

Article

Barzakhic Cinema: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Barzakh Ontology in Nacer Khemir’s *Looking for Muhyiddin*

Oğuz Çetin ^{1,*}  and Öncel Demirdağ ²¹ Independent Researcher, 06500 Ankara, Turkey² Faculty of Divinity, Ankara University, 06500 Ankara, Turkey; onceldemirtas@gmail.com

* Correspondence: oguzcet@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article examines Nacer Khemir’s *Looking for Muhyiddin* (2012), a documentary-fiction film that explicitly names its operative space as *barzakh* (a liminal threshold between two realities). It asks how cinema can mediate between visible form and invisible religious meaning without reducing one to the other. The method is mutual illumination: close formal analysis of the film is brought into dialogue with Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology of *barzakh*, *khayāl*, *dhawq*, *wajh/hijāb*, and *tajallī* (imaginal reality, experiential tasting, face and veil, and divine self-disclosure, respectively), alongside debates in religion-and-film studies, documentary theory, haptic visuality, and spectatorship. The analysis shows that the film’s barzakhic structure operates through two encompassing dimensions—the ontology of production and the epistemology of reception—and three formal operations: barzakhic thresholds of cemetery, dream, and *yakaza*; the aniconic withdrawal of the faceless *khirqā*/burnous (the Sufi patched cloak); and *tissage* and superimposition as alternatives to montage. The article argues that these operations do not merely represent Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought but stage cinematic analogues of its relational logic. It concludes that “barzakhic cinema” names a limited reading framework derived from the Islamic intellectual tradition, useful for rethinking how religious meaning can be sensed through cinematic form.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabī; Nacer Khemir; *Looking for Muhyiddin*; barzakhic cinema; religion and film; Islamic aesthetics; *khayāl*; *tajallī*; aniconism; Sufi epistemology

1. Introduction

Cinema records the visible. Religion points toward the invisible. When these two practices converge on the same screen, the encounter raises a question that has not been fully answered: what language does it require? The study of religion and film has largely approached this question with the conceptual tools of dominant cinema theory. This article takes a different path—one that begins with the film itself.

Nacer Khemir names that path in the essay he wrote about his own film: “It was precisely this liminal space between reality and fiction—what might be called the *barzakh*—that brought us closest to the Master” (Khemir 2024, p. 132). The word was not chosen accidentally. *Barzakh*—the threshold that, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s (1165–1240) ontology, separates and at the same time relates two realities, can be qualified by the attributes of both, gathers these attributes within its own barzakhic ground, yet is reducible to neither—is both a cosmological principle and the name for the language this film requires. Ibn ‘Arabī arrived at this ontology not through abstract system-building but through direct experience: as Chittick notes, his fundamental concern was not philosophical systematization but the



Academic Editor: Irena Sever Globan

Received: 24 May 2026

Revised: 16 July 2026

Accepted: 22 July 2026

Published: 25 July 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

tasting of God's Being (*dhawq*) (Chittick 1989, p. 3). Dreams, dialogues with the dead, and encounters within *'alam al-khayāl* were, for him, as Addas observes, "not only as real but much more real than the Andalusian earth on which he walked as a child" (Addas 1993, p. 10). *Looking for Muhyiddin* (2012) is accordingly not merely a film about Ibn 'Arabī; it is a practice that operationalizes barzakh as a formal principle. This article proposes a reading framework adequate to that practice and names it "barzakhic cinema".

The question of how a film can both record the visible and gesture toward what exceeds visibility is not a new problem. The etymology of *medium* is instructive: Latin *medius*, "in the middle, between" — cinema and religion share the structural position of the intermediary, neither fully on this side nor fully on the other (Plate 2003, p. 3). Both work with concrete materials—light, sound, movement, ritual—to reach beyond the material, and both live with the same foundational tension: making the abstract perceptible without reducing it to the merely perceptible. The history of religion-and-film scholarship reflects successive attempts to think through this tension. S. Brent Plate's formulation remains foundational: "Films are not religious simply because of their content but become religious due to their form and reception" (Plate 2003, p. 1). What makes a film religious is not only what story it tells, but how it sees, how it builds, how it positions its spectator.

Following this principle, Schrader's "transcendental style" demonstrates how the aesthetics of Zen Buddhism and Christian mysticism can each be transposed into formal cinematic principles—Ozu's cinematography, Bresson's and Dreyer's refusals—and thereby suggests, as this article reads it, a broader implication: each religious tradition produces its own cinematic signs and images; there is no single "religious film language" but a plurality of distinct orientations (Schrader 2018, pp. 79, 82–84). El Khachab's approach to what he calls *un cinéma soufi* (Sufi cinema) addresses the gap left by Schrader with respect to Islamic aesthetics; yet it identifies a film as Sufi primarily on the basis of its content and the director's stated beliefs rather than its formal and ontological operations, leaving the question of how form works at an ontological level only partially answered (El Khachab 2000, pp. 145–46). Marks's *Hanan al-Cinema* is the most sustained attempt to think Islamic aesthetics and cinema theory together; she notes, however, that approaching such films risks charges of Orientalism—a concern she cites in explaining the absence of the relevant chapter (Marks 2015a, p. 21). The gap these choices collectively leave open is the one this article addresses.

Two grounds justify the present approach. The first is methodological: the director himself, not the analyst, reached for the word barzakh (Khemir 2024, p. 132). This is not a framework imposed from outside but one that surfaces from within the film's own conceptual movement. The second is structural: cinema theory, in its own development, has repeatedly encountered ontological questions it could not fully resolve—the status of the image, the boundary between reality and illusion, the nature of movement—and Ibn 'Arabī's barzakh ontology stands in structural resonance with these unresolved problems. That resonance does not rest on a historical connection; it is the independent convergence of two traditions on the same ontological threshold. Khemir's practice makes the convergence visible. The article adopts what it calls "mutual illumination" as its method: the film and Ibn 'Arabī's corpus are treated as two environments that illuminate one another across different registers; neither is made the illustration or explanatory key of the other. This bidirectional movement—from film to barzakh, from barzakh back to film—deepens the interpretation at each pass. The decisive point is that the movement begins with the film: Khemir's own naming of barzakh is the starting point; the analysis unpacks the ontological structure behind that naming within Ibn 'Arabī's conceptual context. A methodological caveat follows from this starting point. A director's retrospective account is itself an interpretive text, shaped by memory, by address to an audience, and by the desire, in hindsight,

for coherence. Treating Khemir's 2024 essay as the point of departure, then, does not mean reading authorial self-commentary as unmediated access to the film's meaning. It is used here in a delimited way: as the occasion that names the reading framework, and as one of three source tiers (see below); it does not settle what the film means. Section 4 tests the film's own cinematic operations—thresholds, aniconism, tissage—against the barzakhic structure Khemir's language points toward, instead of assuming that structure simply because the director names it. Where the article cites Khemir 2024 beside a formal observation, the citation typically supports a claim about authorial intention or production context, while the claim about the image's own operation rests on independent formal analysis. This approach aligns with what Marks calls "process thinking": meaning does not reside within the work but opens at the moment of contact with it (Marks 2015b, p. 1).

Earlier scholarship has mapped adjacent terrain. Morris (2015) bridges Ibn 'Arabī's ontology and cinematic experience through the axes of spiritual receptivity (*isti'dād*) and transformative wonder (*ḥayra*), foregrounding barzakh as a cosmic frame and positioning cinema as one illuminating stage within it. Ogunnaike (2013) demonstrates the concrete possibility of reading a specific film against Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy in a cross-illuminating mode. What remains open across these trajectories—the direct comparative analysis of cinema's own structural and ontological operations with barzakh ontology, and the reading framework that emerges from that comparison—is what this article moves toward. That framework is named here "barzakhic cinema".

The source base of this article operates on three tiers: Ibn 'Arabī's primary texts (*Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* [The Meccan Revelations] and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* [The Bezels of Wisdom]) and the contemporary scholarship that interprets them; Khemir's own account of the film (Khemir 2024); and the relevant cinema theory corpus—Gunning, Marks, Deleuze, Plate, Bruzzi, and Rascaroli principally.

"Barzakhic cinema" is not a new cinema theory but a reading framework derived from the Islamic intellectual tradition's own ontological ground—specifically from Ibn 'Arabī's conceptual constellation of barzakh, *khayāl* (imaginal reality), *dhawq*, *takhalluq*, *wajh/hijāb*, and *tajallī*—and designed to make visible what formal operations a particular film shares with that ontology. This framework does not remain at the level of philosophical analysis; it also addresses how cinema can operate as a human artistic analogue to the logic of *tajallī* (divine self-disclosure) in artistic practice, rendering visible the conditions under which cinematic form can point beyond itself toward what exceeds visibility. Its contribution lies not in replacing existing frameworks but in naming what their combined coverage leaves open: the domain of meaning that requires the ontological ground of the Islamic intellectual tradition to be fully articulated.

There is one further ground for this choice. Ibn 'Arabī himself was a thinker of thresholds—not from within any single tradition but across the intersections of cultures: from Andalusia to Mecca, from Baghdad to Anatolia and Damascus, his encounters with different intellectual and spiritual traditions shaped a corpus that addresses itself to the common inheritance of those who travel in spirit. Khemir's film shares this geography: shot in Tunisia, Spain, Turkey, Yemen, the United States, England, and Syria, in Arabic, French, and English. The structural fit between that plurality and barzakh ontology is not coincidental—the threshold structure that separates and relates two sides without being reducible to either maps onto a universal human experience. Turner's anthropological liminality (Turner 1977, p. 95) and the interplay between the real and the imaginary in German Romanticism—such as Hoffmann's 'Serapiontic' principle, which holds external reality and inner vision in a state of simultaneous 'duplicity' (Phelan 2009, p. 55)—demonstrate how other intellectual traditions have approached analogous states of suspension. Such aesthetic-historical parallels remain external analogies, however. This article reads the

universal structure from the frame of Islamic epistemology because the director himself reached for a concept from that tradition.

The article builds its argument in three analytic sections before turning to evaluation. Section 2 develops Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology of barzakh and khayāl from primary texts and opens the theoretical ground for the film analysis. Section 3 examines the structural resonances between that ontology and cinema theory’s own unresolved questions, establishes “barzakhic cinema” as a reading framework, and works out the spectator’s position in terms of dhawq. Section 4 analyzes the concrete cinematic practices of *Looking for Muhyiddin*—barzakhic thresholds (cemetery, dream, *yakaza*), the aniconism of the *khirqā* (the Sufi patched cloak), the principle of *tissage*—within this framework. Section 5 evaluates the reading’s limits and the paths it opens. Throughout these sections, one background condition must be kept in view: barzakh is not only an analytic framework but a living theological concept. The reality it points to—the threshold between two states—is not exclusive to the Islamic tradition; liminality, passage, in-between experience are attested across traditions. Ibn ‘Arabī is the thinker who named this threshold most precisely in the language of his tradition, and who, in the *Futūḥāt*, positions barzakh not as a post-mortem cosmological event but as an ever-present condition—between sleep and waking, knowledge and ignorance, visible and invisible. This article reads that condition in the one idiom Khemir himself chose.

2. Barzakh: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Ontology of the Intermediate Realm

2.1. Between Two Worlds: Etymology, Cosmology, and Definition

Classical Arabic lexicography opens simply: barzakh denotes a barrier between two things, a wall, a grave—a spatial marker at the point where one reality ends and another begins (Karbassian 2018, pp. 86–87). Yet this lexical plainness conceals a terminological history that resists resolution. Karbassian’s comprehensive investigation demonstrates that barzakh is neither straightforwardly Arabic nor straightforwardly Persian in origin; multiple etymological genealogies—Sogdian, Aramaic, Avestan—compete for primacy, each capturing a different semantic thread without settling the question definitively (Karbassian 2018, pp. 91–95). The instability is not incidental. A word that crosses linguistic boundaries without belonging fully to any one of them carries, already in its etymology, the ontological structure it will come to name.

In the Quran, barzakh appears in three distinct contexts, each marking a different threshold. It names the invisible barrier that prevents the mingling of fresh and salt water (Q. 25:53); the separating force between two seas (Q. 55:19–20); and the state between death and resurrection (Q. 23:100). Common to all three is not the boundary itself but the structure of the boundary: something that holds two realities apart while maintaining their relation—that marks difference without erasing either term.

Ibn ‘Arabī unfolds the full ontological weight of this structure in chapter 63 of the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*. The canonical definition is given directly: “Know that the word ‘barzakh’ is an expression for what *separates* two things without ever becoming either of them, such as the line separating a shadow from the sunlight” (Morris 1995, p. 106). The definition is at once geometric and ontological: a line that separates but does not belong. Its epistemological consequence is immediate: “Because if something is perceived by the senses, it must be one of those two things, rather than the barzakh” (Morris 1995, p. 106). The barzakh is precisely what falls out of sensory perception, because sensory perception requires something to be one thing or another. The moment of sensory registration is the moment of the barzakh’s disappearance.

The same chapter extends the definition toward its epistemological limit. Morris elaborates Ibn ‘Arabī’s technical formulation: the barzakh separates the knowable from the

unknowable, the existent from the nonexistent, the intelligible from the unintelligible—and is therefore nothing but the khayāl, the imagined-image. Its epistemological sting is irreducible: to perceive it is to know with certainty that *something* is there, while simultaneously being unable to affirm its existence without equally affirming its nonexistence (Morris 2015, p. 34). This is not uncertainty but structural antinomy: the mind that encounters the barzakh reaches a junction at which two mutually exclusive judgments become simultaneously necessary.

This formulation is not rhetorical flourish. It registers the cognitive arrest that is the barzakh's proper effect: the mind that perceives it reaches a junction at which two mutually exclusive judgments become simultaneously necessary. Not uncertain—structurally antinomial.

Salman Bashier's philosophical analysis draws out the logical structure with precision. The barzakh "is known but not perceived, rationally understood but not witnessed" (Bashier 2004, pp. 87–88). It divides without being divided; it faces both sides with the same face—were it to turn a different face toward each side, an additional barzakh would be required between those two faces, generating an infinite regress. Indivisibility is thus not a merely formal property but the structural ground of the barzakh's ontological function. Bashier's formulation of existential status follows: "The Barzakh is like the dividing line between existence and nonexistence. It is neither existent nor nonexistent. If you attribute it to existence, you will find a whiff of existence within it, since it is immutable. But if you attribute it to nonexistence, you will speak the truth, since it has no existence" (Bashier 2004, p. 98). The phrase "a whiff of existence" is precisely calibrated: not presence, not absence, but a trace that remains undecidable at the level of categorical attribution.

Sara Sviri addresses a risk of misreading. To call the barzakh an "in-between" space might suggest a midpoint on a spectrum—a compromise that dilutes both sides. This is not the structure Ibn 'Arabī describes. The barzakh is, in Sviri's phrase, "the third dimension that belongs neither to the one, nor to the other"—*tertiary* in the strict sense: "unitive and inclusive of the two familiar dimensions" but reducible to neither (Sviri 2016, p. 385). The unity in question is not synthesis but co-presence without fusion: "the water of the 'bitter sea' remains bitter and that of the 'sweet sea' sweet" (Sviri 2016, p. 392). Two things are held in structural relation without losing their separate identities—a structure the Sufi tradition encapsulates in the formula *fa-mā ijtama 'a ithnāni fī mizāj wāḥid* ("two things do not unite in a single mixture"; Sviri 2016, p. 392): distinctive co-presence, identity-preserving permeability. This is what distinguishes barzakh from Hegelian dialectical synthesis and from any model that resolves antinomy by cancelling one of its terms.

The cognitive dimension of this structure appears in the *Futūḥāt*'s 72nd chapter: "The 'middle', that which separates between two sides and makes them distinguished from one another, is more hidden than they are... We know that there is a separating line there, but the eye does not perceive it; the intellect acknowledges it, though it does not conceive of what it is" (Sviri 2016, p. 387, citing *Futūḥāt* vol. 2, ch. 72, p. 536). Reason acknowledges the barzakh; perception cannot confirm it; imagination alone inhabits it. Chapter 63 makes the identification explicit: "For imagination is neither existent nor non-existent; neither known nor unknown; neither negated nor affirmed" (Sviri 2016, p. 388, citing *Futūḥāt* vol. 1, ch. 63, pp. 680–81). Imagination (khayāl) and barzakh share the same ontological coordinates—and this convergence, as the following subsection develops, is structural rather than metaphorical.

Within Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology, the ontological structure just described operates within a tripartite schema. Reality unfolds across three registers: *ālam al-shahāda*, the sensory world accessible to ordinary perception; *ālam al-ghayb*, the unseen domain closed to both sense and discursive reason; and between them, *ālam al-mithāl*, the imaginal world

where form and meaning interpenetrate (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 5, p. 62; Chittick 1989, pp. 12–13). Barzakh names the universal *principle* governing each transition; ‘ālam al-mithāl is its cosmological *site*—the territory where the principle operates most visibly. The two must not be collapsed: barzakh is the structural logic; the imaginal world is its primary theatre.

The universality of the principle is stated directly in the *Futūḥāt*: “There is nothing in existence but barzakhs, since a barzakh is the arrangement of one thing between two other things, like the present moment between the past and the future” (Chittick 1994, p. 102). Not an exceptional threshold but the ordinary structure of every transition. Chittick isolates the mirror as its paradigm case: “a mirror image... acts as a bridge or ‘isthmus’ (barzakh) between the reflected object and the mirror” (Chittick 1994, p. 25). And from the *Futūḥāt* itself: “The barzakh is a world where the outward becomes inward, and the inward outward” (Chittick 1994, p. 106). Reversal without confusion—each side passes into the other without ceasing to be what it is.

The mirror image is also where Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology acquires what might be called a cinematic resonance. In *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, the cosmos is figured as God’s shadow: “The cosmos is God’s shadow... there must be a substrate in which the shadow appears... The substrate of the appearance of this divine shadow, called the cosmos, is the (fixed) entities of the possible things” (Abrahamov 2015, p. 70). The shadow is real—it exists in the senses—but it has no existence apart from the light that produces it and the surface that receives it. Something comparable is visible in the dark room where a film is projected: what appears on the screen is perceptible, real in its appearance, but depends entirely on a light source and a surface for its instantiation. Morris draws out the epistemological paradox from the mirror image: the person perceiving their reflected form “definitely knows that they have perceived their (own) form in a certain respect, while they know just as absolutely that they have not perceived their form in another respect... So what is that reflected form? And where is it actually located? And what is its (ontological) status? For it is both affirmed and denied, both existent and nonexistent, both known and unknown” (Morris 1995, p. 106). The comparison between cinematic image and ontological shadow is structural, not assertive: the film image does not *demonstrate* Ibn ‘Arabī’s shadow ontology; it offers a staging through which that ontology becomes thinkable within a cinematic register.

2.2. Neither This nor That, or Both This and That: The Logic of the Imaginal Realm

The cosmological and epistemological framework established above reaches its organizing centre in khayāl. The term requires careful handling from the outset. Morris notes that al-khayāl refers, in its ordinary range, to what might be called an “image” or “object of imagination,” but at a deeper level it designates “the actual underlying reality of *all* the ‘imaginal’—not ‘imaginary’—objects of our perception in virtually all forms and domains” (Morris 1995, pp. 104–5). “Imaginal” is not “imaginary.” The khayāl is not a faculty for producing fictions; it is the ontological capacity through which the intermediate realm is accessed and through which divine creativity first proceeds.

Corbin’s influential label “creative imagination” carries risks Chittick has noted: its romantic and psychological associations risk obscuring a term that in Ibn ‘Arabī names an objective ontological register independent of any particular perceiver (Chittick 1989, pp. xi–xii). Khayāl is not a mental operation; it is a dimension of being. Chittick’s formula is the most economical: “imagination is fundamentally an intermediate reality; as such, it is intrinsically ambiguous and can best be defined by saying that it is neither this nor that, or both this and that. Hence it is a barzakh, or the barzakh *par excellence*” (Chittick 1989, p. 117).

Ibn ‘Arabī distinguishes three levels of khayāl in the *Futūḥāt*. The first—absolute imagination (*al-khayāl al-muṭlaq*)—encompasses the whole of existence: the cosmos is itself imaginal, a divine disclosure that is real in its appearance yet dependent on what exceeds it for its being. The second—detached imagination (*al-khayāl al-munfaṣil*)—is the imaginal world as an autonomous cosmological domain, the ‘ālam al-mithāl, which exists independently of any individual perceiver. The third—connected imagination (*al-khayāl al-muttaṣil*)—is the human faculty bound to its bearer and dissolved when its bearer is lost (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 3, pp. 465–68). The *Futūḥāt* states the epistemological consequence with unequivocal force: he who does not know the station of imagination knows nothing (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 3, p. 469). The implication for the framework this article pursues is direct: the station of imagination is not only the prerequisite of Sufi spiritual practice—it is the prerequisite of cinematic experience.

The distinction matters for what follows. *Al-khayāl al-munfaṣil* is not merely a mediating realm; it is the first theatre of divine creation. Ibn ‘Arabī designates its contents “the science of the barzakh”: spiritual realities taking bodily form; divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*) in changing shapes; meanings that cannot subsist on their own being given concrete figure; what the sleeper sees in the dream; the state between death and resurrection (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 3, p. 464). Each instance follows the same logic: what is formless in the sensory world—death, knowledge, spiritual presence—acquires necessary bodily form in the imaginal domain. This process Ibn ‘Arabī calls *tajassum* (embodiment of meaning). Milk is knowledge; a ram is Death—neither false nor straightforwardly literal but imaginal translations (Abrahamov 2015, p. 68; Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 5, pp. 175–76). The necessity is structural: full experiential encounter with the divine disclosure requires meeting it through the concrete forms of the sensory or imaginal world (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 4, p. 170). This becomes significant for any art that works with visible form: each such art operates, in its own register, within this structural necessity.

Al-khayāl al-muttaṣil is the human-scale reflection of this divine creative capacity. The human being imagines because God first created through the imaginal; the human faculty is not identical to the divine but structurally homologous. Its receptive capacity depends on a person’s constitutive nature (*nash’a*): “God created their constitution (*nash’a*) so that it could receive things like that: this being the constitution of the Messengers, the prophets, and those among the saints who are the recipients of special divine Providence” (Morris 1995, p. 107). The *muttaṣil* capacity opens onto the *munfaṣil* domain; what it receives depends on its own ontological preparation.

The logic that makes this reception possible—the “both-and” of the barzakh—is not a mystical privilege but a structural consequence. The rules of sequential time and separate space govern ‘ālam al-shahāda; in the imaginal domain they do not apply. Ibn ‘Arabī states this directly: the imaginal world was created for *jam’ al-aqdād*—the gathering of opposites—because sense and reason cannot hold contraries together, whereas imagination can (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 8, p. 60). Ibn ‘Arabī grounds this in the Sufi tradition: Abu Sa’id al-Kharrāz recognized God precisely through the gathering of opposites (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 4, p. 12). This is not a claim against the law of non-contradiction but a claim about its proper domain: it governs the sensory world and its temporal-spatial constraints. Barzakh operates beyond those constraints.

The epistemological corollary follows. Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “Thus there never is any ‘false imagination’ at all—indeed all of it is correct! [...] the imagination perceives with its light whatever it perceives, without passing judgment. The judgment only belongs to something else, which is the intellect, so the error can’t be attributed to the imagination” (Morris 1995, p. 107). *Khayāl* does not err; interpretation errs. The imaginal faculty receives the co-presence of opposites accurately; the error begins when reason imposes

the “either-or” of categorical judgment on what imagination received as “both-and.” This formula—held in the technical pair *Huwa/Lā Huwa* (He/not He)—is the epistemological hinge of Ibn ‘Arabī’s entire ontology. It has direct consequences for what happens when a spectator encounters a cinematic image: experience precedes interpretation; what the eye receives is not less but more truthful than what the mind subsequently constructs from it.

2.3. Wayfaring and Tasting: *Sayr Wa-Sulūk* and *Dhawq*

Every human being carries the *khayāl al-muttaṣil*—the connected imaginal faculty—by virtue of being human. But possession does not entail access. The gap between having the faculty and employing it adequately for genuine encounter with the imaginal domain is precisely the gap that spiritual practice addresses.

The problem is structural. When a person enters the imaginal domain relying on an unprepared *muttaṣil* capacity, what they encounter is not the independent reality of *al-khayāl al-munfaṣil* but the projection of their own desires, fears, and expectations. The faculty is present; it has been dominated by the lower self (*nafs*). Sufi spiritual wayfaring—*sayr wa-sulūk*—is designed to loosen this domination: through discipline, sustained spiritual witnessing (*shuhūd*), and lived experience, the hold of the self over the imaginal faculty is gradually released. *Takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*—assimilation to divine qualities and names—names both the method and the horizon: to become a form adequate to receive what the imaginal domain actually carries (Chittick 1989, p. 283).

At the advanced stages of this journey, the *mukāshif*—the one endowed with spiritual unveiling—occupies the threshold that is the concern of this section. Morris translates the relevant *Futūḥāt* passage: “And the person of spiritual unveiling (*al-mukāshif*) already sees (here), while they are awake, what the sleeper sees in their dream state or the dead person sees after they have died” (Morris 1995, p. 107). The *mukāshif* inhabits the *yakaza*—the threshold state between sleep and wakefulness—in waking life: the imaginal eye is open while the sensory eye remains functioning. This is the position of one for whom the *barzakh* between the sensory and the imaginal has become traversable in conscious experience. Ibn ‘Arabī elsewhere figures the person of realized spiritual nature as the *barzakh* between the Real and the cosmos itself: “a raised-up mirror. The Real sees His form in the mirror of the human being, and creation also sees its form in him” (Bashier 2004, p. 117). The threshold is not a location but a relational position—one that holds two orientations simultaneously.

The cinema spectator can be read as occupying an analogous threshold. In the darkened auditorium, eyes open but the external world withdrawn, the spectator witnesses what appears on screen while knowing it is “not real”—yet remaining within its effect. This is neither full wakefulness nor sleep: it is a *yakaza* state, positioned between the one who sees in the dream and the one who sees while awake—a *barzakhic* in-between. The isolation is not incidental. Ritual structures the same threshold in its own register: departure from ordinary time, spatial framing, reorientation of the body. As Plate observes, “Cameras and rituals *frame* the world, *selecting* particular elements of time and space to be displayed” (Plate 2017, p. xiii). Both cut a portion from the ongoing world and place the participant outside habitual perception.

Bewilderment (*ḥayra*) marks the interior of this position. Chittick conveys it in Ibn ‘Arabī’s own terms: “To find God is to fall into bewilderment (*ḥayra*), not the bewilderment of being lost and unable to find one’s way, but the bewilderment of finding and knowing God and of not-finding and not-knowing Him at the same time” (Chittick 1989, pp. 3–4). And elsewhere: “Knowledge of God is bewilderment, and knowledge of creation is bewilderment” (Chittick 1989, p. 376). *Ḥayra* is not a failure of knowledge but its ripened form—the state in which the antinomial character of *barzakh* is no longer a logical

problem to be resolved but a living condition to be inhabited. The *Futūḥāt* draws a precise distinction between two forms of bewilderment. The first—the bewilderment of rational reflection (*nazar*)—retreats at the limits of discursive demonstration and carries no pleasure. The second belongs to the people of spiritual unveiling (*ahl al-kashf*): it arises from the successive alternation of divine self-disclosures (*tajalliyāt*) in witnessing (*shuhūd*) and carries within it a distinctive pleasure—“their bewilderment increases, but within it there is pleasure; and it is incomparably greater than the bewilderment of the people of rational reflection” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 1, pp. 408–10). Dhawq is the opening instant of this second bewilderment. Barzakhic indeterminacy is not anguish; it carries a distinctive savour.

That savour is dhawq—literally “taste,” but in Ibn ‘Arabī’s usage a singular epistemological mode. Chittick places it at the centre of Ibn ‘Arabī’s enterprise: “his main concern is not with the mental concept of being but with the experience of God’s Being, the tasting (dhawq) of Being, that ‘finding’ which is at one and the same time to perceive and to be that which truly is” (Chittick 1989, p. 3). Dhawq is the first instant of such contact—the moment of direct experiential encounter before conceptual formulation intervenes. Ibn ‘Arabī marks it as the opening movement of *tajallī*: an unsolicited arrival in the heart that—if it persists—deepens into *shurb* (drinking) and then *rayy* (satiation) (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 4, p. 265). What distinguishes dhawq from all other modes of knowing is its irreducible singularity: “The knowledge of tasting given by each existent thing cannot be given by any other existent thing. Man may find in himself a distinct taste in each bite of an apple he eats, a taste not found in any other bite” (Chittick 1989, pp. 220–21). Each instance is unrepeatable—not a cognitive operation performed on an object but a contact with a specific disclosure of being at a specific moment.

The singularity of dhawq does not make it merely subjective. Within the imaginal domain, the boundary between the tasting subject and what is tasted is itself barzakhic—permeable without dissolving. The *Futūḥāt* distinguishes two modalities: *khayālī dhawq* (imaginal tasting), which reaches through the *khayāl al-muttaṣil* and affects the lower soul; and *‘aqlī dhawq* (intellectual tasting), which opens through the heart (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 4, p. 266). Between these two modalities there is, characteristically, another barzakh. The reconceptualization of aesthetic experience within the Sufi tradition along these lines opens onto an understanding that moves beyond conventional rational aesthetic theory (see Çetin 2025).

This distinction will become structurally significant when the cinema spectator’s position is examined in Section 3.3. One coordinate serves as a bridge: when Khemir writes: “It was not a question of asserting a truth, but of making one feel a certain taste that the Sufis call dhawq” (Khemir 2024, p. 134; *dhawq* is Khemir’s transliteration of standard dhawq), he is locating the film’s epistemological target within the register of *khayālī dhawq*—not conceptual understanding but pre-conceptual imaginal contact. This is not a comment about audience appeal; it is a precise statement about the mode of knowing the film is designed to solicit. *Khayāl* does not err; dhawq registers the contact that *khayāl* makes possible. The spectator who receives the film through *khayālī dhawq* has not understood something; they have tasted it. The barzakh ontology developed across these three sections makes the epistemological grounds of that tasting visible—and prepares the ground for asking, in Section 3, what happens when cinema theory confronts the same ontological threshold from its own direction.

3. Sensing the Invisible: Cinema Theory and Religion

3.1. Reality and Movement in Cinema Theory

Cinema theory has confronted a fundamental ontological question for over a century: does film show reality, or produce the appearance of it? André Bazin locates the answer in

the indexical character of the photographic image. For Bazin, the relation between photograph and object is not merely resemblance; it is existential identity—“the photograph is the object itself, freed from temporal contingencies” (Bazin, cited in Gunning 2007, p. 32). Translated into Peirce’s semiotic framework, this becomes the index: an existential link to the referent established through physical impression. Barthes draws the consequence: the photograph announces, simply, *ça a été*—it was there (Gunning 2007, pp. 35–38). For several decades this framework organized cinema analysis, positioning the index as one of the medium’s founding categories.

The theory encounters a structural limit at precisely the point where cinema departs from photography: movement. The photographic trace documents; cinematic motion produces presence. The difference is ontological: “the strict distinction between object and copy dissolves on the threshold of motion... In the cinema, the impression of reality is also the reality of the impression, the real presence of motion” (Gunning 2007, p. 41). The impression of reality no longer derives from a past trace but from movement happening in the present, in the body. Bergson states the demand this places on the perceiver: “In order to advance with the moving reality, you must replace yourself within it” (Bergson, cited in Gunning 2007, p. 42). Kinesthesia demonstrates this at the somatic level: the spectator’s body tenses, leans, recoils before conceptual interpretation begins.

At this point the cinema screen acquires a distinctive ontological position. Cinema occupies a threshold between theater and photography: neither a living body nor a frozen trace—a surface across which movement arises and at which it expires. Read against the *Futūḥāt*’s barzakh definition—“an expression for what separates two things without ever becoming either of them... if it is apprehended by the senses, it is one of those two things, not the barzakh” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 1, pp. 459–60)—the cinema screen suggests a structural analogy: neither reality nor illusion, neither the space behind the camera nor the space of the spectator. It is reducible to neither side, yet relates both. Cinema theory names this configuration “the impression of reality” (Gunning 2007, p. 41); barzakh ontology names the underlying structure from a different conceptual vantage.

Gunning articulates the cinematic logic in terms that carry an unmistakable resonance with this threshold: “Like Mercury, winged messenger of the Gods, cinematic motion crosses the boundaries between heaven and earth, between the embodied senses and flights of fancy” (Gunning 2007, p. 45). The barzakhic reading of this passage is suggestive: cinema does not simply cross this boundary; it is stationed *at* it—neither celestial nor terrestrial, neither sensory nor imaginal. A Mercury that inhabits the crossing rather than completing it.

Deleuze’s crystal-image offers a further convergence from within film theory. “The crystal always lives at the limit, it is itself the ‘vanishing limit between the immediate past which is already no longer and the immediate future which is not yet’” (Deleuze [1985] 1989, p. 82). In the crystal-image, the actual and the virtual become indiscernible—structurally parallel to barzakh’s “both affirmed and denied, both existent and non-existent.” Yet a decisive difference separates them. As Deleuze outlines, the crystal-image captures the indiscernibility of the actual and the virtual, but this indiscernibility is an effect immanent to cinema’s own temporal structure; it closes with the film (Deleuze [1985] 1989, p. 82). Barzakh is not generated by the cinematic apparatus. It is an independent, pre-existing ontological reality, one that cinema’s formal and aesthetic capacities can only point toward. The two traditions arrive at the same threshold from different directions, each limited by its own conceptual ground in how far it can name what it finds there. Deleuze’s crystal is a production of cinematic time; barzakh, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is what precedes the screen.

3.2. Cinema as a Barzakhic Mode of Reading

The structural tension at the heart of making the invisible visible—between showing and concealing—tests every available framework for thinking the kind of film *Looking for Muhyiddin* is. Each framework grasps the film partially; none is designed to name what the film itself gestures toward with the term barzakh. The absence of an adequate category is not an obstacle but a pointer.

Walid El Khachab's *cinéma soufi* provides an initial orientation. Beyond its immediate claim, this proposal draws attention to a philological convergence relevant to the barzakhic reading: an Arabic term associated with cinema, *khayyāla*, derives from the root khayal—meaning shadow (El Khachab 2000, p. 144), a root that the Islamic philosophical tradition simultaneously designates as the imaginal faculty through which the intermediate realm is accessed. This philological convergence allows the vocabulary of Arabic cinema to be read in relation to the imaginal domain structured by barzakh; the conceptual framework appropriate to reading this cinema may therefore derive from within that same tradition.

Among existing frameworks, Deleuze's time-image offers the most systematic account of the ontological paradoxes of the cinema screen—its temporal indeterminacies and undecidable figures. The barzakhic reading does not contest this account; it operates in the space Deleuze's framework opens. But translating barzakh's ontological and cultural specificity—khayāl, tajallī, dhawq—into Deleuzian categories risks transforming that specificity. The barzakhic reading approaches the film from within its own conceptual tradition, without requiring that translation.

The theorist most directly engaged with the Islamic intellectual tradition in relation to cinema is Laura Marks. In *Hanan al-Cinema*, drawing on Chittick's reading of Ibn 'Arabī, Marks writes: "Inasmuch as Wujūd [Being] appears in its own images, the images are real, but inasmuch as Wujūd stays hidden, they are unreal... everything is simultaneously God's face (*wajh*) and his veil (*hijāb*)" (Marks 2015a, p. 325). With this formulation, Marks approaches a barzakhic structure: the image is simultaneously real and unreal, simultaneously *wajh* and *hijāb*. Yet the *Futūḥāt* passages allow the argument to move beyond the point at which Marks's formulation pauses. Three passages, read together, establish the ontological ground:

"You are the very substance of the veil; we are veiled from you only through you, and you are veiled from us only through your own appearance." (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 3, p. 239; translation mine)

"The eye falls only on a veil, for the eye falls only on a form." (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 4, p. 274; translation mine)

"The hidden is manifest... The concealment belongs to the veil, not to you." (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 6, p. 366; translation mine)

Together these passages establish that the divine is already manifest (*ẓāhir*); this manifestation always occurs within a form, and therefore through a veil (*bāṭin*). Appearing is veiling; veiling is appearing—not sequentially but simultaneously, in the same movement. Barzakh names this ontological threshold: the position that both establishes and preserves the separation between the two realms. The *wajh/hijāb* relation and the *ẓāhir/bāṭin* tension are inseparable: neither term functions without the other.

El Khachab's account is important not because it offers a model to be adopted, but because it reveals the risk this article seeks to avoid. His theory of "cinematic pantheism" grounds cinematic immanence in a Spinozist model of pantheism—*Deus sive Natura*—and brings Ibn 'Arabī into that framework by explicitly describing him as an "Andalusian pantheistic mystic." Aligning *wajhiyyah* with Deleuzian faciality, El Khachab reads the realized human as "wholly a face," able to face God in every direction, and then extends this into a

cinematic analogy in which the Akbarian “man-face” becomes at once camera and spectator (El Khachab 2006, pp. 133–34). This is a productive but unstable move: wajh cannot be separated from hijāb, just as *tashbīh* cannot be separated from *tanzīh*. When transcendence (*tanzīh*) is absorbed into immanence, the ontological ground in which barzakh operates contracts. Barzakh functions only where both poles remain real in their difference—where *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* are held simultaneously, neither canceling the other. Chittick identifies the problem precisely: “‘The Oneness of Being’ may appear to some people as another brand of pantheism. But... this simplified expression cannot begin to do him justice” (Chittick 1989, p. 79). Ibn ‘Arabī’s actual position is precise: “God alone is Being, and the ‘existence’ of the things is identical to that Being, though the quiddities of the things as quiddities are not Being; in themselves the things are nonexistent” (Chittick 1989, p. 81). The *Futūḥāt* formula confirms the structural gap: *al-ḥaqq huwa al-wujūd wa al-khalq huwa al-‘adam*—the Real is Being; creation is non-being (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 2, p. 44). The Huwa/Lā Huwa (“He/not He”) formulation preserves this irresolvable simultaneity: not “everything is He” but “everything is simultaneously He and not He” (Chittick 1989, p. 4).

Marks does not adopt El Khachab’s formulation directly, but incorporates it within an immanentist framework. In *Hanan al-Cinema*, she notes that El Khachab aligns immanentist readings of the divine in Sufism and Spinoza: an immanentist view recognizes how even the most ordinary things simultaneously reveal and conceal the divine, thereby orienting a theory of cinema as something that both veils and reveals the world’s divine nature (Marks 2015a, pp. 325–26). The core of Marks’s own theoretical project reflects this alignment: she proposes translating the transcendent infinity of Islam’s monotheistic God as an *immanent infinite* into non-dualist thought, with the explicit aim of offering a secular and worldly alternative to transcendent religious belief (Marks 2010, pp. 15, 20). Within this framework, cinema is performance rather than representation: in Marks’s aesthetics of enfoldment and unfolding, images, information, and infinity fold into and unfold from one another, and aesthetic evaluation asks whether works represent or enact this movement of folding and unfolding (Marks 2010, p. 11).

Marks explicitly distances herself from pantheism. She constructs a Deleuzian plane of immanence that preserves the interplay of immanence and transcendence through the enfoldment/unfolding dynamic—a critical difference from El Khachab’s model, and one the barzakhic reading acknowledges. What remains partially named in Marks’s framework, however, is the specific ontological logic of wajh/hijāb within Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology: the structure in which appearing and veiling are not an interplay but a co-constitution—simultaneous, not sequential. From a barzakhic perspective, the cinema screen never ceases to be a screen; the signifier never becomes the signified. The “as if” of cinematic belief is permanent and structural—not a deficiency but a confirmation that cinema generates meaning from within barzakhic separation.

The barzakhic dialogue with Marks does not end here. Her *Enfoldment and Infinity* offers a more productive resource: “Zāhir implies outer forms, a surface, that which is manifest and explicit... Bāṭin, by contrast, signifies enfoldedness and the deeper, implicit meanings” (Marks 2010, p. 15). This pairing is a productive starting point for grasping the ontological dynamics of the imaginal domain. What Ibn ‘Arabī’s system brings into view is a third position: the paradox in which zāhir without bāṭin and bāṭin without zāhir are equally unthinkable—jam‘ al-addād (the union of opposites). Barzakh names this third position: neither zāhir nor bāṭin, yet simultaneously both. Marks’s binary model captures the cinema’s enfoldment/unfolding dynamic; the barzakhic framework makes visible the ontological ground from which that dynamic arises—the permeable threshold where enfoldment and unfolding endlessly generate each other.

3.3. The Spectator's Barzakhic Position: Dhawq and Mukāshif

The barzakhic framework also requires an account of the spectator. The ontology of the image must be paired with the epistemology of reception: what position does the spectator occupy at the threshold the image opens?

Dhawq provides the ontological ground. As established in Section 2.3, dhawq is a direct, experiential mode of knowing that precedes conceptual formulation—a knowledge that opens through imaginal contact before interpretation arrives (Chittick 1989, pp. 220–21). Moreover, within Ibn 'Arabī's own typology, two forms of dhawq are distinguished: khayālī dhawq (imaginal tasting) affects the nafs through the imaginal faculty; 'aqlī dhawq (intellectual tasting) reaches the heart. Between these two modalities, characteristically, a barzakh obtains (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 4, p. 266). Cinema, in this reading, engages the register of khayālī dhawq specifically: it opens onto the nafs through imaginal contact rather than rational inference.

The cinema spectator enters the hall already holding two dimensions simultaneously: the images are real movement and fictional construct, photographic trace and kinesthetic provocation. This is not a contradiction to be resolved. Al-khayāl al-muttaṣil—the connected imaginal faculty—is constitutively capable of bearing the “both/and” without reducing it to “either/or.” Cinema can be read as operating upon this faculty with particular force. It operationalizes the structural logic of khayālī dhawq as an aesthetic mode of reception within the visible world.

Marks theorizes this imaginal opening as an essentially bodily event. Her haptic visuality argues that the spectator does not maintain optical distance from the image but enters tactile contact with it (Marks 2015a, p. 276). Gunning's kinesthesia—the involuntary forward lean, the body responding before the mind has analyzed—is the cinema-theoretical counterpart. The connection to Ibn 'Arabī's dhawq epistemology is structural rather than terminological: the body knows before the mind formulates; cinema operates through this mechanism; within Ibn 'Arabī's ontology, this pre-conceptual mode of knowing is named dhawq.

Merleau-Ponty's aesthesiological body places this on a broader philosophical foundation. Against the Cartesian model of a fixed subject calculating the world from a distance, Merleau-Ponty argues that “vision is bound to movement” (Plate 2017, p. 104): seeing is not detached calculation but the activity of a body immersed in the world. In the aesthesiological body, the rational and the sensory are held in productive tension; at that point of friction, an irreducible openness arises—what Merleau-Ponty terms “perceptual doubt,” the body's resistance to any final interpretive closure—not as failure but as the body's sign that it remains open to ambiguity (Plate 2017, p. 105). Cinema engages this body at the pre-reflective level: muscles tense, breath holds, the body leans forward before consciousness registers what has happened. Religion and cinema share precisely this mechanism: both access the body first; the intellect catches up later (Plate 2017, pp. 99–106). Dhawq is the name this structure receives in barzakh ontology.

Christian Metz describes the spectator's bodily situation in terms that converge on this analysis. In Metz's account, the cinematic situation necessarily involves motor inhibition: “the cinematic situation in this respect is a miniature sleep, a waking sleep. The spectator is relatively motionless; relatively immersed in a relative darkness” (Metz 1976, p. 85). Motor inhibition is not incidental; it is the structural condition that intensifies perception. Metz elaborates the phenomenology: a “silent, motionless, continuously sub-motor and hyper-receptive empty spectator” (Metz 1982, p. 96), whose stilled body accompanies maximally opened perception. Metz associates this state with somnambulism (Metz 1982, pp. 102–3). Merleau-Ponty's pre-reflective body and Metz's sub-motor spectator name the same struc-

tural configuration from different angles: as the body quiets, perception intensifies toward the imaginal plane.

Dhawq does not open automatically. The spectator's *isti'dād*—receptivity, individual constitution, present openness—is decisive: the same film may affect some spectators strongly and leave others untouched. This bodily tasting—of the kind Marks, following Kuniichi Uno, associates with art's capacity to produce vertigo, bewilderment, and ecstasy in the body (Marks 2015a, p. 312)—opens in some moments and some spectators; it is not guaranteed but depends on *isti'dād*. A further distinction matters here. In cinematic dhawq, differentiation follows personal sensory *isti'dād*. In divine dhawq, differentiation follows the wayfarer's *maqām*—the existential station reached on the path: “each wayfarer speaks only according to the taste that their station has given them” (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 6, pp. 150–52). Cinema does not replicate divine dhawq. It carries a structural analogy to khayālī dhawq within the visible world. The principle “imagination does not err; interpretation errs” (Morris 1995, p. 107) holds at both levels—yet what cinema offers remains within the *'ālam al-shahāda*; the horizon opened by the *'ālam al-mithāl* marks a distinct threshold.

Ibn 'Arabī names the one who fully inhabits this khayālī mode of knowing the *mukāshif*—the one of spiritual unveiling. In the Sufi tradition, seeing and tasting share the same epistemological ground: both are modes of knowing that precede and bypass discursive inference, grounded in immediate witnessing. The *mukāshif* stands at their intersection: “The one of spiritual unveiling already sees, while awake, what the sleeper sees in their dream state or the dead person sees after they have died” (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 1, p. 460). This definition cuts across three levels of consciousness: sleep, death, and the waking unveiling of the *mukāshif*. The cinema spectator occupies a structural position within this tripartite configuration—awake in the darkened hall, yet held in motor inhibition and imaginal openness, approaching the boundary of sleep. The station of the *mukāshif* is not identical to cinematic spectatorship; the conditions it names, however—pre-conceptual receptivity, imaginal contact, threshold consciousness—serve as a structural frame.

Ibn 'Arabī adds a corresponding distinction. Among those who encounter imaginal forms, there are those who perceive them “with the sensory eye (*'ayn al-hiss*)” and those who perceive them “with the eye of imagination (*'ayn al-khayāl*)” (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 1, p. 460). This distinction cuts across the cinema spectator as well—between surface registration and imaginal contact. The threshold state of consciousness between these two modes is what Ibn 'Arabī calls *yakaza*: the interstitial state between sleep and waking.

Morris identifies two contrasting types: the spectator who recognizes a *tajallī*—sensing an opening in the passing image—and the heedless *ghāfil* who misses it; the difference lies not in capacity but in present imaginal openness when *'ayn al-khayāl* is operative (Morris 2015, pp. 41–42).

Ibn 'Arabī develops the same differentiation through the shadow-theatre analogy (*khayyāl al-ẓill*): figures move on the screen; the screen itself is visible, but the *muḥarrik*—the hand animating the figures—remains hidden. The *ghāfilūn* assume the figures move of themselves; the *'ulamā'* know what lies behind the screen and read the figures as variant expressions of a single movement (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 5, pp. 99–100). Cinema matters here as an instance of this structure: the spectator already knows the screen is a screen, yet the apparatus draws them in regardless. The deeper blindness is more radical: living inside the world with screens open, and failing to see the *tajallī* passing.

Two successive formulas compress the two poles of the spectator's position. The first: “God did not create for you two eyes except that with one of them you might witness Me, and with the other your own shadow” (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 3, p. 456). Light and shadow—*tajallī* and *khalq*—were created to be seen simultaneously, through different eyes.

Neither light alone nor shadow alone. The second follows immediately: “Sometimes be this; sometimes be that” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 3, p. 455). The barzakhic spectator holds both without being captured by either.

This “sometimes this, sometimes that” position is not only perceptual; it extends into the structure of cinematic belief. Metz analyzes the spectator’s subjective relation to film through a three-layer structure: “Behind any fiction there is a second fiction: the diegetic events are fictional—that is the first; but everyone pretends to believe that they are true—that is the second; there is even a third: the general refusal to admit that somewhere in oneself one believes they are genuinely true” (Metz 1982, p. 72). The third layer is decisive: *somewhere in oneself* I believe—but refuse to acknowledge it. From a barzakhic perspective this structure is recognizable: the “somewhere in oneself” that Metz names can be read through al-khayāl al-muttaṣil—an intermediate register neither simply conscious nor simply unconscious, the imaginal threshold at which knowing opens. The place where the spectator genuinely believes and the place where interpretation begins are separated by that same barzakhic line: imagination does not err; what errs is the interpretation that follows. Metz’s third layer approaches that line from the cinema-theory side.

This intermediate zone between conscious acknowledgment and bodily belief is the spectator-level signature of yakaza. The ontological depth of this threshold opens further in the Islamic tradition’s understanding of the life-dream relation. In the Yūsuf chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Ibn ‘Arabī interprets the saying widely circulated in Sufi literature as a hadith—“People are asleep; when they die, they wake”—to position life itself as a dream: as dream exists within waking, so life exists within death (Abrahamov 2015, p. 68). Within this cosmological structure, the cinema screen opens a third layer: *manām fī manām*—dream within dream. The spectator is already inside dream-life when they enter the darkened hall; there, in the motor-inhibited state Metz describes, they are exposed to the images of another dream-world. The mukāshif’s wonder opens at the center of this layered dreaming—simultaneously asleep and awake, knowing and not-knowing—a position structurally analogous to the barzakhic threshold.

The mechanics of this layered structure are captured in Akkach’s formulation: khayāl muttaṣil is a “faculty of participation” in the khayāl munfaṣil (Akkach 1997, p. 106). The cinema spectator enacts this participatory movement precisely: the images moving across the screen are not identical with the khayāl munfaṣil, but they function as an external imaginal surface with which the spectator’s khayāl muttaṣil enters contact—and that contact opens, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s terms, a barzakhic field simultaneously existent and non-existent (Huwa/Lā Huwa).

This epistemological framework finds an echo in Khemir’s own words. He articulates the film’s goal through the distinction between understanding and tasting: “It was not a question of asserting a truth, but of making one feel a certain taste that the Sufis call dhawq” (Khemir 2024, p. 134). This choice carries a formal consequence: “narration needed to fade into the background, allowing the audience to experience the desire to approach him” (Khemir 2024, p. 131). The film’s structure—dissolved chronology, suspended resolution—is the formal counterpart of this decision: when narrative recedes, space opens for dhawq. That dhawq was for Khemir not a theoretical concept but an embodied practice is documented by Barghouti: in the Tunisian Shadhiliyya tradition, knowledge is acquired through *hadra* ritual and tomb visitation—“Taste is not a matter of rational formulation. It is acquired through the seeker’s capacity to realize God’s presence in the cosmos” (Barghouti 2021, p. 12). The capacity to receive dhawq in this tradition is called takhalluq—acquiring the qualities of the divine names (the principle established in Section 2.3 as takhalluq *bi-akhlāq Allāh*). The reception dimension of barzakhic cinema, then, cannot stop at tasting; it must also include this horizon of transformation.

4. Film Analysis: Barzakhic Cinema in *Looking for Muhyiddin*

Khemir describes *Looking for Muhyiddin* as “a three-hour documentary-fiction that offers an investigation in the footsteps of shaykh al-akbar” (Khemir 2024, p. 134). Khemir uses the label himself—not as a definition but as the name for an impasse. The film is neither straight documentary nor straight fiction; yet saying this does not yet explain anything: which films stand at the precise border between them? Cinema history has offered several answers. Bruzzi’s model of performative documentary frames the reality-fiction tension as the film’s generative force: the transparency ideal of classical documentary is replaced by “a multi-layered, performative exchange between subjects, filmmakers/apparatus and spectators” (Bruzzi 2006, p. 10)—not the stabilization and transmission of reality, but “performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming” (Bruzzi 2006, p. 14). This framework illuminates certain dimensions of *Looking for Muhyiddin*; yet naming the negotiation is different from asking after the ontological ground of the two poles’ simultaneous existence. Bruzzi’s question is: how do these two things affect each other? The film’s question is different: how can they coexist, at the same moment, without resolution?

Rascaroli’s essay film framework offers a closer answer. The essay form treats irresolution not as a defect but as a structural principle: Rascaroli argues that “disjunction is to be found at the core of the essay film’s diverse signifying practices” (Rascaroli 2017, p. 8). The in-between condition is here not purposeless ambiguity but an epistemological invitation. That *Looking for Muhyiddin* fits this description is clear: the film moves toward the question rather than the answer. Yet Rascaroli’s framework is occupied with form, not ontology; the in-between condition is not only formal but ontological and epistemological—a difference that opens at the level of the spectator as well: Rascaroli’s spectator reasons and draws inferences; the spectator proposed by the barzakhic framework prepares to taste.

El Khachab’s *cinéma soufi* category brings Islamic aesthetics into play—but reads the film from its content rather than its form, from the director’s stated beliefs rather than its cinematic operations (El Khachab 2000, pp. 145–46). Sufi cinema is a content classification; barzakhic cinema is equally a question of form. Existing categories illuminate certain dimensions of the film; yet the word barzakh, which Khemir himself reaches for to name the film’s operative territory, requires thinking through generic indeterminacy as an ontological structure rather than a classificatory problem. Into this gap Khemir’s own text enters directly. As Section 1 established, in his 2024 account the director describes the film’s operative space as a “liminal space between reality and fiction—what might be called the barzakh” (Khemir 2024, p. 132). The director reaches not for the vocabulary of cinema theory but for Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept. This article proceeds from that point: to give analytic ground to Khemir’s intuitive naming, and to open the ontological structure behind that phrase. The film’s own production conditions give this question its concrete formal dimension.

The film’s first interview is structurally definitive. James Morris—whose theorization of barzakh and khayāl is foundational to this article’s framework—appears at 00:03:34, his opening words establishing the film’s epistemological ground directly: “The tajalliyāt are always different at every moment... we do not live in abstractions; we live in moments with God” (Khemir 2012, 00:03:34). The encounter is not treated by the film as accidental; it marks a convergence between the film’s subject and its analytic register, announced in the film’s first minutes.

The narrative engine propelling the journey is *amāna*—sacred trust. After his mother’s death, Khemir sets out to fulfill a charge transmitted in a dream by his late father; the content of that charge is never disclosed (Khemir 2024, p. 131). This structure echoes the Quranic figuration of *amāna* (Q. 33:72): the trust was offered to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains; all declined; the human being accepted. Khemir extends this structure to

the form of the film itself: the film, like an *amāna*, deposits something in the spectator without naming what it is. The charge cannot be carried through the film's external imaginal surface alone—through what the screen stages in a manner recalling the logic of *al-khayāl al-munfaṣil*—but becomes bearable only through the spectator's *khayāl al-muttaṣil*, activated through *dhawq*. What the film leaves behind cannot be fully named; it can only be carried.

The film begins from death. Khemir decided to build the story from this point after his mother's passing (Khemir 2024, p. 130): in a dream, his long-dead father appears and entrusts him with the *amāna*; the journey is born of love and fidelity (Khemir 2024, p. 132). The first stop—the *zawiya* of Sidi Belhassen, a space in which the living and the dead share the same enclosure (Khemir 2012, 00:02:42)—is followed by the shaykh's counsel: set out. A dead father initiating a journey through a dream is not merely dramatic convention; it is a familiar epistemological structure. Across the religious literature, the dream is a universal channel of contact with what lies beyond—it stands at the crossing between death and life. Ibn 'Arabī demonstrates that this threshold operates not only in death but in every moment of sleep, every transition between the visible and the invisible (Q. 23:100). *Looking for Muhyiddin* places this structure at the heart of its narrative: the story comes from a *barzakh*—from a dead father, from the beyond. And this movement from beyond encompasses the director's will as well: the seeker too, as the pursuit of the sought continues, gradually dissolves within what is sought.

A Western Bildungsroman sets different expectations: its hero typically journeys toward personal responsibility and social integration, not least through marriage (Phelan 2009, p. 41). Khemir's *barzakhic* trajectory inverts that logic, finding fulfillment not in an independent self but in surrender to a lineage.

Production structure mirrors narrative structure. Khemir notes that the only person available to sustain the role across four years and ten countries was himself (Khemir 2024, pp. 132–33); practical constraint became ontological necessity. As director and character converge in a single body, Khemir reports beginning to sense that the Master was choosing who would speak—as if the Master's presence itself was guiding the production team to the correct locations through unexpected turns (Khemir 2024, p. 131). The structural affinity with *fanā'*—the dissolving of will in encounter with what is sought—is not asserted by Khemir as doctrine; it surfaces as the form that the making gradually takes.

4.1. Barzakhic Thresholds: Cemetery, Dream, Yakaza

The film's first sequence (Khemir 2012, 00:02:14–00:02:52) opens in a Tunisian *zawiya*: simultaneously a sanctuary enclosing an ancestor's tomb and a space of living devotional practice—a site where the living and the dead share the same enclosure by virtue of the space's ritual and ontological function. This opening shot establishes the spatial template governing the entire film: the *barzakhic* threshold made architectural.

The journey's second stop makes this template explicit. At the coastal cemetery outside Tunis (Khemir 2012, 00:03:45), Khemir sets his red suitcase on a grave marker; the Gulf of Tunisia opens behind him. Before the journey begins, it pauses at a threshold—neither departure nor return, neither living space nor dead. The pause is not incidental. Arabic can designate the sacred funerary enclosure with the word *rawḍa*—a term that simultaneously denotes a garden (Ruggles 2008, p. 104). The starting point is linguistically *barzakhic*: the place named is stationed where boundary becomes opening. In the Islamic garden tradition, this duality carries ontological weight: "Living gardens did not take on a specific paradisiac meaning until they were used as the settings for tombs; from that point, in addition to their role as signs of God's visible bounty to the living, they became metaphors for the perfect Paradise gardens in which believers dwell eternally" (Ruggles 2008, p. 103).

Tomb and garden, living space and funerary enclosure, serve as prototypical sites of the divine-human threshold in Islamic spatial thought (Burckhardt 2009, pp. 16, 31).

This opening cemetery is the first in a systematic series. In Istanbul, Khemir pulls his red suitcase through rows of Ottoman tombstones—turbaned marble heads—as the crowd of the dead frames the solitude of the living (Khemir 2012, 01:25:38). In Murcia, an academic speaks in a cemetery ringed with Christian crosses of Ibn ‘Arabī’s childhood departure from his homeland: “He left and never came back” (Khemir 2012, ~00:49:00). In Damascus, the most concentrated sequence: in golden sunset light, Khemir reads the stones and sets a book on a grave marker; the khirqa-clad figure—without suitcase, without face—stands alone among the dead (Khemir 2012, 02:43:05–02:44:13). The Tunisian coastal cemetery reappears near the journey’s end (Khemir 2012, 02:05:09), closing a circle that opened there. The cemetery is not a recurring motif but the film’s most concrete barzakhic space: the dead are neither fully departed nor fully present; the *ziyāra* (tomb visitation) ritual sustains living contact across the threshold in each country’s Islamic practice.

This cinematographic itinerary carries a structural resonance with Ibn ‘Arabī’s own sustained practice. The *Futūḥāt* records his engagement with cemeteries as places of living spiritual contact with the departed—spaces where the *baraka* left by the righteous continues to affect receptive hearts (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 1, p. 154; vol. 5, pp. 66–68). Khemir’s film emerges from a Tunisian Shadhiliyya milieu in which such practices remain culturally and ritually intelligible: his opening visit is to the zawiya of Sidi Belhassen, associated with Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī’s Tunisian residence. Barghouti documents how this tradition transmits knowledge through hadra ritual and tomb visitation as embodied practice—“Taste is not a matter of rational formulation. It is acquired through the seeker’s capacity to realize God’s presence in the cosmos” (Barghouti 2021, p. 12). The film’s cemetery visits are not metaphorical; they are the continuation of an epistemology that has always been embodied.

The red suitcase resting on the grave marker in the opening cemetery sequence condenses the film’s barzakhic logic into a single object. Its contents are never revealed; the weight it carries cannot be named. It materializes the *amāna* logic: something entrusted, borne across thresholds, set down at the moments of deepest crossing. The suitcase is the film’s formal thread—and, as Section 4.3 develops, the visible *fil rouge* of tissage.

Among the film’s threshold surfaces, water carries the densest barzakhic charge. The Quranic verse that names barzakh through water—“It is He who released the two bodies of flowing water, one sweet and fresh and the other salty and bitter, and put an insurmountable barrier [Ar.: barzakh] between them” (Q. 25:53)—makes water the element through which the structure was first named in scripture. Water reflects and transforms simultaneously; it makes visible while concealing depth; it carries the movement of what passes across it without retaining a trace. The Alhambra Garden’s pool sequence (Khemir 2012, 00:52:37) gives this ontological logic its most explicit form: the figure at the water’s edge watches the pool simultaneously reflect sky, trees, and its own image. The reflection is not a simple copy; it is a barzakhic version of the real—neither the pool itself nor the sky, holding the attributes of both while reducible to neither. Morris’s formulation of the mirror-image ontology applies directly: “both affirmed and denied, both existent and nonexistent, both known and unknown” (Morris 1995, p. 106). Ruggles confirms the epistemological consequence: in the Alhambra, “the imaginary and the real cannot be easily separated” (Ruggles 2008, p. 75); Burckhardt extends it: the Alhambra is “stone transformed into a vibration of light” (Burckhardt 2009, p. 84)—a space read through the logic of *tajallī*, then mirrored in water. The Alhambra’s barzakhic status is not only visual; it is embedded in its architecture and history. In the fourteenth century, the Naṣrid sultans were buried in a small enclosure adjoining the Court of Lions (Ruggles 2008, pp. 104–5): the space filmed is liter-

ally both a space of the living and of the dead. Burckhardt closes the ontological chain that runs from carpet to garden to paradise to pool: each element figures the same threshold in interlocking images, each the symbol of the other (Burckhardt 2009, p. 116).

Ta'bir—dream interpretation—derives from *'abara*, “to cross”: the image at the surface points toward what lies on the other side. The composite shot that follows the pool sequence makes this movement visible: Khemir’s recitation of Yūsuf’s dream—“I dreamed of eleven stars and the sun and the moon” (Q. 12:4)—overlays the *khirqā*-clad figure appearing and dissolving in the water (Khemir 2012, 01:37:15). The shot can be read as a cinematic staging of *al-khayāl al-munfaṣil*’s logic: the imaginal form appears independent of any perceiver, visible for a moment, then withdrawn. Puerta Vilches glosses this immediately by describing Ibn ‘Arabī as “always being in the intermediate world between reality and the dream,” and speaking extensively of *ta'bir*, “the crossing from one world to another” (Khemir 2012, 01:38:08–10). Visual logic and conceptual framework converge in the same sequence as mutual confirmation.

The water logic recurs across geographies: the Oxford pool scene, developed in Section 4.3; the Central Park pond, where the question of creation’s epistemology is posed at the water’s edge (Khemir 2012, 01:51:02–01:53:13); and most concentrated, the Damascus sequence (Khemir 2012, 02:46:20), where the left half of the frame is entirely dark ground and the right half is grey water and fading sky, with the *khirqā*-clad figure standing precisely on the line between them. Q. 25:53’s waters—“one sweet and fresh and the other salty and bitter”—find their visual analogue: neither fully in earth nor in water, neither in darkness nor in light—stationed at the *barzakh*.

The film’s three *yakaza* moments—the threshold state between sleep and waking—mark the interior dimension of this spatial geography. In the first (Khemir 2012, 00:29:22), sitting in a moving vehicle, Khemir’s head drops slowly as the camera holds his face in close-up: neither asleep nor awake. Immediately after (Khemir 2012, 00:29:52), the laptop screen shows an Ibn ‘Arabī manuscript alongside Khemir’s own mirror reflection in the same frame—a visual trace of contact with the other side. The second *yakaza* (Khemir 2012, 02:19:37) occurs within the crowd in *Ṣan‘ā’*: head bowed over an open book, the same interior withdrawal. The third (Khemir 2012, 02:46:07) is open-air, before tree branches, eyes half-closed and turned inward. The journey is not only geographical. These three passages suggest a movement between registers of consciousness—between *‘ālam al-shahāda* and the *barzakh* that opens toward *‘ālam al-ghayb*—structurally analogous to the *mukāshif*’s position described in Section 3.3: present in body, open in perception.

4.2. Aniconism and the Faceless *Khirqā*

The spatial structure built by *barzakhic* thresholds is inhabited by a figure whose formal construction enacts the same logic at the level of the body. Khemir’s most radical formal choice—the decision not to show a face—is named directly: “The representation is not that of the visible, but of the invisible. This is why I chose for my film to wear my father’s burnous, thus symbolizing the presence of the Master, without resorting to an actor who would lend his body and face” (Khemir 2024, p. 134). Khemir designates the garment as a burnous—the ubiquitous hooded cloak that has been a hallmark of Maghrebi attire since pre-Islamic times (Stillman 2003, p. 87). However, the analysis that follows reads this garment through the conceptual framework of the *khirqā*. This terminological transition from a regional cloak to a Sufi initiatory garment is historically and materially grounded. As Stillman observes, the early ascetic pietists who became known as Sufis were distinguished precisely by their coarse wool (*sūf*) attire, with the rough woolen *khirqā* eventually becoming the recognized uniform of the spiritual wayfarer (Stillman 2003, pp. 31, 51). When the Sufi tradition took root in North Africa, the indigenous burnous—traditionally a humble,

coarse woolen garment woven to ward off the harsh desert and mountain elements—could readily be read as embodying this ascetic ethos. Consequently, the burnous can be read, in this context, as a regional analogue to the eastern khirqa: the material embodiment of spiritual authority and lineage. In this reading, when Khemir dons his father's burnous to symbolize the presence of Ibn 'Arabī, he is not merely wearing a theatrical costume; he is operating within a specific regional Sufi vestimentary logic. In either designation, the face, the primary locus of individual identity, is withheld.

The ontological weight of this choice is grounded in Ibn 'Arabī's own record. He reports receiving a khirqa whose lineage was traced to al-Khidr—a figure associated with guidance across visible and unseen registers (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 1, pp. 283–84). Ibn 'Arabī defines the garment accordingly: the khirqa is “the expression of companionship (*ṣuḥba*), discipline (*adab*), and takhalluq” (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 1, p. 284)—the embodied form of spiritual assimilation, not a theatrical costume but the material idiom through which a shaykh's presence persists. Khemir's father's burnous, worn in the film, is read here through this genealogy: it simultaneously evokes Khemir's father, Ibn 'Arabī, and the viewer's own capacity for imaginal recognition—the garment functions as a material idiom making the servant's relation to the Real visible, with *takhalluq bi-asmā' Allāh* at its center (Çetin and Demirdağ 2026, p. 5).

The barzakhic logic of the khirqa lies in this: without a face, identity escapes fixation to any particular person or moment; it becomes simultaneously universal and unlocatable. The face binds a form to a singular body and time; the faceless khirqa is reducible to neither—anyone and no one, holding the attributes of presence and absence without resolving into either. The camera honors this logic: in the khirqa sequences, it turns to folds of fabric, the rhythm of walking, the movement of hands (Khemir 2012, 00:06:26, 01:02:35, 01:28:47, 01:39:49). Attention moves from identity to movement—from the *who* to the *how*. The most concentrated expression occurs at 01:39:49: at a bright window opening onto the hills of Granada, the khirqa-clad figure has dissolved into a pure black silhouette. Face, hands, and body disappear into the backlight; only the peaked hood and the hills beyond the glass remain. Between light and darkness—neither inside nor outside, neither visible nor invisible—this single frame distills the aniconism of the *wajh/hijāb* relation: *tashbīh* (the presence of form, the real inhabiting of space) without the fixation that would violate *tanzīh* (transcendent incomparability); the face withheld not to deny presence but to preserve its unlocatability.

The formal choice stands in productive relation to the aniconism of the Islamic artistic tradition. Burckhardt articulates the function: aniconism “creates a void by inhibiting every image that would invite the mind to fix itself on something outside itself and project its soul onto an ‘individualizing’ form... Nothing should stand between the human being and God's invisible presence” (Burckhardt 2009, p. 31). The film performs a comparable function: Ibn 'Arabī's presence is neither directly individualized through a face nor absent—it is held in the khirqa's void and movement, in the imaginal intermediate layer. This formal choice stages a fundamental tension between film aesthetics and Islamic theology. Cinema's medium-specific demand is visibility: what is not seen does not exist on the screen. Islamic theological practice, epitomized in the tension between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* explored above, has long resisted the opposite demand, direct visual representation of the sacred. The faceless khirqa resolves this paradox of ‘representational impossibility’—less as a practical workaround than as a theoretical cinematic invention. It satisfies cinema's demand to show by making the unrepresentable visible through the very form of its withdrawal. Marks reformulates aniconism for contemporary art theory as withdrawal rather than prohibition: “I redefine aniconism in Islamic art as a process-based phenomenon... of withdrawing the divine from perception. Withdrawal enfolds the divine image yet invites

a devotional attitude, so that it is not in seeing but in imagining that the faithful come close to the presence of God" (Marks 2024, p. 380). Khemir names the operation: "This notion of abstraction implies the presence of someone we cannot see. He is there, on the screen, but he transcends the decor; because he is before our eyes, we feel his presence without seeing him" (Khemir 2024, p. 134).

This aniconism constitutes the film's theological self-discipline. The epistemological principle established in Section 2.2 operates here at the level of spectatorship: "Imagination does not err; what errs is the interpretation that follows" (Morris 1995, p. 107). The imaginal eye that watches the khirqa move can receive this faceless form as a barzakhic intermediate; the error begins only when reason attempts to fix it to a particular identity. Akkach's formulation of imaginal forms confirms the structural parallel: they are "perceptible, meaningful forms; but devoid of physical existence. Like an image in a mirror—visible but not there; apparent but bodiless; and like a deceptive mirage—real but never within reach" (Akkach 1997, pp. 101–2). The khirqa on screen is visible—moving, inhabiting space, drawing attention—but offers no face to hold, no identity to complete. This is not absence but the co-presence of form and withdrawal that the wajh/hijāb pair names: to appear is simultaneously to veil. In Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy, the *kāmil insān*—the one of realized spiritual nature—is a barzakh between the Real and the cosmos: "a raised-up mirror. The Real sees His form in the mirror of the human being, and creation also sees its form in him" (Bashier 2004, p. 117). The khirqa, in its filmic use, invites this structure without asserting it: it can be read as a cinematic staging in which the viewer, the father, and Ibn 'Arabī are simultaneously held in the same imaginal surface—mirror, veil, and disclosure at once.

4.3. *Tissage: Weaving the Invisible into the Fabric of the Visible*

The most visible formal mechanism of tissage opens early and quietly. In Oxford, immediately after Morris's first words, a drop falls into a still pool and sends concentric ripples outward; superimposed over the water, the khirqa-clad silhouette stands in a sun-dappled garden (Khemir 2012, 00:08:58). Water and figure do not occupy separate frames in succession; they share a single surface. The ripples spread through the figure; the figure inhabits the water. Two realities: not stacked but woven.

This technique receives its formal name in Khemir's own account: "So I wove the film instead of editing it" (Khemir 2024, p. 134). The choice of tissage—weaving—over montage encodes a different principle of image relation. Khemir states that the film was "truly pieced together with scraps and threads" (Khemir 2024, p. 131), a process that ultimately "required four years of intermittent shooting" (Khemir 2024, p. 130). The practical necessity and the ontological language converge without forcing.

Classical montage cuts: A ends; B begins. The boundary is productive and visible—Eisenstein grounds his early theory on precisely this cut: "There is no art outside of conflict... A stabilization born from the clash of opposites" (Eisenstein 1982, p. 42). His later move toward organic unity and ekstasis approaches a vocabulary of transformation that differs from pure collision (Eisenstein 1987, pp. x, 27), but the fundamental principle holds: in Eisenstein, the motor of transformation is the internal tension of opposites. In Khemir's tissage, the cut is replaced by permeability; the boundary does not disappear but becomes barzakhic—threads pass through each other as constituents of a single weave, neither colliding nor dissolving (Bashier 2004, p. 131).

The material carrier of this weave is the red suitcase. Khemir describes pulling it through the film "like a thread" and notes that he became "the thread connecting all these stories" (Khemir 2024, pp. 129, 131). Three visual constants hold the film's geography together across four years, ten countries, and four continents: the red suitcase, Khemir's

unchanged clothing, and his father's khirqa. They appear in Granada, in Oxford, in New York, in Ṣan'ā', in Damascus—the same figure, the same bag, the same garment. Spatial and temporal discontinuity is not denied; it is held in the thread's continuity. Khemir notes the suitcase's practical function: it makes him recognizable in a crowd, keeping open what Khemir calls the “liminal space between reality and fiction—what might be called the *barzakh*” (Khemir 2024, p. 132).

The suitcase's meaning is not only in its carrying but in its setting down. Three times the film records it deliberately abandoned: at the first coastal cemetery, it rests on the grave marker as Khemir walks toward the *zawiya* (Khemir 2012, 00:03:45); at the Oxford phone box—a moment of oblique contact with an absent interlocutor—it waits outside the threshold while Khemir enters (Khemir 2012, 00:16:11); in the Damascus cemetery, the khirqa-clad figure stands among the stones without it—without suitcase, without a face (Khemir 2012, 02:44:13). The pattern is consistent: the suitcase belongs to *ʿālam al-shahāda*, the visible journey; when the crossing deepens, the visible load is set aside. The suitcase enacts the *amāna*'s paradox in material form—necessary to carry, necessary to release. This structure is condensed in the line Khemir chose as epigraph to his account of the film, drawn from Mahmoud Darwish: “My homeland is a suitcase... My suitcase, my homeland” (Khemir 2024, p. 129). The suitcase carries both return and displacement, both memory and its weight; an object in which neither side cancels the other.

The film's geography follows the logic of *sayr wa-sulūk*—spiritual wayfaring—without naming it as such: Tunisia, Oxford, Granada, Konya, New York, Ṣan'ā', Damascus. The connections between these stages are not established by chronological causality or cartographic proximity but by the thread. Tarkovsky pursues this continuity within montage, noting that “time courses through the picture despite editing, rather than because of it” (Tarkovsky 1987, p. 117). Khemir, by contrast, replaces the absolute boundary of the cut with permeability (*tissage*)—yet both proceed from the same demand: that time remain unbroken in the picture. *Tissage* is the attempt to hold this temporal current intact—to allow the film's four years of duration to remain continuous in the weaving.

The superposition technique is *tissage*'s most concentrated formal instrument. Two examples develop the Oxford opening further. In the Córdoba Mosque sequence (Khemir 2012, 00:45:43), the dome is overlaid with undulating water: stone and water inhabit the same frame, each revealing the other's latent movement. Later, the khirqa-clad figure appears superimposed over dark water surrounded by Arabic calligraphy (Khemir 2012, 02:20:19): the letters ripple in the water's movement, and the figure and text become inseparable. Superposition is not new to cinema—from Méliès's phantasmatic overlays to the surrealist avant-garde, the technique has layered realities since cinema's earliest decades (Gunning 2007, p. 46). Khemir appropriates a technique with a long formal history and uses it as the instrument of a specific ontological claim: two realities that are neither stacked nor separated, but inhabit the same ontological surface simultaneously—the structure that *barzakh* names.

Ibn 'Arabī's ontology grounds this reading from within: “So there is nothing but inter-tying and intertwining... Our affair is intertwined and knotted with His affair, so we will never be untied from His knot” (Bashier 2004, p. 131). *Tissage*, in this reading, is not merely an aesthetic freedom but a form that an ontology of interlinking can take when it enters cinema. Burckhardt traces the same logic in Islamic geometric interlacement: “harmony being nothing other than ‘unity in multiplicity’ (*al-wahdah fi 'l-kathrah*)... It is generally constituted from a single element, a single rope or a single line, which comes endlessly back upon itself” (Burckhardt 2009, p. 73). The film's diverse continents, languages, and centuries converge around a single invisible thread—Ibn 'Arabī's presence—in formal terms structurally homologous to this interlacement logic.

Cinema theory has, from its own direction, approached the same vocabulary. Gunning observes that cinema “has always been a point of intersection, a braiding together of diverse strands” (Gunning 2007, p. 36); Elsaesser, in his account of the essay film, reaches directly for the vocabulary of fabric and weaving (Elsaesser 2017, p. 241); Rascaroli, drawing on Adorno, compares the essay film’s structure to a carpet in which meaning opens not between threads but through and with them (Rascaroli 2017, p. 24); Metz describes cinema’s structure as “the adjacent stitches of a piece of knitting” (Metz 1974, p. 176). These convergences show that the weaving metaphor serves both Islamic art thought and modern cinema theory as a productive model for relational form. Khemir’s tissage enters this field of theoretical resonances while transforming the weaving figure from metaphor into ontological choice: not a comparison to weaving but a formal principle designed to produce barzakhic co-presence, the simultaneous inhabiting of two realities within a single surface.

5. Conclusions: Barzakhic Cinema and Beyond

The inquiry began with an observation that resists easy classification: *Looking for Muhyiddin* is neither documentary nor fiction, and this resistance is not accidental. The question pursued here is whether that in-between condition marks a contingent production circumstance or something at work in the film’s deeper ontological structure. The analysis pursued its answer on the ground of barzakh—and not by imposing this framework from without. Khemir himself names the territory: “It was precisely this liminal space between reality and fiction—that might be called the barzakh—that brought us closest to the Master” (Khemir 2024, p. 132). The film does not merely represent Ibn ‘Arabī; it operationalizes the principle that this word points to: a threshold that separates and relates two realities at once, being qualified by the attributes of both, gathering them within its own barzakhic ground, and remaining reducible to neither. The binaries at stake multiply: reality and fiction, visible and invisible, seeker and sought, representation and tajallī (divine self-disclosure). The film resolves none of them. It holds all of them at a barzakhic threshold simultaneously—and positions the spectator at the center of that suspension.

The analysis has shown that this barzakhic structure operates through three formal operations framed by two encompassing dimensions: the ontology of production and the epistemology of reception. At the level of production ontology: Khemir positions himself inside the film as both director and character; four years, ten countries, with no artificial lighting (Khemir 2024, p. 133)—these are not methodological preferences but the material conditions of a barzakhic production logic, in which chance and the sense of being guided intertwine and the seeker approaches the sought within the same process without ever completing that approach. At the level of reception epistemology, the spectator is not invited to conceptual interpretation but to a threshold: a mode of knowing structured by khayālī dhawq, yakaza, and the position of the mukāshif, in which sensing precedes understanding and tasting precedes interpretation. This mode carries a structural affinity with the stratum of cinematic belief that Metz associates with the spectator’s suspension between knowledge and credence (Metz 1982), while opening onto a different epistemological register through the logic of manām fī manām (dream within dream, Section 3.3). Within these two encompassing dimensions, three formal operations are at work: the barzakhic thresholds woven through cemetery, dream, and yakaza; the aniconism of the faceless khirqa, suspended between wajh (face-as-disclosure) and hijāb (veil); and the tissage and superimposition that transform the cutting logic of montage into barzakhic co-presence. Each operation works out a different relational structure from Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology at the level of cinematic form.

This account of reception is phenomenological and theoretical: it maps the epistemological conditions under which khayālī dhawq becomes available to a spectator, without

measuring whether, or to what degree, actual audiences reach this mode of knowing. The limitation is deliberate, not an oversight. Testing the framework against empirical spectatorship data—audience response studies, reception ethnography, viewer interviews—remains a task for future research, one that would test the phenomenological account offered here rather than substitute for it. Treating perception itself as a faculty transformed along the spiritual path has a theoretical warrant elsewhere, in a systematic account of dhawq’s transformation within a tawhīd-centered aesthetics (Çetin 2026, p. 219).

This reading enters into dialogue with existing frameworks while making visible what each leaves open. Bruzzi’s performative documentary illuminates the film’s negotiation of reality and fiction; Rascaroli’s essay film framework positions its in-between condition as an epistemological invitation; El Khachab’s approach to Sufi cinema engages its Islamic content; Schrader’s transcendental style accounts for formal asceticism; and Deleuze’s crystal-image captures its temporal indeterminacy. Yet none of these frameworks is designed to name the barzakhic co-presence of visibility and veiling, representation and tajallī, wajh and hijāb, with the ontological density proper to Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought. Among them, Marks holds a distinctive position: her account of haptic visuality and immanence comes closest to the barzakhic reading. Yet it is not designed to account for the simultaneous logic of disclosure and veiling specific to the wajh/hijāb relation within Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology—the structure in which appearing and veiling are not sequential but co-constitutive. This shared limit is not a failure of these frameworks; it reflects a difference in epistemological orientation. Because barzakhic cinema derives from the ontological ground of the Islamic intellectual tradition, it cannot be fully named without the concepts native to that ground. This is where “mutual illumination” becomes decisive: the film is not an illustration of Ibn ‘Arabī, and Ibn ‘Arabī is not an external decoding key for the film. Each illuminates the other across different registers, and the concept of “barzakhic cinema” emerges at that moment of illumination—irreducible to either source.

“Barzakhic cinema” is not the name for every hybrid form, every mystically inflected film, or every documentary-fiction blend. The concept derives from the specific constellation of barzakh, khayāl, dhawq, takhalluq, wajh/hijāb, and tajallī; applied outside that conceptual fabric, it loses its specificity. Within that limit, a small piece of evidence is telling: rawḍa—the Arabic word that can denote both a sacred tomb enclosure and a garden—is itself a barzakhic word, gathering two semantic fields without collapsing into either and showing how a boundary can also become a site of opening. Other intellectual traditions possess their own threshold concepts—such as Turner’s liminality (Turner 1977, p. 95) or the aesthetic interplay of the real and the imaginary in German Romanticism (Phelan 2009, p. 55)—with which this framework may enter productive dialogue; yet, as noted above, these remain points of aesthetic-historical resonance rather than equivalences to barzakh’s own conceptual ground. It speaks from within Ibn ‘Arabī’s conceptual world, and in that idiom renders visible a domain of meaning that other frameworks do not fully open. The study of religion and film is left with a reoriented question: not only how religion is represented in film, but the conditions under which cinema—through the ontological status of its image, the reality of its movement, the structural position of its spectator—can itself operate as a threshold between the human and the divine. Barzakhic cinema is not an aesthetic of direct representation of tajallī; it is a framework for thinking about how visible form may point beyond itself. With that framework, barzakhic cinema makes visible not only a particular film, but also the conditions under which cinema can function as a human artistic analogue to the logic of tajallī. The method of mutual illumination is the methodological answer to that question; *Looking for Muhyiddin* is the cinematic instance against which the method is concretely tested.

At a bright window looking out over the hills of Granada, the khirqa-clad figure has dissolved into a pure black silhouette: face, hands, and bodily detail disappear into the backlight; only the peaked hood of the khirqa and the hills beyond the glass remain. This single frame carries the article's three formal operations simultaneously: the window stages a spatial threshold; the facelessness stages an aniconic withdrawal structured by the wajh/hijāb relation; the fabric of the khirqa materially recalls the logic of tissage. Barzakhic cinema does not seek to make the invisible visible; rather, like the faceless khirqa at the edge of the visible, it holds the spectator at the threshold between seeing and sensing.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, O.Ç. and Ö.D.; Methodology, O.Ç. and Ö.D.; Formal analysis, O.Ç. and Ö.D.; Investigation, Ö.D.; Resources, O.Ç. and Ö.D.; Writing—original draft, O.Ç. and Ö.D.; Writing—review and editing, O.Ç. and Ö.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Abrahamov, Binyamin. 2015. *Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam: An Annotated Translation of “The Bezels of Wisdom”*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Addas, Claude. 1993. *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ‘Arabī*. Translated by Peter Kingsley. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society.
- Akkach, Samer. 1997. The World of Imagination in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Ontology. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24: 97–113. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Barghouti, Dia. 2021. Ibn ‘Arabī and the Shadhiliya of Tunisia: Exploring Knowledge as Embodied Practice in the Hadra Rituals of Sidi Bin-Hasan. *Performance Research* 26: 11–17. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Bashier, Salman H. 2004. *Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Bruzzi, Stella. 2006. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Burckhardt, Titus. 2009. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*. Bloomington: World Wisdom.
- Chittick, William C. 1989. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Chittick, William C. 1994. *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Çetin, Oğuz. 2025. *Tasavvuf ve Estetik*. İstanbul: İlahiyat Kitap.
- Çetin, Oğuz. 2026. Beyond the Subject–Object Dichotomy: Tawhid-Centered Aesthetic Experience in Yunus Emre. *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Velî Araştırma Dergisi* 118: 207–21. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Çetin, Oğuz, and Öncel Demirdağ. 2026. Wearing Tradition: The Khirqa and Sufi Memory in Nacer Khemir’s *Bab’Aziz*. *Religions* 17: 547. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1989. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson, and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. First published 1985.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. 1982. *Film Essays and a Lecture*. Edited by Jay Leyda. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. 1987. *Nonindifferent Nature: Film and the Structure of Things*. Translated by Herbert Marshall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- El Khachab, Walid. 2000. Un cinéma soufi? Islam, ombres, modernité. *CiNéMAS* 11: 133–49. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- El Khachab, Walid. 2006. Face of the Human and Surface of the World: Reflections on Cinematic Pantheism. *Intermedialités* 8: 121–34. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Elsaesser, Thomas. 2017. The Essay Film: From Film Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form? In *Essays on the Essay Film*. Edited by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 227–52.
- Gunning, Tom. 2007. Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18: 29–52. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Ibn ‘Arabī, Muḥyī al-Dīn. 1999. *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*. Edited by Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn. 8 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya.
- Karbassian, Malihe. 2018. The Etymology of the Word Barzakh and Its Role in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Mystical Cosmology. *Journal of Sufi Studies* 7: 84–112.
- Khemir, Nacer, dir. 2012. *Looking for Muhyiddin [À la Recherche de Muhyiddin]*. Tunisia: Wallada Productions.
- Khemir, Nacer. 2024. Heterography 1: ‘Looking for Muhyiddin’. *Religiographies* 3: 128–36. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Marks, Laura U. 2010. *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Marks, Laura U. 2015a. *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Marks, Laura U. 2015b. Process Thinking for Islamic Art. *Journal of Art Historiography* 13: 1–18. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Marks, Laura U. 2024. Process Thinking for Islamic Art and Media Art. In *Made for the Eye of One Who Sees: Islamic Art, Culture, and Heritage Studies*. Edited by Marcus Milwright and Evanthis Baboula. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, pp. 376–90.
- Metz, Christian. 1974. *Language and Cinema*. Translated by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok. The Hague: Mouton.
- Metz, Christian. 1976. The Fiction Film and Its Spectator: A Metapsychological Study. *New Literary History* 8: 75–105. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Metz, Christian. 1982. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Translated by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Morris, James W. 1995. Divine ‘Imagination’ and the Intermediate World: Ibn ‘Arabī on the ‘Barzakh’. *Postdata* 2: 104–9.
- Morris, James W. 2015. ‘Life Is a Dream’: Ibn ‘Arabī on the Mysteries of Divine Cinema. *El Azufre Rojo* 2: 31–48.
- Ogunnaike, Oludamini. 2013. Inception and Ibn ‘Arabī: The Oneiric and Imaginal Worlds of Christopher Nolan. *Journal of Religion and Film* 17: 11.
- Phelan, Anthony. 2009. Prose Fiction of the German Romantics. In *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism*. Edited by Nicholas Saul. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 41–65.
- Plate, S. Brent, ed. 2003. *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Plate, S. Brent. 2017. *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rascaroli, Laura. 2017. *How the Essay Film Thinks*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ruggles, D. Fairchild. 2008. *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Schrader, Paul. 2018. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Updated ed. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Stillman, Yedida Kalfon. 2003. *Arab Dress: A Short History. From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times*, Revised 2nd ed. Edited by Norman A. Stillman. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Sviri, Sara. 2016. Seeing with Three Eyes: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Barzakh and the Contemporary World Situation. *Synthesis Philosophica* 31: 385–93. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Tarkovsky, Andrei. 1987. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Turner, Victor W. 1977. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.