh*, the spirit, awaken. This triadic journey, which maps the soul's progression toward God, also offers a powerful lens through which to view Halil's emotional and existential trajectory in *Time to Love*. Halil's early fixation on Meral's photograph says a lot; not just about his longing, but about what he's avoiding. The image gives him something stable, something untouched. It is not Meral, the person, that draws him in. It is the stillness. The control. The illusion that love can be held in place if it is never actually lived. This is the *nafs* at work, the self clinging to a fantasy it can manage, shaping desire around safety instead of surrender. And as long as Meral remains a photograph, Halil does not have to risk anything.

But then she appears, not framed and silent, but alive, reactive, and real. Her presence throws off the balance. It interrupts the neat circuit of projection Halil has built. Suddenly, the ideal does not hold. He is no longer in control, and the illusion begins to fray.

While this tension draws directly from Sufi thought, especially the idea that form (*surat*) must give way to essence (*ma'na*), it also tracks closely with certain psychological frameworks. Carl Jung's idea of individuation comes to mind: the slow, often painful process of integrating the unconscious into conscious life (1988: xxviii). It is about facing what we'd rather not see in ourselves, letting go of the armour we have built around our egos. Halil resists this process. He clings to the image because it demands nothing of him. The real Meral, by contrast, invites chaos, contradiction, change. And he's not ready for that. The image was safe. She isn't.

As a result, he remains stuck behind what Jung would call the *persona*: a kind of mask we wear to keep our vulnerabilities hidden (Ibid.: 97). What might appear as romantic devotion is, in his case, a quiet form of retreat. The image lets him feel love without risking the uncertainties of intimacy. In the real woman, he finds a challenge. And he cannot yet hold both.

Erich Fromm puts it bluntly in *The Art of Loving*: “Immature love says: ‘I love you because I need you.’ Mature love says: ‘I need you because I love you.’” (1995: 32). Halil’s early love belongs to the first category. He is in love with what the image gives back to him; his own longing and fantasy of purity, not with Meral as she truly is. When she enters his world and resists the confines of his ideal, Halil’s *nafs* is fully exposed. His ego, long accustomed to control, falters in the face of another’s autonomy.

Sufi psychology has long anticipated this crisis. Al-Ghazali and, more recently, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, remind us that the *nafs* fiercely resists surrender (Helwa, 2017: 7; Haeri, 1989: 30-31). It is the part of us that clings to form, image, and the illusion of certainty. Halil’s silence, his withdrawal, and his disappearance are not signs of transcendence. They are more like symptoms of spiritual blockage. He has not yet moved into the space of the *qalb*, let alone the awakening of the *ruh*. The film captures this perfectly: instead of giving us a clear resolution or a sense of redemption, it holds us in a state of suspension. Halil’s journey does not conclude. It just halts, lingering like a breath held too long.

Beneath this spiritual standstill lies another dimension that is an existential one. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl writes that human beings are driven not by pleasure or power but by the search for meaning (2000: 117). Halil’s love for the photograph gives him a sense of order and identity. It tells him who he is. However, when that illusion begins to fall apart, he is thrown into crisis. What once gave his life coherence now confronts him with chaos. Frankl would call this a turning point, either toward despair, or toward deeper meaning (Ibid.: 122-123). Erksan wisely does not answer the question for us. He lets the tension linger.

Roland Barthes captures the spiritual risk of love with stark precision: “...love is but a roundabout way of dying.” (quoted in Blanchot, 1995). This is precisely what Halil cannot accept. He cannot let Meral remain other, unpossessed and ungraspable. Sufi love

demands the opposite: *fana' fi'l-mahbub*, the annihilation of the self in the beloved, and ultimately *baqa'*, the soul's subsistence in the Divine. Halil glimpses this path, but he retreats. The risk seems to be too significant for him.

Nevertheless, the film does not pathologise Halil entirely. In the spirit of James Hillman's archetypal psychology, we might say that Halil's breakdown is not failure but initiation. Hillman writes: "We make salt in our suffering and, by working through our sufferings, we gain salt, healing the soul of its salt-deficiency..." (2013: chapter 6⁶). This, too, resonates with the Sufi notion of *laylat al-qalb*, the dark night of the heart. Halil's suffering may be the precondition for transformation, but the film does not show whether he ever completes that descent. It leaves us in the moment of rupture, where the possibility of awakening still flickers, but is not yet realised.

In this sense, *Time to Love* becomes a study in spiritual incompleteness, a movement from *nafs* toward *ruh* cut short by fear, pride, or the terror of loving someone real. Halil's failure is not merely personal; it is archetypal. His love remains trapped on the surface, unable to dive into essence. We are left with a haunting parable: the soul's resistance to the Real and the high cost of clinging to illusion.

5.3 The Sacred and the Profane: Meral as the Catalyst of Halil's Crisis

In many classical Sufi texts, the beloved functions as a *mirror*, a site where the seeker encounters the Divine, albeit veiled in form. Ibn Arabi wrote (1978: 123, xxxix, 1-2):

My soul be the ransom of fair-complexioned and coy
virgins who played with me as I was kissing the
Pillar and the Stone!
When thou art lost in pursuit of them, thou wilt find no
guide but in their scent, the sweetest of traces.

Yet this form can also mislead: if the lover clings to the form, the beloved becomes an idol, not a guide. In *Time to Love*, Meral embodies this duality. She is both a symbol of divine attraction and the agent of spiritual undoing.

⁶ "Alchemical Solutions".

At first, Meral is a pure image that is silent, distant, and unattainable. But when she enters the narrative as a speaking, acting subject, she collapses the aesthetic distance that Halil had maintained. This movement from image to person is crucial: the shift from symbolic projection to ethical encounter. At that moment, Halil begins to retreat. By simply being real, Meral shatters the sacred illusion Halil had built. Her humanity becomes profane in Halil's eyes, not because it is base, but because it interrupts his egoic ideal.

This reflects the Sufi tension between *majazi* (metaphorical) and *haqiqi* (real) love. Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes "bliss inhering in this knowledge and the love of God as the source of the illumination of knowledge." (1989: 15). This signal to see the beloved as a means to a higher truth, not as an end in itself. Halil fails to make this leap. His crisis emerges not because Meral is unworthy, but because she is too real. She demands relationality, vulnerability, and reciprocity. For Halil, whose love was built on projection, this seems intolerable.

In Turkish Sufi literature, the appearance of the beloved rarely soothes, rather it wounds. Her coming is not a balm but a rupture, a tearing away of illusion. For Niyazi Mısri, whose verses are carved from the stone of spiritual disillusionment, love without the Real is not love at all: "Âlemde nice yüzbin olur aşka giriftâr. / Gel sorma o mecnunlara dâna haberin sen." (2009: 100) ("In this world, countless are ensnared by love. / Ask not about those mad with longing — wise one, you know not."). A world without love, is a lie, it is a masquerade of forms. One who has not glimpsed the truth cannot claim to have loved. His words fall not only as doctrine but as indictment, striking at the root of Halil's condition. Meral does not simply disrupt his solitude, she unravels it. What had shimmered in absence turns brittle in presence. The sacredness of distance crumbles when touched.

Yunus Emre, too, names this moment of encounter not as arrival but as undoing: "âşık oldun ise mâşukunı buldun ise / Maşukunı bulan kişi yokdur hiç nesneden bâkî." (1943: 107, xvii) ("If in love you've fallen and your Beloved you have found, / Then nothing in this world can hold you bound."). The one who finds the beloved no longer abides in things. Love strips not only illusion, but structure, shelter, identity, control. The beloved, in this tradition, is not consolation but test. It resembles a divine appointment that sears

away the self one thought sufficient. Through this lens, Meral ceases to be a woman in Halil's story and becomes what Turkish mystics often feared and yearned for: a threshold figure. Her arrival marks the gate, but Halil halts before it. He does not flee her touch; he flees the abyss it unveils. He retreats not from her, but from the collapse she incites. This is the collapse that might have saved him.

This crisis is also foreshadowed in Sufi narratives such as that of Majnun and Layla. As Annemarie Schimmel notes in *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Majnun's madness is not just romantic excess, but a sign that human love has broken through into divine yearning (2011: 140). Halil, too, undergoes a breakdown, but unlike Majnun, he does not spiritualise his love. He abandons it. This points to a tragic inversion of the Sufi arc: the encounter with the Real (Meral) leads to fear, not *fana*'.

Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's writings on the ambiguity of love are also relevant here. In *The Second Sex*, she observes, "For woman, to love is to relinquish everything... There is no other way out for her than to lose herself, body and soul, in him who is represented to her as the absolute, as the essential." (1960: 608-609). Halil creates and obstacle for this transformation. His love, though intense, is fundamentally controlling. He wants Meral as an image, not as other who will go through changes in relation. Her emergence as a subject destabilises his desire and his entire cosmology.

Meral thus becomes the film's ethical and metaphysical fulcrum. She reveals that love must either evolve or collapse. She exposes the fragility of Halil's inwardness and his attachment immaturity. In psychological terms, she brings him to the threshold of integration. In Sufi terms, she offers him the station of *ma'rifa*, the direct, gnostic knowledge of the Other. He refuses it.

Nevertheless, Erksan does not blame Meral. Her presence is generous, open, and even redemptive. It is Halil who cannot meet her gaze. Meral's profane reality does not cause his crisis, but by his inability to sanctify it, to see *ma'na* through *surat*. In this way, the film delivers a profound Sufi lesson: that true love begins where fantasy ends.

5.4 Cinematic Love as Failed Initiation: Between Erksan and Bresson

Time to Love presents love not as fulfilment but as fracture. This aligns with a specific cinematic tradition that sees love not as the climax of narrative resolution but as a site of metaphysical testing. In this regard, Erksan's approach resembles Robert Bresson's, whose films often depict characters undergoing spiritual crises in emotionally muted worlds. In *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) or *Pickpocket* (1959), Bresson isolates his characters in ascetic frames and restricts their affect, not to deaden emotion, but to heighten the viewer's sensitivity to interior transformation.

Erksan achieves something similar with Halil. His love for the image is an initiation into interior life, a symbolic first step toward transcendence. However, unlike Bresson's protagonists, who often reach some redemptive insight, Halil aborts his journey. As Paul Schrader notes in *Transcendental Style in Film*, Bresson's characterisation "pass through the visible world toward the invisible." (1988: 12-13). Halil, by contrast, is arrested by the visible. He cannot relinquish *surat* for *ma'na*.

This failure echoes the spiritual warning in Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, where many birds turn back before reaching the Simurgh, the truth of God. One bird, infatuated with worldly love, says (Attar, 2005: lines 2209-2230):

A bird who cannot leave his beloved
'Great hoopoe,' said another bird, 'my love / Has loaded me with chains, I cannot move.
This bandit, Love, confronted me and stole / My intellect, my heart, my inmost soul –
The image of her face is like a thief / Who fires the harvest and leaves only grief.
Without her I endure the pangs of hell, / Raving and cursing like an infidel;
How can I travel when my heart must stay / Lapped here in blood? And on that weary Way,
How many empty valleys lie ahead, / How many horrors wait for us? I dread
One moment absent from her lovely face; / How could I seek the Way and leave this place?
My pain exceeds all cure or remedy; / I've passed beyond both faith and blasphemy –
My blasphemy and faith are love for her; / My soul is her abject idolater –

And though companionless I weep and groan, / My friend is sorrow; I am
not alone.
My love has brought me countless miseries,

Halil is the bird caught at the first gate of perception. The connection between perception and action breaks down. This breakdown occurs precisely because Halil does not act. His passivity, his refusal to move from image to encounter, creates the film's temporal stasis. Erksan uses this formal stasis not just narratively but metaphysically: to show that when the soul refuses transformation, time itself becomes stagnant.

5.5 The Mirror of the Beloved: Sufi Ontology and the Question of the Real

Sufi thought consistently emphasises that creation is a mirror in which the Divine contemplates Himself. Ibn Arabi wrote (1978: 65, x, 1-2):

She said,
'I wonder at a lover who in conceit of his merits
walks proudly among flowers in a garden/
I replied,
'Do not wonder at what thou seest, for thou
hast beheld thyself in the mirror of a man/

The beloved, then, is not an end in herself but a reflection, a veil behind which the Real is glimpsed.

Halil's error lies in mistaking the mirror for the Real. He becomes what Jalaluddin Rumi calls the "idol-form" (1973: 46, xv): one who bows before the image and forgets the source. In *Time to Love*, Meral's photograph is quite literally a mirror, a surface that reflects Halil's own desire, not her being. This aligns with what Slavoj Žižek, in *The Fragile Absolute*, describes as "fetishistic split" (2001: 6): Halil knows Meral is not just the image, but he behaves as if she were. The image becomes a fetish, a psychological crutch to shield him from the radical openness of love.

However, in Sufi terms, the image is only meant to be a point of departure. Al-Hujwiri, in *Kashf al-Mahjub*, writes: "as long as you seek her she will seek you, but when you turn away from her and seek God she will flee from you, and worldly thoughts will no more cling to your heart." (2000: part 49). Halil does not seek. His gaze is fixed, and his heart

is inert. In contrast, true Sufi love demands a surrender of self through the beloved into the Divine.

Philosopher Jean-Luc Marion's "saturated phenomenon" concept is also relevant here. In *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Marion claims that when truly encountered, the beloved exceeds conceptualisation (2007: 13-14). In this sense, love is not about comprehension but dispossession. Halil's tragedy is that he refuses this excess. He wants a love he can understand, frame, and control. But real love, as Sufis know, is constantly destabilising.

This ontological error, mistaking form for essence, is not simply romantic immaturity but spiritual blindness. It reflects the condition of *hijab* (veiling), a recurring Sufi motif for those who are caught in the illusion of appearance. Erksan, in this sense, constructs a cinematic *hijab*, a beautiful veil that the protagonist cannot see through.

5.6 The Death of Stillness: Ontological Fracture

Sufi poetry often speaks of absence (*ghayba*) as the place where love is born. In *Time to Love*, absence is not merely the lack of a lover but the very condition of Halil's love. He falls in love with a woman who is not there, who exists only as a trace. This aligns with the Persian poet Hafiz, who wrote (1897: 94, xxiii):

Then said my heart: Here will I take my rest!
This city breathes her love in every part.
But to a distant bourne was she addressed,
Alas! he knew it not, alas, poor heart!
The influence of some cold malignant star
Has loosed my hand that held her, lone and far
She journeyeth that lay upon my breast.

In this sense, love is not the fruit of encounter, but of distance.

Psychologist Adam Phillips, in *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*, argues that much of our emotional life is shaped by fantasies of what never was (2014: prologue). Halil's fixation on Meral's image is precisely this: he is in love not with her but with what she represents which is his own imagined life, and unconsummated potential. This is the false Beloved of Sufi teaching: the idol the self creates in place of true union.

Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory also plays a role here. Lacan suggested that the ego formation depends on identifying with an image that is both self and not self (2005: 4-6). Halil's love for Meral is such a mirror-stage event: the image of Meral becomes the site where he constructs and maintains a coherent self. Losing her would mean dissolving that illusion and this is apparently something his psyche cannot tolerate.

Yet the Sufi tradition, especially in Rumi and Ibn Arabi (1978: xxvi, 6-7), insists that such a rupture is necessary. Rumi says, "Embrace the soul which is embraced by nothing. / What was born of spring dies in autumn, / Love's rose-plot hath no aiding from the early spring. / A thorn is the companion of the rose that comes of spring, / And the wine that comes of grape-juice is not free from / headache." (1973: 42, xiii). Erksan stages this breaking not through melodrama but through slow spiritual erosion. Halil's eventual disappearance from Meral's life is not an act of cruelty but of despair. He cannot make the ontological leap from absence to presence, from image to being.

In this way, film signals a form of transcendence. Even if there are limits to this transcendence, stillness and aesthetic asceticism can function tools to get through where love not simply as an emotion but as a spiritual challenge, a metaphysical test. He builds a world where the beloved is both a lure and a lesson, both illusion and invitation. In this world, love does not just comfort, it confronts. It asks something of the lover. In this way, Erksan draws on a deep current of Sufi thought, where love is always double-edged: it can chain the soul to the world or burn that chain away entirely.

Halil's journey becomes a meditation on what happens when that burning never takes place. His love remains caught in *'ishq majazi*, the love of form, surface, and beauty unredeemed by depth. He never makes the leap to *'ishq haqiqi*, to the essence beyond the image, the truth behind the veil. In a sense, he is a spiritual aesthete drawn to beauty, but unable to follow it into transformation. This is not just a personal heartbreak. This is more of a spiritual impasse. The mystics have long warned that to stop at beauty, to linger at its surface without diving into what it reveals, is to risk stagnation. Beauty can open the door, but it can also become a prison.

However, what is striking is how the film echoes the Sufi path that Halil cannot walk. Its slow rhythm, visual restraint, and refusal to resolve into neat answers feel like *muraqaba*,

the Sufi silent meditation practice. The viewer is asked not just to watch, but to wait. To dwell in silence. To notice what arises when the noise fades. Erksan is creating a space, a practice. A kind of cinematic Sufism, where stillness matters more than spectacle, and openness matters more than resolution.

Reza Shah-Kazemi captures this in *Paths to Transcendence*: “What must be underlined here is that transcendent consciousness is attainable only when the individual, along with his immutable entity, is completely annihilated in the unitive state, this being the only conceivable manner in which consciousness—now no longer qualifiable as “individual”—can be said to surpass the level of the individual entity and the “manifestation of its properties.” (2006: 93). In *Time to Love*, the eye remains just that, an eye. The heart never quite opens. But the ache is unmistakably there. Frame after frame, we feel the weight of longing. Not just for the beloved herself, but for something beyond her; for the Real, the deeper truth.

In this sense, the film does not hand us neat answers. Instead, it leaves us with a sense of yearning. And that may be precisely its purpose. *Time to Love* seems to invite us to look deeper, to question what we hold onto, and maybe even to start waking up ourselves. And for this purpose, there is nothing more useful than a fracture like at the end of the film. There is no catharsis, no neat spiritual awakening. Instead, what remains is a kind of quiet aftermath, charged with absence. Earlier moments might hint at transcendence or inner change, but the final scenes snap us back into something colder, more static. Seen through the lens of Sufi thought, this is not just emotional failure, it is more of a metaphysical stasis. Love never crosses the threshold from *surat* to *ma'na*, from surface to truth. And Erksan does not dramatise this with big gestures. He does it through stillness, negative space, and long silences. The gap between what's seen and what's felt becomes its own kind of wound.

The mannequin bride says it all. Halil does not run to Meral, he returns to the image that is plastic, lifeless, and safe. So, Halil's decision to take the mannequin instead of Meral becomes a symbolic choice to remain with the image rather than a simple act of madness. This moment isn't romantic. It's a collapse. A retreat into fantasy so total it turns love into possession. Not of a person, but of a symbol. Yunus Emre warns against this inertia when

he proclaims: “It’s called Heaven or Paradise: / It’s some mansions and some houris; / Give them to those who desire these. / It’s you I need, it’s you I crave.” (Halman, 2009: 13). For Yunus, even paradise is meaningless without love’s transformation.

Contrastingly what Halil holds isn’t her; it’s the illusion that comfort can replace connection, that control can stand in for vulnerability. And in doing so, the film quietly closes on its harshest truth: to refuse love’s risk is to forfeit its reality.

The mannequin becomes more than a strange object; it’s a symbol of his refusal to move toward *haqiqa*, the deeper truth beneath the form. His soul clings to *surat*, unable, or unwilling, to step into transformation. Al-Ghazali puts it plainly: “...knowledge of mystery which is beyond the possessions of jurisprudent ... it is an ocean, whose furthest depth could not be attainable.” (1962: book 1, p. 101). Halil, it seems, stays shackled to the surface while cannot go into the ocean.

When Meral throws the painting and mannequin into the lake, the act carries the weight of ritual like a cleansing, or an attempt to let go of illusions. But it does not resolve anything. The lake becomes a threshold, where surface meets depth, yet the crossing does not happen. There’s no guarantee of revelation, only the uneasy sense that something was attempted and left incomplete.

The final boat scene adds to this uncertainty. Meral, dressed as a bride, steps into Halil’s secluded world, and the moment feels suspended, part promise, part forewarning. It doesn’t bring resolution so much as magnify the gap between their hopes and the truth they can’t quite reach. Ibn Arabi reminds us (1978: 61, vii):

As I kissed the Black Stone, friendly women thronged
around me; they came to perform the circumambulation
with veiled faces
They uncovered the (faces like) sunbeams and said to me,
‘Beware! for the death of the soul is in thy looking
at us.

This is exactly what fails to happen. They remain locked in *surat*, unable to see each other clearly by unveiling the hidden reality.

The film doesn’t offer transcendence. The couple’s sudden deaths at the hands of Başar cut the story short without redemption or awakening. What we’re left with is not union,

but absence. And that absence is the point. It shows us the cost of loving only the image, of failing to let love change us.

Rumi wrote, “Fire is my child / but I must be consumed / and become fire.” (1997: 63). But in *Time to Love*, the Halil is never quite consumed by anything. This lack of resolution isn’t a flaw; it’s a challenge. Erksan asks us to reflect on how we see, how we love, and what we lose when we settle for surfaces.

Even the film’s style, its stillness, symbolic detail, and careful pacing, echoes this Sufi warning: don’t mistake beauty for truth. Attar puts it best (2005: lines 834-838):

The home we seek is in eternity;
The Truth we seek is like a shoreless sea,
Of which your paradise is but a drop.
This ocean can be yours; why should you stop
Beguiled by dreams of evanescent dew?

In the end, *Time to Love* seems to be a meditation on what happens when love stops short of transformation.

CHAPTER VI. CINEMATIC IMAGERY VS. POETIC IMAGERY: FORM AND ESSENCE

6.1 Love Through the Frame and the Verse

Metin Erksan's *Time to Love* (1965) explores love not just as an emotion, but as a way of seeing, one shaped by visual fixation and marked by spiritual stillness. In the film, love reaches beyond the romantic and enters the realm of being, echoing Sufi ideas where true love is the ability to see the essence hidden within appearances. Just as classical Sufi poetry employs language to both conceal and reveal the Divine, Erksan turns to the cinematic image to navigate the same tension between *surat* (outer form) and *ma'na* (inner meaning). This chapter compares the mechanisms of cinematic and poetic imagery, with a special focus on their capacity to express, distort, or transcend love, and ultimately, the Real.

Both Sufi poetry and Erksan's visual language treat love as not an end but a passage that begins in appearance and longs for essence. However, the tools they employ differ vastly. Poetic imagery relies on metaphor, rhythm, and ambiguity, while cinematic imagery operates through framing, composition, and temporality. The heart of this comparison lies in how these two forms of expression handle representation and whether they offer liberation from, or entrapment within, appearances.

Film, as a visual medium, deals with literal images. But under the hands of auteurs like Metin Erksan, cinematic images transcend their surfaces and invite interior reflection. *Time to Love* is a film about gazing as Halil stares at a photograph until the image becomes real to him. However, unlike the layered metaphors of Sufi poetry, this image does not evolve. It remains static, imprisoning Halil in a single level of perception. His desire is constructed visually, but it never develops into ethical seeing. The image is consumed, not transcended.

However, Erksan does not glamorise this gaze. On the contrary, he critiques it by showing Halil's paralysis. In the language of Deleuze's Halil "is struck by paralysis," (2005: 72) which forces cinema into contemplation. The camera lingers on spaces, faces, and absences. Time thickens. Movement recedes. This is not classical cinema's linear desire, but something closer to Sufi contemplation.

The cinematography itself echoes asceticism. Unlike the symbolic opulence of Sufi verse, *Time to Love* operates in a minimalist, almost monastic visual style using long takes, muted tones, and silent emotional interiors. This visual restraint mirrors the Sufi practice of *zuhd* (abstinence) in behaviour and perception.

6.2 The Beloved as Symbol and Subject

In Sufi poetry, imagery does not simply decorate the verse, it performs a spiritual function. It veils and reveals at once. Every metaphor and symbol are a puzzle: it points toward something beyond itself but obscures that very thing. The beloved appears so vividly in these texts and is rarely just a human figure. She is both real and unreal, both a person and a portal. Annemarie Schimmel refers in *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, "'the veil of gnosis" (W 380), which, tender / and subtle as it may be, can constitute the greatest barrier between / man and God." (2011: 81). The image seduces, but it also conceals. The seeker must learn to look not at it, but through it.

Consider the lines by Hafiz (1897: 87):

Alike the drunk and the strict of fare / For his mistress yearns in the
mosque Love doth / dwell / And the church, for his lodging is everywhere.

Here, the sacred is found everywhere, in every form. Each building is different, each tradition its own, but all carry the same presence. The multiplicity of forms does not hide unity; it reveals it. Yet it also tests the seeker: Can they look past surface distinctions and perceive the One behind the many?

Rumi offers a similar insight, but in the language of love (1997: 106):

The moment I heard my first love story, / I started looking for you... /
Lovers do not finally meet somewhere. / They're in each other all along.

This is not romantic sentimentality, it is also metaphysical. The lover and the Beloved are never truly separate. The love story is not about finding someone out there but about awakening to what has always been within. The beloved, then, is a symbol not of possession, but of recognition. And recognition begins when one stops looking with the eyes and starts seeing with the heart.

Schimmel calls this poetic strategy the “symbolic and allegorical exegesis” (2011: 25) of Sufi poetics which is a way of pointing to God not by naming Him, but by building an atmosphere in which He can be felt. Symbols accumulate, images echo and refract one another, and the literal begins to fade. The reader is invited not just to interpret, but to turn inwardly to participate in the act of unveiling.

This is exemplified in Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*, where each bird stands for a trait of the *nafs*; pride, greed, fear, and doubt. Their journey is not linear, but layered and allegorical. Their very selves are stripped away as they pass through valleys of love, knowledge, annihilation, and bewilderment. By the end, the image of God, the Simurgh, is not described directly. Instead, Attar constructs a vast world of images only to reveal that what the birds seek is never external (2005: lines 4255-4263). The Simurgh is itself reflected and transformed. In this moment, language collapses into silence, image into essence (Ibid.: lines 4264-4269).

Poetic imagery functions more like a path rather than a destination. It is a scaffold that holds the seeker long enough for something deeper to emerge. As Henry Corbin explains in *Alone with the Alone* (1969), the realm of *imagination* (*khayal*) is not mere fantasy or illusion (1998: 3-4). The *alam al-mithal* is the imaginal world, the in-between space where spirit and form meet. This realm is neither abstract nor concrete; it is symbolic and real, felt and seen. It allows the Divine to appear without being reduced.

This is what makes Sufi poetry so powerful and so elusive. It never gives you God directly. It gives you love, a rose, a face, a flame. But always with a whisper: This is not the end. Look again.

In a sense, the image or the imagery is never the end, it is the veil. As Yunus Emre writes, “I looked and looked, but failed to find. / I found him inside man at last.” (Halman, 2009:

15). This discovery signals a collapse of distance which Halil cannot perform as his gaze fails at turning inward.

In *Time to Love*, Meral seems to resemble this future of Sufi poetry both as an individual and a symbol. As with Layla in the *Layla and Majnun* tradition, she is not simply a woman, but the key to a metaphysical doorway. She is the one through whom Halil approaches his own interiority.

However, unlike the active mystical journey in Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, Meral here is not a guide but a disruption. Her appearance in the flesh breaks Halil's closed circuit. He must confront her reality and his failure to see beyond the image. This moment mirrors the Sufi challenge: when the metaphor you have worshipped confronts you with its mortality.

Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* helps frame this tension: the feminine has often been a symbol of Divine beauty, but this symbolic elevation can dehumanise (1992: 145-152). Sufi poets exalt the beloved woman while also erasing her subjectivity. The same tension exists in Erksan's film. Meral is idealised, but her actual self is only partially known. He retreats when she begins to speak, assert herself, and question Halil. He is not in love with her, but with the silence surrounding her.

Turkish Sufi poetry has long trembled before the same precipice: how to call upon the beloved without collapsing her into metaphor, how to invoke without erasure. In the verses of Yunus Emre, the beloved often arrives clothed not in allegory, but in unguarded tenderness. "Ben seni sevdigümü işitsünler (1) hâssu âm / Söyleşenler söyleşsün" (1943: 194, xiii) ("Let both noble and common hear that I have loved you — / Let the gossips chatter as they will."), a line so bare, so confessional, it resists symbolic domestication. It is not a trope. It is a wound named aloud. The beloved here is not reduced to a signifier of the Divine; beloved is allowed to remain, at least momentarily, as person, as presence, as ache.

Kaygusuz Abdal, more elliptical in tone but equally radical in spirit, refuses to draw a boundary between the divine and the human beloved, not to diminish her into symbol, but to let her expand. In a quatrain laden with mystical surrender, he writes: "Gel gel i gönül

gör ki ne kutlu sâ'at oldı / 'İşkî görelî 'akluma bak nice mâ't oldı" (Gaybi, 2021: 414) ("Come, O heart, behold this joyous hour; Since love arrived, how utterly reason has cowered."). The beloved here is not passive. She is not a symbol to be decoded. She is the catalyst of rupture, the event that dismantles the self. She does not represent; she transforms.

Halil's vision of Meral never reaches such a threshold. She remains frozen and untouched by becoming. She is seen but never seen-through. Where the Sufi lover turns the beloved into a mirror through which the ego shatters into the Real, Halil turns Meral into a screen: she reflects not transcendence, but hesitation. His gaze does not awaken mystery; it traps it. In this, he inverts the entire tradition. The Turkish Sufi ghazal does not ask the beloved to remain safe. It demands that she remain dangerous like an exposure, a flame, a fracture. In silencing her, Halil does not honor sanctity; he annuls it. And in sparing himself her mystery, he spares himself the annihilation that love, in its truest form, always requires.

Subjectively, I find this both beautiful and unsettling. There is an allure to the mystic's image of the beloved: the face as a map of the cosmos, the hair as the veil of night, the eyes as black holes of longing. Nevertheless, in cinema, this symbolic reading often erases the woman. Erksan walks a fine line. He neither fully humanises nor fully mystifies Meral. She exists in a liminal space: a person and a portal.

This echoes Fatema Mernissi's critique in *The Veil and the Male Elite*: when the woman becomes solely a symbol, she loses her narrative agency (1991: 22-25). In Sufi poetry, the woman may lead the lover to God, but she remains silent. In Erksan, Meral begins to speak but Halil cannot listen. His ears are attuned to the image, not the voice.

6.3 Philosophical Mirrors: Platonic and Aristotelian Echoes in *Time to Love*

Plato's metaphysical framework, particularly his theory of Forms, offers a deeply resonant parallel to the philosophical and spiritual tensions explored in *Time to Love*. In the Platonic view, what we perceive through the senses, the visible, tangible world, is merely a shadow or copy of a higher, immutable reality. As he states in *The Republic*, "The truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images." (1977: "The

Republic”, book vii, 515c). For instance, the Form (or Idea) of Beauty is not located in any specific object but exists beyond the realm of appearances as a perfect, unchanging essence. This distinction between appearance and reality echoes both the Sufi metaphysical divide between *surat* (form) and *ma’na* (essence), and the central thematic structure of Metin Erksan’s film, where Halil’s love remains fixated on a visual representation, Meral’s photograph, without transitioning into a recognition of her full humanity or spiritual being.

Plato’s *Symposium*⁷ and *Phaedrus*⁸ present love as a philosophical ascent, famously illustrated through Diotima’s Ladder of Love. According to Diotima, the true lover begins with desire for physical beauty, then ascends to a love for all beautiful bodies, progresses to the beauty of the soul, and ultimately reaches an intellectual vision of the Form of Beauty itself. She explains: “He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love...by contemplating the beautiful itself with the faculty with which it is visible, will be able to bring forth not images of virtue, because he is in touch with no images, but with the truth; he will give birth to true virtue.” (Ibid.: “Symposium”, 210e-211b).

This upward movement, from particular to universal, from sensory to intellectual, is, like the Sufi path, a journey from illusion toward truth. Halil, however, halts at the first rung of this ladder. His love for Meral is frozen at the level of *eikasia*, Plato’s lowest stage of knowledge (Ibid.: “The Republic”, book vi-vii, 509d-511e), which pertains to shadows and reflections. His perception remains bound to the image, incapable of the dialectical leap required for *noesis* (Ibid.), the direct intellectual apprehension of truth.

This failure resonates with Platonic epistemology and understanding’ *ishq majazi*’ as a potentially misleading stage of love. In Sufi cosmology, as in Platonic thought, the material world is meaningful only insofar as it points to something beyond itself. For the Sufi, the beauty of the beloved is a sign (*ayah*), a trace of the Divine. For the Platonist, the beauty of a body is a mere echo of the Form of Beauty. In both systems, to become attached to the sign without seeking its referent is a metaphysical error. Halil’s tragic arc

⁷ In 210a-212b.

⁸ In 249e-251a.

can thus be interpreted as a failure of transcendence. His love arrests at the surface, never reaching the inner essence of the beloved, let alone the divine truth that beauty intimates.

Plato's allegory of the cave, presented in *The Republic*,⁹ offers another potent analogue for interpreting Halil's condition. The prisoners in the cave mistake shadows for reality, having never seen the true source of light, the sun, symbolising the Form of the Good. As Plato puts it, the prisoner "would be compelled to stand up, turn his neck around, walk, and look toward the light..." (Ibid.: "The Republic", 515c). Halil, by contrast, remains bound within his own perceptual cave. The photograph of Meral is his shadow on the wall, and around it he builds his entire emotional world. Erksan's film, with its sparse dialogue and contemplative visual language, evokes the claustrophobia of that cave. Halil is not merely a man in love; he is trapped in a particular way of seeing, in a vision that mistakes the image for the real.

Reading *Time to Love* through a Platonic frame sharpens its ethical and metaphysical edge. The image, in this case, doesn't point beyond, it circles inward. Halil doesn't see through the photograph; he stares into it, mistaking projection for presence. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, he confuses shadow for substance. But where Plato's allegory ultimately urges the soul upward, toward truth, light, and understanding, Erksan's story lingers in the refusal. What sets this narrative apart is its quiet moral weight: the cost of staying in the cave. The film suggests that to move from image to essence requires more than recognition. It asks for change, a shift of soul. And Halil, at every turn, resists that demand.

Plato's idea of *anamnesis* adds another layer (1999: 81c-86c). Love, for him, isn't just a feeling, it's a recollection. A flash of eternal truth sparked by beauty. In *Phaedrus*, he writes that beauty gives the soul its strongest glimpse of the divine (1977: "Phaedo", 249-251). But Halil's experience runs the other way. Instead of remembering, he forgets. The image doesn't wake anything in him; it dulls him. There's no ascent, no movement. Just repetition. He doesn't rise. He sinks.

⁹ In 514a-517a.

This failure has consequences. In Platonic thought, real beauty gives wings to the soul, lifting it toward higher vision. Here, though, there's no flight, only stillness edging into stagnation. Halil clings to the form and misses what it was meant to reveal. In doing so, he cuts himself off from the transformation love might have offered.

Erksan's direction underlines all of this. The film is full of mirroring surfaces, visual echoes, and spaces that feel frozen in time. These aren't just aesthetic choices, they're also philosophical ones. The entire structure of the film calls attention to the gap between what's seen and what's real. In this way, *Time to Love* aligns with Plato's suspicion of images: that they seduce us, distract us, keep us twice removed from truth. Halil is stuck in that remove, enchanted by beauty, but unable to follow where it leads.

So, what's left? A love that doesn't evolve. A beauty that doesn't redeem. A soul that never moves. *Time to Love* becomes, in this sense, a parable, may be not of transcendence, but of its failure. It warns what happens when we stop at appearances, when we mistake stillness for serenity and projection for intimacy. The cost isn't just emotional. It's spiritual. And that's what makes the film linger: not as a story of romance, but as a quiet meditation on love that forgets how to reach. Without the discipline of ascent, love risks becoming not a vehicle for freedom but a mirror-lined prison.

In contrast to Plato's emphasis on eternal Forms and the metaphysical separation between essence and appearance, Aristotle offers a more grounded and immanent account of form, perception, and representation.¹⁰ Where Plato views *mimesis* with suspicion, concerned that imitation distances us from truth, Aristotle, particularly in the *Poetics* and *Metaphysics*, sees imitation as a fundamental mechanism by which human beings engage with and understand the world. "...he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation," (1967: chapter 4, p. 2316, 1448b5-10). Aristotle writes, suggesting that mimetic art need not obscure reality but can, instead, illuminate its emotional and ethical contours. From this Aristotelian perspective, representation becomes a means of revealing it. Every being, he argues, carries within it a *telos*, an inner aim or purpose toward which it naturally moves. Love, within this framework, is not an

¹⁰ This is by combining *Metaphysics*, book vii, 1037a5; *de Anima*, ii.12, 424a17; *Poetics*, chapter 6.

escape from the material world, as it often appears in Platonic or Sufi traditions. Rather, it unfolds within it. It's not static, it's a process of becoming. Essence isn't just admired; it's enacted. What's possible has to be made real, shaped through choice, risk, and presence.

Love, in this sense, is not an escape from the world but a way of moving through it and its messy, time-bound, shaped structure by encounter. It shapes in relation, not in a disconnected manner. But Halil doesn't move. His love stalls, caught in stillness, unwilling to touch what's real. His fixation on the photograph arrests love before it can begin to fulfill its *telos*. Trapped in the stillness of the image, his desire never shifts. It loops, sealed off from the friction, risk, and renewal that real connection demands. What might have been a process of unfolding becomes, instead, a refusal to move, an attachment not to life, but to its representation. In Aristotelian terms, his relationship with Meral lacks *entelecheia*, which is the realisation of potential; love must pass from potentiality (*dunamis*) to actuality (*energeia*) (1998: book ix.8, 1050a8-10; book xii.6, 1071b12-14), a process never completed in the film.

Furthermore, Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* (2009: book i.7, 1098a16-18; book i.8, 1098b30-32), flourishing through virtuous activity, underscores the ethical gap in Halil's form of love. There is no ethical engagement with the beloved as a living subject, shared development, or relational virtue. Love remains passive, self-enclosed, and sterile. This absence of ethical actualisation parallels Sufi concerns with *nafs*, the egoic self that halts the soul's development. Where Plato and the Sufis seek transcendence, Aristotle demands engagement. And in both systems, Halil fails.

From a cinematic standpoint, Erksan's use of stillness and repetition can be interpreted as a visual commentary on this arrested motion. The photograph becomes a symbol of stagnation, not of being. While Aristotle values form, he does so in its embodiment and dynamic realisation in life. Halil's error is not his love of form, but his refusal to allow that form to evolve, grow, and act.

Thus, when placed alongside both Platonic and Sufi frameworks, Aristotle introduces a necessary ethical and ontological dimension: love must be lived, not merely imagined. It must become. In *Time to Love*, the tragedy lies in the love that refuses to move; an unactualised affection cut off from its purpose, *telos*, and virtue.

6.4 Derviş Mustafa: Ethical Witness and the Absent *Telos*

Among the film's quieter yet symbolically potent figures, Derviş Mustafa emerges as a meaningful foil to Halil's inward, image-bound love. Whereas Halil withdraws into his solitary fixation, Derviş Mustafa embodies a grounded, active ethical presence. Though his screen time is limited, his character carries considerable weight, both narratively and philosophically, especially when viewed through the lens of Aristotle's ethics and the Sufi ideal of spiritual companionship (*sohbet*).

From an Aristotelian perspective, Derviş Mustafa functions as a voice of *phronesis*, practical wisdom. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines the human good as "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue." (2009: i.7, 1098a16). For Aristotle, *aretē*, virtue, is not lofty abstraction. It's practice. It's balance, self-awareness, and a life aimed at *eudaimonia*: human flourishing through thoughtful, ethically engaged action. Within this frame, Derviş Mustafa in *Time to Love* stands out as someone quietly anchored. He doesn't lecture Halil. He nudges. Gently, patiently, he tries to steer him out of the frozen comfort of fantasy and into something harder, messier, but real: love that's reciprocal, that breathes, that asks something of you.

And yet, Mustafa's presence also casts Halil's inertia into sharper relief. From an Aristotelian angle, Halil is stuck in *dunamis* (1998: 1050a9-10), potential that never takes shape. He circles the idea of love but doesn't live it. Aristotle is clear on this: contemplation alone isn't enough. Virtue needs action. It has to show up in the world, in choices, in relationships. Mustafa, grounded and steady, becomes the quiet measure of what Halil is refusing to become.

Aristotle also gives us *philia*, the love of friendship, as one of the highest, most stable forms of human connection (2009: book vii, 1156b6-9). It's not fuelled by passion or idealization, but by mutual respect, shared values, and a genuine concern for the other's well-being. Seen this way, Halil's relationship with Mustafa holds more weight than it might seem. It isn't just a side plot or a source of exposition. It's a quiet moral counterpoint. Mustafa models a kind of relational ethics that Halil can't yet reach, a way of being with others that's present, mutual, and rooted in care rather than projection.

There's a clear echo here with Sufi thought as well. The tradition of *suhbah*, companionship on the spiritual path, values friendship not just as comfort, but as guidance. A spiritual companion helps strip away the illusions of the ego, not through force, but through presence, through example. Even Mustafa's name, *Derviş*, signals this role. He's not a savior. He's a fellow traveler, steady in his own humility, showing Halil, if Halil is willing to see, what it might mean to walk with love, not just dream of it. His presence in the narrative models the *sohbet* (spiritual conversation) that refines perception and deepens self-awareness. Just as in Sufism, the friend is not only a peer but also a mirror to the soul; Mustafa is a subtle mirror to Halil's spiritual stagnation.

Cinematically, Derviş Mustafa offers a tonal and moral contrast. His presence disrupts Halil's self-enclosed world. He belongs to the realm of dialogue and action, while Halil belongs to the realm of images and silence. The film's *mise-en-scène* often separates them visually, emphasising their differing modes of being. Derviş Mustafa lives in the world; Halil retreats from it.

In this way, Derviş Mustafa becomes a character and a structural marker of absence, an absent *telos* within Halil's ethical and spiritual journey. He is the figure of becoming that Halil fails to heed, the reminder that love must move from the aesthetic to the ethical, from fantasy to form, from self to other. Their friendship, grounded in care and contrast, remains one of the film's quietest but most ethically potent elements, an enduring symbol of a love that could have guided Halil back to life, had he only listened.

And yet, despite his name and manner, Derviş Mustafa does not function as a dervish in the classical Sufi sense. He is a companion, and at times he does interrupt Halil's inertia with questions, glances, soft critiques but his gestures lack the spiritual fire that characterises the role of a *murshid*. In Sufi literature, the dervish is never simply present. He is a catalyst, a vessel of divine disturbance, an agent of annihilation and awakening. He intervenes not with politeness but with disruption, pulling the lover away from illusion and into the terrifying intimacy of truth.

Shams al-Tabrizi's sudden arrival in Rumi's life, for instance, is often described as a spiritual storm, an encounter so intense it overturned Rumi's scholarly identity and opened him to ecstatic divine love (Lewis, 2003: 138–145). Tapduk Emre, in Turkish Sufi

tradition, does not bestow knowledge on Yunus Emre easily or gently. Instead, Yunus is said to have carried firewood to the lodge for forty years without question, undergoing long and silent apprenticeship before being allowed to taste the inward path (Öztelli, 1997: 26-27). These dervishes are not companions in the modern sense. They are forces. They are furnaces. They burn away the ego so that the real may appear.

Derviş Mustafa, by contrast, does not orchestrate any such transformation. His concern for Halil is evident, but he does not rupture Halil's fixation. His words remain hesitant, his interruptions delicate. He gestures toward an ethical horizon, but he never forces Halil to confront his obsession. He is not indifferent as he tries. But what he offers lacks the intensity, intentionality, and metaphysical authority that the Sufi tradition demands of the guide. He becomes not the gatekeeper of the path, but a shadow beside it.

In this sense, Mustafa is a symbol not of Sufi mastery, but of its modern afterimage. His failure is not personal; it is structural. The film strips the dervish figure of his historical function, reducing him to a companion who watches but cannot intervene, who speaks but cannot transform. He does not activate *ma'na* behind *surat*; he cannot move Halil from image to essence. Thus, he becomes a kind of metaphysical residue, more like a trace of a spiritual lineage that no longer carries momentum.

I think this is not a betrayal of the dervish figure, but an elegy. Mustafa represents the broken chain of transmission since he is represented as the guide who is still present, still listening, but no longer heard. His words do not pierce because the symbolic framework in which they once had force has thinned. He is a remnant of a cosmology in which guidance mattered, now floating in a world where longing loops without direction.

And so he remains. He watches Halil return to the photograph, again and again, without transformation. Unlike the *murshid*, who disappears after the seeker awakens, Mustafa lingers after the seeker stalls. He is not the dervish of the path, he is the dervish after the path has been forgotten.

6.5 Transcendence and Disappearance: Time, Annihilation, and the Cinematic Sublime

Both poetic and cinematic imagery can act as vehicles toward essence, but they operate under different logics. The poetic metaphor displaces the reader from literal meaning and

opens semantic excess. Cinematic framing, by contrast, restricts and selects, inviting contemplation through visual limitation.

The metaphor resembles *majaz* (symbol), a key device in Arabic and Persian poetics. It offers multiplicity. A single word may allude to lover, wine, God, and annihilation. As Schimmel explains, the richness of Sufi metaphor lies in its “metaphors” as they are “not merely poetic ornaments but are indicative of a peculiar way of thinking.” (2011: 144). In this sense they bear a polysemic elasticity.

In film, however, ambiguity is achieved through wordplay and image composition. If constructed deliberately, a single shot can contain contradiction, longing, and transformation. In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky calls this the “truth of the cinema” (1986: 67), a temporal exposure that analysis cannot fully resolve (Ibid.: 42-56). Like Erksan, Tarkovsky resists montage in favour of duration. Time, not metaphor, becomes the path to essence.

This temporal unfolding is what Henri Bergson calls *durée*: an inner time that cannot be spatialised or dissected (1959: 99-104). In Erksan’s film, love unfolds not in action but in delay. This delay, this refusal to resolve, mirrors the Sufi state of *sabr* (patient endurance), a form of longing that refines the soul.

This temporal suspension and other framing strategies of the film can mirror the delay process of Sufi verses in pathway to transcendence. But what happens when the image begins to dissolve the self who sees it?

One of the most central concepts in Sufism is *fana*, the annihilation of the self in Divine presence. This annihilation is often described poetically through fire, drowning, or erasure metaphors. For instance, Mansur al-Hallaj famously said, “I am the Truth,” and was executed for collapsing the boundary between self and God (Al-Ghazali, 1962: 85).¹¹

In poetic form, *fana* is often celebrated through ecstatic language (Rumi, 1997: 23):

A candle is made to become entirely flame.
In that annihilating moment
it has no shadow.

¹¹ Also referenced in Attar’s *The Conference of Birds*, lines 4271-4281.

In *Time to Love*, there is no overt mystical union. However, Halil's disappearance, his final act of self-removal, can be interpreted as a failed or incomplete *fana*. He does not dissolve into God but into absence. His love, having failed to pass through form into essence, collapses back into the void. This suggests *fana* without *baqa*, an annihilation without return or subsistence.

This could be read as a form of ego-death. Halil refuses individuation; he does not integrate the *anima* (Meral) into the self, but projects her entirely, then retracts (Jung, 1988: 133-138). This results in stasis, not transformation.

Film, unlike poetry, can show disappearance. The camera lingers on Halil's absences. In one of the final scenes, his erasure is not dramatised but silently registered through vacant rooms, fading light, and Meral's stunned gaze. The viewer witnesses *fana* visually, rather than imagining it metaphorically. This is where cinematic imagery becomes effectively powerful, though less semantically rich than poetry.

Still, transcendence and *fana*, as a mode of presence shaped by absence, do not explain *Time to Love*'s haunting use of space and silence by themselves. In both Sufi poetry and *Time to Love*, we encounter a sublime displacement. It seems like a shift from immediate content to a sense of transcendent longing. In his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke described the sublime as that which evokes awe and fear, often through vastness or emptiness (1823: 58-62). In *Time to Love*, the sublime arises from the absence of fulfilment. It employs an emotional geography defined by stillness, shadows, and silent interiors. This might not exactly align with Burke's sense of sublime as he suggests a more grand and overwhelming sense. However, in a more restrained version, the emptiness in the film evokes a more internalised version of awe.

The house where Halil gazes at the photograph becomes a shrine to displaced desire. It is sacred not because of what it contains but because of what it withholds. The room, the image, the stairwell becomes a vessel of potential meaning that never arrives. This echoes the mystical sublime in Sufi texts, where the Divine is always just out of reach, like the

beloved glimpsed through a veil. As Rūzbihān Baqlī puts it in *The Unveiling of Secrets* (1997: 5):

Now they loved him with a special love, but this love is in reality love of the beginning of the end. Then he unveiled to them the sublimities of his beauty and his majesty, manifesting his essence and his attributes. They knew him and loved him with the great, true love that does not alter with the changing of time, nor with the onset of afflictions and challenges. They witnessed him with the witnessing of reality without a veil.

This cinematic strategy resonates more intimately than the florid metaphors of Sufi poetry. In Attar or Rumi, the language swells with beauty, and I am led on a path of aesthetic intoxication. However, with Erksan, I feel suspended, disoriented, left to fill in the absence. This is not less spiritual, but perhaps more quietly existential. I think it is a negative theology of film, showing by not showing.

The stillness and negation in Erksan's mise-en-scène connect to what Maurice Blanchot termed the "space of literature" (1989: 17): a space where the unnameable is gestured toward but never spoken. For Blanchot, it seems like this silence is not failure, it is fidelity to the Real. The same could be said of *Time to Love*: it denies the viewer closure, not out of narrative laziness, but out of metaphysical honesty.

6.6 Ethics of Representation: Seeing without Possessing

A central ethical and spiritual concern shared by both Sufi thought and modern cinema is the tension inherent in seeing without possessing. This is precisely where Halil's gaze takes on a tragic dimension. His intense, unfiltered, and obsessive love for Meral's image reveals a profound desire for connection that avoids real engagement. He sees her, never truly touches; he loves, yet never genuinely relates.

Sufi teachings caution us here: loving the form itself is not condemned, but it becomes perilous when the form is mistaken for the essence. This misrecognition traps the lover in illusion, obstructing the path to deeper, transformative love. In *The Seals of Wisdom*, Ibn Arabi warns that the lover must love the Real in the beloved, not the beloved herself (2006: 18):

You are not Him, rather you are Him
and you see Him in the source of thing,

absolute and limited at the same time.

Otherwise, love becomes idolatry (*shirk mahbub*). The image becomes a god.

Halil's love verges on this idolatry. And yet, paradoxically, his restraint from pursuing the real woman (Meral) shows a kind of ascetic ethics. He does not want to taint the purity of his inner image. This recalls the Sufi concept of *wara* ' , a cautionary self-restraint not out of fear, but out of reverence.

Subjectively, this reminds me of the way one can sometimes fall in love with a memory of someone rather than the person. The lived, embodied individual disrupts the fantasy. This discrepancy between the beloved as she is and as imagined can lead to disillusionment or, in Halil's case, a withdrawal into solitude. The cinematic image becomes a *mihrab*, a niche of prayer, where he gazes not at Meral but at what she represents: unattainable beauty, Divine mystery.

Erksan visualises this ethical boundary with discipline. The camera rarely objectifies Meral. Even in her moments of vulnerability, she is not eroticised. This aligns with the ethics of *tasawwuf*, where the lover's gaze must ultimately lead to purification, not consumption.

CHAPTER VII. TOWARD A POETIC-CINEMATIC ONTOLOGY

7.1 Art as a Medium of Ontological Revelation

Comparing cinematic and poetic imagery concerning Sufism reveals a shared metaphysical longing: to express the inexpressible, to see what lies beyond the veil. While Sufi poetry uses metaphor, negation, and rhythm to destabilise literal reality, Metin Erksan's *Time to Love* uses stillness, framing, and interior space to suspend time and perception.

Both mediums operate in the space between form (*surat*) and essence (*ma'na*), key concepts in Sufi metaphysics that inform the representation of love and being. However, the way they operate this space is different from each other. Poetry leads the reader upward through layers of language and symbolic complexity, inviting reflective engagement with meaning and spiritual ascent; cinema envelops the spectator sensorially, demanding presence and patience, crafting a temporal and spatial experience that unfolds as lived duration.

Sufi poetry opens a mental and emotional relation between language and mysticism leading to a metaphysical discourse. In contrast, Erksan's film performs a kind of slow alchemy on perception itself; watching *Time to Love* is like inhabiting a poem that refuses to end. It can be even interpreted as a cinematic meditation. The silence, repetition, and stillness evoke a suspended temporal state and opens up a possible meditational state.

This distinction between poetic and cinematic imagery is not hierarchical but experiential. Poetic imagery works through the unfolding of language. In contrast, at its highest, cinematic imagery transcends narrative to become a felt duration—a meditation that reveals the limits of language and the necessity of silence. Both confront the impossibility of truly possessing the beloved and invite a surrender to beauty rather than its conquest.

In *The Vision of Islam*, Murata and Chittick points out to the Sufi idea that the eye must be trained to see with the heart, not merely with the head (1994: 176-177). This training, or this inward seeing, is the aim of both the mystic and the cinematic contemplative. The journey is the same through verse or lens: from image to essence, from *'ishq majazi* to *'ishq haqiqi*, from self to silence.

This chapter seeks to elaborate on poetic-cinematic ontology, exploring how poetry and cinema function as ontological modes and art forms that do not simply represent reality but participate in its unveiling. Engaging with Sufi poetic tradition alongside Erksan's cinematic language, I argue that these two art forms share a metaphysical project challenging conventional epistemologies and ethics of vision. This chapter advances the broader thesis through close literary and cinematic analysis, illuminating *Time to Love* as a cinematic poem in dialogue with Sufi poetics, one that articulates a distinctive ontological vision of love and being.

7.2 Sufi Poetics: Metaphor, Negation, and Ontology

Sufi poetry doesn't just belong to the Islamic literary tradition; it cuts into it, reshaping language into something more than art. It's not about laying out doctrine or preaching belief. It's about brushing up against what can't quite be said. It uses metaphor, silence, repetition; not as decoration, but as tools for reaching past literal thought. The point isn't clarity. It's proximity.

Metaphor here isn't flair. It's function. Annemarie Schimmel analyses these metaphors as signposts to "the ineffable" (2011: 4). This is a phrase that captures their direction without claiming destination. Poets like Rumi, Attar, and Ibn Arabi didn't repeat symbols like wine, the nightingale, the elusive beloved just for the sake of style. They returned to them because the symbols kept opening, layer by layer. The world wasn't being described by using words; it was being unpeeled by these words. Take Rumi's line: "You said, "But who is this other *living* / being?" / "That is my wounded soul." / Then I brought that soul / to you as a prisoner." (1997: 77). In this sense, pain is the starting place. It's the door.

Negation also carries weight. In Sufi practice, it's not a sidebar, it's the beginning. You start by saying no. *Tanzih* strips the image clean. God is not this or not that. It's a holy

subtraction, a clearing-out process of false shapes. Only then does *tashbih* arrive, not with the thunder, but with a whisper. This is some sort of a resemblance, not a clear identity. A closeness that isn't exact. A trace. The poems don't just describe this shift; they move like it. They flicker between presence and absence, like something glimpsed from the corner of the eye. Ibn Arabi said it best (1978: 130, xlii, 10-11):

She excels the sun in splendour: her form is not to be
compared with any.
The heaven of light is under the sole of her foot: her
diadem is beyond the spheres.

This is to mean that it is not a tidy idea; it's in motion resembling a process of letting go. Truth doesn't settle in any way. It flickers, opens, pulls back between meanings.

The shape of these poems mimics the path they point toward. Their rhythm spirals looping with intention. It's not a move forward so much as inward. The verses echo the soul's shift from *nafs*, the ego's grip, to *ruh*, the thread of spirit that leads back to the source. It's not just writing. It's a form of practice. A way to look. A way to live.

There's no solid ground at the end of this. No final, fixed idea. What emerges is a kind of living structure; always shifting, always resisting closure. I don't think that these poems aim to define divine love (*'ishq haqiqi*). They let it gleam between cracks; ambiguous, contradictory, alive. The meaning doesn't land exactly on anything. It lingers. Reading becomes something participatory to make sense. One is not only decoding, also entering.

This movement between presence and absence, this trembling at the edge of form, finds a particularly potent resonance in Turkish Sufi poetry, where metaphor does not merely describe, but unravels, and where negation is not denial but method: a way of unmaking the self to glimpse what lies beyond it. In the verses of Niyazi Mısri, paradox is not a flourish, it is discipline. He writes: "Dört yanımdan nâr u bâd u âb u hâk ede hucûm, / Benliğim anlar alup bu varlığım talân ola." (2009: 301) ("From every side, fire, wind, water, earth attack in turn, / My ego is taken; this existence of mine is undone and burned."). He does not rejoice in existence but also, he does not grieve in non-existence. This is no retreat into indifference. It is an ontological calibration, a refusal to lodge the

heart in either being or its absence. It echoes the doctrine of *fana*, the annihilation of self, but with the particular austerity of Anatolian mysticism: spare, unornamented, final.

Yunus Emre, too, speaks from within this chamber of negation, where revelation comes not through excess, but through undoing. His haunting lines, “Severem ben seni candan içeri / Yolum utmaz (1) bu erkândan içeri / Nireye bakar isem toptolusun (2) / Seni kanda koyam benden (3) içeri” (1943: 121-122, xliii) (“I love you from the depths of my soul, / My path is not ashamed to enter these rites. / Wherever I look, you are altogether there, / I cannot hide you within myself.”), announces not a mystery to be solved, but a mystery to be lived. Identity here collapses into itself like a folding mirror. It is not metaphor, it is a break in language, a fissure through which the Real begins to whisper.

These formulations do not speak of mystical states from a distance; they enact them. They are not observations. And in this light, Halil’s fixation in *Time to Love* becomes more than emotional paralysis. He never enters the negative space these poets describe. He never lets the image unravel, never risks the loss that truth demands. He clings to the form not as a step toward meaning, but as its substitute. For him, beauty is final. It must be enough.

But Turkish Sufi poetics does not permit such stasis. It declares that love, to be worthy of the name, must pass through fire. The image is not the end; it is the wound. It is the point at which metaphor ceases to signify and begins to burn. To love, truly, is not to confirm but to collapse. It is not to name, but to be unmade.

Metin Erksan’s *Time to Love* moves in a similar way. It’s less a narrative than meditation, a visual echo of the Sufi poem. Rhythm, repetition, stillness aren’t stylistic choices; they’re part of the film’s logic. Long-takes stretch time. Reflections double the frame. The plot stays quiet, almost stubbornly so. And like poetry, it doesn’t try to explain. It asks for the presence of the viewer. You’re not meant to solve it. You’re meant to sit with it, just to wait. There is a pause between the image and meaning. That’s where this participation begins.

7.3 Cinematic Ontology: Time, Space, and Perception

Sufi poetry and cinema may seem like distant forms, but they share a strange, deep relationship. Both work with time, with perception, with what is beyond the language. Sufi verse moves by metaphor and rhythm, by what isn't said as much as what is. In a way it gestures. Cinema, by contrast, moves us through the senses, it pulls us in through image, sound and movement. The screen surrounds us. It doesn't just speak to the mind; it gets under the skin. If the Sufi poem hints at the unseen through dense symbols and layered phrasing, the film does so through cinematic functions like slowness, presence, and atmosphere that doesn't always explain itself.

Metin Erksan's *Time to Love* shows how a film can carry metaphysical weight. His style is stripped down but heavy with suggestion: long, quiet shots, tight interiors, a kind of narrative hush. Things don't move in a straight line. They hover. Deleuze's idea of the time-image helps with this sense of hovering (2005: 30-33). The film breaks from the usual cause-and-effect rhythm. Instead of action in the scenes, we get duration of the scenes. There is some sort of a mood rather than answers. In *Time to Love*, silence doesn't mean nothing is happening. It's a space, an invitation to lean into what is going on. Like the Sufi *mawqif*, those pauses meant not for talking, but for listening, it opens a space for reflection rather than appointing a fixed, closed meaning.

This connects to the old Sufi pairing of *surat* and *ma'na*; form and meaning. You can't separate them cleanly. Erksan's images work like that. They don't tell you what to think. They seem to hold something back. Like the lines of Ibn al-Fāriḍ or Rūzbihān Baqlī, they hint and veil, never laying it all out. The settings, tight rooms, shadows, stark walls, aren't just backgrounds. They're some sort of doorways to reach what is not said. The characters also aren't moving toward big dramatic reveals. They don't seem to try to uncover. They're staying, waiting and feeling. Emotion builds slowly, like a breath you don't realize you've been holding.

Andre Bazin and Hugh Gray talked about photographic image as a way of showing the world without interference, of letting reality come through (1960: 7-8). But *Time to Love* tweaks that idea. This isn't realism about how things look. It's about how they're felt and what stays invisible. You could call it a kind of Sufi realism centered on presence more

than appearance. What Erksan reveals matters, but also what he chooses not to show, if not more. That space, the withheld, the ambiguous, is where the viewer meets the scenes; to not to understand, but to experience.

In this sense, cinema becomes a contemplative practice, echoing the Sufi insistence that true vision requires the heart (*qalb*), not just the eye. Erksan's camera lingers, not to explain, but to let being unfold. The result is not narrative in the conventional sense, but something closer to a visual *dhikr*, or like its cinematic invocation. It does not rush toward resolution; it circles, dwells, and listens.

Ultimately, *Time to Love* is less a tale of unrequited affection than a meditation on perception itself on the difference between seeing and knowing, looking and witnessing. It suggests that to truly perceive, one must relinquish the impulse to grasp, to categorize, to possess. In this way, Erksan's film aligns with the Sufi path, where love is not a feeling to be indulged in, but a discipline of attention, a form of ethical and ontological commitment. Where to see becomes to love and to love becomes to let go.

7.4 Between *Surat* and *Ma'na*: The Tension in Image and Essence

The split between *ma'na* (inner meaning) and *surat* (outer form) isn't just a tidy concept in Sufi thought; it's more like a friction, a lived paradox. It shapes how the self sees, wants, and comes undone. In *Time to Love*, this tension, similarly, doesn't stay in the background. It's etched into the film's structure. What's shown and what's felt keep drifting apart. Image and essence don't align. They circle each other, while not quite touching. That same loop turns up again and again in Sufi verse, where meaning slips and doubles back, while never sitting still.

Sufi poetry doesn't treat *surat* and *ma'na* as a true/false binary. They move together, uneasily. The surface isn't a mask to rip off; it's a veil, one that both hides and hints what's behind. As Ibn Arabi puts it, the veil isn't just a screen; it's a spiritual tension that pushes perception past the visible (1978: 131, xlv). It both blocks and invites. However, the point isn't to decode it, it's to let it work on you. In this sense, seeing becomes less about the eyes, more about the heart's capacity to stay open, even when clarity fails.

Erksan's film lives in that in-between. Objects don't just sit in the frame, they pulse. The photo, the mannequin bride, the lake, the dimly lit rooms, they're more than props. They function to hint at. They don't explain, even fully show what they are hinting at. Instead, they gesture toward something withheld. The image gives you just enough, then suddenly turns away. In this way, Erksan doesn't film things so much as offer them. What matters isn't the object itself, but the space it opens and which meaning we can fill this space.

Silence, stillness, stretched-out time aren't just stylistic choices for Erksan to try out.

They're part of the film's inner logic. Dialogue is sparse. Action slows to a crawl.

Nothing hurries. These pauses pull us inward, away from plot, and toward presence. This is close to *tawajjuh*, the Sufi practice of focused attention; not the attention of watching for what happens next, but of waiting without expectation. The film trains you to sit with the unresolved. It gives nothing away. You can only meet it where it is.

Nowhere is this more felt than in how the film handles love. Halil's fixation on Meral's photograph is love stalled at the surface. It never crosses into real relation. His desire locks onto form. There's safety there; no risk or rupture. Just image. But in the end, when Meral throws the painting and the mannequin into the lake, something shifts. It's not just rejection. It's a refusal. She's walking away from illusion, from being looked at as a stand-in for some inner truth. Her gesture doesn't resolve anything neatly, but in a way, it breaks the spell. It's a move toward *ma'na*, toward something that can't be possessed or pinned down. Not exactly like a statement, but more like a starting point of the process of letting go.

This movement parallels a core dynamic in Sufi hermeneutics: the oscillation between the literal and the allegorical, the sensual and the spiritual, the manifest and the hidden. Just as the beloved in Sufi poetry signifies both the human and the divine, so too does Erksan's narrative resist singular reading. Is this a tale of romantic alienation, or a metaphysical parable about the failure to see beyond appearances? The ambiguity is deliberate. Like a ghazal, *Time to Love* holds its meanings in tension, never collapsing metaphors into message.

What emerges, then, is a cinema not of explanation but of unveiling. *Time to Love* is not merely a story of deferred affection; it is a meditation on perception itself; on the ethical

and ontological implications of how we see, what we cling to, and what we must relinquish in order to encounter truth. In Sufi terms, this is the path from *naẓar* (gaze) to *basirah* (inner vision), from desire bound by form to love aligned with essence. And in Erksan's hands, cinema becomes the space where that transformation is both dramatized and quietly invited. *'Ishq haqiqi* aspires to union with the divine essence that the beloved's form symbolises, whereas *'ishq majazi* is still enamoured with the beloved's physical form. The cinematic and poetic ontologies converge here, articulating a shared struggle to reconcile form and essence in the act of love and perception.

This interaction questions accepted forms of representation by demanding that both poetry and film recognise their limitations and the need for a reader or viewer sensitive to the hidden. In this sense, it proposes an ethics of reading and seeing that emphasises tolerance, modesty, and receptivity to mystery.

7.5 Experiencing Poetic and Cinematic Ontologies

The meaning of poetry and film doesn't sit neatly in what they say or show, it unfolds in how they're experienced. Their power lies in what they do, not just what they represent. Both art forms circle the tension between *surat* (form) and *ma'na* (essence), yet the ways they draw us in to themselves and, the routes they offer into reality, differ. This difference matters.

Poetry leans inward. To feel its paradoxes, its layered metaphors and open-ended images, the reader has to soften, intellectually, emotionally, and even spiritually. It doesn't hand you the meaning. This means you have to lean in, feel your way through. Especially in Sufi verse, where repetition and symbolism aren't just literary tricks and more like part of the practice. These poems don't just describe spiritual experience; they create the conditions for it. Their rhythm, density, the circling back to certain images; it all works like a kind of tuning. You don't read them so much as enter them. The mind slows. The boundaries between what's literal and what's allegorical start to blur. You begin to read with your attention, not just your analysis.

The cinema moves differently. It works through time and the body. Film doesn't just speak to the mind; it wraps around the senses. Where poetry unfolds line by line, cinema

immerses image, sound, silence, and pacing. It places you inside this duration. I think in *Time to Love*, Metin Erksan leans hard into this. He doesn't chase the plot. He slows everything down. Stillness, echoing shots, drawn-out silences stretch time until it starts to feel strange, and almost sacred. You're not just watching. You're waiting and dwelling. The film doesn't explain, it *holds*. And the longer it holds, the more your attention shifts, deepens. Eventually, the separation between what you're watching and how you're watching starts to dissolve. This kind of slow attention feels a lot like the rhythms of Sufi practice. Repetition, restraint, silence aren't absences. They're tools. Ways of listening differently. Ways of clearing space.

Some of these ideas overlap with phenomenology, especially with the works of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger talks about truth not as something to be proven or explained, but as *unconcealment*, a kind of opening. In his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, he says that a work of art doesn't represent reality; it reveals it, in its own time, in its own way (2002: 4-8). Art becomes a kind of clearing, a site where the real can show itself; not through logic or argument, but through presence. This is close to the Sufi idea of *kashf*, the unveiling of what's already there, though usually hidden. Not something you reason your way into, but something you witness, if you're paying the right kind of attention.

Merleau-Ponty, in turn, places the body at the center of perception. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he argues that vision is not the passive reception of images but a form of lived engagement, a bodily openness to the world. "I know that objects have several facets because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body." (2002: 95). Perception is thus not an abstract cognitive act but an incarnate relation: to see is to be touched, to be drawn into the fabric of what is seen. From this perspective, film is not a neutral medium but a phenomenological encounter. It is an event in which the viewer's body, senses, and affective rhythms are brought into resonance with the world onscreen.

Time to Love exemplifies this kind of cinematic attunement. Erksan does not merely depict love or longing; he creates a perceptual space in which those states can be inhabited. Through extended silences, minimal dialogue, and tightly framed interiors, he

slows the viewer's gaze, cultivating a mode of seeing that is closer to *basirah*, inner vision, than to conventional spectatorship. The film does not explain but discloses. It opens a space where love becomes not just a theme but a mode of being, a form of dwelling in the tension between surface and essence, image and insight. In this sense, the viewer is no longer a detached observer but a participant in the film's unfolding ontology, experiencing cinema not as entertainment or narrative, but as an embodied meditation on presence, desire, and the unseen. So, the stillness does not represent absence but rather presence, which the audience must patiently inhabit to perceive.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty maintains that ambiguity is the foundation of perception rather than a constraint, saying, "The world is not what I think, but what I live through." (Ibid.: xviii). This realisation strikes a deep chord with *Time to Love*'s and Sufi poetry's experiential ambiguity. Both are rich because they create a space where meaning is constantly sought and postponed, echoing the mystical longing (*shawq*) at the core of Sufi metaphysics, rather than by providing a single truth.

Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies illuminate how poetry and cinema open ontological spaces; poetry through linguistic disclosure and cinema through embodied presence; that transform the viewer's or reader's relationship to reality. Thus, the phenomenological act of dwelling in being, where silence, duration, and attentiveness reveal the boundaries and possibilities of perception, is mirrored in the patience and openness needed to engage with *Time to Love*.

This dichotomy is reflected in my own experience. Sufi poetry leads the reader through the complexities of love and existence by opening up mental and emotional landscapes. However, Erksan's film performs a slow alchemy on perception, allowing the audience to linger in quiet moments and experience time as an ontological dimension.

Both poetry and cinema offer complementary paths to ontological insight; one linguistic and symbolic, the other visual and sensory; each enriching the other's capacity to express the inexpressible and reveal the hidden dimensions of love and existence.

7.6 Silence, Ineffability, and the Beloved

Silence appears as a necessary form of expression rather than an absence in Sufi poetics and Metin Erksan's *Time to Love*. It marks the boundary between language and image, where awe replaces perception and beauty can only be seen rather than owned. In this context, silence is ontological, structured by indicating what can only be experienced and not spoken. This silence frames the beloved as an object of desire and a horizon of meaning.

Sufi poetry frequently confronts this paradox. The beloved is described in sensual and passionate terms, yet remains elusive, veiled, and undefined. As Rumi writes, "When Truth shines out words fail and nothing tell; / Now hear the Voice within your hearts. Farewell." (2010: 24). The function of poetic language, then, is not to define the beloved but to trace the contours of the ineffable. It is to reveal through metaphor what cannot be named directly. The deeper the love, the more words dissolve into longing. This movement from articulation to silence also goes from '*ishq majazi* to '*ishq haqiqi*, from human love to divine encounter.

Time to Love similarly dramatises the insufficiency of speech and the necessity of silence. Halil, the protagonist, often remains mute in the presence of Meral, as if language itself would profane the ideal he perceives. Dialogue is sparse throughout the film, and when it does occur, it is often awkward, interrupted, or deferred. The most emotionally charged moments are conveyed not through verbal confession but through gesture, posture, and framing. In one key scene, Halil's stillness says more than any declaration of love could. The cinematic silence becomes a spiritual gesture, resonant with the Sufi practice of *samt*, the sacred silence that allows the heart to hear what the tongue cannot say.

This spiritual silence is not empty. It is full of presence, potential, and listening. Rumi writes, "Be silent that the lord who gave thee language may / speak, / For as he fashioned a door and lock, he has also made / a key." (1973: 112). In this formulation, silence becomes the very condition of revelation, and the absence of speech does not signal detachment, but attunement. *Time to Love* adopts this sensibility in its visual language, where the still frame becomes a site of ontological attention, and the long pause a gesture of reverence.

Moreover, silence protects the beloved from appropriation. In the Sufi tradition, to name the Beloved too clearly is to risk idolatry. Essence can collapse into form. Similarly, Halil's tragic obsession with Meral's photo highlights the peril of replacing the indescribable real with the image. A metaphysical failure is highlighted by his inability to transcend the visual into relational presence: he clings to the form without letting go of the silence that would reveal the essence.

In her last act, however, Meral also makes a silent gesture by tossing the mannequin and her self-portrait into the lake. This action, devoid of dialogue, performs a relinquishing of surface, a symbolic release of the illusions that bound both her and Halil. In this moment, cinematic silence converges with Sufi self-effacement. It can be even interpreted as the disappearance of the ego in the face of a greater reality.

Thus, both poetry and cinema confront the limits of their mediums by invoking silence as a form of ontological humility. Silence becomes not a void but a presence, what the mystics describe as the station of the Real (*al-Haqq*), before which all speech is stilled. In this silent encounter, the viewer or reader is invited not to understand, but to surrender; not to master, but to witness.

In Turkish Sufi literature, silence is never emptiness. It is a gesture of reverence, a spiritual poise before the ungraspable. It marks the moment when language, strained to its edge, kneels. Yunus Emre, whose verses spiral around the unsayable, names the power of the spoken word with astonishing force: "Söz ola kese savaşı söz ola bitüre başı / Söz ola ağulu aşı bal ile yağide bir söz" (1943: 345, xiv) ("Words can stop the battle, words can mend the strife, / Words can be bitter medicine or sweet as honey and life."). A word, he says, can halt a war, sever a head, sweeten poison into honey. And yet, in so many of his poems, it is what remains unsaid that carries the heaviest weight. The voice does not conclude, it only vanishes. It folds into itself. It ends not in closure, but in a luminous quiet. This is not poetic modesty; it is theological restraint. For when the Beloved approaches, language can only bow. The silence that follows is not concealment. It seems more like protection.

In this mystical economy, silence becomes a veil to shield the Real from the violence of naming. It is a mercy: to fall quiet where speech would betray. In *Time to Love*, Halil's

long, hushed gazes seem at first to echo this Sufi stillness. He does not speak; he beholds. But the stillness does not open. Unlike the Sufi's silence, which makes space for surrender, Halil's quiet becomes a wall. It is not born of awe, but of hesitation. He does not fall silent because he has reached the threshold of knowing. He remains silent because he never approaches it. His refusal is not the silence of revelation, but of retreat.

In Turkish Sufi poetry, language isn't pushed to deliver answers. It moves until it can't go any further, and then it lets silence take over. That silence isn't a break or a void. It's part of communication. The beloved is still present, just not spoken about directly. Instead of offering clarity, the poem clears a kind of space, so something quieter, or less obvious, can be felt. It's not that meaning disappears; it just starts to work in a different way, through feeling more than through words.

However, this surrender to silence, carefully fostered by the film's silence and meditative rhythm, is ultimately broken. The last disturbance is brought about by violence rather than revelation by Başar's unexpected act of shooting Halil and Meral with a gun. This intrusion is startling from an ontological and narrative standpoint. The layered metaphysical space of image and essence is collapsed into a terminal silence that is not chosen but imposed, breaking the film's contemplative rhythm with a rupture that feels both arbitrary and brutal.

Başar's violence signifies the return of the world's noise into a space that had, until that moment, maintained a sacred quiet. It is the loud assertion of possessive ego, of *nafs*, reasserting itself against the transcendence Halil and Meral might have been approaching. In this sense, the act of murder is not just physical; it is metaphysical. It denies the possibility of spiritual resolution by reintroducing force into a space where surrender had been the governing principle.

From a Sufi perspective, the film's final silence is not *samt*, the contemplative silence of the mystic, but *sukut*, a silencing imposed from the outside, a severing rather than an unveiling. The stillness is no longer generative; it is dead. Başar's gun represents the triumph of worldly attachment, control, and retribution over the interior unfolding of love and loss. The entire ontology of the film dissolves into finality in the space of a single sound, gunshots, leaving the audience with a strong sense of spiritual disruption.

In this conclusion, the viewer is deprived of the solace of transcendence or catharsis. Instead, it exposes us to the frailty of inner quiet in a violent and possessive world. The shortcuts in the poetic and cinematic movements toward essence imply that although art can make gestures toward the real, the environment in which it is created might not always permit the movement to develop fully.

7.7 Ethical and Spiritual Implications of a Poetic-Cinematic Ontology

The journey through Sufi poetry and Erksan's *Time to Love* reveals that both poetic and cinematic forms hold the potential to enact an ontological mode of engagement, one that does not merely represent the world, but participates in the unveiling of its deeper structures. By exploring the interplay between *surat* and *ma'na*, presence and absence, and image and essence, I arrive at a shared metaphysical concern across these two mediums: how to love, see, and dwell in what cannot be fully known or possessed.

Sufi poetry shows what happens when language is pushed to the edge of what it can hold, when words strain under the weight of what they're trying to reach but can't fully name. It doesn't aim to resolve. With techniques like silence and repetition and metaphor, it unsettles more than it ever explains. The reader isn't guided toward certainty but drawn into ambiguity, where truth arrives, if at all, through paradox and a kind of restless yearning. In this way, it cultivates an ethical mode of perception: a reader or viewer who, in the spirit of *kashf* and *aletheia*, embraces humility before the unknown and reverence toward the irreducible otherness of the beloved.

Cinema performs a similar ontological function, particularly in the contemplative form Erksan employs. *Time to Love* creates a visual and temporal language that mirrors the inner practices of mystical reflection by slowing down time, silencing speech, and foregrounding the unseen. The viewer is drawn into a mode of seeing that demands not mastery but submission, not conclusion but contemplation. It is a cinematic ethic of patience, attentiveness, and restraint.

Nevertheless, the last break, Başar's violent intervention, reminds us that these ontologies are not infallible. The intrusion of ego and possession, as well as worldly noise, can break the silence that has been fostered by poetic and cinematic structure. Thus, the film's

abrupt conclusion deprives the audience of a fully realised transcendental arc. Instead, it puts us in front of an ethical dilemma: What does it mean to behold beauty and not destroy it? To love without owning? To perceive without seizing?

This ethical question is central to both the Sufi and artistic traditions. Whether the beloved is human or divine, they must remain partially veiled, resisting possession, eluding final interpretation. What emerges from this is a posture of restraint, reverence, and ethical distance. As it is noted in *Kashfal al-Asrar*, “I looked at the beauty of his transcendent face with the eye of the heart, and he said to me, ‘How can they reach me by strivings and disciplines, if my noble face remains veiled to them? This is reserved for my lovers and the near ones among the knowers of God; there is no way to me except through me, and by the unveiling of my beauty.’” (Baqli 1997: 108). In this sense, *Time to Love* isn’t just another tale of missed chances or love left hanging. It reads more like a slow, careful reflection on what gives love real weight; not winning someone over or finding closure but learning how to exist differently with someone. In this way, love becomes less about getting and more about seeing; seeing yourself, even, through someone else’s eyes.

Poetry and film both seem to stretch further when they stop treating the beloved as a prize. Instead, the beloved becomes a kind of reflection, less a goal, and more a turning point. This chapter looks at that shift, and what it asks of us. Watching. Reading. We’re not just following a plot anymore. We’re being nudged to notice the quiet, the in-between, the things that don’t explain themselves. There’s a kind of sacredness in that, maybe not the loud, obvious kind, but something hidden in the uncertain, the open-ended. In a time that rewards speed and flash, slowing down to sit with what doesn’t resolve might be the boldest thing these works ask of us. And maybe the most lasting.

CHAPTER VIII. CONCLUSION: LOVE BEYOND THE IMAGE: A RETURN TO ESSENCE

At its core, this thesis has followed a layered set of questions, about love, how we see, and who we think we are. I've used Metin Erksan's *Time to Love* and the symbolic language of Sufi poetry as the ground for this exploration. What came out isn't just a side-by-side study of film and mysticism. It's a deeper look at love itself: where it starts, how it shifts, and whether it can outgrow the limits we place on it.

Erksan's 1965 film doesn't play by the usual rules of romance. Halil, the main character, doesn't fall for a person. He falls for a photograph, a still image, silent and unchanging, asking nothing from him in return. His love is locked in visual stillness instead of lived experience. At first glance, it might seem strange, even obsessive. But the film slowly peels that back. What looks like detachment starts to feel more like a quiet search for something else, something harder to name. In the end, it reads less like a love story and more like a philosophical puzzle: Can love be real if it doesn't involve another person? Or is it just another way of learning how to see?

Reading through a Sufi lens, Halil's obsession stops looking like a psychological problem. It starts to look like a metaphor. His distance, his fixation aren't signs of dysfunction, but of a different kind of longing. A spiritual hunger. Not for the image itself, but for what the image might be pointing to. His yearning, his refusal to possess the actual woman, and his withdrawal into interior silence mirror the Sufi seeker's journey from *surat* (form) to *ma'na* (meaning), from *'ishq majazi* (metaphorical love) to *'ishq haqiqi* (true, divine love).

Chapters 1 and 2 laid the groundwork for this dialogue by situating *Time to Love* within both its cinematic context and a Sufi cosmology. By drawing on foundational texts by Rumi, Ibn Arabi, Al-Ghazali, and Attar, alongside modern scholarship by Chittick,

Schimmel, and Murata, I explored the metaphysical structure of love as a force that originates from God and seeks to return to Him through the purification of the heart (*qalb*), the disciplining of the self (*nafs*), and the awakening of the spirit (*ruh*). Erksan's film visualises these spiritual states through carefully orchestrating space, silence, repetition, and absence.

Chapter 3 focused on the interior architecture of the self. I found that Halil's ascetic stillness, retreat from the world of active desire, and obsession with the silent image are not simply character traits but cinematic representations of the Sufi inner path. His withdrawal from the physical woman, Meral, mirrors the mystic's wariness of *nafsani* (egoic) attachments. Instead, Halil remains loyal to the image, which serves as a projection screen for idealised beauty (*jamal*), a veiled manifestation of the Divine.

Chapter 4 further deepened this reading by examining the complex psychological and symbolic dynamics between Halil and Meral. Here I contemplated the tension between idolatry and idealisation, between the ethics of seeing and the risk of objectification. Like Layla in classical Persian literature, Meral is both a subject and a symbol. Halil's inability to relate to her as a person exposes a fissure common to both mystic and modern sensibilities: the difficulty of reconciling love as metaphysical longing with love as lived relationship.

It was in Chapter 5 that this dialectic was brought to its critical pivot: the transformation of love from form to essence. Through detailed visual analysis and philosophical discourse, I saw how Erksan's cinematic language, his use of *mise-en-scène*, temporal suspension, and non-verbal narrative, parallels Sufi poetics in their shared aim: to strip away superficialities and reveal an underlying reality. The aesthetic asceticism of *Time to Love* becomes a visual form of *dhikr* (remembrance), calling the viewer not toward climax but toward contemplation. It is a film that withholds to reveal and frustrates to purify.

Chapter 6 offered a comparative epistemology of poetic and cinematic imagery. I interrogated how each form engages with beauty and truth, how Rumi's metaphors and Erksan's frames might both be vehicles for unveiling the Real. Yet they operate differently: Sufi poetry intoxicates the reader with divine longing through the multiplicity

of language, while *Time to Love* anchors us in the sobriety of repetition and silence. What unites them is a shared reverence for the unseen: an ethics of love that does not seek to consume the beloved but to transcend the self through love's fire.

Chapter 7 extended this exploration by proposing a poetic-cinematic ontology, an integrated mode of being and perceiving shaped through both verse and visual form. By placing Sufi poetics in dialogue with the phenomenology of cinema and drawing on the ontological insights, I arrived at a deeper understanding of how *Time to Love* functions as a narrative and a contemplative experience. In its silence, stillness, and symbolic minimalism, the film participates in the same spiritual movement traced in Sufi verse: a movement from language to silence, from surface to depth, from the seen to the Real. Yet, as the chapter also revealed, this fragile ontological stillness is finally disrupted, violently shattered by intrusion, signalling the limits of transcendence in a world governed by ego and violence. In doing so, *Time to Love* leaves us not with resolution but with a wound that calls us, like the mystic and the poet, to continue seeking essence beyond image, and to love even in the face of its impossibility.

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