Sufi-Inspired Cinema in Turkish Filmmaker Semih Kaplanoğlu's Trilogy *Egg, Milk* and *Honey*

Nesrin Karavar. Professor of Turkish Language and Literature and researcher, Universitat de Barcelona and Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Making a film is like praying.[1]
Semih Kaplanoğlu

This article analyses the influence of Sufism in the films of the Turkish director Semih Kaplanoğlu, with special emphasis on his trilogy *Egg, Milk* and *Honey.* Kaplanoğlu's cinema is highly poetised and spiritually Eastern, marked by the melancholia of the Sufi doctrine. Kaplanoğlu's films show today's Turkey, both traditional and modern, while being in themselves a spiritual enterprise, like the prayer that takes place in the depths of individuals and finally transforms them. Thus, viewers of Kaplanoğlu's films, like readers of the Turkish Sufi poet Yunus Emre, must lose themselves in them, as in nature, must immerse themselves, plunging into their depths, as in a cosmos.

Introduction

In recent decades, the new Turkish cinema has given us some internationally-renowned films. With a brief filmography of only six feature films, Semih Kaplanoğlu (1963) has become one of the masters of Turkish contemporary cinema. Born in Izmir, on the coast of the Aegean, a town linked to ancient philosophy, Kaplanoğlu grew up in a mixed, Jewish and Christian neighbourhood, listening to the old Sephardic language, Greek and Italian. Such a multicultural setting, halfway between the East and West, is reflected in his films, as is the dual Turkish cultural character, built upon tradition and modernity. In his parents' library, Kaplanoğlu discovered the figure of the Andalusian Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), in relation to whom the filmmaker himself has stated: "One of the books that has most influenced me is *The Bezels of Wisdom,* by Ibn Arabi."[2] In any case, what we propose here is to

1. Ç. Özvaran, "Film yapmak dua etmeye benziyor", *Karabatak*, http://www.karabatakdergisi.com/roportaj/flm-yapmak-dua-etmeye-benzyor-semh-kaplanoglu, 2014 [last accessed: 19 January 2019].
2. *Ibidem*.

trace the influence of the Turkish Sufi poet Yunus Emre (1238-1321)[3] in Kaplanoğlu's cinema.

As a Turkish filmmaker with such a multicultural and spiritual background, Semih Kaplanoğlu creates highly original cinema that reflects today's Turkey, both modern and traditional. In 1923, one of the most influential thinkers of the new Republican Turkey, Ziya Gokalp, commented on the country's new cultural policy in these terms: "We belong to the Turkish nation, to the Islamic community and to Western civilisation. Our literature must address our people and, at the same time, the West" (Halman, 2014: 37).

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In Kaplanoğlu's case, it is a different cinema that provides a contrasting viewpoint on the world and reality: a poetised, melancholic and spiritual one; in other words, a Sufi viewpoint that delves into God's silence. According to the filmmaker, his cinema portrays the subtle relations established between the most secret phenomena of life. For him, cinema is not just a mere vehicle of expression of the different passions and emotions but is in itself a spiritual enterprise, as if it were a prayer. Kaplanoğlu seeks to show an inner adventure, something that happens in the depths of individuals and finally transforms them. In the few interviews he grants, when asked about why he makes films, he always answers that he does it for God.[4] According to his philosophy of life and as a filmmaker, everything we do should be a prayer. Thus, he prefers not to discuss some topics, something reflected in his films, where the characters usually say very little. In fact, his films are like moving images of the following lines by the aforementioned Yunus Emre, his favourite poet: "There's an I within me / deep, deeper than I." Or these: "There are no words to describe my moon / But lovers know it. / There are no words to explain my sorrow / But lovers understand it."

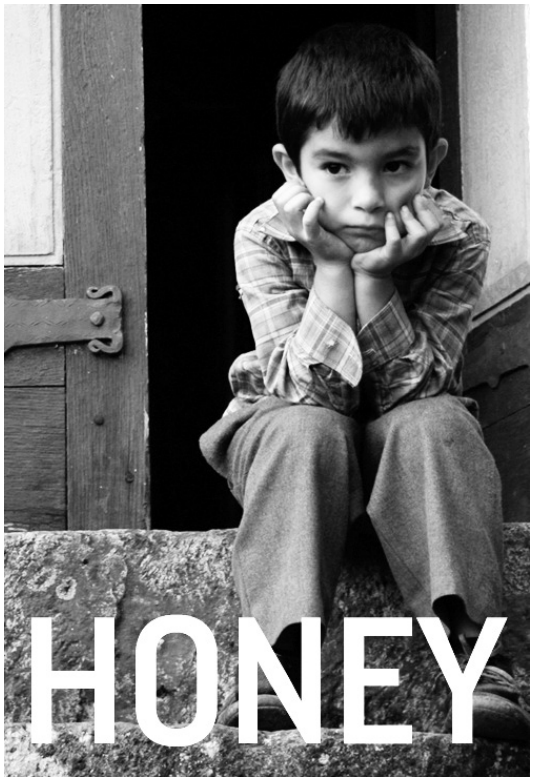
Kaplanoğlu lets the gazes of the actors and their body gestures speak, all in silence, although this may seem monotonous to some kinds of audiences. However, Kaplanoğlu is simply following in the steps of one of the filmmakers who has most influenced him, the Russian director Andrei Arsenyevich Tarkovsky (1932-1986) and, especially, his film *The Mirror*. This film is, for the Turkish director, the best example of the poetic cinema he seeks to make. In fact, after watching Tarkovski's *The Mirror*, Kaplanoğlu decided to focus his cinematographic approach on poetic cinema.[5] Returning to Yunus Emre's poetry, viewers of Kaplanoğlu's films, like the readers of the Sufi poet, must lose themselves in them, as in nature, must immerse themselves, plunging into their depths, as in a cosmos.

The treatment of silence in Kaplanoğlu's films takes us to the following Sufi anecdote, which shows that the designs of life are incomprehensible and cannot be grasped through words. "Two Dervishes met again after a long time. They sat together, remaining in silence for a long while. Later they said goodbye, after

3. Yunus Emre is a 13th century Turkish poet of popular and mystic literature, who lived in Anatolia approximately between 1240 and 1321, during the Seleucid period. 1991 was declared by UNESCO International Yunus Emre Year, on the occasion of the 750th anniversary of his birth.

4. Ç. Özvaran, "Film yapmak dua etmeye benziyor", *Karabatak*, 2014, http://www.karabatakdergisi.com/roportaj/flm-yapmak-dua-etmeye-benzyor-semh-kaplanoglu [last accessed: 14 January 2018].

5. Ç. Özvaran, "Film yapmak dua etmeye benziyor", *Karabatak*, 2014, http://www.karabatakdergisi.com/roportaj/flm-yapmak-dua-etmeye-benzyor-semh-kaplanoglu [last accessed: 14 January 2018].



Honey, by Semih Kaplanoğlu.

melting in a hug. One of them said to the other: 'What a beautiful talk!'" (Sayar, 2012: 27).

On the aesthetic dimension of Islam, Yunus Emre, the main source of inspiration for Kaplanoğlu, wrote some poems based on the famous prophetic hadith: "God is Beautiful and loves beauty." Kaplanoğlu's film trilogy, like Yunus Emre's poetry, is a clear example of Islamic aesthetic expression in the field of Turkish cinema. Sufi vision and practice have an effect on both the form and message of the poem and, today, on cinema. Sometimes, the form and message are more visible and, on others, invisible, precisely to awaken the spirituality of the person and, more specifically, in the case at hand, to affect those areas of the brain related to states of unity with the superior reality of an absolute beauty, which encompasses both the transcendent and the immanent.

In Sufi-inspired cinema there is, moreover, an experience with the natural music of the rain and wind or the images of nature. It also shows the human body pursuing union with divine uniqueness, beyond the non-verbal communication developed by individuals in their own inner world, at the precise moment of writing a poem or shooting a film. All these elements are paramount in Kaplanoğlu's film aesthetics. Although many of the artists, poets and filmmakers of Sufi inspiration take on such elements, the Sufi strictly speaking takes them to their greatest level as they shape a life experience and an existential knowledge of the self and the whole. Semih Kaplanoğlu insists on the mystic quality of his films, defining them as a search for the absolute in which there is an exploration of certain ethical and spiritual values whose ultimate end is divine: "The human being is lost,"[6] states the filmmaker in one of his few interviews referring to a Quran verse (103: 1-3).

Sufi-inspired cinema uses real life images and is not set, therefore, outside time. Its cinematographic non-verbal communication style recalls Ingmar Bergman's words when the Swedish director explained: "It took me a long time to find actors who were able to speak to me without words. I needed people to understand me emotionally. It is like a child or a dog, who do not understand words but know how they sound. They can't say anything but they understand it perfectly. It is very interesting."[7]

After reading the following sentence by the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami "I

6. *Ibidem*.

7. J. Cruz, "Ingmar Bergman. Ser o no ser", *El País*, 30 July 2007, https://elpais.com/cultura/2007/07/30/actualidad/1185746403_850215.html [last accessed: 14 January 2018].

don't like granting interviews" (Elena, 2002: 15), Kaplanoğlu stated in his turn: "I am not a person who likes speaking. Moreover, I've never liked speaking about myself [...] What does my work involve? Pen. So, let's take the pen as a reference and talk about it."[8]

Trilogy (Childhood-Youth-Maturity)

In the three films that make up his trilogy, the Turkish director uses symbolism to explain the mystery of life, something common to Sufi art and literature; and he does so as a narrative strategy whose end is mainly educational. For example, the fact of making a series of three films refers to the childhood, youth and maturity of Sufi tradition. These three stages correspond to the process of spiritual development and expansion, from the inanimate level of life to the superior or divine level, until completing what Sufi wise men call the perfect human being (*insân-ı kâmil*), and who is no more than the maximum expression of the total man, who has updated his latent potentialities and become the mirror in which God looks at himself.

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Neither are the names of the main characters of his films without significance. The name of the protagonist, Yusuf, is the Quran name of the prophet Joseph, just as his father's name, Yakub, relates in its turn to the Quran name of the prophet Jacob, who in the Quran text is also the father of Yusuf (Joseph). Moreover, what really gives a poetic identity to the trilogy is the craft of its main character, a poet: "The complete trilogy makes up a poem. A poem divided into different parts. It is a film about a poet, and therefore it must be a poem."[9]

This reminds us of the Basque filmmaker Víctor Erice when he says: "A poem must not signify but be" (Arocena, 1996: 326). Kaplanoğlu has addressed with great acuity and through a refined neoexpressionist stylisation the main questions of the human condition: its problematic dependency on a supernatural world, its thirst for the absolute, its solitude and selfishness, everything combining the existential concerns that have imbued the works of the spiritual philosopher Ibn Arabi and the poet Yunus Emre, as well as Tarkovsky's films. An artist, a poet or a filmmaker inspired by Sufism do not act to create beauty but to discover it. Hence, neither does he use music made by human beings in his films. The music of nature emerges in his films and always in a setting where the divine uniqueness is symbolised, without duality and separation between the creator and his creature. Kaplanoğlu seeks to show with his camera the truth encapsulated by the following lines by Yunus Emre, which allude to the divine and musical language of nature: "Yunus says that in his garden / The nightingales wail and the roses grow / And the roses that utter the name of the Beloved / Will fade while uttering it."

Thus, the poet Yunus Emre and the Turkish filmmaker inspired by him consider that each detail of existence has a direct communication with God, although on the screen the viewers are often unable to grasp such a message by

8. Ç. Özvaran, "Film yapmak dua etmeye benziyor", *Karabatak*, 2014, http://www.karabatakdergisi.com/roportaj/flm-yapmak-dua-etmeye-benzyor-semh-kaplanoglu [last accessed: 14 January 2018].

9. "Entrevista con Semih Kaplanoglu, Oso de Oro por *Miel*", Filmin, 2010, https://www.filmin.es/blog/donosti-2010-entrevista-con-semih-kaplanoglu-oso-de-oro-por-miel [last accessed: 19 January 2018].

the director. Consequently, the mission of the filmmaker of the type of cinema we are examining is not only to show the spiritual aesthetics underlying the text of nature but to lift the veil that covers the unity of existence so that it can be glimpsed. The symbolism of nature seeks to convey two notions: that of a regular change and the idea that worldly everyday life is not the whole of existing reality. There is, therefore, another dimension of reality behind the veils of the visible, and the sound of the music of nature is like a third dimension.

Honey (Childhood), 2010

In his first film, *Honey*, awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, Kaplanoğlu provides a great portrait of rural life and the world of childhood through the figure of Yusuf, a child to whom he attaches great importance, as he embodies the figure of the home, childhood and the early sensations in a mountain village close to the town of Rize, by the Black Sea. The landscape is made up of forests of powerful walnut trees. There are almost no buildings, just some wooden houses. In relation to the spiritual value of nature, the Swiss thinker Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), one of the European voices of Sufism, states: "Virgin Nature is at one with holy poverty and also with spiritual childlikeness; she is an open book containing an inexhaustible teaching of truth and beauty. It is in the midst of his own artifices that man most easily becomes corrupted, it is they that make him covetous and impious; close to virgin nature, who knows neither agitation nor falsehood, he has the hope of remaining contemplative like Nature herself. And it is Nature, quasidivine in her totality, who will have the final word" (1990: 41).

Equipped with his camera, the director, without using any language, poetically enters the inner world of a child and his intuitive awakening to the beauty of the world surrounding us, showing its real values, beyond appearances, and turning each detail of the film into a symbol. With respect to the value of childhood, Ingmar Bergman said: "I am a child. I said it once before: all my creative life comes from my childhood. And emotionally I am a child. The reason why people like what I do or I did is because I am a child and speak to them like a child."[10]

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Talking about the film *Honey*, in an interview granted to him during the San Sebastián International Film Festival, Kaplanoğlu argued: "Yusuf's childhood is the childhood of a poet, always looking, surprising himself, searching. And this happens in all the films I have devoted to him. When they are older, many people lose the capacity of surprising themselves. This is not so in the poets, the artists, the musicians. The hearts of artists don't grow old."[11]

In the words of the director Víctor Erice, poetic language is the most radical: "I believe that, of course, a certain form of cinema will socially become something similar to poetry. In my view, poetry is the most radical and residual language [...]. I'm afraid cinema will have

10. J. Cruz, "Ingmar Bergman. Ser o no ser", *El País*, 30 July 2007, https://elpais.com/cultura/2007/07/30/actualidad/1185746403_850215.html [last accessed: 20 January 2018].

11. J. Sarda, "Semih Kaplanoglu", *El Cultural*, 28 January 2011, http://www.elcultural.com/revista/cine/Semih-Kaplanoglu/28577 [last accessed: 28 January 2018].

this residual character that poetry has today" (Arocena, 1996: 25).

Kaplanoğlu, who is extremely meticulous, builds in his three films a rich symbolic universe in which he encapsulates all his spiritual teaching, bringing a great richness and vivacity to the screen. Undoubtedly, the aim is to fulfil the desire to combine the art of cinema with literature or, more precisely, with Sufi mystic poetry. The Turkish director makes a very particular use of the symbolism present in the Quran and in the prophetic sayings, as well as in dreams, of which there is a rich Islamic written legacy. It is about the imaginary or dream world, a topic very present in the texts by Ibn Arabi that Kaplanoğlu reads and reinterprets in an original way to reach the conclusion that the whole of life is like a dream. The fusion between dream and reality is very present in *Honey*, a film that shows the viewers the different worlds in which the characters of the Turkish director move.

In my cinema the most important thing is simplicity. This is why if I can get over my message without dialogues, I try not to use dialogues. What I do is to stage those silent moments and feelings

The filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, who we have previously mentioned, one of the most important directors of the poetic cinema we are analysing, explains the relationship between cinema and the dreamful process as follows: "Cinema is a window on our dreams thanks to which we can know each other better: the knowledge and passion thus acquired enable us to transform life in the direction of our dreams" (Elena, 2002: 285).

The first word uttered in the first film of the trilogy coincides with the imperative with which the Quran begins: "Read!", said by Yakup, Yusuf's father, who then begins to read slowly and with difficulty a saying by the prophet Mohammed printed on the sheet of a calendar: "Make things easy for the people, and do not make it difficult for them, and make them calm with glad tidings and do not repulse them." Another symbolism present in the film corresponds to the dreamful processes. As happens with the story of the prophet Joseph (Yusuf), the first scenes of the film begin with a dream, while the end is the interpretation of this dream. All this gives a special meaning to the film, because this is where we can better see the Turkish culture, tradition and spiritual and religious practice, a practice in which the body is the setting where the great spectacle of spiritual emotions is manifested. Moreover, the film shows the traditional lifestyle in contact with nature of a people in a village characterised by its simplicity. In this respect, the director states: "In my cinema the most important thing is simplicity. This is why if I can get over my message without dialogues, I try not to use dialogues. What I do is to stage those silent moments and feelings. I want to create a simpler and purer world. This is why I don't use music."[12]

In his turn, Yakub, Yusuf's father, symbolises such a tradition in the film. His death at the end indicates the end of tradition and the start of modernity.

Milk (Youth), 2008

In the second part of the trilogy, *Milk*, Yusuf is eighteen years old. His great dream is to be a poet and move to Istanbul. On this occasion the village and its surroundings are very different from what appeared in *Honey*. In the last two

12. A. Yaşa, "Semih Kaplanoğlu: Sinemada Sadelik Peşindeyim", *Tulip & Rose* (TaR), http://www.tulipandrose.net/wp/230-semih-kaplanoglu-sinemada-sadelik-pesindeyim.html, 2010 [last accessed: 14 January 2018].

films, Kaplanoğlu chose the coast of the Aegean as a setting, the region where he was born and grew up. Here nature is drier and flatter and the landscape encompasses many ruins of ancient Greece. Now we see the young Yusuf walking with his girlfriend through some ancient ruins to which they barely pay any attention despite their historical value. The viewer can now become familiar with the most western side of Turkish identity.

The age of the protagonist, forty, is very closely related to the life of the director himself. Such an age represents, in Kaplanoğlu's biography, the search for the meaning of life

The film begins with a scene that shows some kind of medieval witchcraft, while the young Yusuf is riding his motorbike or having a beer. This mixture of settings is present throughout the film and seeks to portray the original creation of modern Turkey, although without being modern or European as such. In the new Turkey, many of the most outstanding aspects of life and culture have found their direct or indirect expression either in poetry, through language, or in cinema, through image. Among the topics and concerns of the film we can highlight the search for modernity, Europeanisation or return to spiritual culture. The Turkish director, influenced by the Sufi mystics, combines a striking imagery with melancholic effects on identity and spiritual exile. He therefore uses the camera as the poet uses language, halfway between tradition and modernity, to show a kind of specific crisis like that experienced by the main character who seeks to flee tradition in pursuit of modernity and, to this end, he sends his poems to the Istanbul magazines, as if they were his saviours.

Egg (Maturity), 2007

In the final film of the trilogy, *Egg*, Yusuf is already an adult poet who runs a second-hand bookshop in Istanbul. The age of the protagonist, forty, is very closely related to the life of the director himself. Such an age represents, in Kaplanoğlu's biography, the search for the meaning of life. At that age he began to sense that the universe is not the background to human actions but a symbolic reality. Moreover, it means the return of such things to their divine origin: "In reality, the idea emerged at forty-five. It is the age when I asked myself many things that I hadn't asked until then. Things such as questioning life and death. At that age I was clear that I couldn't live another forty-five years and began to think about death, also the future and the past, and I realised that the answers are in childhood. When I started questioning myself, from time to time I returned to the village where I grew up."[13]

It is difficult to imagine a film that so effectively uses this Turkish character that struggles between tradition and modernity and experiences the great complexity of the modern Turkish identity. In the words of the filmmaker himself: "What I do is to analyse modernity through tradition." A created image is faithful when it has elements that express the truth of life. It is important to pay attention to the strong symbolic weight of the first scenes of *Egg*, in which we can see this mixture of the new Turkish identity between the West and the East. One evening, when Yusuf is in his bookshop, a woman holding a bottle of wine enters to ask him if he has a book on vegetarian food. The woman tells him that she is going to a party. Meanwhile, Yusuf, as happens in the last two films of the trilogy, appears smoking with a melancholic gesture.

13. "Entrevista con Semih Kaplanoglu, Oso de Oro por *Miel*", Filmin, 2010, https://www.filmin.es/blog/donosti-2010-entrevista-con-semih-kaplanoglu-oso-de-oro-por-miel [last accessed: 17 January 2018].

Such melancholy, *hüzün* in Turkish, as the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk (1952) explains, is not an expression of bitterness but has a mystical origin and is very positive and understanding with regard to the meaning of the word and the place of the feeling of loss and pain in life (Pamuk, 2017: 111). Kaplanoğlu wishes to show the viewer the depth and privilege of this melancholy that, as Sufi mystics argue, expresses the want arising from not having been able to be close enough to God or do enough for God in this world. The protagonist, Yusuf, now in his maturity, experiences the same solitude and lack of communication as little Yusuf did in *Honey*. It is as if all previous time had culminated in the maturity of *Milk*. At the start of the trilogy, in his childhood, Yusuf's father dies. At the end, as a conclusion of the trilogy, his mother dies. Curiously, according to Sufism, the number forty symbolises death, but in this case the spiritual death of oneself. Thus, the following Quranic quotation appears in the film: "My Lord, enable me to be grateful for Your favour which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents and to work righteousness of which You will approve and make righteous for me my offspring" (Quran, 46:15).

In reality, in the shooting of the trilogy, *Egg* is the first film, while *Honey* is the last. This is how Kaplanoğlu explained it in an interview for the Catalan television channel TV3: "It is a film about the life of a poet. First, we made the parts that recreate his youth and maturity, and then, later, to show Yusuf before he wrote poetry, we shot his childhood, to show where he was born and the environment he grew up in and created his poetry."[14]

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14. "Entrevista a Semih Kaplanoglu, director de *Miel* (Bal), feta al festival de San Sebastià", *Cinema 3*, http://www.ccma.cat/tv3/alacarta/programa/Entrevista-a-Semih-Kaplanoglu/video/3339270/, [last accessed: 17 Janaury 2018].