

Islam, Consciousness and Early Cinema: Said Nursî and the Cinema of God

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Abstract:

The early 20th century works of Kurdish Islamic thinker Said Nursî explore how cinema can provide access to the divine. Yet, considering the periods of Nursî's life that were spent in prison, or in exile in remote locations, it is likely that the cinema he was discussing was, very specifically, the early silent cinema of attractions. Thus the distinctive format of this cinema can be uncovered in, and seen to structure, Nursî's formulation of 'God's cinema'. With this proposition in mind, this article indicates something of the potential that an engagement with Nursî's cinematic writing offers for reconsidering topics already much discussed in film-philosophy, such as that of time in the works of Gilles Deleuze.

Keywords: Said Nursî; Islamic philosophy; early cinema; religion; Deleuze; Turkey.

Those who take pictures shall go to hell... It is vain, especially for those who look at pictures that were taken when they were 25 years old and now still consider themselves as 25 year olds. The pictures merely represent the past and nothing besides. They say photographs might be used in arresting criminals, but it this is only coincidental and is of no real help. Personally, I would be bothered if my photograph was seen by the people I dislike or by my enemies. Those, whom I would not be in touch with, would be in touch with my photographs. One's shadow should only be attached to oneself, not to some strangers. Besides, to some extent it might lead to a sort of prostitution. A man who could not possess a certain woman may possess her

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picture and take pleasure through her pictures. (Şeyhülislam Mustafa Sabri, [1899] 1984, p. 63)

These words, as much as they belong to a high-ranking Ottoman bureaucrat responsible for religious affairs, namely the *Şeyhülislam* Mustafa Sabri (1869–1954), do not indeed form the main view of the relationship between mechanically-reproduced images and Islam in the Ottoman world at the turn-of-the-20th century. Notwithstanding the controversies regarding cinema as a representational art, especially in its early period, there have been many different perspectives, interpretations and practices surrounding visual representations in the Islamic world.¹ It is unclear to what extent this *fatwa* (the legal opinion of an Islamic bureaucrat or teacher), written in 1899, is representative of the general perspective on the subject. Yet, it seems to reveal the conflicting judgments on nineteenth-century photography's realism. On the one hand, one's integrity and moral decency might have been corrupted by photography's ability to 'represent' one's shadow as well as one's personal image, which was equated to one's actual body. On the other hand, photography was connected to reality only contingently. Its ability to show the real is not temporally accurate and might result in vanity stemming from a denial of the linearity in time. It is exactly this bridging of the past and the present that the photographic medium offers which fascinated Said Nursî (1878–1960), just as it fascinated Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, André Bazin and others. For Nursî, the photographic (and the cinematic) image offers a gateway to the imaginary world, which he deems superior to the real, unlike his contemporary, Sabri.

Nursî was a thinker and the founding leader of a large Islamic movement known today as the *Nur* order. His ideas can be seen as a mixture of Islamic Esotericism and Sunni Islam and his main emphasis is on the nearing Apocalypse. Perhaps this angst regarding an inevitable end was ironically what drew him to a preoccupation with passages of time, grief, the everlasting movements of the universe and visions as signs from the divine. This focus is also at the intersection of his understanding of cinema as a medium to channel the divine source for his students.

Nursî rarely mentions going to the movies in his teachings but he admittedly saw the world through the lens of a camera that he calls the 'cinema of God'. The cinema of God, for Nursî, is a multidimensional

1. In Iran for example, Hamid Naficy highlights how minimal the role of the prohibition against human representation in the attitudes towards visual arts was. In the case of the reception of early cinema in Iran, the religious concerns were mainly directed toward the images of unveiled women (Naficy, 2011, 90–91).

time travelling machine which allowed him access to different time periods, simultaneously connecting 'here' and 'there' as well as 'now', 'then' and beyond. As Nursî travelled between different countries, and states of existence (being often in prison or exile), he witnessed tragedies and epiphanies which might have created an obsession with what he calls the 'changing landscapes of cinema' (Nursî, 1936). It is this obsession which this article charts.

As film-philosophy takes a turn towards a world of cinemas, lesser known philosophers of the Middle East and the Balkans, such as Nursî, and their views on cinema's potential to transform human consciousness and our visual perception of time, may contribute to a more inclusive understanding of film theory. In particular, engaging with the notions of multiple concurrent temporalities from the perspective of the Quran, Nursî's understanding of cinema offers a different view to existing theories of time in film, like, for example, that of Gilles Deleuze.

Moreover, Nursî's philosophical positioning of cinema is crucial for widening the horizon of our understanding of the world of cinemas. He approaches theology through films of the silent period from a transnational background, being a Kurdish man imprisoned by both Russia and Turkey, locations where he first opposed the Ottoman sultan and then the founder of the Turkish Republic. Thus, as an Islamic thinker and leader writing extensively on cinema in its early period, understanding Nursî's teachings may help the reader orient and contextualize not only film theory, but also film history.

Dealing with films from the early period in Turkey, Nursî's knowledge of cinema mainly covers what Tom Gunning famously dubbed the 'cinema of attractions,' whose self-reflexive characteristic provided an inter-relational model of reception for the spectator. For this reason, Nursî's views on cinema, as attempts to access the divine, offer a unique historical reaction to early cinema as a purely visual event rather than as a classically linear mode of storytelling practice.

Whilst it is true that Nursî made moralistic and didactic judgments concerning the lifestyle offered by cinema-going culture, this was of much less interest to him than the metaphysical connections and the visual journeys that he professed to have accessed, and found similar to, watching cinematic images. Although Nursî never mentions any particular film that he saw, he often makes close connections between cinema and his visions. We do know that these visions of the imaginary realm remind him of the movies he saw before he was jailed in 1925. As he mainly likens the experience of coexisting multiple timelines and the beauty of a moving landscape to cinema, it can therefore be safely speculated that these were most likely films made prior to the 1920s, where the storyline paid less

attention to narrative than visual appeal – spectacles such as a surprise element, illusion or trick, or landscapes foregrounded in their own right. It is to the cinema of attractions which we must turn, then, to understand Nursî's formulation of a 'cinema of God'. Before we do so, however, a very brief introduction to Nursî's life is a helpful way to commence.

Nursî's Life in Context

The Ottoman Empire, particularly after the 17th century, was predominantly under the influence of the state-supported, and so-called, Orthodox Sunni Islam. Although, at the beginning of the 19th century, religion and religious institutions were still part of the Ottoman governmental and administrative machine, we see an increased cleansing of these institutions from the stranglehold of religious authority with the start of the reformist movement (namely *Tanzimat*, pr. 1839–1876). The early 20th century allows us to see how the complexity of Turkey's relationship with secularism and Islam gained what was then a new momentum within the establishment of the new Republic in 1923. This is the context in which I would like to consider Nursî, who was an opponent of both the caliph Sultan Abdulhamid in the period of the Ottoman decline, and the founder of the Turkish Republic, Atatürk, who abolished the caliphate in 1924. Nursî was involved in a large-scale Kurdish rebellion, after which he withdrew from politics and focused solely on inviting people to the Islamic faith. It is his role in both the Islamic and the Kurdish movements that got him into trouble and led him to spend more than half of his life in exile or in prison. He became a grand figure in the *Nur* order, which evolved into a worldwide, transnational Islamic movement that is now led by Fethullah Gülen, estimated to have millions of followers and hundreds of schools around Africa, Central Asia and in the USA.

Nursî's early life was spent in Asia Minor, after which he moved to Istanbul in the early 20th century, where his interest in cinema grew. He then joined the Ottoman army during World War One, became a prisoner of war in Russia and was exiled to Siberia. When he returned to Turkey, he had troubles with the new Republican state², spending many years in prison and in exile between 1925 and 1952. He died in 1960 after a visit to some of his students in Ankara.

Nursî's lifetime coincides with a major change in the visual culture of the Ottoman world. The political attitude of the reform movement in the

2. He was often in conflict with the new Republican state because of his outspoken religious and political views on the aforementioned Islamic and Kurdish issues.

mid-19th century brought about a certain pragmatism and positivism. Science and industry became key words for Ottoman modernizers (Mardin, 1989, 136) and a cosmopolitan lifestyle was enjoyed by the public at large in the capital city. This lifestyle was also imbued with a transformation within the culture of spectatorship, which was initially experienced through a rupture in the late 19th century created by the global flow of mechanical images. In 1896, the first public screenings of the *cinématographe* took place and cinema gradually became a large part of the cultural scene, particularly in Istanbul. The international influence of early cinema attracted a curiosity-driven public, even if the same public was critical of the imperfect technology of the apparatus itself. With the outbreak of World War One, a nationalistic and conservative critique came to the fore particularly with regard to female spectatorship of popular European films, especially melodramas and diva films made in Italy in the mid 1910s. The end of the war caused the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic, after which cinema-going started to be gentrified and was seen as an educational tool, as well as a means of creating bourgeois public space, in the service of nation-building (Balan, 2010).

Nursî and Cinema

As a scholar of Sunni Islam, Nursî's main concern was to restore Islamic faith in God, which he assumed was weakening. Reading his teachings, one can become overwhelmed by his tireless struggle to prove the timelessness of the Quran. It is arguably with this purpose in mind, along with an obsession with scientific and technological developments, that he analyzes everyday interactions and objects (including technical devices and means of communications) from the perspective of the Quran. Among these, cinema offers a great opportunity for him to explain his visions about heaven, purgatory, the transition from life to death, eternity and the universe as a physical manifestation of God.

As noted previously, Nursî never makes any references to individual films, nor does he explicitly appreciate cinema-going. As a matter of fact, he deems those who are 'addicted to cinema, theatre and dance,' inappropriate and unhealthy from a puritan perspective (Nursî, 1949–1960). However, he seems to idealize cinema as a visual phenomenon by likening it to his spiritual visions an estimated sixty times in his writings.³ Considering that he spent his life in exile in small

3. This statistic occurs when doing a search for 'cinema' in the collections of his teachings online. <http://www.erisale.com/>

towns in Asia Minor, or in prison after the mid-1920s, his understanding of cinema is mainly of it as a visual event. As noted above, we can conclude from this that most of the films he saw were examples of the cinema of attractions, or films of the transition period (1907 to 1915) in which the more mainstream Western conventions of continuity were taking shape, towards the mainstreaming of the classical narrative which was soon to follow. In a few places, he also uses the term *cinematographe*, which may indicate that his familiarity with cinema began as early as the late 1890s. In many cases, he uses the phrase ‘changing landscapes in films’ as a possible sign for his fascination with a popular early film genre, the travelogue.

Nursî posits cinema mainly as a portal into the unknown, finding it similar to mental processes like dreaming, daydreaming, trance and other altered states of mind. In some cases, he calls cinema, *levh-i mahfuz*, which, in his teachings, refers to some form of tableau of the collective consciousness, where one can access both the past and the future. Nursî calls films ‘tableaus of cinema’, possibly stemming from the term for early cinema, *tableau vivants*, used in the French newspapers of Istanbul at that time. This ‘eternal’ tableau of the universal consciousness is a place that Nursî visits frequently in his visions, and in order to explain it to his students he likens it to cinema. In some instances, he uses phrases such as the ‘divine cinema’ or ‘the cinema of God’ (Nursî, 1933). In other instances, he mentions cinema in proto-semiotic terms where, according to him, verbal signifiers appear in visual form in the human mind similar to ‘the working of the cinema apparatus’ (Nursî, 1911). Whatever context it may be, for Nursî, the unchangeable function of cinema is that it is the perfect medium for visual communication, as it visualizes the workings of the human mind.

Thus Nursî appears to be fascinated by cinema’s ability to connect moving images and the human mind beyond temporal and spatial limitations. The past may appear in the audience’s present and, most likely, it shows a location where the audience has never physically been (Nursî, 1929–1934). The past and the future may appear in front of his eyes as though in ‘tableaus of cinema’ (Nursî, 1934). The deceased may see the heavens from their graves as if they are watching the cinema (Nursî, 1934). Even though he never says these are the capabilities of cinema, it is clear that these are possibly a way to help his students imagine what he means by using the metaphor of cinematic images. Nursî believes that he channels insights and visions in a very similar way to cinema and in order to explain how he channels from the divine source, he again uses cinema as an example. Therefore, the cinema’s connectivity is twofold: it helps him justify his connection with the heavens in his

mind, whilst also functioning as a metaphor to help his readers to clearly understand or envisage this connection with the divine. This is one of the reasons why Nursî uses the term ‘God’s cinema’ (Nursî, 1929–1934).

It is perhaps ironic, then, that as the time machine of the secular world, cinema, for Nursî, materializes transcendent visions. The cinema grounds the higher realms in his world. Whenever he needs to depict an extraordinary vision, such as witnessing the entirety of the movements of the universe in one single moment, he utters ‘just like the cinema’ (Nursî, 1935). Hence cinema for Nursî seems like a magical area of endless possibilities, but more than anything, he conceives of it as a time-travelling apparatus that reflects the image of God.

After Nursî was kept hostage in Siberia by the Russian army during World War One, he came back and spent a few years in Istanbul. In his autobiography, reminiscing about those days in Istanbul, Nursî mentions his cinematic contemplation on a hill facing an old graveyard, namely Eyüb Sultan (Nursî, 1919). His relating this contemplation to cinema might also be a reflection on some of the early footage of this famous graveyard in Istanbul that he might have seen in the cinema.⁴ As he views the landscape on the hills of Eyüb Sultan, Nursî senses all the departed of the past centuries who were buried in this graveyard. This feeling is followed by grief about transience and his mortality. Suddenly, the visitors of the graveyard begin to look to Nursî as if they were already dead. He considers this change in his vision as a cinematic trick and furthers the metaphor in a way that may remind us of Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image, the image of the deceased that was freed from the conditions of time and space (Bazin, 1960). Nursî claims, ‘the people of Istanbul at that moment all looked like walking corpses just as in cinema, where we can see the shadows of the past brought into the present.’ He travels into the future just as ‘the *shadows* of people recorded with the camera travel into the movie theatres’. He then says, ‘since these people at the graveyard look like they were in a film, I realized I was supposed to see them as if they will definitely be buried and that they are already dead’ (Nursî, 1934).

In this way, for Nursî, time does not pass in a linear fashion, for there is only an eternal duration. This is also how he experiences and explains the

4. One Pathé stencil film found in the Austrian Film Archive, *Turkey-Constantinople* (1910), shows that the intertitles that were inserted highlight the Muslim peoples’ visits to graveyards as a favorite pastime of this period. Although this found footage was filmed around a decade before this particular experience of Nursî’s, it is very likely that he saw some similar footage presented by a travelling showman.

concept of time in his writings. His obsession with time can also be seen in his choices of pseudo-names such as *Bediüzzaman*, which may mean ‘the master of time’ or ‘the son and wonders of time’. In most of the temporal experiences Nursî underwent, he deals with time leaps or the expansion of the present moment through which he feels his consciousness exists in different places at the same time. When he tries to explain the peculiarity of these incidents, he uses the analogy of cinema most of the time. It is true that he does not elaborate on this particular relationship of cinema as Hugo Münsterberg or Gilles Deleuze does, but his analogies may also be found to parallel the connections of the ‘photoplay’ with mental processes in Münsterberg (1916) or Deleuze’s ‘crystal image’ in which past and present coexist (1985: 66–94). This concept is a part of Deleuze’s overall transposition of Henri Bergson’s idea of duration into cinema (a somewhat similar, if distinct notion of time to Nursî’s), which also attempts to account for similar feelings of multiple consciousness through concepts like the ‘powers of the false’ (122–150).

D. N. Rodowick and Damian Sutton both develop Deleuze’s work to consider the ‘time-image’ as already existing in the early silent period, this despite Deleuze being somewhat dismissive of the temporal potential of early cinema due to his unfamiliarity with it.⁵ Helpfully for this discussion, Sutton draws our attention to the cyclical nature of Lumière films, in particular in *Barque sortant du port* (1895) and the movement of the boats in the sea that create a feeling of endlessness and repetition in time, which, in turn, reminds us of the passing of time. Along with a sense of endlessness and repetition, the instant that our attention is turned to the present moment, we also experience an immediate loss of the present (2009, p. 84). This self-aware sensitivity to time is what connects Nursî to early silent cinema as well. The sense of loss, however, is also the loss of connection for him, a sense of separateness. This is why, even in the most euphoric states, his writings are imbued with feelings of abandonment and longing, which is how he addresses the divine.

Further depth can be added to how Nursî conceived of time through cinema, in a manner that takes us in an altogether different direction to Deleuze’s more well-known reflections. On another occasion at the graveyard, Nursî’s gaze again switches between the present and the future state of humanity, or, to put it more accurately, he looks into the present

5. David Martin-Jones argues that the reconsideration of the movement-image and the ‘cinema of attractions’ may be beneficial in that early cinema might form its own Deleuzian concept, which he calls the ‘attraction-image’ (2011, 35).

and sees the future of these human bodies (Nursî, 1934). This gaze is informed by a different state of consciousness, as he does not simply hallucinate, but takes his vision for real. He maintains a calm or detached awareness that is capable of observing the thoughts, visions and his actual surroundings, as well as the surroundings in his visions. For him, this self-aware gaze is possible for the non-believer as well, though only if they have been in a cinema audience.

There are many early silent films that show characters watching cinematograph shows or looking through a keyhole, making eye contact with the camera or otherwise addressing the spectator in a very specific or direct manner. Nursî's analogy functions, then, most appropriately through the workings of the cinema of attractions, which invited an attentive audience through the use of attractions aimed to directly address the spectatorial gaze, a practice which was replaced by the appeal to a more voyeuristic perspective on a closed world under classical continuity editing.

In a book which Nursî wrote during his time in prisons in different cities of Asia Minor in the 1940s, he again mentions seeing into the future in relation to death and cinema (Nursî, nd A). However, this time there is a more moralistic and gender-biased attitude rather than an ontological reflection. Perhaps a little too voyeuristically, he watches young school girls from a prison window, around forty out of a number of fifty to sixty girls appear to him as dead and suffering in hell. Ten of them, in his vision, now look as if they are seventy or eighty years old and hated by people from whom they expect love, because of their inability to keep their dignity when they were young. He begins to cry and says it was real and not his imagination. Once more, in order to sound more convincing perhaps, he claims 'if they invented a cinema that would be able to show the future –say fifty years from now– just as the cinema that shows us our past –say fifty years ago– and if these girls were able to see their future selves in this film, they would be crying with self-loathing instead of laughing hedonistically.' Right after the vision of the girls, the devil appears to him and says, 'we want to taste and experience all the pleasures of life, leave us alone!' and then Nursî begins preaching about how human beings have to think about the afterlife (Nursî, 1931). In fact, the afterlife frequently appears in Nursî's visions in what he calls 'God's cinema', and it is here that his view on time, explained via cinema, becomes clearer.

In an altered state of mind, Nursî experiences time becoming intensified, through which past, future and what he called 'holy time' squeeze into one big moment. In this moment, he gazes into the heavens and sees the shadows of ancient prophets and saints reflected in 'God's cinema' (Nursî, 1931). To describe this process he also uses the phrases,

the 'divine cinema' and the 'photography of limbo' (Nursî, 1938). In this distinction appears Nursî's view on the difference between photography and cinema, a topic most frequently discussed in relation to the work of scholars like Barthes in the West. For Nursî, photography captures a transient or a temporary phase in the soul's journey into the unknown in the cycle of life and death. This idea might stem from the notion that photography freezes and separates the moment in still frames from what can be seen as its predecessors and successors. Meanwhile, the divine cinema is capable of recording the eternal life (Nursî, 1938). Perhaps it is the cinema's ability to convey motion that makes it more 'divine', since Nursî also likens the cinema to the movements of the universe in the same book, whose title can be translated as 'Illuminations'. He describes the universe's movements as 'attractions' of God, in an ever-increasing state of euphoria. It is through these attractions and euphoria, precisely, that the universe takes the shape of the 'cinema of God' (Nursî, 1938).

A further aspect of Nursî understanding of time can also be revealed by contemplating the resonances between his philosophy and the specificities of the cinema of attractions. Nursî explains that the landscapes within cinema change rapidly, which is something of a reflection of the universe. This analogy is clarified if we consider the train films, or phantom rides, of early cinema. Nursî's evocation of the changing landscapes of the cinema may perhaps be inspired by the phantom-ride footage of the Manakia Brothers shot during Sultan Reşad's visit to Thessaloniki (Manakia Brothers, Macedonia, 1911). The Manakia Brothers never admitted having public exhibitions, but Nursî shares a certain lugubrious detachment by way of his cinematic thinking of the self and world that suggests an acquaintance with the phantom-ride films.⁶

In phantom ride films we see the rapid change of beautiful landscapes from cameras mounted on trains. Considering the fact that 'Illuminations' was written in the 1920s when Nursî was in exile in a provincial town in Anatolia, it is very likely that he was describing the early travelogues

6. Nursî was not alone in thinking that cinematic spectatorship was a therapeutic tool useful for reflection. Peyami Safa was a secular novelist and another intellectual of the same period from Turkey and he makes the main character of his book, *Novel of a Hesitation*, advise a young woman to look at her life as if she is watching a movie. That way, he thinks, the woman will be able to detach herself from the drama of her life, be more observant of her emotions and thereby, take more responsibility. First published in 1933, *Novel of a Hesitation* might be Safa's only novel where the cinema appears to be a beneficial tool for young women (Safa, 1980). In most of his novels, where cinema plays a role in the narrative, it usually corrupts young women (Balan, 2015).

or phantom-ride films he saw in Istanbul at the turn-of-the-century.⁷ The phantom-ride films for Gunning do not only present sublime landscapes, but also imply a sense of loss and ‘a phantomization of the experience of self and world’ (Gunning, 2010, 64). Nursî’s writings, whilst preoccupied with a certain melancholia (possibly stemming from the years he spent in exile and prison), are also imbued with an understanding of the transience of the world very much in line with Gunning’s assessment of the affective nature of these landscapes. Wherever he looks, Nursî is filled with a sense of wonder that is death-aware. This death-aware, but ecstatic, gaze perfectly aligns with the perception of sudden replacements of presence with absence (and vice versa) that are found in the phantom-ride films. Thereby, an apparatus like the camera that, according to Benjamin, has the characteristic of giving the moment a ‘posthumous shock’ (1939, p. 175), becomes a very useful tool for Nursî’s teachings. However, unlike Benjamin, in Nursî’s case, it is more of a posthumous meditation, rather than a shock, perhaps because he perceived the world as a place defined less by distraction and stimulation and more by the flow of open-ended time.

Nursî did not only see the future-death of currently-alive human beings, he also actually witnessed devastation and loss in many instances. These enabled a reflection on the past for which he again turned to cinema to explain. Upon returning to his hometown after being held hostage in Russia after World War One, Nursî visited the school where he had taught and came across the devastation, loss and sorrow the city had undergone after its defeat. In this scene of tragedy, ‘the tableaux of happier times pass in front of my sight carrying the images of my old students and the joys of the past, just as the images of a movie’ (Nursî, 1934). Approximately forty years before Barthes, we see an obsession with an irretrievable past and death in Nursî as he presents his grief through an imaginary camera. The remembrance of death and the irreversibility of time which dominated Barthes’s notion of photography in *Camera Lucida* (1981) is here prefigured in Nursî’s mourning, albeit in a perhaps more detached mode. Nursî seems to be connected to his birthplace and loved ones via this machine in his psyche, like an ‘umbilical cord’, an analogy recently used by Kaja Silverman for contemporary analogue photography (2015, p. 7). Thus, Nursî deemed suffering necessary,

7. Between 1896 and 1899 in Istanbul, there were many cinema shows containing local images taken by foreign travelling showmen as well as travelogues from other countries (Özen, M, 2008 & Balan, C. 2010).

but only when it was *viewed* from a detached vantage point as if in a movie theatre. He comments on the seas and the earthquakes and likens their existence to chaos. However, he says ‘in order to learn from the violence and the horrors of life, one needs to watch them from a distance, as if we are viewing the changing landscapes of the cinema’ (Nursî, nd B).

The Cinema of a Hundred Thousand Faces

Nursî’s contemplation of, and from, a detached vantage is also integral to his view on existence. Nursî again evokes the cinematic apparatus when he sees the earth spinning around. Perhaps it is his spectatorship of this spinning that made him consider cinema, or what he terms in another context ‘the photography of a hundred thousand faces’ (Nursî, 1936), the most apt metaphor. Since in its most classical sense, photography can capture the face from only one perspective whereas cinema may reveal the same face from different angles in motion, Nursî thus tries to emphasize cinema’s multi-dimensional aspect when considering existence.

For Nursî, it is more difficult to prove non-existence than existence. He says that if you need to prove scientifically the non-existence of God, you have to search the entire universe and see that he does not exist. However, to prove his existence, only one example should be enough. For Nursî, cinema offers a great opportunity to explain the ways in which one can see the divine in visible forms, for it is a medium which specifically enables this. He believes cinema is also an explicable and perceptible tool for the inexplicable and imperceptible. In order to describe the resemblance between scientific explanations of natural phenomena and his own theological efforts, he uses the example of the cinematograph through which ‘the shadow of truth appears just as the ways the heavens descend to the earth’ (Nursî, 1911). In this respect, cinema for Nursî, belongs directly to the mind, or else it is an extension of the consciousness, an apparatus for seeing through to higher realms. Once again it is for him, a grounding medium through which the divine appears.

In fact, in different places Nursî directly utilizes the cinematograph as one proof of the existence of God: ‘watching the earth from the eternal source, the many faces of God appear just as the light bubbles flowing through the sun, refreshingly and delightfully, like the cinema’ (Nursî, 1936). For Nursî, spectatorship of the cinema, and of the world, is full of wonders, beauty and awe, as long as he sees them offering ‘paths to God’. In this way Nursî insists that the truth is shown by the cinema of God himself, as the filmmaker of the universe (Nursî, 1936). For this reason,

for the believer, ‘the eternal diversity of the universe’ resembles what he calls a ‘cinema of a hundred thousand faces’ (Nursî, 1936).

Finally, Nursî elaborates on the mental processing of audio perception and its relation to visual perception. In various different places he states that as soon as a human hears a word, the word appears in their mind’s eye and is replaced by another word – just as in cinema, where one frame is replaced by another.⁸ Therefore, according to Nursî, in the human mind the relationship between the signifier and the signified works in a similar fashion to cinema. He claims that the meaning of a word appears as a visual form in the mind as soon as the word is heard by the listener and a new word replaces the previous one (Nursî, 1911). Viewed cinematically, then, we might interpret Nursî’s ‘changing landscapes’, ‘cinema of God’ and his ‘hundred thousand faces’ in ‘holy time’ as analogies drawn from the self-aware spectatorial experience of the early silent cinema of attractions. Nursî seems to attribute a certain consciousness to the camera that recorded the phantom-rides and travelogues. This camera thereby captures time moving in space in an awe-inspiring manner and reflects a world reflecting on itself. It might have provoked melancholia as well as euphoria in a fashion that reminded Nursî of the passing and irreversibility of time– which, whilst at once evocative of Deleuze’s time-images (that provide, through discontinuous edits, glimpses of Bergson’s virtual whole of time in what could be considered a somewhat similar fashion), are entirely different in their direction and import due to the underlying Islamic traditions behind Nursî’s writing.

Nursî’s writings mostly cover the late 1910s and the 1930s, a period in which Münsterberg developed analogies between cinema and the human mind (1916) while Benjamin wrote ‘One-Way Street’ (1928) and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). This was also a period when other Turkish-Ottoman intellectuals – such as feminist novelist Halide Edip Adıvar, the communist poet Nazım Hikmet (Balan & Altuğ, 2015) and the relatively conservative-decadent writer Peyami Safa (Balan, 2015) – all wrote about film culture and used cinema as a metaphor for either human consciousness, American imperialism, or as an emancipatory tool for (or a corrupting force of) women. Nursî remains the only one who saw in cinema an opportunity to experience divinity.

8. I am not indicating that Nursî investigates ‘the brain as screen’, but such a connection is worthy of consideration. In another book called *Rays of Light*, he again contemplates death. He tells us that he loves death for it reminds him of eternity. He says, ‘when I watch the world that is transient from the perspective of the eternal source, I see the reflections of God as when I watch the cinematograph.’

However, the aim of this article is not to defend the dominance of an Islamic world view in terms of the scholarship of the period, in relationship to the lifestyle it offered (including early cinema going), or to position Nursî in film history (and theory) in an idealized fashion. Nursî was also a very moralistic figure, who had an openly judgmental perspective about the pleasures of life, including ‘being addicted to cinema’. Yet it is clear that he did not shy away from lovingly going to film shows, nor of using this experience as a channel and metaphor for his teachings, in most cases in an ontological and romanticized manner. If nothing else, this consideration of the influence of the cinema of attractions on Nursî’s thinking illuminates the intricacies and complexity of Islam’s relationship to mechanically-reproduced images at the turn of the twentieth-century, particularly in Turkey.

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