

The prince who contemplated his soul: Akbarian readings of Nacer Khemir's film *Bābā ‘Azīz*¹

O príncipe que contemplou sua alma: leituras akbarianas do filme *Bābā ‘Azīz*, de Nacer Khemir

Carlos Frederico Barboza de Souza *

Camilla Moreira Alves **

Translated by Brasil Fernandes de Barros***

Abstract

This paper aims to address two main issues: first, in what sense have Ibn ‘Arabī’s conceptions influenced or been present in the film “*Bābā ‘Azīz, the prince who contemplated his soul*”? Second, we also aim to interpret some scenes from this film production from the *Ṣayḥ al-akbar*’s point of view. To address this effect, we will discuss the concepts of “Spiritual Cinema” and “Mystical Cinema”. Following that, we will show the roots of the cinematographic and artistic production of Nacer Khemir, and, finally consider the presence of Ibn ‘Arabī in this film, as well as establishing Akbarian readings of it based on four headings: 1. the Akbarian perspective on the various paths that lead to God; 2. the mystical/contemplative gaze, which allows us to “see” the Real (*Ḥaqq*) with the eyes of the Real itself, accessing its secret (*ṣirr*); 3. the unveiling of the Real mediated by a woman; 4. the conception of knowledge through unveiling, as distinct from rational knowledge. The method used was based on a bibliographical investigation and image and sound analysis. We conclude by affirming an Akbarian influence in *Bābā ‘Azīz*, as well as we understand that establishing a type of Akbarian reading provides enriching reading keys.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabī. Nacer Khemir. Spiritual movie. Mystical movie. Islamic Mysticism.

Resumo

Este artigo tem como meta discutir duas questões: em que medida se pode entender que Ibn ‘Arabī e suas concepções influenciaram ou estão presentes na obra fílmica “*Bābā ‘Azīz, o príncipe que contemplou sua alma*”? Por outro lado, também se almeja ler algumas cenas desta produção cinematográfica a partir do pensamento do *Ṣayḥ al-akbar*. Neste sentido, em um primeiro momento, discute-se a concepção de “Cinema Espiritual” e “Cinema Místico”. Em seguida, apresenta-se as raízes da produção cinematográfica e artística de Nacer Khemir, para, por fim, discutir a presença de Ibn ‘Arabī neste filme, bem como estabelecer leituras akbarianas acerca do mesmo a partir de 4 tópicos: 1. a perspectiva akbari acerca dos diversos caminhos que levam a Deus; 2. o olhar místico/contemplativo que propicia “ver” o Real (*Ḥaqq*) com os olhos do próprio

¹ Research and article written with financial support from the Minas Gerais Research Foundation (FAPEMIG): APQ 00769-17.

Artigo submetido em 1 de abril de 2023 e aprovado em 30 de julho de 2024.

* Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora; Professor in the Postgraduate Program in Religious Studies at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais. Editor-in-chief of Horizonte, a journal of theology and religious studies.

** Master's student in Religious Sciences at the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC Minas).

*** PhD and Master's in Religious Studies at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais. Scholarship holder of the Postgraduate Development Program (PDPG) - Strategic Post-Doctorate of CAPES. ORCID: 0000-0002-5285-4871. E-mail: brasil@netinfor.com.br.

Real, acessando seu segredo (*sirr*); 3. O desvelamento do Real mediado por uma mulher; 4. a concepção acerca do conhecimento por desvelamento, diferenciando-se do conhecimento racional. A metodologia utilizada foi de pesquisa bibliográfica e de análise da imagem e do som. Concluímos que há influência akbariana em *Bābā ‘Azīz*, assim como compreendemos que estabelecer um tipo de leitura akbariana propicia enriquecedoras chaves de leitura a esta obra.

Palavras-chave: Ibn ‘Arabī. Nacer Khemir. Cinema espiritual. Cinema místico. Mística islâmica.

Introduction

The creation of a cinematographic project, mainly in its beginning, follows commonly a slow and solitary path, nevertheless rich in perspectives that bring out ideas, feelings, memories, and lived experiences. The inception of a cinematographic project, widely speaking, starts with an inspiring idea, which the creators then develop to delve into a specific theme. This idea can come from a wide range of sources. However, it is often born from the very depths of the unconscious and the human’s desires, as well as their ability to admire, contemplate and “read” meaningfully events and reality. It can also be said that it is born, in some way, from the spirituality of those who conceive it (LYNCH, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, we will use the notion of “spiritual film field” which will be conceptualized here later. In the same way, the filmic experience can arise from a type of experience that we call mystical or, equally, it can provide the audience with experiences of the same kind. From this perspective, we call it the “mystical film field” which will be discussed later.

This paper will consider this context to analyze the work of Nacer Khemir, “*Bābā ‘Azīz, the prince who contemplated his soul* (2005)”, from a spiritual and mystical field of cinema. Without claiming that one or another example is certainly influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī. This kind of assertion is only for the director of the work in question and the recognition of his creative processes. What we want to do here is to emphasize possible Akbarian readings present in the film - or which inspired it.

Our personal experience with this film begins with the impact it had on us when we first saw it during a meeting of the Ibn Arabi Society in New York, which sparked a desire to watch it and explore the richness and depth of its content. We noticed a certain mystery that dwells in its settings, and its beauty that reflects the depth of Islamic aesthetics and its symbolic reality, as well as its soundscape, beautifully created by Armand Amar. We have become curious about this film, its sources, and how they are portrayed through a rich cinematographic language from the experiences it provides. This film presents a diversity of “presence”, among which the great poets Rūmī, Neffari, Yunes Emre and ‘Aṭṭār stand out. However, this paper only aims to discuss the extent to

which Ibn 'Arabī and his conceptions of mysticism may be present in some way in this cinematographic work.

Initially, we will briefly discuss the relationship between cinema, religion, spirituality, and mysticism. Next, our discussion will present, widely, both the life and work of Nacer Khemir, as well as his filmic work, which is the subject of our study, describing his narrative and his choices of cinematographic language, including the great presence of the literary work “One Thousand and One Nights” in this cinematographic work. Finally, we will discuss the presence of Ibn 'Arabī in this film, as well as interpreting and commenting on some scenes based on this mystic who was born in Al-Andalus. We will do this, above all, based on some elements that seem to refer to this mystic: 1. the akbari perspective on the various paths that lead to God; 2. the mystical/contemplative gaze, which allows us to “see” the Real (*Ḥaqq*) with the eyes of the Real itself, accessing its secret (*sirr*); 3. the unveiling of the Real mediated by a woman; 4. the conception of knowledge through unveiling, as distinct from rational knowledge. It should also be borne in mind that the background to this entire narrative is a perspective based on the akbari vision richly developed by Henri Corbin (1997) about the “imaginal world” (*‘alam al-miṭāl*) and his conception of the heart (*qalb*) as an essential organ for mystical experience and knowledge.

The methodology used is based on Chrstian Metz (1972) and also on Manuela Penafria's paper (2009) on “Image and sound analysis”.

1. Cinema, Religion, Spirituality and Mysticism

The cinema is a mirror of the cultures and human manifestations present in its production. Among these manifestations lies the religion in its various expressions: communal, ritual, mystical, aesthetic, narrative, among others. When we bring cinema and religion together as a way of expression, we see a similarity in their languages and the sharing of certain horizons. Both occur in physical spaces² that create the proper conditions for the experience they want to be achieved. At the same time, they also operate with a narrative notion, structured from a movement that leads to a “turning point”³, from which a resolution is sought to a problem raised.

Cinema and religion also work with the individual's life experience, whether

² Here we are focusing on the reality of the cinema expressed in specific rooms for film projection and we do not take into account the cinematographic exhibition from other supports, such as TV, the internet, streaming platforms, among others.

³ By turning point we mean the crucial moments in a narrative when the plot takes a significant turn and the characters face important dilemmas or challenges, which will be resolved in the course of the plot afterwards.

religious rites challenged them or by darkened rooms with projections of sounds and images based on their experiences. Religious rituals and cinematographic language both employ a style that selects specific dimensions or aspects of reality, enabling individuals to have a deeper and more singular experience. Thus, filmmakers and religious practitioners choose specific dimensions or aspects of reality to articulate their rituals and cinematographic language. They separate and isolate a moment in time, an aspect of life, or a feeling in a certain way from its context. This allows for a deeper and more singular experience, and after this experience, they reinsert it into life, often in a new and meaningful way. Both frame reality, since “the most salient characteristic of ritual is its function as a *frame*. It is a deliberate and artificial demarcation. In ritual, a bit of behavior or interaction, na aspect of social life, a moment in time is *selected*, stopped, remarked upon”. (MYERHOFF, 1977, p. 200, *apud* PLATE, 2017, p. xiii). Cinema does the same: “the [câmera] *frame* makes the image finite. The film image is bounded, limited. From an implicit continuous world, the *frame* selects a slice to show us...” (BORDWELL; THOMPSON, 2001, p. 216, *apud* PLATE, 2017, p. xiii). Brent Platte makes the same clarification: “Cameras and rituals *frame* the world, *selecting* particular elements of time and space to be displayed. These framed selections are then projected onto a broad field in ways that invite its viewers/adherents to become participants, to share in the experience of the re-created world. The altar and the screen are thus structured and function in comparable fashion”. (PLATTE, 2017, p. xii, italics in original).

These phenomena feed back into the experiences and sensations that take the subject out of their everyday life so that they can then return to it and give it new meaning. Thus, as John Lyden states, the films and the religious rituals involve cognitive strategies to help us cope with life, enabling learning through the characters and the narrative in the films (LYDEN, 2003, p. 94-95). In this manner, the languages of religion and cinema can take their believers/spectators to an intense level of immersive experience in certain realities through the elements used.

On the other hand, the seventh art, through its languages and technical devices such as the darkened room, the striking sound projection and the impression of reality, as defined by Christian Metz (1972)⁴, can bring with it content and expressions uttered by different religions, allowing immersion in their realities and favoring certain experiences of spiritual traditions, their wisdom, grandeur and beauty. Because images,

⁴ By impression of reality, we mean the representation of the real world in imagery. The painting is full of simulacra, distorted concepts in which the imitation of things includes a creative act, a look and a momentary record of a situation. At the same time, it implies a psychological recognition on the part of the viewer that the narrative is believable.

as well as bringing feelings to the people who watch them, can lead the audience to subjective content.

This content can be reached in different ways and in different levels of depth, because even though there is the “field” described by Jacques Aumont as “the portion of imaginary space that is contained within the frame”⁵ and that the “image is limited in its extension by the frame” (AUMONT, 1995, p.21), interpretations can be attributed to a narrative in sub-layers of the cinematographic work. The various departments that make up a film examine these sub-layers as artifices, extracting content and symbolic expressions that add meaning to the work through thorough analysis. These meanings are marked by intentions that are part of the field or frame.

The concept of layers or sub-layers of a cinematographic production is important to us, as it allows for a variety of and infinite “interpretations” and understandings of the film. It is from these layers that cinema can be associated with spirituality. According to Glauber Rocha⁶, cinema is a trans-realist art, because it allows people to re-read their own reality. Through the cinematographic screen, the audience recreates its world, going beyond the “reality presented and lived” (DANIEL, 1999, p. 19), having the opportunity to experience a movement of the transcendent. Cinema enables this through a specific characteristic: “Human perception has gained special access to the intimacy of processes with cinema” (XAVIER, 2003, p. 42), which allows for capturing them in their depth or revealing hidden and subtle dimensions.

Cinema and spirituality thus form an interesting pair. But what can we understand as spirituality? Here, we understand spirituality as a human dimension that provides deep meaning to existence, diverse connections (with oneself, with others, with the cosmos and the Transcendent, whether or not religious), transcendence and the ability to integrate the diversity that makes up life and the person themselves (SOUZA, 2020, p. 116-118). The access to this spiritual dimension could characterize a certain type of cinematography that taps into the deepest meanings of subjects and their lives, provoking them. This can happen both from the perspective that a film - or particular scenes from it - can be produced at a level of depth that can be experienced from its deepest layers, and from the perspective that a film can provide its audience with varied and profound experiences of connection and meaning-making, including transformative,

⁵ A frame is the limit of the image represented on the canvas. A two-dimensional, limited representation, analogous in function to paintings or a frame.

⁶ Brazilian filmmaker associated with a movement in the country's cinema known as Cinema Novo. He states that cinema is a trans-realist art in an interview called “A passagem das mitologias” (The passage of mythologies) given in Sintra, Portugal, to João Lopes, in August 1981, and included in Sylvie Pierre's work. Glauber Rocha. Campinas: Papirus, 1996.

alchemical ones, which bring about fundamental re-significations in the viewer's life. Also, among the wide range of artistic expressions, cinema is the one that most provides those who approach it with an immersive experience because of the characteristics of its language. We would like to call this type of cinematography "Spiritual Cinema"⁷, in other words, audiovisual production born from the subtleties of spiritual language and perception and which access the spiritual dimensions of the audience. This cinema, in the words of Paul Schrader, is permeated by a style, namely a "transcendental style of film" (SCHRADER, 2018).

However, there is another concept that could be very useful to us: the Mystical Cinema⁸. This could be associated with two movements that do not always have to occur together: it arises from an unveiling experience of those involved in the production of an audiovisual and this experience shapes the very process of its creation and realization; or it is an audiovisual product that provides the audience with experiences that can be considered mystical. For this paper, mysticism is understood as a set of experiences associated with the following elements: the experience of a Mystery (whether in everyday life or in intense moments of experience), which presents itself in an ineffable way and challenges its expression in language (apophatic dimension) and which requires those who experience it to open themselves up to a certain condition of passivity or great receptivity to some broader reality or to the Sacred (JAMES, 1982, p. RODRIGUEZ, ; PINHEIRO, 2022; VELASCO), which provides a differentiated awareness of a Presence (MCGINN)⁹.

2. Nacer Khemir: his origins and cinematographic work

Mohammed al-Nasir al-Khumeir, more commonly known as Nacer Khemir, is an artist who was born in Korba, Tunisia (1948) and settled in France. He expresses his art in various areas, such as storytelling - following the example of his Andalusian grandmother, who was an expert storyteller - writing, calligraphy, painting - heavily influenced by Paul Klee - and sculpture, as well as significant filmmaking. His work has

⁷ Not that it is a film genre. However, Luiz Vadico's (2016) perspective on the Religious Film helps us understand we can speak of a cinematographic field. Vadico, appropriating Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "field", affirms the existence of a "religious film field" and not a genre. Here, the idea of the possibility of the existence of a "spiritual film field" or a "spiritual cinema" is also defended.

⁸ As mentioned in the previous note about the "field of the spiritual film", here we propose to think of it, if not as a field, at least as a style of film production and language.

⁹ Regarding Mystical Cinema, there are other expressions with which it can be referred to, such as Contemplative Cinema or Slow Cinema (with other perspectives associated with this concept, as expressed by Thomas Elsaesser, in *Stop/Motion* in Eivind Rossaak (ed.). **Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms**. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011. It includes filmmakers such as Tarkoski, Antonioni, Pasolini, Bresson and Kiarostami, among others) and Cinema of the Sublime (see Jeffrey Pence. *The cinema of the sublime: theorizing the Ineffable*. **Poetics Today**. 25:1, Spring 2004. It is also interesting to note that in the city of Granada, Spain, there is an annual film festival called "Cinemística" (<https://www.cinemistica.com/indexen.html>)).

been described as a great bridge of dialogue between different cultures, continents and artistic and religious expressions, especially with his emphasis on the Arab and Islamic worlds. In his story, he was greatly influenced by the classic “One Thousand and One Nights”, and in 1982 and 1988, he narrated several of its stories for several weeks at the Théâtre National de Chaillot in Paris. His sculpture and paintings are also significant and have been exhibited in important centers such as the *Centre Pompidou* and the *Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris*. Finally, he has published several books¹⁰.

As a filmmaker, he graduated in Paris and has won several awards in his career¹¹. He also has a rich and varied cinematography, with a strong relationship to the Islamic world. Some of his notable works include *Wanderers of the desert* (El-Haimoune, 1984). (2014); *Whispering sands* (2017); *Loving Wallada*, a docu-fiction (2019).

Through these films, he re-discusses the Islamic world and presents it through the lens of its aesthetics and beauty, as well as its wisdom, which makes his cinematographic work a significant production, even more so at a time marked by such reductive media readings of Islam. In his cinematography, he also tries to respond to anti-Islamic sentiment. As he himself says:

I would explain it with this allegory: if you are walking alongside your father and he suddenly falls down, his face in the mud, what would you do? You would help him stand up, and wipe his face with your shirt. My father's face stands for Islam, and I tried to wipe Islam's face clean with my movie, by showing an open, tolerant and friendly Islamic culture, full of love and wisdom... an Islam that differs from the one depicted by the media in the aftermath of 9/11 (OMARBACHA, n.d.).

Furthermore, we can say that his work contributes to the anti-colonialist¹² tradition of Arab and Tunisian¹³ cinematography. This tradition is known for its realism

¹⁰ Here are some books written by Nacer Khemir, dated according to the edition found: *Le livre des marges* (2019); *El cuento de los contadores de cuentos* (2007); *La quête d'Hassan de Samarkand* (2003); *Le chant de génies* (2001); *J'avale le bébé du voisin* (2000); *La grand-mère, le juge et la mouche* (2000); *Le livre des djinns* (2000); *L'alphabet des sables* (1998); *Paroles d'Islam* (1994); *Shéhérazade* (1987); *Grand-père est né* (1985); *Le conte des conteurs* (1984); *Le sommeil emmure* (1978); *L'ogresse* (1975).

¹¹ Among the awards received for his filmmaking, it is worth highlighting: *Palme d'Or and Premier Prix de la Critique, Mostra de Valencia* (1984); *Valladolid International Film Festival* (1984); *Grand Prix, Festival des Trois Continents* (1984); *Prix de la Première Oeuvre, Carthage Film Festival* (1984); *Grand Prix, Belfort International Film Festival* (1991); *Prix Spécial du Jury, Locarno International Film Festival* (1991); *Namur International Festival of french-speaking film* (1991); *Nantes Three Continents Festival* (1984 e 2005); *East-West Coexistence Award, Beirut Film Foundation* (2006); *o Golden Dagger, em Muscat Film Festival* (2006); *Prix Henri Langlois* (2007); *IBAFF International Film Festival* (2014). In addition to his awards, he has participated in several international film exhibitions.

¹² Several filmmakers of Arab origin have used and continue to use cinema to question and problematize social norms and denounce extremist situations. Examples include conflicts in the Middle East, gender inequality, religious conservatism and cultural identity. Tunisian cinema also fits into this libertarian perspective and has an anti-colonial tradition (SHAFIK, 2003, p. 247-250). In addition, it faces many challenges, such as limited funding opportunities, political instability and conservative social attitudes, which ultimately represent obstacles for Arab filmmakers.

¹³ With a limited visibility in Western societies, Arab cinema began as an industry in the 20th century. “*Leyla*” (1927), a film directed by Wedad Orfi and shot in Egypt - a country of great prominence in the region's cinematography - was a milestone for Arabic-language cinema. In the 1960s and 1970s, this cinema experienced significant growth and creative exploration. Filmmakers such as Youssef Chahine and Salah Abu Seif emerged, presenting a series of themes that

and diverse political and cultural perspective, often serving as a “cinema of resilience and resistance”. Thus, the historical context of Arab and Tunisian cinema is crucial to understanding the socio-political foundations that shape Nacer Khemir's narratives, one of whose characteristics is the ability to navigate complex social issues. However, it can be said that his anti-colonialism navigates and acts through cultural and aesthetic diffusion, which is present in looks that seek to be differentiated in the sense that they are not guided by a “westernized” aesthetic, but based on a way of looking and being born of the Arab Islamic world, with its rich historical, cultural and singular tradition (KHEMIR, 2010).

However, despite its realism, the Arab cinematic aesthetic often blends this realism with symbolic elements, using visual metaphors that will enhance the depth and complexity of its narratives. Nacer Khemir also uses weaves between the real and the symbolic, and frequently uses a dialog between images and allusive elements, through a particular narrative, in line with Arabic sound and musicality and specific scenarios related to the socio-cultural and geographical environment in which many of the Arab countries are located.

One perspective that stands out in several works by Arab and Tunisian cinema is the vision focused on female liberation through narratives that are frequently nuanced but no less critical and enable different perspectives on women's reality. In this sense, Nacer Khemir enters a unique way, celebrating the empowerment of women through diverse and rich protagonists, besides the fact that many of his films are based on storytelling, an art associated with women in the Arab world, such as the Šahrāzād of the “One Thousand and One Nights”¹⁴.

Additionally, Khemir has an interesting perspective that preserves, recaptures and works from collective memory, searching for and reviving identity issues through the exploration of deep inner life related to external reality, marked by scenarios that take up the aesthetics of traditional and popular Islamic art.

These characteristics of Nacer Khemir's cinematographic work are present in his

resonated with Arab society. Several countries also produced their own films, each with its own particular characteristics. In terms of Tunisia, the first public screening of a film took place in 1897, organized by Albert Shamama (also known as Chemama Chikly), who also made the first local production: a short fiction film called *Zuhra* (1922), the first Arab film production outside of Egypt

¹⁴ Another example of the influence of One Thousand and One Nights and the importance of the female narrative - now in literature - can be seen in Fatima Mernissi (2001), whose original title is “*Schherazade goes west*” (first published in 1994). Depending on the work, Tunisian cinematography also features an important female presence. In this sense, Moufida Tlatli is one of the leading names for her innovative contributions to Arab cinema. Known for her storytelling skills, Tlatli rose to prominence in the film industry in her first film as director, “*The Silence of the Palace*” (1986). She also stood out in “*The season of men*” (2000).

film *Bābā 'Azīz*, which we will discuss below.

3. *Bābā 'Azīz*: the prince who contemplated his soul

“*Bābā 'Azīz*, the prince who contemplated his soul” took a long time to be made¹⁵ and is the third film in the “Desert Trilogy”¹⁶. Lasting 98 minutes, it is a co-production that has involved several countries: Tunisia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Iran and Hungary, as well as working with several production companies: *Behnegar Films*; *Les Films du Requin*; *Zephyr Films*; *Pegasos Films*; *Hannibal Films* and *Inforg Studio*. The script was written by Nacer Khemir himself and Tonino Guerra. The cast includes actors such as Golshifteh Farahani, Parviz Shahinkhou, Maryam Hamid, Nessim Kahloul and Mohamed Grayaa and Hossein Panahi. It also has Mahmoud Kalari as director of photography and the soundtrack was created by Armand Amar; the production was directed by Cyriac Auriol and the cinematography was signed by Mahmoud Kalahari¹⁷

The film was recorded almost entirely in Persian, except for some parts in Arabic, and was filmed in Tunisia and Iran. The relationship with Iran stems from his personal history: as a child he received a card from his sister with the title “The prince who contemplated his soul”. (PAPAN-MATIN, 2012, p. 109; OMARBACHA, n.d.).

Bābā 'Azīz, is metaphorically dedicated his elderly father, Sidi Muhamed Bentaher al-Khemir, and carries various expressions of the Islamic world, as well as its rich and beautiful medieval tradition. Moreover, this film follows September 11, 2001, which meant the reproduction of a negative view of Islam that was very present in various Western media. With *Bābā 'Azīz*, Nacer Khemir wants to help Islam show its face: its beauty (*jamāl*) and its culture (KHEMIR, 2010). Khemir, who prefers the image to verbal narrative to present his history (HMIDA, 2022, p. 54), addresses the wisdom, hospitality, love and tolerance of the society depicted in the film.

3.1. *Bābā 'Azīz*: the work's narrative and structure

Bābā 'Azīz is a rich and complex work in its narratives and use of cinematographic language. It takes us back to the story of “One Thousand and One Nights”, showcasing the complexity of its narrative, conception, and language.

¹⁵ According to Nacer Khemir himself, in an interview for the Al Jazeera network, it took him 12 years to complete this production, mainly due to his commitment to raising the necessary funds to make and produce the film

¹⁶ The two other films in this trilogy are: *Wanderers of the desert (El-Haimoune, 1984)* e *Le collier perdu de la combe (Tawk al hamama al mafkoud, 1991)*.

¹⁷ For access to the full credits, see <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0395461/fullcredits>.

3.1.1. *The Book of one thousand and One Nights (kitāb 'alf layla wa-layla)*

A book with ambivalent symbolism and a dichotomous character that embraces the concrete and the abstract, the material and the spiritual, the intuitive and the conceptual, the subjectivity of expression and the objectivity of the collective attribution of meaning, “One thousand and one nights” resembles a rich kaleidoscope in which meanings and perspectives interact with each other and are constructed. As if the diversity of stories in it were not enough, plurality has made up it since its beginnings, coming from different regions and peoples, collecting diverse oral traditions and literary genres¹⁸. However, one genre stands out: the *asmār* genre, i.e. a type of narrative that expresses itself in nocturnal storytelling.

Its storytelling strategy is based on the frame-tale or pretext-tale¹⁹, which works as follows: it draws an initial scene and gives it a closure. This story's beginning and end will form a kind of frame, justifying the inclusion of a diverse narrative collection within it. Without this frame, the collection would be like a “patchwork quilt”, lacking a sense of cohesion²⁰.

According to Jamil Almansur Haddad, when he prefaced the translation of “One thousand and one nights” to Portuguese (HADDAD, 1961), it has an “infinite character”. Mariza Werneck confirms his interpretation (WERNECK, 2020, p. 19-24). This character of accessing or suggesting infinity is present in its very title, which, rather than forcing itself to be a narrative of 1001 stories, signifies its infinite character, with one relatively incomplete story giving rise to another, forming an endless chain of narratives and meanings that open up infinitely. In fact, this work “never achieved a definitive form, and never established a canonical version, even after it was printed. It is an eternally unfinished book, whose destiny is to be eternally rewritten” (WERNECK, 2020, p. 20). And interestingly, these stories are told at night, which turns Šahrāzād²¹ - the main narrator of these stories - into a “nocturnal narrator, [who] wisely ritualized speech and silence. Her stories, immersed in a profound nocturnality, create new mysteries”

¹⁸ These include: *Hurāfāt*: fables; *Ahbār*: chronicles and news; *Maṭāl*: exemplary history, moralizing, with a didactic objective; storical genre.

¹⁹ A very common storytelling strategy among Persians and Hindus and also present in other Arabic literary works, such as *Kalila and Dimma*, the *Wise Sindbad*, the *1001 Nights*, among others.

²⁰ In the case of “One thousand and one nights”, the frame-tale articulates around 4 narrative blocks that combine and maintain a certain independence from each other: 1. the story of Chahriar as king; 2. the story of Chahriar's journey in search of knowledge; 3. the story of *Šahrāzād*; 4. the story told by *Šahrāzād*'s father about a farmer who knew the language of animals

²¹ Fatima Mernissi's understanding of the figure of *Šahrāzād* is that she was impressed to realize how for many Westerners she was considered an “entertainer, the simplest charmer, someone who tells innocuous stories” (MERNISSI, 2001, location 315). According to her, in her culture, *Šahrāzād* “is seen as a courageous heroine and is one of our rare female mythical figures, a strategist and great thinker who uses her psychological knowledge of human beings” (MERNISSI, 2001, location 321).

(WERNECK, 2020, p. 13).

Even though there is this novelty of unusual mysteries always present in the narratives, it is nuanced by great repetitions, with subtle variations between them, but no less repetitive, making us think of a narrative technique that ritualizes the telling to provide different experiences with each narration. Because of the repetitions, it is created narrative structures that make easier for the listener or the reader to follow their own paths, based on the precise and clear signposts explained in well-organized, well-lit places, rooms and architectures with clear and precise objects. In addition, these stories are circular, creating a system of perfect fit in which the end of one story demands the beginning of another, and so on, *ad infinitum*. It is thus a text in a state of continuous flux.

It is possible that the stories that make up the Book of One thousand and one nights had an oral source prior to their writing - or, at least, that this work should reiterate the language of orality - so that it reproduces “enchanted formulas that produce in the sultan a true bewitchment” (WERNECK, 2020, p. 36), delight or enchantment, realizing an experience that takes him away from his decision to kill his wives. The sultan undergoes a transformative initiatory experience through a true storytelling. In this sense, it has the “dimension of the revelation of a mystery” (WERNECK, 2020, p. 37), making use of a rich work with the human senses, suggesting memories, experiences and different nuances of experience from them. Thus, various tastes and smells, sensations, sounds, objects to be seen, touched, tasted and smelled are presented.

Finally, the work embodies an existential perspective that can be discovered in the text, symbolizing a route, a path, for dealing with existence and the ruptures present in it. Thus, themes such as travel and space-time relationships are very present in this work. The work develops the transformation of the reader, teaching them to look at life from a new perspective, and presents a multitude of stories that unfold in an unlimited and chaotic manner, inflating the language and symbologies instead of imposing a certain fixed and ordering structure.

Similarly, we can consider the film *Bābā 'Azīz* as incorporating and making use of various resources present in “One Thousand and One Nights”.

3.1.2. *Bābā 'Azīz: a plural story of searches, unveilings and glimpses of love*

“*Bābā 'Azīz: the prince who contemplated his soul*” presents the story of a Sufi

*dervish*²², Bābā ‘Azīz, whose life trait is detachment and placing himself with faith on a mystical-spiritual path, open to the unusual experience of meeting the Real (*Ḥaqq*), in Ibn ‘Arabi’s language. The film does not explicitly address this type of pursuit, but it hints at it metaphorically by showing in the opening dialogues that Bābā ‘Azīz is going to a meeting (4:1" 5:5") that takes place every 30 years. The idea of 30 years, of a journey towards a meeting, and the presence of two hoopoes at the beginning of the film (3:1") seems to show a strong influence from the book “The language of birds” (*Manṭiq al-ṭayr*), by ‘Aṭṭār (ATTAR, 2011), already hinting at the direction of the narrative. In this work, the hoopoe²³ guides several birds to Mount Qāf²⁴, where a female bird, *Simurğ*²⁵, lives. Only 30 birds reach their final destination.

Bābā ‘Azīz, which means: “dear father”²⁶ or “door/portal”²⁷ makes his journey in the company of his granddaughter, Iṣṭar²⁸, representing the possibility of transition, connection, which connects different spaces, histories, lives, generations. He also walks, transits, towards a “portal”, that is a definitive passage. He travels across the immensity of the desert in a journey marked by the story he tells about a prince who abandons everything when he comes across the image of his soul at the bottom of a pit, and by the stories of three other characters: Hassan, Zaid and Osman. In the case of these characters, their stories are also related to an intense and longing search for an encounter, driven and motivated by love, whether it is experienced in relationships with women or with a missing brother, which is the situation experienced by Hassan. And all of them face the absence of their love objects, which increases their love and suffering, expanding their search.

In his journey and itinerary, Bābā ‘Azīz guides these other characters, because even though he is blind and does not know where the meeting will occur, he has a certain “orientation” for his walk. Bābā ‘Azīz’s ‘guidance of the other characters in the story,

²² Throughout this film, there is no reference to Sufism as such. And within Islam there are various mystical-spiritual groups that do not call themselves Sufis and even differ from it - although they also have some kind of mysticism - such as *‘irfan*, *malāmatiyya* and *qalandariyya*. However, due to the themes addressed, as well as the poetry present and the style of the narrative, it seems that we can say that this film reminds us of Sufism (cf. SOUZA, 2005).

²³ The hoopoe is King Solomon’s Koranic bird which represents his wisdom, having served as his messenger to the kingdom of Sheba. For this, it received “a crown of glory”, a reference to the plume that adorns its head.

²⁴ In Islamic cosmology, Mount Qāf represents the mountain that surrounds the earth. According to Iranian cosmology, this mountain is the support, the sustenance of the earth, and at the same time the mother of all mountains. In poetry, above all, it will be seen as the mountain of wisdom and happiness, the place where *Simurğ* dwells.

²⁵ *Simurğ* is the feminine name of a mythical bird whose origins can be found in the Zoroastrian sacred scripture Avesta.

²⁶ ‘Azīz, in Arabic, can mean “powerful”, “respectable” and/or “loved”. It originates from the Arabic ‘azza, which points to meanings such as “to be valued” or “to be powerful”. It is also one of the divine Names: Al-‘Azīz “The Beloved”.

²⁷ Bāb in Arabic also means door, gate, portal, like the gates of mosques or city walls.

²⁸ Iṣṭar is a name from Mesopotamian mythology, associated with Sacred Marriage, as well as themes such as sexuality, eroticism, love and war. Cf. SUGIMOTO, David T. **Transformation of a Goddess: Ishtar - Astarte – Aphrodite**. Zurich: Academic Press Fribourg, 2014; BUDIN, Stephanie Lynn. Creating a goddess of sex. in: BOLGER, Diane; SERWINT, Nancy. **Engendering Aphrodite**. Women and society in ancient Cyprus. Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2002, p. 315-324.

including Iṣṭar, brings us face to face with two themes: the master/disciple relationship and initiation.

A master (*muršid* or *ṣayḥ*) is essential for the disciple's (*murīd*) process of entry and development on the mystical path, which occurs through an initiatory process that takes the gnostic out of his daily life and introduces him to another level of experience that allows him to see and perceive his path and life differently. Its importance is because the journey on the path is complex, full of dangers, risks, and tribulations to be faced alone. As a famous Sufi adage says, "Without a teacher, I would never know my Lord". A pupil who wants to walk without a teacher is like an ill person who wants to be cured without a physician. According to Éric Geoffroy, "The sheik is the physician of souls, the mediator between God and man, the support of contemplation for his disciple". (GEOFFROY, 2003, p. 219). Thus, the master is the *qibla* (guidance of Mecca) for his disciple, as the Koran states: "Behold those whom God has directed. Conform to their guidance" (C 6:90).

The initiatic relation has its foundation in the disciple-master relationship. In this relation, the disciple must be totally transparent and open to initiation into a specific experience, in order to be invested by the master with his spiritual state. And Iṣṭar goes through a real initiatory process, going from the condition of the one who wants to abandon the desert path presented at the beginning of the film (3':56") to that of the one who leads the character Zaid to his love encounter (from 1:22':20"), passing through the desire to continue on the path only "to find out how the prince's story will end" (21':38"), similar to the book "One thousand and one nights". And in the middle of his journey, he has an experience of unveiling, which we will mention later. Hassan, too, almost at the end of the film, is invested with the cloak of Bābā 'Azīz (1:30") after a search for his brother, being robbed of his clothes (56':55")²⁹ and experiencing the fear of death. The donning of a cloak, in many *ṭuruq* (plural of *ṭariqa*), is an important ritual that symbolizes the transmission of the *baraka* from a master to his disciple and is one of the gateways to the path. However, the paths are many and there are various ways to walk them.

3.1.3. "There are as many paths to God as there are souls on Earth"

The film has a linear narrative that interleaves on screen the journey made by the *Dervish* and his granddaughter through the desert with the story he tells about a prince

²⁹ "In order to 'put on God', man must first be naked." Stéphane RUSPOLI. *Le livre des théophanies d'Ibn Arabî*, p. 111, nota 1.

who had a “boring” life (11':14-25") and is amazed and ecstatic at the contemplation of his soul in a spring of water. It is the prince's narrative that serves as a frame for the others, giving them meaning and unity. Meanwhile, the other narratives provide the frame narrative with the possibility of expanding its meanings, as well as explaining different perspectives that are not always explicit in the frame story, presenting shades in the way the main story is understood. For example, Osman's story (narrated from 30':46") brings the idea of the search for union with the Real and the experience lived by the three moths (1:11':25"ss), told by 'Attār in the “*Language of the birds*” (ATTAR, 2011, p. 223-225)³⁰, and which point to the “language of the birds”. (223-224), showing the loving desire that leads to the experience of the last valleys through which the birds pass in their search for *Simurğ*: the valleys of Unity (*tawhīd*), Perplexity (*ḥayra*) and, finally, Poverty (*faqr*) and Annihilation (*fanā'*). And this same narrative contributes to the understanding of the frame-tale which is the story of the prince who contemplated his soul.

In the opening seconds of the full-length film, we are surprised by traditional percussive beats and Sufi singing, which partly takes up the *Bismillāh*. The sounds of the film and the musical tracks are essential for the rhythmic construction of the story, for the creation of a specific environment that allows for ecstasy, wonder, a new look and the experience of a meaning beyond.

We hear the musical beats on the darkened screen. Little by little, a dome is revealed, engraved with various symbols and shown in a circular pattern. Then, from a dry cutting, we see a “red-haired *derwish*”³¹ spinning in alternating shots and frames with a camera that slightly sways, following the man as if he were spinning the *samā'*. Sound and image together, portraying a fictional space/time like the one described, invite us to share in this same experience, which already hints at another logic of perception: not the rational one, but an intuitive one, which is reached through mystical unveiling, as we will discuss later. Then the red-haired *derwish* falls, as if in ecstasy or having experienced the process of annihilation (*fanā'*). Then, with a fade, the text is inserted: “There are as many

³⁰ Although 'Attār narrates this story, it precedes him. Hallaj, in his *Kitāb al-Tawāsin*, already mentions it. Perhaps he was the first to record this analogy. Also, Rūmī, Rūzbiḥān Baqlī and Najmuddin al-Rāzī (ÖZTÜRK, 2019, p. 61).

³¹ We cannot explore the character of the red-haired *derwish* in this text. From the point of view of the film narrative, he fulfills interesting functions. The first seems to be to introduce another logic into the narrative behind a more visible logic, as he often appears in the background of scenes reciting some mystical poem. This means that the scene unfolds with a specific theme and the *derwish*, in the background, provides a subtle reading key that helps us understand the deeper meaning of what is unfolding in the narrative. These keys are often contradictory, presenting a *coincidentia oppositorum*. Finally, he also acts as a madman, referring to the significant story of “*Layla and Majnun*”, so characteristic of the Islamic tradition and which brings the theme of the madness of love, that is, the strong love search experienced by Majnun in the face of an impossible love and, at the same time, the search that takes place beyond a certain rationality, resonating madness, but which actually reveals another form of knowledge.

paths to God as there are souls on earth" (1':55").

Immediately after the initial scene described above, there was silence. In fact, it is the screaming silence of the wind. The howling silence of the desert that already becomes poetry just by presenting it in images. The poetry of the sound contrast made in a dry cutting, of the singing and swirling image of the sand that swirls and sings like a Sufi. There is a panoramic image of the desert, from which the characters emerge. Symbolizing unpredictability and mystery, the vast desert also represents the vastness of the journey. The camera, in circular movements, shows the cycles of each person and the challenge of circling before God. The desert itself is an important character in this film (OMARBACHA, 2006). As Nacer Khemir himself says, demonstrating a true correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm:

I believe that the desert stands for many things at the same time. It is a place with minutely small particles of sand while it is also the place of the infinitely vast. So, the desert for me is a smaller scale of the universe, so to speak. The desert is also the place where the Arab language was born and where Islam has prevailed. The desert is also the symbol of the notion of emptiness, which for me lies at the core of Islamic culture. There is something about the desert which surpasses our sense of time. At the same time, it represents the "now" and the "past" (ARSIYA, 2017).

Then the two main characters, *Bābā 'Azīz* and his granddaughter *Ištar*, appear in the film, uncovering themselves from the sand that covered them after a sandstorm. As if springing from the desert - and at the end of the film *Bābā 'Azīz* will once again will cover himself with desert sand, this time in his grave - these characters appear and two singing hoopoes also appear, showing a certain logic to the film, similar to the logic present in 'Aṭṭār's work, "The Language of Birds" (*Manṭiq al-ṭayr*). They appear discreetly, quickly and simply (3':10'), just enough to remind us of their importance in understanding the story. Like the birds in 'Aṭṭār, our characters have to travel through "valleys" on their way to meet the "*Simurḡ*", because to get there - to the meeting of dervishes that takes place every 30 years - "some cross mountains, others seas. And we through the desert", as *Bābā 'Azīz* says to *Ištar* (45':15").

Here we can see the representation of the opening sentence of the film: "There are as many paths to God as there are souls on earth" (1':55"). This phrase, often attributed to Rūmī³², also reflects Ibn 'Arabī's perspective on the plurality of paths. And it portrays the perspective of the film *Bābā 'Azīz*, in which various paths are described,

³² In this regard, Eva Meyerovitch makes a similar reference to Rūmī: "Many paths lead to God" (*Mystique et poésie en Islam*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1972, p. 83), but he chose the path of dance and music.

related to each character in the story and also showed by the movements of the walkers, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left, sometimes the camera capturing from one perspective, sometimes the camera going beyond the “180-degree rule”³³. At the same time, the multiple paths show the importance of the uniqueness of each trajectory, because “Everyone has their own path” (45':11") and “Everyone uses their most precious gift to find the way” (22':10"), because “an essential theophany is always effected through the form of the predisposition of the one who is its beneficiary” (IBN 'ARABĪ, 1998, p. 79). Thus, there is a diversity of paths to the Real and, at the same time, there is an infinite diversity of manifestations of this Real for each walker, according to their being and their history. Everyone has to discover their path when walking and make use of what is theirs: singing, for example, in Zaid's case.

Šayḥ al-akbar anchors his plural perspective on human journeys towards the Real in his conception of the cosmos (*'ālam* or *ḥalq*): this is a dynamic manifestation of *al-Ḥaqq*, in its dimensions of *tašbīh* (closeness, similarity to the cosmos and creation, immanence) and *tanzīh* (differentiation, distance, from the created, transcendence). In this condition of His, everything is “He / not He” (*hwa la-hwa*), who manifests Himself through the divine Names (*asmā ilahiya*) through the infinite reflection of His theophanies (*tajalliyāt*). If the cosmos, as a manifestation of *al-Ḥaqq*, is this infinite and fluctuating dance between *tašbīh* and *tanzīh*, the paths of each person towards the Real also take part in this dynamic and unusual non-repetition and infinite innovation. Thus, the possible paths are also infinite, unrepeatable, innovative in each expression, and unique.

Another possibility for thinking about the “many paths of God” is the diversity of beliefs. The film does not address this perspective, at least in any explicit way, but it does not exclude it. In this manner, there is the possibility that the various paths could also mean the paths of the various religious traditions, as Ibn 'Arabī so well explains in his poem XI, in the *Tarjumān al-ašwāq*:

My heart could welcome every form.
It is a feeding ground for gazelles and an abbey for monks!
It is a temple for idols and the Ka'ba for the pilgrim (*qui en fait le tour*),
he is the Tablets of the Torah and also the leaves of the Koran!
The religion I profess is the one of Love.
Where the caravans (*montures*) of Love turn, this is my religion and my faith. (IBN 'ARABĪ, 1996, p. 94).

³³ The “180-degree rule” is a cinematographic production rule that aims not to invert the order of the characters on screen especially when they are in dialog or moving in one direction, so that they always appear in the same place within a scene. If this limit is exceeded, it creates visual confusion and the characters end up changing places. This overstepping is only appropriate when it enters the cinematic discourse, as is the case in Bābā 'Azīz. And in this case, it serves to signify something.

In the poem above, Šayḥ al-akbar shows six elements that points to the diversity of beliefs and nature and that can be thought of both from the perspective of a process that occurs in stages towards the “caravans of love” and from the perspective that “Wherever you turn, there is the face of God” (C. 2:115). These are: 1) the pasture for the gazelles; 2) the cloister for the monks; 3) the temple for the idols; 4) the *Ka'ba* for the pilgrims; 5) the pages of the *Torah*; 6) the leaves of the Koran. Somehow, at least some of these elements are found in Bābā 'Azīz, such as the gazelle, the recitation and auditory references showing the Koran and the direction of Mecca (*qibla*), present in the underground mosque (which begins to be shown just before 47').

Ibn 'Arabī sought to bring the Islamic tradition to life in its entirety. And he did so in a unique way. Above all, through his ability to integrate diversity into Unity, combined with his universal vocation to integrate the beliefs and currents of humanity. Thus, he is the representative of the human category of the *Muhammadans*, those who are qualified to develop an integrating capacity like the Prophet Muḥammad, who realized the integrating dwelling. And in Bābā 'Azīz, both the different stories and experiences are integrated and lead to the “encounter”. And they are integrated into the frame-narrative of this film, about the prince who contemplates his soul.

3.1.4. *The prince who contemplated his soul: a frame narrative by Bābā 'Azīz*

Throughout the film, at several points³⁴, Bābā 'Azīz tells the story of a prince (9':43"ss) who had an insensitive life, like the water brought by his servant and which he tastes. The gazelle leads this prince to a pit or a fountain³⁵ in the desert. The gazelle is an important animal in mysticism and universal literature. According to F. Viré, “without the gazelle, Arabic literature would have been without an important source of inspiration” (VIRÉ, 1991, p. 1037). She represents divine beauty, but, at the same time she is an elusive being who flashes her presence, but who disappears in the face of any strange movement. According to an ancient Semitic image, she is associated with beautiful young women (LOPEZ-BARALT, 2020, position 2323). Her beauty attracts and generates a dynamic search, just as the prince found himself drawn to this gazelle who led him to a spring in the middle of the desert. This fountain struck him with what he saw at its bottom: his own soul.

³⁴ Like *Šahrāzād*'s storytelling, which was interrupted daily as a way of keeping Sultan Šaryar's attention. In Bābā 'Azīz, the interruption of the narrative traps Ištār, who wanted to leave, on his way to meet the dervishes.

³⁵ The symbolism of the fountain appears other times in the film, such as at 31':10", when Osman falls into the fountain. Later, Hussein contemplates a translucent fountain, reflecting a dome and moving slightly (35':14"). The fountain also appears next to Osman, when he counts the money for his departure (37':48").

This time, for days and nights, the prince remains motionless and ecstatic, contemplating the bottom of the fountain, even being abandoned by everyone around him (18':38"), with only a *dervish* who understood the scene staying by his side, "making sure his soul was not lost". Next to the pit we see a tree, simple and with dry branches, but symbolic, like the water. The prince seems to contemplate his image at the bottom of the water. However, his contemplation is of a different order: "Only those who are in love to see their own reflection. [...] He is contemplating his soul" (18':36" - 19':02"). This is not a narrative associated, therefore, with Narcissus in the Greek world, who falls in love with his image reflected in the water. Here it goes further. There is a falling in love with his own soul.

The scene then returns to Bābā 'Azīz narrating the prince's story to his granddaughter, who has fallen asleep. It is night, Bābā 'Azīz enters a silent and contemplative attitude. The full moon appears in the background and the music of Armand Amar, "Poem of the Atoms" starts performing the passage from one scene to another. This song takes up a poem by Rūmī, which deals with the ecstasy of a love encounter. Later, the narrative about the prince continues (29':44"ss). Now it is night and the light of the moon illuminates the scene. The gazelle is also present. At this point, the water in the fountain reflects the moonlight and bubbles come out of it. Armand Amar's soundtrack comes into play again: "You created the night; I made the night". And important elements of the Islamic and Akbari conception are present, such as the "logic of reflection", the similarity of the divine manifestations and reflections (*tajalliyāt*) that make up everything. Also, the perspective of the night, which "hides and protects" the lovers in their intimate and profound encounter, while indicating the need to purify, to polish the mirror that is the heart (*qalb*) so that it can be a more effective reflector of the diversity of divine Names. And even the moon has its symbolic function in this scene composition: it has no light of its own, but it is a support that reflects another Light and thus illuminates.

In the prince's scene, we are caught by his gaze fixed on the fountain, as if he were looking at a mirror statically. To look in the mirror, according to López-Baralt, is to ask oneself about one's own identity (LÓPEZ-BARALT, 2000, p. 64), showing a deep search for who we are. Michael Sells complements this idea by adding the perspective that, with Sufism, the mirror also represents the possibility of a process of polishing it so that it can clearly reflect the Real. Deep identity, therefore, in order to be "seen" and "contemplated" clearly, needs to be polished so that the mystical awareness of the deep union between the Self and *Allāh* can manifest itself (SELLS, 1994, p. 144). Ibn 'Arabī also makes use of

the symbolism of the fountain in *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* II, 447. And the symbols of the fountain and the mirror are associated with the symbol of the eye and the gaze, since, above all, the fountain and the eye are related in Arabic, since the word for both is the same: *'ayn*, which also means, in some way, identity and essence (LÓPEZ-BARALT, 2000, p. 64; CARBÓ, 2023, p. 1). Thus, the bubbling, living fountain shows the prince is in contact with his origin, his root, his source, like the fountain that gives rise to a watercourse.

About looking at and contemplating the Real, Ibn 'Arabī says: “When the Beloved reveals, with what eye do you see Him? With his eye, not with yours, for none other than He sees Him”. (RUSPOLI, 2000, theophany 85), along the lines of the *ḥadīṭ qūdsi*, “I am the eye through which my servant sees”. In other words, one looks at God with one's own divine eyes. At the same time, these divine eyes are marked by the human being who looks, because the divine eyes “see” according to the human essence. In this way, according to a famous adage: “He who knows himself knows his Lord”, what the prince does when he looks at his soul is to contemplate the Real in the depths of himself. Therefore, by contemplating his soul at the source, he lives a mystical experience that can only occur after a process of annihilation (*fanā'*) of himself, showing a certain death and transformation of his gaze, through which the Real can see himself and the prince sees his soul marked by the presence and gaze of the Real that dwells deep within him.

An essential element in all of this is the heart, a mystical organ, that the film does not explicitly deal with this. However, as it is the locus of the encounter with the Real, it resembles the soul contemplated by the prince. Thus, we understand that when the prince contemplates his soul, he contemplates the depth of himself, the place where the human and the divine meet, communicate, and unite, like the heart (*qalb*). This process is mediated by perplexity (*ḥayra*) and secrecy (*sirr*), as Šayḥ al-akbar himself says: “Eyes become short, intellects dumbfounded, hearts blind, the wise are lost in the desert of perplexity, and understandings vanish in stupefaction, unable to grasp the tiniest secret of the epiphany of My Greatness. How, then, could they grasp it? Your knowledge is scattered dust.” (IBN 'ARABĪ, 1994, p. 66).

According to Hallāj, the heart is a “Virgin”: it does not “penetrate the dream of any dreamer [...] this Heart, where only the presence of the Lord penetrates, to be conceived there”. (WARE, 2002, p. 3). It is the “luminous point” (*nuqta*), the space in which human and divine converge, the place of immanence of the ever-transcendent Mystery: “that nameless and aspect less depth within the self which is identical to that of divinity and which is also, in another way, one's own identity. As a result of the

annihilation of the illusory self, mystics gain another sense of identity". (SCHWARTZ, 2005, p. 232) Or, as Ernesto Cardenal states, "at the center of our being we are not ourselves, but Another. Our identity is defined as Other. That each of us is ontologically two. That to find ourselves and concentrate on ourselves is to throw ourselves into the arms of Another". (CARDENAL, 1970, p. 41) Therefore, it is the place where the theomorphic condition of each human being is radically manifested.

As such, the heart is comparable to "a hidden crypt, the center of our being and so inaccessible that the journey of the spiritual life can be called nothing less than a rediscovery of the heart and an exploration into it" (NASR, 2002, p. 32), like the mosque that appears in the film (46':56"ss): underground in the desert, far from all eyes, and which our characters enter at dusk, with Iřtar taking off one of his sandals to clean it before entering. This is the place where Iřtar will have his unveiling. And here we have an association between the heart and the desert: both, in their nature, are continually changing. The desert, with the wind, takes the sand to dance and swirls until it is transformed, continually moving its mountains so that it becomes the same. The heart is also continually changing (*taqallub*). In this way, somehow in the desert's heart you can experience your own heart in depth. A transformative event³⁶ that, like the completion of an initiation process, introduces you to a new way of seeing, feeling, desiring, and being.

3.1.5. *Iřtar's "underground" unveiling*

The presence of women is very significant in Bābā 'Azīz's narrative. Women transmitting an experience to women. Either representing the Real or manifesting It for other women. Femininity is an important theme in Nacer Khemir's work and in this film, in particular, it has interesting accents, presenting several layers in its representation.

On a first layer, in terms of equality between men and women, Iřtar, the female protagonist of the narrative, actively takes part in the journey alongside Bābā 'Azīz. With her own desires and opinions, she plays an important role in the story's outcome. Independence and freedom mark her actions for a large part of the film, and she is not the only one³⁷. Through her perceptions, Iřtar contributes to Bābā 'Azīz's decision-

³⁶ The heart is understood here not as a static mystical organ, but a dynamic one, configured as an event that is constituted in the relationship with the Real. A "significant event", in the words of Michael Sells (1994, p. 63), or a theophanic event that manifests itself in a fluidic way to allow the Real to be received in all the diversity of its manifestations. It reveals its condition as a receptacle associated with its receptivity, its ductility and its capacity to continually transform itself (here referred to as "fluctuation"). It also has an interface characteristic (*barzaḥ*) and the ability to reflect and mirror the continuous manifestations of the Real.

³⁷ It is enough to remember Noor's autonomy in the face of Zaid's leaving in search of his father or Zahra's not speaking up to Osman anymore.

making, and is thus of great importance in the protagonist's choices.

In another layer of the film, from the perspective of the relationship with the Real, the figure of the woman gains other contours. From the akbari perspective, the degrees through which the pilgrims pass can be traveled by both men and women, and the perfect human being (*al-Insān al-kāmil*) can be a woman or a man, with no gender differentiation³⁸. Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabī had several female teachers and learned a lot from them. Therefore, there is already a concept of equality between women and men in his thinking. However, the film offers another approach: one that presents the unveiling perspective of the feminine, which is also present in the akbari conception. *Šayḥ al-akbar* himself has a very significant experience with a woman one night in Mecca, near the *Ka'ba*: the Iranian Nizam. Mediated by her figure, Ibn 'Arabī encounters the divine mysteries and writes a commented poetic work, the *Tarjumān al-ašwāq*.

Ištar is one of the important women in the whole plot of *Bābā 'Aziz*'s narrative. She appears before her grandfather in the story and, in some way, is the one who calls him and introduces him into the story, takes part in the whole process of his journey and, when he leaves at the end of the story, somehow and in her own way, continues his mission. She wears a red turban, on which appears to be written in the calligraphic³⁹ form the Arabic letter ha (ه), which also exists in contemporary Persian. According to Firoozeh Papan-Matin (2012, p. 122-123), this letter is important in Sufi mysticism because it is the last letter of the word *Allāh*. In addition, because of its rounded shape, it resembles the letter waw (و), which means the conjunction “and”, whose linguistic function is to unite, to put together. Thus, “these two letters form the important term *hwa*, which means 'He, God,' or 'the beloved. In Bab'Aziz, the child Ishtar with her heavy turban and small figure is the human embodiment of the letters waw and ha. [...] Ishtar keeps Bab'Aziz connected with this world to the end, and brings Zaid and Nur together”. (PAPAN-MATIN, 2012, p. 123).

In his trajectory *Bābā 'Aziz* presents the gazelle to Ištar during a night (8':30"), with a *plongée*⁴⁰ feature. Later, *Bābā 'Aziz* mentions Ištar has the mark of the angel on his chin (24':45"), taking up an old Islamic tradition which says that babies in their mothers' wombs know all the secrets of the universe and that an angel, just before they are born, puts his hand on their mouths, making them forget everything. This tradition

³⁸ Ibn 'Arabī states this view in some of his works, as can be seen in BENEITO, Pablo. Ibn 'Arabī. The secret of the names of God. São Paulo, Editorial Attar, 2019, p. 61, note 75.

³⁹ Calligraphic art is an important element in the narrative, which is present on several different occasions.

⁴⁰ *Plongée* and *contra-plongée* are two very important and significant camera frames. *Plongée* allows us to see the image from top to bottom. *Counter-plongée* is the opposite, when we see an image from the bottom up. Often, in religious narratives, it points to the relationship and dialog with the Sacred or the sacredness and transcendence of a scene.

goes back to the Koran, which states that the human being (*insān*) is “one who forgets” (C 19:67) and, for this reason, must dedicate himself to the pedagogy of *dīkr*, the pedagogy of always remembering the divine Names so that he can return to the path of God (C 18:24; 20:42; 33:41). Also, Bābā ‘Azīz states that Iṣṭar “is a child, but his soul is old” (1:00:30”).

However, it is precisely in the mosque submerged in the desert that Iṣṭar has her main passage in the narrative (50':10"). A little earlier, however, while in the underground mosque there is a practice of *dīkr*, Iṣṭar enters a *miḥarāb*⁴¹ protected by a “veil” and is overwhelmed by the beauty of the place, with its dome and walls full of calligraphic art, colors and mandalas/rosaceae (49'00"). Then, outside the *miḥarāb*, enveloped by the beats of the music and the singing/recitation of a woman, Iṣṭar walks to meet this voice and its sound along a path with light and dark environments and behind the mosque's pillars. We realize that these are not random details, but refer to particular characteristics of the mystical process. She comes across three women, each wearing a veil. In her curiosity and amazement, she lifts the black veil that surrounds the face of the woman who is reciting, who also has the “mark of the angel”. At this point (50':35"), the camera stops showing us Iṣṭar and allows us to see what her eyes see. In the cinematographic language, we have a subjective shot⁴². As if the camera were her eyes and we were immersed in this perspective. At the same time, it's possible to see the eyes of both women as if they were illuminated in their pupils⁴³. As in the story about the prince contemplating the fountain (3.1.4.), in which the divine and human gaze come together as one, this reality is also repeated here. However, there is an added element: in the final scene of the lifting of the veil, the pupils of both characters are illuminated (50':34" onwards). Apart from the fact that it is through the pupil that the light enters the eyeball, providing the effect of vision, the light also refers to the divine light: *al-Nūr*. This is also one of the divine Names. In this way, this small and important detail seems to refer us to the process of illumination that is occurring, through which *al-Nūr* invests in Iṣṭar, alchemically transforming her vision, perception and being.

Antoni Gonzalo Carbó (2023) tries to address the notion of the eye and the pupil, as present in various cultural, religious and artistic traditions, especially the Akbari, in its relationship with Bill Viola's⁴⁴ work. In this sense, he brings up important

⁴¹ In the mosque's architecture, *miḥarāb* is an apse-like niche (in architectural terms, it refers to a part of the building that projects outwards), usually made up of a semi-dome or dome, and which points in the direction (*qibla*) of Mecca.

⁴² When the camera is set up in a manner that enables the viewer to see the character's perspective.

⁴³ From a technical point of view, it was possible to minimize the light reflecting in the eyes of both women. Hence our understanding is that the explicit representation of the illuminated eyes is the result of a significant and intentional decision by the director in the context of his narrative

⁴⁴ American video artist.

considerations for thinking about the gaze, the pupil and the relationship with the Real: the pupil is like a mirror - or points to the human condition when in mystical transformation - having the role of a *barzaḥ*, constituting an intermediate plan between the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual/intelligible, through which both the cosmos and the Real manifest themselves and generate mutual knowledge. Through this mirroring provided by the pupil, the cosmos manifests itself, and presents itself to the Real, which loves to know its cosmically reflected Names. The Real, in turn, also presents itself to the cosmos, including human beings, the only being capable of receiving all the divine manifestations within itself when it reaches the condition of “perfect human being” (*Insān al-kāmil*), according to Ibn 'Arabī's conception. In this way, the transformation experienced by Iṣṭar portrays his condition of access to another type of reality: the imaginal world (*'ālam al-miṭāl*), which will allow him to move between the various dimensions of reality, while also allowing him to perceive them in their Unity.

On the other hand, a pupil in Arabic is *insān*, the same word for human being. From this perspective, the human being is God's pupil in the cosmos, through which the Real sees himself, his creatures and reveals his mercy. And it should be borne in mind that the expression “pupil of the eyes” often shows a relationship of admiration and love, of someone centered on the figure of the person who is loved and cared for. Thus, if the human being is the pupil of God in the cosmos, it is because they can allow the Real to see their cosmic reflections and, at the same time, because they are considered a unique being, capable of establishing a singular and loving relationship with the Real. As Samer Akkach states,

Metaphorically, the act of seeing captures the binding relationship between divinity and humanity: God sees the world through man (*insān*) and it is the light of divinity that penetrates the eye's human centre in order to make vision possible. Explaining the meaning of *insān* (“man” and “pupil”), Ibn 'Arabī writes: “[H]e is to God (*ḥaqq*) as the pupil (*insān al-‘ayn*) is to the eye, with which vision (*naẓar*) occurs, and which is referred to as *baṣar*. It is for this reason he is called *insān* (at once pupil and man), for God sees his creatures through him (being the pupil of God's eye) to show his mercy upon them”.⁴⁵ (AKKACH, 2022, p. 27).

Finally, Iṣṭar's illuminated pupil, which is black in itself (*ḥawar*), appears luminescent against a background that is also black, which is the rest of the eyeball. We think this image may lead to some considerations. According to Bill Viola, “Blackness, the luminous black, as throughout the *Tarjumān*, indicates the deep interior of

⁴⁵ Quote from Ibn 'Arabī. *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. Ed. by Abu al-'Ala 'Afifi. Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, p. 50.

something, a place of intimacy, the repository of the secret or mystery (*sirr*), the innermost core of the heart. In that deep space, the Beloved resides”. (BILL VIOLA, apud CARBÓ, 2023, p. 21; also SELLS, apud CARBÓ, 2023, p. 29). Thus, pupil and heart are united, pointing to a dimension of deep interiority, where secrecy, mystery and intimacy dwell simultaneously.

Ibn 'Arabī in his poem “I saw a girl...” brings up this idea. This poem has three parts, the first of which describes a vision or dream. In this vision, the girl is “staring at me with an eye that was all a dark pupil”. And Šayḥ says: “so that I died in ecstasy for her from that dark pupil / I died out of love of her from the pleasure of the gaze (*naẓar*)”⁴⁶. In other words, contact with the dark pupil provides the process of ecstasy and, even more so, annihilation (*fanā'*) when experiencing the pleasure of the gaze. This idea is also confirmed by Gonzalo Carbó (2023, p. 40), since black (*aswad*) is the color of the annihilation of the ego and the divine essence (*al-Ḍāt*). Likewise, the dark pupil points towards the bottomless, infinite void and the nothingness that results from the process of annihilation. But a nothingness inhabited by another Presence because of a new form of subsistence (*baqā'*) in the Real.

Another element we can see in this scene is the polishing process of the mirror in the face of the diffuse multiplicity of reality. Thus, the polished mirror that is the pupil brings together the diffuse multiplicity into unity, providing a focus for cosmic admiration and the perception of the divine Names reflected on it. Meanwhile, the pupil can be associated with the condition of intermediation between the internal and the external. In this way, it is at the edge of the world and, at the same time, points to the interior of the human being or to the depths of reality. It works like a veil, which shows something and hides something. And what it hides is the Secret of the Heart (*al-sirr al-qalb*)

Facing what she sees and hears, Iṣṭar makes slight head movements in the recitation's rhythm (*dīkr*), closes her eyes as if enjoying (*dawq*) what she is experiencing. Then, Iṣṭar lowers the veil (51':26") with her eyes ajar, emerging from an ecstasy, an unusual/ordinary state of consciousness, resembling a dervish and Bābā 'Azīz himself. It is interesting to remember that the veil can have different meanings. When one uses the veil, it represents the protection of a secret lived in intimacy (which alludes to the

⁴⁶ The first stanzas of the poem are as follows: “1. I saw a girl in my sleep, unadorned / and most beautiful, who has no sister in humanity, / 2. staring at me with an eye that was all a **dark pupil**, / so that I died in ecstasy for her from that **dark pupil**. / 3. When I looked at her, while she was looking at me, / I died out of love of her from the pleasure of the gaze (*naẓar*).” (IBN 'ARABĪ, apud MCAULEY, 2012, p. 121. Grifo nosso). Referência do poema: Būlāq, p. 310–11 / Basaj, p. 291.

concept of “friendship with God”, *walāya*), but when one removes it, it represents the unveiling, the access that becomes possible to this previously restricted intimacy. The veil thus reveals and conceals, presenting an ambivalent, creative and rich dynamism that is typical of revelation.

By lifting the veil, Iṣṭar allows us to see the sacred and the revelation that occur before our eyes. We are inside the film; we have Iṣṭar's eyes and we sway from side to side, guided by the magnetic rhythm of the melody and seduced by the enveloping sweetness of the recitation, which takes us back to the divine Names: the Compassionate (*al-Raḥmān*), the Merciful (*al-Raḥīm*), the Generous (*al-Karīm*), the Most Loving (*al-Wadūd*), the One who always listens, the Listener (*al-Samīʿ*), the Unique, the singular, the One (*al-Wāḥid*), the re-creator, the restorer, the re-integrator, the reproducer (*al-Muʿid*), the most forgiving, the one who forgives everything, the one who covers with a protective veil (*al-Ġafūr*). This recitation also states that “you are my soul” (*ruḥiy*) and that there is no god but God (*lā ilāha illā Allāh*).

This is a description of a theophany, which Mircea Eliade calls a hierophany:

Man realizes the sacred because it manifests itself. It shows itself as something absolutely different from the profane. In order to indicate the act of the manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term hierophany. This term is convenient because it does not imply any additional precision: it only expresses what is implied in its etymological content, namely that something sacred is revealed to us. [...] We face the same mysterious act: the manifestation of something “of a different order” - of a reality that does not belong to our world - in objects that are an integral part of our “natural”, “profane” world. (ELIADE, 2001, p.13).

The woman and the recitation reveal something sacred in her beauty. As does the meeting of these two eyes and gazes, bringing back the visual metaphor, in which one sees and is seen, in which the gazes of the characters blend with the divine gaze itself, revealing something of itself. This experience awakens Iṣṭar, who leaves the mosque and resumes his observation through an opening in its roof, acquiring another perspective on himself and the world. Like the prince looking at the bottom of the fountain, she looks at the bottom of the mosque, also its source, its source for another kind of vision. In her vision, there is a dervish performing *samāʿ*, like a heart turning around and capable of “welcoming all forms”. In fact, the metaphor of the underground mosque and the unveiling meeting of two women also brings us back to the idea that life comes from within, from maternal entrails, which point to interiority and depth, as well as to creativity and motherhood, which give rise to new life.

Then Iṣṭar also sees a gazelle and follows it, in the middle of the desert and at night, after which it disappears, causing concern in Bābā ‘Azīz. After intense and tense searches, she is found. But she is ill. An initiation illness, which takes her out of one condition and into another: now she will become a teacher; a role that will be played by leading Zaid in search of his beloved Noor (*nūr*, in Arabic means light).

This entire sequence presents an intense mystical process. What is revealed in the depths of Iṣṭar's heart has to do with divine secrets experienced in a degree of unfathomable intimacy. Therefore, they are secrets that are not found in a register of superficial understanding, but presuppose a procedural coexistence with the Mystery, a commitment to be open to its manifestation and continuous and infinite unveilings (*kašf*).

3.1.6. *Knowledge through unveiling (Kašf)*

In his life and work, Ibn 'Arabī invites us on a great adventure: a journey towards the Real. In the film “Bābā ‘Azīz: the prince who contemplated his soul”, we are also faced with a travel story related to a mystical journey. But how does this journey take place? In “Unveiling the effects of the journey” (1998), Ibn 'Arabī mentions the existence of three types of journeys: 1. “the journey from Him”; 2. “the journey towards Him”; 3. “the journey in Him” (IBN 'ARABĪ, 1998, § 2). The “first two journeys have a delimited end that is reached and stopped at, while the third type, that of wandering, is endless”: “it is the journey of wandering and perplexity” (IBN 'ARABĪ, 1998, § 2. our translation), because “it never ceases [...] until infinity” (IBN 'ARABĪ, 1998, § 3. our translation). In this sense, although the film Bābā ‘Azīz has a precise ending for the main character, it is somehow also dealing with an infinite journey. Infinite in its direction, in its silhouettes, in the elements involved that extend to an endless multiplicity of possibilities and paths and that doesn't end with the characters involved. He himself, Bābā ‘Azīz, leaves for a new cycle of existence, totally indefinable and open. Faced with such magnitude, how do we know the dictates of this journey? What are its demands and signals?

According to Ibn Arabī, there are two forms of knowledge, above all, knowledge associated with the existential and mystical journey: knowledge based on unveiling (inner unveiling or mystical intuition) and knowledge based on reason and reflection. However, according to Šayḥ himself, although reflective and rational knowledge is important, it is not enough to guide the Gnostic on his journey, because the Real is

unknowable in its essence and an apophatic perspective is necessary to approach it⁴⁷.

In this way, even though they are important, rationality and intellect need to be repositioned in the cognitive structure so that they can exercise a positive function, according to Ibn 'Arabī. Human knowledge is organized based on the intellect and the human faculties that are hierarchically arranged at its service (reason, imagination, representation, memory, and the senses). Thus, the intellect develops knowledge based on what it receives from each of these faculties, which each act according to their own specific way of being. The intellect is only responsible for judging whether to reject or accept what the faculties make available to it about the world around it (SOUZA, 2010, p. 276). However, all these faculties, like the intellect, are directed towards the outside world. And they generate some kind of delimitation (*taqyīd*). The Real, however, is the “not delimited” and “human knowledge is limited, for it is equipped to know only what is similar and identical to itself and nothing resembles the Creator, praise be to Him”. (FM I 121, apud HAKIM, 1993, p. 268).

Using an Arabic etymological resource, Ibn 'Arabī relates the intellect (*'aql*) to its trilithic root ('-q-l) which means “to tie, bind or imprison”. In this way, the intellect “binds” reality and the Real in its manifestations in fixed and mutually exclusive images, so that they are not revealing and do not represent the perpetually changing forms of the Real. Thus, while the intellect acts analytically, cutting out, differentiating and classifying facets of the world, knowledge through unveiling enables a synthetic and integrative vision of reality, which, in the plurality and dynamism of the Real's manifestations, does not possess a single qualification. Thus,

when Gnostics know Him through Him, they distinguish themselves from those who know Him through their own rational consideration (*nazar*), because they possess non-delimitation, while the others possess delimitation. Gnostics who know through Him witness Him in every thing or in the entity of every thing, but those who know Him through rational consideration are removed far from Him. (FM, III 410:17, apud CHITTICK SPK, p. 110).

The incommensurability of the Real also manifests itself in its condition of *tanzīh* and *tašbīh*. It (*Hwa*) is not only incommensurability but also a deep immanence. Not only is he the incomparable and indeterminate Being of whom nothing can be affirmed, but he is also the Being who limitlessly assumes all determinations, assuming a condition

⁴⁷ By “apophatic perspective” here we mean a way of approaching the Real that, although it also has explicit knowledge about Him, for the most part moves through the non-definable, the non-conceptual, the non-delimited, the mysterious, since “the appearance of His light is so intense that it surpasses our perceptions, to the point that we call His manifestation a mystery”. (IBN 'ARABĪ, 2002, p. 26).

of profound complexity.

Therefore, knowledge through the path of “inner unveiling” or “mystical intuition” (*kašf*) becomes necessary, given what the intellect cannot grasp because of its very nature. But what is knowledge through *kašf* about?

It is the knowledge that sees the presence of the Real in all reality, just as it sees the world in the Real, because “the vision of God is the very vision of the world”. (ADDAS, 1996, p. 145). As Ibn 'Arabī states:

You must first know that God is too great, too sublime for you to know him in himself. But one can know Him in things [...] He who achieves unveiling sees God in things, just as the Prophet saw what was happening behind his back [...] I myself have experienced this season (*maqām*), praise be to God for it! On the other hand, one cannot know God in things except through the manifestation of things and the disappearance of their status. The eyes of ordinary people dwell on the status of things, while those who have the enlightenment of unveiling see nothing but God in things. Among these, there are those who see God in things and others who see things and God in them [...] The greatest enlightenment in this field is that the vision of God is the very vision of the world. (*Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* II, p. 507-508 *apud* ADDAS, 1996, p. 144. our translation).

For Ibn 'Arabī, there are two types of enlightenment: the one that sees only God; and the one that sees God in things and things with God's eyes, reaching the condition of perceiving the One in the multiple and the multiple in the One. This is the most perfect enlightenment. In this akbari perspective, with this kind of unveiling, reality becomes a “forest of symbols”, a system of self-referring ontological correspondences, because “Every reality in the world is a sign that guides us to a divine reality, which is the fulcrum of its existence and the place of its return as it comes to an end” (IBN 'ARABĪ. *Kitāb al-Abādila*, *apud* CHODKIEWICZ, 1992, p. 56).

In this system, everything is within the hermeneutic sphere and calls for an interpretation (*ta'wīl*), reflecting well the Islamic way of thinking based on the term *ayat*, which is a concept that is articulated around the terms sign and signal and can have various meanings, such as law, manifestation, indication and, above all, a signal from God. The Koran itself, with its verses, is an *ayat*, which teaches us to read the *āyāt* (plural of *ayat*) that the world and the human being are. In fact, everything is a great *maṭal*, that is, a parable, proverb, which contains the various *āyāt* of God and, more than manifestations of natural phenomena or expressions of a written text (in the case of the Koran), these signs are a divine revelation (cf. SOUZA, 2010, p. 70).

Bābā 'Azīz is a man who is guided by his mystical intuition, by his heart, and not by his rationality. He never answers Iṣṭar's questions rationally. And in his answers, he always points to a “something more”, to a possibility to be built, but not yet realized... left open. He is also a blind man, but one who can see beyond his lack of physical sight. He also represents the search for knowledge, both in the desert's aridity and in the gazelle's symbolism, which approaches and flees all the time and is a sign of Beauty, like the desert itself. Thus, knowledge occurs everywhere and is mediated by all things, which always point to something in themselves and beyond them, forming a unity in which the Real manifests itself there.

Bābā 'Azīz possesses the ability to see beyond apparent forms. As he himself says: “the prince has contemplated his soul so much that he has left the visible world for the invisible” (1:18:00”). Thus, he can perform *Tawḥīd*, which is also propitiated by his capacity for concentration, which brings things to their center, allowing them to be perceived from their focus and not in dispersion. And he introduces Iṣṭar to this kind of experience. Towards the end of the film, when Bābā 'Azīz finishes telling the story of the prince in front of the fountain and how he entered the invisible world, his granddaughter tells him that the prince then became a *dervish*. And Bābā 'Azīz says: “Iṣṭar, you begin to see” (1:18:10”). In other words, from her inspiring experience of unveiling in the underground mosque, she took on a new vision, a new condition of positioning herself in the cosmos, a *cardio gnosis* (SOUZA, 2010, p. 276-281). She becomes capable of opening up her subtle centers of perception, becoming able to enter another sphere of reality, the imaginal (*'alam al-miṭal*). And it is this condition that will allow her to perform the function of “uniting the lovers”, bringing Zaid and Noor together.

Conclusion

After going through the discussions proposed here, it seems possible to conclude that there is an Akbarian influence in Nacer Khemir and in this work in particular, just as we understand that establishing a type of Akbarian reading provides diverse and enriching reading keys for approaching this rich cinematographic work. Although the “presence” of Sufism cannot be credited only to Ibn 'Arabī, it is present in various manners. The very landscape of the narrative, it seems to us, would not be possible without *Ṣayḥ al-akbar*'s very own conceptions, such as the notion of the imaginal world, of travel, of the various paths that lead to the Real, of *barzaḥ*, of mystical unveiling and its cordial secret. In terms of the imaginary world, it seems to run throughout the narrative, in which the various characters transit and move between worlds in which the

material and the spiritual are interacting. And when one of them gains the ability to perceive the interaction between these worlds, which occurs above all in *'alām al-miṭāl*, a new vision opens up to him, capable of perceiving the Unity of all things. It is no wonder that the end of the film portrays a return to Unity by Bābā 'Azīz, just as Iṣṭar leads Zaid and Noor to this longed-for and sought-after Unity.

In this way, it is possible to think of a spiritual or mystical cinematography, in the sense that “Bābā 'Azīz, the prince who contemplated his soul” can provide, through its various cinematographic language resources, as well as a rich narrative in terms of script, an aesthetic experience that speaks to the senses and that, in some way, invites the senses to think about the “Meaning(s)” of existence and life choices, especially in relation to the way of looking at and positioning oneself in life and reality. And these same senses can also summon someone to open up to other types of experiences and paths, seeking to transcend their limited aspects and go beyond themselves, opening up to, in Raimon Panikkar's words, an “experience of life” (PANIKKAR, 2008).

REFERENCES

- ADDAS, Claude. **Ibn 'Arabí o la búsqueda del azufre rojo**. Murcia: Editora Regional de Murcia, 1996.
- AKKACH, Samer. Nazar: The Seen, the Unseen, and the Unseeable. In: AKKACH, Samer. (Ed.). **Nazar**. Vision, Belief, and Perception in Islamic Cultures. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2022, p. 12–32.
- ARSIYA, Iklim. God, beauty and love: An interview with Nacer Khemir. **Daily Sabah**. Istanbul, 22/Feb/2017. Disponível em: <https://www.dailysabah.com/cinema/2017/02/22/god-beauty-and-love-an-interview-with-nacer-khemir>. Acesso em 12/12/2023.
- ATTAR, Farid Ud-Din. **The conference of the birds**. Translation of Dick Davis and Afkhan DARbandi. London: Penguin Books, 2011.
- AUMONT, Jacques. **A estética do filme**. 9. ed. [S.I.]: Papirus, 1995.
- BABA AZIZ, le prince qui contemplait son âme. Direção: Nacer Khemir [S.I.]: Les Films du Requin, 2005 (95 min) son., cor. Disponível em: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9JnzGEDJd4>. Acesso em: 08 de agosto 2022.
- BORDWELL, David; THOMPSON, Kristin. **Film Art: An Introduction**. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.
- BUDIN, Stephanie Lynn. Creating a goddess of sex. in: BOLGER, Diane; SERWINT, Nancy. **Engendering Aphrodite**. Women and society in ancient Cyprus. Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2002.

CARBÓ, Antoni Gonzalo. The Black Mirror of the Pupil of the Eye: Around the Eye that Sees and Is Seen: Ibn al-'Arabī, Bill Viola. **Religions**. 2023, 14, 994, p. 1-52.

CARDENAL, Ernesto. **Vida en el amor**. Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé, 1970.

CHITTICK, Willian. **The sufi path of knowledge**. Ibn Arabi's metaphysics of Imagination. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

CHODKIEWICZ, Michel. **Un ocean sans rivage**. Ibn Arabî, le libre et la loi. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992.

CORÃO. Tradução do sentido do Nobre Alcorão para a língua portuguesa. Versão árabe-português. Tradução de Helmi Nars. Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah: Complexo do Rei Fahd, s/d.

CORBIN, Henri. **Alone with the Alone**. Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabî. Chichester, West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1997.

DANIEL, Roberto Francisco. **Descobrimos o religioso no cinema**. Pequeno método para análise teológica do filme. Bauru: EDUSC, 1999.

ELIADE, Mircea. **Sagrado e Profano**. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2001.

GEOFFROY, Eric. **Le soufisme**. Voie intérieure de l'Islam. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2003.

HADDAD, Jamil Almansur. **Livro das mil e uma noites**. Prefácio. São Paulo: Saraiva, 1961.

HAKIM, Souad. Knowledge of God in Ibn 'Arabi. In: HIRTENSTEIN, Stephen e TIERNAN, Michael (eds.). **Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: a commemorative volume**. Shaftesbury, Dorset [etc]: Element [etc], 1993, p. 264-290.

HMIDA, Meriam. **La quête identitaire et le voyage initiatique dans le cinéma de Khemir**. Analyse filmique de la trilogie cinématographique de Nacer Khemir. Mauritius: Éditions Universitaires Européennes, 2016.

IBN 'ARABĪ. **Las contemplaciones de los misterios de Ibn Arabi**. Tradução e edição de S. Hakim e P. Beneito. Murcia: Editora Regional de Murcia, 1994.

IBN 'ARABĪ. **L'interprète des désirs**. Tradução de Maurice Gloton. Paris: Albin Michel, 1996.

IBN 'ARABĪ. **Le livre des chatons des sages**. Traduction, notes et commentaires de Charles André Gilis. Beyrouth: Les Éditions Al-Bouraq, 1998.

IBN 'ARABĪ. **Les dévoilement des effets du voyage**. Texte arabe édité, traduit et présenté par Denis Gril. Paris: Editions de L'Eclat, 1998. Disponível em: <http://www.lyber-eclat.net/lyber/ibnarabi/voyage.html>. Acesso em 22/12/2023.

IBN 'ARABĪ. **Viaje al Señor del poder**. Málaga: Editorial Sirio, 2002.

JAMES, William. **The varieties of religious experience**. Nova York: Penguin

Books, 1982.

KHEMIR, Nacer. One on one. **Al Jazeera English**, [Vídeo] 11/09/2010. Disponível em: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ag-gkbsOB9Y&t=235s>. Acesso em: 12/12/2023.

LYDEN, John. **Film as religion**. Myths, morals and rituals. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

LYNCH, David. **Em águas profundas**. Criatividade e meditação. Rio de Janeiro: Gryphus editora, 2015.

LOPEZ-BARALT, Luce. Saint John of the Cross and Ibn 'Arabī: The Heart or Qalb as the Translucid and Ever-Changing Mirror of God. **JMIA**. V. XXVIII, 2000.

LOPEZ-BARALT, Luce. **La cima del éxtasis**. Madrid: Trotta, 2020. Kindle edition.

MCAULEY, Denis E. **Ibn Arabī's Mystical Poetics**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

MCGINN, Bernard. **Foundations of mysticism**. New York: Crossroads, 2003.

MERNISSI, Fatima. **Nasci num harém**. As mil noites de xerazade. Alfragide, Portugal: Edições Asa II, 2001. Kindle edition.

METZ, Christian. **A Significação no Cinema**. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1972.

MYERHOFF, Barbara. We Don't Wrap Herring in a Printed Page. In: MYERHOFF, B.; MOORE, S. **Secular Ritual**. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977.

NASR, Seyyed Hossein. The heart of the faithful is the Throne of the All-Merciful. In: CUTSINGER, James S. **Paths to the heart**. Sufism and the Christian East. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002.

OMARBACHA, Nawara. An interview with Nacer Khemir. **Spirituality & Practice**. Resources for spiritual journeys. s/d. Disponível em: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/features/view/17822/an-interview-with-nacer-khemir>. Acesso em: 22/11/2023.

ÖZTÜRK, Ridade. Sufism in Cinema: The Case of Bab'Aziz. **Film-Philosophy**, 23.1 (2019): 55–71.

PANIKKAR, Raimon. **De la mística**. Experiencia plena de la vida. Barcelona: Herder, 2008.

PAPAN-MATIN, Firoozeh. Nacer Khemir and the Subject of Beauty in Bab'Aziz: The Prince Who Contemplated His Soul. **Cinema Journal**, V. 52, N. 1, Fall 2012, p. 107-126.

PENAFRIA, Manuela. Análise de Filmes - conceitos e metodologia(s). **VI Congresso SOPCOM**. Lisboa, Abril de 2009.

PLATTE, Brent. **Religion and film**. Cinema and the re-creation of the world. New

York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

PINHEIRO, Marcos Reis. O conceito da mística: as origens. In: BINGEMER, Maria Clara Lucheti; PINHEIRO, Marcos Reis; LOSSO, Eduardo Guerreiro. **A mística e os místicos**. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2022, p. 13-22.

RUSPOLI, Stéphane. **Le livre des théophanies d'Ibn Arabî**. Introduction philosophique, commentaire et traduction annotée du Kitâb al-tajalliyât. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2000.

SCHWARTZ, Sílvia. O suspiro do compassivo. A imaginação criativa de Ibn Arabi e o Diálogo Inter-Religioso. Dissertação de mestrado apresentada na UFJF sob a orientação do prof. Dr. Faustino Teixeira, 2005.

SHAFIK, Viola. **Arab cinema**. History and cultural identity. Cairo; New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2003.

SCHRADER, Paul. **Transcendental style in film**. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.

SELLS, Michael. **Mystical languages of unsaying**. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

SOUZA, Carlos Frederico Barboza de. O sufismo como dimensão mística do Islã. Belo Horizonte: **Horizonte – Revista de Estudos de Teologia e Ciências da Religião**, v. 4, n. 7, p. 76-94, 3 dez. 2005.

SOUZA, Carlos Frederico Barboza de. **A mística do coração**. A senda cordial de Ibn 'Arabi e João da Cruz. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2010.

SOUZA, Carlos Frederico Barboza de. Perscrutando sentidos: manifestações de necessidades espirituais em pacientes/famílias sob cuidados paliativos. In: LEMOS, Carolina Teles; MARTINS FILHO, José Reinaldo F. (Org.). **Religião, espiritualidade e saúde: os sentidos do viver e do morrer**. Belo Horizonte: Editora Senso, 2020, p. 113-131. Disponível em: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346320173_PERSCRUTANDO_SENTIDOS_MANIFESTACOES_DE_NECESIDADES_ESPIRITUAIS_EM_PACIENTESFAMILIAS_SOB_CUIDADOS_PALIATIVOS.

SUGIMOTO, David T. **Transformation of a Goddess: Ishtar - Astarte – Aphrodite**. Zurich: Academic Press Fribourg, 2014.

VADICO, Luiz. **O campo do filme religioso**. Cinema, religião e sociedade. Jundiaí: Paco Editorial, 2016.

VELASCO, Juan Martín. **El fenómeno místico**. Estudio comparado. Madrid: Trotta, 1999.

VIRÉ, F. Verbete GHAZAL. **The Encyclopaedia of Islam**. New edititon. Vol; II. Leiden: Brill, 1991, p. 1036s.

WARE, Kallistos. How do we enter the heart? In: CUTSINGER, James S.. **Paths to the heart**. Sufism and the Christian East. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002.

WERNECK, Mariza. **O livro das mil e uma noites**. Memória, escritura e melancolia. São Paulo: EDUC, 2020.

XAVIER, Ismail. Cinema, revelação e engano. In: XAVIER, Ismail. **O olhar e a cena** – Melodrama, Hollywood, Cinema Novo, Nelson Rodrigues. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2003.