

## Non-Western Genealogies of VR and Visions of Said Nursi

Between nature and ourselves, nay, between ourselves & our own consciousness, a *veil* is interposed, a dense veil for the common man, a thin, almost transparent veil for the artist and poet.

Henri Bergson

...many machines in the heads of animate creatures, each like a gramophone, camera or telegraph, gramophone without records, a camera without a film, a telegraph without wires, and a machine twenty times more wonderful.

Said Nursi

As a hybrid art, virtual reality (VR) continues to engage with technology and people while incorporating the use of new media art, the internet, and emerging technologies. This craft's characteristics include interactivity, digitality, dispersal, and virtuality not only to illustrate a technological intent, but also to provide a context that people can use to communicate. Some of the ideas used in modern media art date back to the early centuries and link it to a variety of popular arts, cultures, and ideologies. In her *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (2010), Laura Marks explores this partnership and clearly articulates the fruitful relationship between modern media trends and non-Western classical art forms and ideologies. Adopting a systemic approach to digital media arts and Islamic arts, her research reveals similar points in the intellectual concepts that run deep in both art worlds. The pillars of all worlds, according to this, are founded on the theory of unfold—enfold, an area of science that is not

widely considered. Though Marks noted similarities between modern media art and the history of Eastern arts and ideologies (2010: 5), she argues that Islamic arts would contribute significantly to the creation and enrichment of digital media arts.

Virtual reality refers to 3-D images of the physical world and its objects as a form of interactive media art. Michael Heim describes “virtual” as an influence that is not necessarily known or exists but is created in the mind, and “truth” as a condition of being present. “Virtual reality is an experience or object that is actual in effect but not in fact” (Heim, 1993: 108). This description implies that truth encompasses not only a perceptible reality, but also an unperceivable or hidden reality. On the other hand, absolute realism, according to Bazin, “gives considerable voice to the universe both concretely and in its spirit” (1967: 12).

The most critical aspect that distinguishes augmented reality from reality is its immersive existence (Grau, 2003: 13). Researchers and artists have approached and implemented immersive and digital media arts into VR in a variety of ways. It has been determined that VR is an appropriate tool for studying the experience of reality and virtuality when approached in the context of its high and future technical supremacy, for it is the most futuristic realism genre (Farshid et al., 2018: 661).

Jaron Lanier, one of VR’s founders, argued that virtual reality seeks to discover a new method of communication that transcends our current language (2018: 164). This work reveals the contribution that Marks developed among new media art, Islamic arts, and non-Western ideologies that would eventually lead to VR’s genealogy around film-philosophical thinking, taking into account Lanier’s concept of the VR project. In this sense, the transcendental cinematographic ideologies and dreams of Turkey’s Islamic philosopher Said Nursi (1877-1960) is evaluated within a film-philosophical approach that takes VR’s technological characteristics into account. This approach reveals how his cinematographic visions can be

channelled into media applications, taking into account the interactions analogous to VR technology.

This Kurdish Islamic thinker and philosopher uses the qualities of photography and cinema to clarify his thoughts. When the topics he covers and the metaphors he uses to clarify them are examined, one sees that Nursi emphasizes VR cinema, which is popular in the post-cinematic age, as well as the traditional cinema of his age. With this timeless perspective, he proves that the Islamic world can enrich film's philosophy. Nursi's views can be seen as a blend between Islamic esotericism and Sunni Islam. Considering these concepts and ideas, his work reflects his ability to use the simplest metaphors to describe problems that challenge the limits of most individuals' minds. His concerns with the imminent end of the world (apocalypse) prompted him to contemplate time transitions, grief, the universe's infinite motions, and his visions of divine signs. This contemplation and engagement are also at the heart of his use of cinema as a way of diverting the divine source to the issues he stresses for his students (Balan, 2016: 48).

### **Islamic Philosophies, Non-Western Art, and New Media Art**

The Neoplatonist interpretation of vision as receptors of spiritual images is well-established in Islamic philosophy. As a result, and as Corbin (1977) pointed out, the idea of creativity has a lot of similarities with Islamic philosophy. Imagination enables all universes to interact with one another and enables one to grasp, through experimentation, how the cosmos contributes to each reality. That being said, the mind's cognitive mechanism offers analogous knowledge beyond the rationalism-imposed "matter and mind" duality (Corbin, 1972: 7). The Islamic realm of imagination is more real than superpersonal and matter. The imaginary world is a concept that reveals the importance of poetry, art, and images in motion. The intangible world, according to Persian philosopher Sadr al-Din Muhammad al-Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra (1571–1640), resides in the mind, mediates between the senses and the intellect, and what the

soul perceives is more real than sensory experiences (Marks, 2016; 25). This system of thought enables Deleuze and Guattari's concepts to merge with an immanent Islamic philosophy. Deleuze is interested in an immanent creator that is the same as absolute immanence. As a result, concepts found in Islamic thought, among them real and virtual, *zahir* and *batin* (inner and outer; open and hidden), and *fana* (mystical annihilation in Sufism) are extremely compatible with his thought (Marks, 2010: 12).

Marks contends that the smallest building block (unit) of matter is not a point, but rather a fold. Leibniz refers to this concept as the mirror of the universe (Bergson, 1912: 30). This fold, which is linked to monads and cannot be disintegrated, enfolds and unfolds at different times. In a similar vein, Nursi said that either matter is the substance of the world and that everything takes its shape from it. He further stated that any ripple requires a medium in which it can propagate. Sound waves, unlike water waves, need a source called air rather than space. Light propagating in waves, on the other hand, travels across both air and space. Any wave (fold) necessitates the presence of a source, which brings the detained to the fore as a "delicate material that fills the void." Since there is no friction (resistance) when the medium is very large, even limitless (captive), the wave goes on indefinitely (Nursi, *The Words / Words*, 30th word: 570).

Quantum mechanics plunged into the subatomic realm and found that the actual situation there was that the world of particles that make up the cosmos we exist in is very different from what we are familiar with. According to the science above, atomic particles that seem to be unrelated and unconnected to one another are therefore bound and linked to one another; they exist as an indivisible dynamic unity. Thus, items that are far apart are connected without the need for a chain of cause and effect (Bohr, 1961: 56). Likewise, Imam Ghazali from Iran (1058–1111), one of the most prominent and influential Muslim philosophers, theologians, jurists, and mystics who was also an Islamic scholar and reviver (2005: 167), established an indeterminist interpretation by claiming that the causal-effect interaction is not needed. Marks proposed the

idea of “enfoldment” in the context of these concerns, influenced by quantum theory, and believed that folds are conscious of each other and connected to the whole. Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), an Andalusian Muslim scholar, mystic, poet, and philosopher, sees the single self, the entire body (*al-bodu’l-kulli*), as the basis of life (2007: 19). Ibn Arabi, like Imam Ghazali, interpreted “There is no god but Allah” as “There is nobody but Allah.” Each component has a relationship to the whole (God), which is its counterpart. Per this viewpoint, the body is a single reality, and all entities exist only as a result of His (God’s) manifestation. Another that is not one among many... [this] is the arbitrary or simulated period one (Deleuze, 1988: 76). Union and plurality do not end as components that misrepresent each other in such a flow. In terms of being uninterrupted, flow is one (thesis), more in terms of variety (antithesis), and several in terms of distinction without separation (synthesis).

In Deleuzian’s “plane of immanence,” an infinite number of folds are included, and this surface portrays infinity. Infinity, according to Marks (2010), refers to Deleuze’s (2005) time-images and Bergson’s (1912) universe of images. Matter is made up of images, as defined in *Matter and Memory*, and images are continually interacting. According to Bergson (1912), the universe of all matter’s representations refers to non-Western philosophy’s “imaginal” and “mystical” experiences. As a result, there is a metaphysical nexus among Islamic philosophy and mysticism, as well as the “One-All” plane of immanence that Deleuze and Guattari refer to (Marks, 2010: 30). In Bergsonism, Deleuze writes:

“At the limit, it is the mystic who plays with the whole of creation, who invents an expression of it whose adequacy increases with its dynamism (Deleuze, 1988: 111).”

Being mindful of the intangible side of all that happens requires, according to Islamic mysticism, the spiritual elimination of the distinction between things and God, me and you. In response to this, Corbin said, “Any exoteric meaning *zahir* has an esoteric meaning *batin* (1969: 28).” The ideas of evident and *batin*, according to Laura Marks, are two ends of a spectrum.

*Batin*, on the other hand, refers to the notion that what is accessible in a given plane arises from a deeper plane, while visible exterior forms mean a surface, an open one, temporarily unfolded planes. Even though it corresponds to the external face of evident matter, *batin* is derived from the root of *batn*, which means stomach or uterus, and refers to the unseen side of matter (Marks 2010, 15). An individual has an outward and an inward aspect. Nursi, says at this point “... we see that the interiors of such beings, where the hands of material causes can neither reach nor touch, are ten times more delicate, well-ordered and perfect as regards art than their exteriors” (*The Flashes*, 23rd Flash (3.Hüccet-i İmanniye), 1995: 144),” The invisible face of matter, according to Nursi, is more meaningful than the visible face.

While “*zahir*” focuses on the plane of immanence’s surface, “*batin*” stresses the plane’s motion potential. The definition of “real” is used to convey Deleuzian obviousness. For Deleuze, Bergson, and Marks, *batin* is synonymous with “virtual.” As a result, the virtual has not been realized and is not visible.

This is the goal of virtual art: to encourage the individual to experience the unseen for oneself, rather than to expose it to them. This is a Deleuze feature: the more perception travels away from our immediate needs, the more it opens up to the world of images, which is similar to Bergson’s notion of bringing us closer to time flow (Marks, 2010: 30).

The ideas of visibility (*zahir*) / invisibility (*batin*), legibility, and aniconism are used by Marks to explain the parallels between the East’s Islamic arts and visual media arts. With image knowledge, aniconic Islamic arts and digital visual arts travel through time. New media artworks, like Islamic works of art, invite us to consider eternity and the entire cosmos within a drop of water, a grain of sand, or a single message. The ability to extract the actual thing from the intangible at exceedingly fine resolution ratios is what the pixel, the smallest unit in visual media, brings to limitless sublimation. *Batin*, the dark mystery of modern civilization, is revealed by this technology. There is an intangible network of coding that resides embedded

inside the perceptible that we see, hear, and touch in modern media art. The material and intangible universes are infinitely enveloped by these codes that, in turn, form an interface to other objects and resultantly, the image serves as an interface for information and information serves as an infinite interface. As a result, digital art, like Islamic art, takes advantage of the dynamics of enfolding-unfolding relationships.

Curved cubes and mosaics in Islamic art, especially in mosques, can be opened diagonally to reveal cubes with one of God's ninety-nine names written on them. This work in architecture represents the image being unveiled directly from experience and being fractured. In both Islamic and contemporary digital arts, there is an invisible afterlife that people are expected to discover inside the piece (Marks, 2010: 43). Photos of the universe feature macro and microstructures in Islamic sculpture as if finite and infinite are interconnected. As an example, analyze the relationship between both the dome and the cup. On a cloudless night, looking at the mosque's dome is like seeing fixed and shooting stars in the sky. Technology is also used in new media artworks to investigate the infinitesimal world beyond the finite. This allows you to see beyond the heart of the visible universe by perceiving something you have never seen before (Marks, 2010: 264-265). Heim (1993: 94-95-96) claims that there is no better way to attain knowledge of the real and invisible (knowledge of God) than to construct a simulated universe of data.

The subjective and performative are highlighted in Islamic art. As a result, the idea that everything that has been produced is in motion and continuously revolving is prominent in Islamic philosophy. Regarding this repeated rotation, Nursi compares the rotational movement of everything that has been produced to cinema screens, using the terms "showing the true and imaginary styles of that glorious manoeuvre to the audience every night and every year like cinema plates (Nursi, *7th Ray*, 1998)".

In "Words" written by Nursi (2006):

“Indeed, just as things like glass and water act as mirrors to physical objects, so the air and ether, and certain beings of the World of Similitudes are like mirrors to spirit beings; they become like means of transport and conveyance of the speed of lightning and imagination. The spirit beings travel in those pure mirrors and subtle dwellings with speed of imagination. They enter thousands of places at the same time. Despite being restricted particulars, through the mystery of luminosity impotent and subjugated creatures like the sun and semi-luminous beings restricted by matter like spirit beings may be present in numerous places while being in one place, thus becoming like absolute universals, and with a limited power of choice being able to perform many matters simultaneously.” (p.211)

With these words, he emphasises the belief that everything that has been created is intertwined and that it is continuously in movement, which aligns with Eastern philosophy. “*Sema*,<sup>1</sup>” a symbolic ritual started by the Islamic scholar and mystic Rumi, represents how everything revolves. As the embroidery on the mosque’s domes is followed from the nearest to the farthest, the sketches that are currently stationary appear to move (Marks, 2010: 267). This transforms into a rotational movement when walking due to the rotating form of the dome.

Digital and immersive media have a similar environment to VR, which is performative art. The viewer will still travel in Virtual Space, and the virtual data in this immersive space must be enfolded in a new image and become actual by experience and performance. Deleuze and Guattari approached Islamic art as nomadic art because of the intriguing interaction between abstract lines and haptic space. In VR, these spaces present an insubordinate condition rather than a direct representation of the meaning. Another aspect of Islamic art that stands out is that it is embodied. In Islamic art, the human body is at the core, and thus one of the fundamental aspects of Islamic art becomes concrete (Marks, 2010: 62). Rather than being depicted in

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<sup>1</sup> “*Sema*,” the ritual performed by the Mevlevi dervishes, known in America as the Whirling Dervishes.



aniconic Islamic art, the body is qualified as a way of obtaining. Since Western art and religions have a figurative heritage, abstract representations have long been dismissed, and therefore Islamic art's applicability to Western art has been minimal. Abstract and non-representational representations were incorporated into Western art as a result of new media and modernism, which made Islamic thought and aesthetics valuable to Western art. Bergson chose to emphasize science's metaphysics (which has actually existed in Islamic philosophy for centuries). As a result, Deleuze was interested in finishing Bergson's work and adding the metaphysics, which his work lacked, to cinema (Bogue, 2003: 23). Virtual reality, as a manifestation of these ideas, demonstrates that it is a representation of the true immanence of metaphysics. While we used to believe that metaphysics was "beyond" us, we now realize that it is intertwined with everything. VR encourages one to embrace the virtual as a part of reality (Murphie, 2002: 12), a viewpoint that displaces regimes that deny the relationship of the virtual and the real (Murphie, 2002: 7).

According to virtual reality pioneer Howard Rheingold (1991), the experience of living in a virtual environment or a distant place is at the core of virtual reality. With this in mind, it is clear that virtual reality is a vector in terms of allowing the creation of remote user networks and the expansion of telepresence, which applies to devices that make it look as though they are there or affect a remote environment in which the user is not physically there. According to Gibson (1988: 49), since cyberspace is electronic, it can be transported indefinitely inside it, and thus it represents not just the entire physical universe, but also the imagined dimensions. Virtual reality devices simulate actual space in cyberspace before it is telepresent in every scene. Telepresence may be a chronologically or geographically distant physical space or an animated virtual reality created by a machine that does not exist (Seteuer, 1992: 76). This function corresponds to Islam's vector worship. People who are separated in time and space concentrate their energy on a central point and converge in a "moment." In Islam, this activity

is known as “*seyr-u suluk* (walking on the road/entering/joining into something),” and it appears often in Nursi’s writings. The Buddhist monks’ tradition of “right focus” during meditation is close to this way of thought. A spiritual experience is undertaken in this exercise. The desire to see inside anything, to understand the true essence of things, is often expressed in the *vipassana* (Cahn & Polich, 2009: 52) level of focus (as in *batin* in Islamic philosophy).

When dreaming or imagining, it is as though we are watching television. Attention will lead us to lose sight of the world we are in with our whole body. To compensate for the shortfall, one must take advantage of Eastern philosophy’s wisdom. Taoism increased human vitality by concentrating the mind’s energy on the body. In such approaches, Eastern philosophy seeks to unite mind and body (Heim, 1993: 81). Digital media artworks often use technologies to center the mind’s attention through thinking and to help people explore the world, which is infinite inside the finite (Marks, 2010: 269). *TakHayyul* (shaping something previously perceived with the sense organs in the mind at a moment or place where that thing is not present before us) virtuality becomes fully realized over time (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007: 148). The words *takHayyul* and *dure* are interchangeable in Bergson’s terminology. That is the length that contains all of nature’s variations, as well as the amount that includes all of the differences in degrees. As a result, memory is essentially distinction, while matter is repetition (Deleuze, 1988: 121). When following the lines of reality in space, it becomes clear that the consistency of our spiritual lives still differentiates naturally and its meaning is to transfer. Duration is not just what distinguishes itself; it is also continually changing. Matter, on the other hand, is self-indistinguishable and repeats itself (Deleuze, 1999: 48).

Marks (2010: 47) also contends that the term *nutq*, which in the Quran means the “power of speech,” does not only signify an oration for humans, but also denotes facets of creativity and thinking through interaction with the prose. As a result, the Quran is a performative work of art. There is a continuous movement, a state of flow as in a digital image, and a state of

continuous unfolding created by interlinking in Quranic Arabic, which is somewhat different from Arabic in terms of structure and context (Marks, 2010: 254). Furthermore, the Quran contains repetitions to maintain continuous contact with the participant or reader. These repetitions, which symbolize infinity and hold knowledge for eternity, can be seen in almost every field of Islamic art, including rugs, ceramics, mosque domes, calligraphy, and marbling. Islamic art, such as withdrawing the eye pattern of a dome that leads to eternity, creates a sense beyond rhetoric. When one is faced with a sublime and tremendous event, one loses all sense of proportion. This is subtly but unquestionably present in the unique vision of Islamic art. Some Islamic monuments invite eyes to chant while moving between surfaces decorated with infinite repetitions of Allah's name (Marks, 2010: 285). These works also provide an underlying algorithmic logic (Marks, 2010).

Art cinema started to organize an algorithmic aesthetic in the 1960s, and many films incorporated the Deleuzian crystal image. The algorithmic logic of if-then commands is used to grow the scenes from each other (Marks, 2010: 135). What occurs in the crystal image is the physical and virtual unification at the same time. The topic of organic montage is the actualization of a virtual montage. In this crystal, the real and the imaginary coexist. The actual is in space, for to learn about it we look between objects, to the spot. We, on the other hand, enter time itself (i.e., the past) to recall everything. The pure past and present, as well as the real and virtual, appear in the crystal image. The real image of the moving current and the virtual image of the remembered past, both of which are distinct but indistinguishable, are continuously exchanged by the crystal. Crystal-image is not time, for we see time in the crystal (Deleuze, 2005: 81). As the body plunges into the cyber, mystical reality exposes a form of temporality that crystallizes beyond the realization capacity of a particular body or discourse. This is what separates visionary experience as a metaphysical phase from conventional theological conceptions of the soul (Goddard, 2000: 99). Mystical phenomena, according to Bergson, are

pure immanence as a creative emotion. This is not an avant-garde idea; rather, it is equivalent to “desire for Deleuze” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 27).

One can see signs of the past, future, and present in a “moment” in Islamic arts and philosophy. According to legend, Prophet Muhammad one night ascended to the heavens, saw God and the beyond, and then returned. This occurrence, known as the night journey,” happened in a “moment.” According to Nursi, any night that marks the anniversary of this event is equal to the night it originally occurred on centuries ago (1998: 524-525). This concept is somewhat similar to the Deleuzian crystal image in that the past, current, and future seem to be unified in a single moment. According to Ettinghausen, the winged horse Buraq (Burak comes from the root *berk*, which means lightning) and the winged sphinx, both of which are often used in Islamic artworks, have been assimilated in Islam. Aside from being a celestial motif, the winged sphinx, which is the best representation of spinning animals in Islamic works, lets divine seekers live in a “moment” all the time. The visible figures in this encounter are revealed in layers that, in Islamic art, range from timeless, unrepresentable unity to vivid and expressive figurative images. According to Islamic mysticism, the discernable universe arises in layers (folds) from God and the unperceivable realm, and only mystical seekers can discover this connection. To attain gnosis (*ma'rifa*), one must go beyond mental knowledge (*ilm*), according to Sufism. As a result, religion and intellectual inquiry are at odds (Marks, 2010: 273). True intelligence and truth cannot be attained through information or material benefits. To discover the truth, we must approach it spiritually through the senses and cultivate this aspect. As a separate figure and image in folding architecture appears before us, the smooth spaces in the Deleuzian sense (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) are near aniconism, one of the most important characteristics of Islamic art, and unrelated to dissimilar figures and images in cubist, surrealist, and experimental arts. In processes reflecting the fusion of many geometric and objects, Lynn explores folding architecture. In a way, the smooth space of Deleuze becomes a practical smoothing that includes

the free densities of different components (Lynn, 1998: 110-111). The source and production of Islamic calligraphy should be taken into consideration in this argument.

Islamic calligraphy is a tradition of the line that can be called an image's substratum. Photos from the Islamic calligraphy line can be considered in programming codes such as VR interfaces. Just as codes, the representations generated by lines are capable of creating the nonexistent inside the current line. According to Marks (2010: 66), long before celebrating its freedom in European art, the line was allowed to be imagined to an extravagant degree in Islamic calligraphy. The two dream types were awakened as points or pixels. Plasticity and politics have consequences in all of the aforementioned scenarios. Islamic art develops new lines that seem to take their lives; it searches for methods to discipline and subordinate the line to the stage. This calligraphical tradition is shaped by a profound philosophical, theological, and even political controversy concerning the connection between the fixed point and the moving line. Even in machine art, the vector graphics line was supplanted by the rigours of the pixel by a process of standardization. Computer graphics literature follows the contours of a debate that took place 900 years ago.

Islamic calligraphy and motives, as well as the abstract lines and nomadic lines that run up and down the Quran, are essential to action and vitality due to their multiple points, intertwined lines, and complex figures (Marks, 2002: 4). The radicalism and liberation in Deleuze are closer to the nomadic arts than to the abstract line and the haptic space. In Islamic art, abstraction is the reverse of Renaissance painting, in which the figurative and compositional characters are seen. Marks describes this condition in Islamic arts as the cause of an ever-changing and unremarkable perception of figure and ground (Marks, 2002: xvi). Thus, the concept of "infinity" is again confronted, and geometrical lines eradicate abstraction, the ground, and the spatial position of sculpture. This creates a smooth space in the Deleuzian sense (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 179-181).

From a VR perspective, these concepts and arts show parallels with the production of the aesthetic image, the production of computational digital images, and the interactive viewer of these images in Eastern arts. If the new image emerges from reality, that image should affect us as represented reality. Hence, there is an interactive affection between the new image and the viewer.

### **Said Nursi**

“The politics of the day directed my attention away from myself and scattered it on the outside world. I had been to the cinema from time to time to take lessons, and just then all the dead of Istanbul appeared to me to be walking around, like the cinema shows in the present the images of the past. And all the people I could see at that time appeared to be corpses walking around. My imagination told me: some of the dead in the graveyard appear to be walking around as though on the cinema-screen, so you should see the people of the present, who are bound to enter the graveyard in the future, as having entered it; they too are corpses, walking around” (Nursi, 1995: 302).

I shall focus on two aspects of Said Nursi, both of which are connected and internally interconnected in truth. While theorizing these studies, I think it is useful to explain these two aspects, namely, Nursi’s film-philosophy systematics of thought and his minoritarian figure feature as well as minor thinking and living systematics. This significant figure, who has received little attention in scholarly and creative research, emerges as an embodiment of Deleuzian minor thinking concepts and methods in film philosophy, for they are similar to the ideas of contemporary philosophers such as Bergson and Deleuze.

The first cinematographic shows in the Ottoman Empire, which existed before the establishment of the Turkish Republic, began in 1896, and numerous recordings were made

and shown in the settled halls of Istanbul after that year. Nursi (1878-1960), who was in Istanbul at various points of his life, used cinema as a symbol in his works and even went to the movies on occasion. Throughout his lifetime, he saw cinema as a medium for greater understanding and interpretation of nature and human ontologically, life's transience, and his thoughts on the reality of other lives, in contrast to other religious scholars' skeptical perspectives on theater and film (Balan, 2016: 50).

The oriental theory that film is based on Ibn Arabi, a scholar from Andalusia (modern-day Spain), comes to mind first. In terms of film philosophy, his view of God and His creations, and hence matter and sense, can provide a wealth of information. However, we have no insightful thoughts regarding his experience of cinema because it did not exist during his lifetime. Philosophers like Nursi, who are less well-known in the Middle East and the Balkans, have seen cinema, especially during the era in which they existed, and their perspectives on the ability of cinema to change human consciousness and our visual experience of time may be useful in today's cinema world. This is because no other scholar explores cinematic thought from the viewpoints of knowledge, information, matter, legislation, and divinity (Canan, 2016: 59). In his works, Nursi is obsessed with science and technical advancements.

He attempted to illustrate many otherworldly problems by using technological instruments and communication methods as illustrations in his works, in which he demonstrated the practicality of explaining large issues with very small artifacts and images. His students say that he wrote a math and geometry book, but that they were unable to be combined into a single book. The 14 main books in the Risale-i Nur Collection, one of which includes his own biography, *Tarihce-i Hayat* (Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: The authorized biography, his works, methods and approach), were written under extremely difficult circumstances by his use of the printing press. Three of the books are about his time in jail and his isolation from others,

while the others are about his core philosophy and opinions. His works were secretly published on matchboxes and cigarette packets, and by candlelight in the basements at night, under constant pressure and observation, with the dedication and hard work of his pupils. He predicted things with phrases like “non-fire vehicles” and “mankind going to the moon one day,” but because the ritual is just a sphere with reflective properties, there is little beneficial for mankind; however, as human beings meet the sun (there may be other stars like the sun, the sun here), they may find the aether material and acquire high energy with it.

We can see Nursi’s effort to highlight the multidimensional nature of cinema within the idea of “other cinema” in his ideology<sup>2</sup>. Nursi’s cinematographic examples in some of his experiences, as well as phrases like “just like the cinema,” “similar to cinema,” or “non-cinema,” and “walking cinema,” are understood to metaphorize digital expanded cinema, immersive and interactive technologies, and VR cinema rather than conventional cinema.<sup>3</sup> Raymond Bellour theorizes the cinema out of its medium by dividing it into different rooms, exhibiting it in different ways in museums, and thereby deterritorializing the cinematic medium from its dominated borders. He forms a “definite, limited interaction, but more forced and more lively than that which we experience at the cinema. We are indeed in an other cinema” (Bellour, 2008: 410). Erika Balsom argues the transformations of old cinematographic films in galleries as a new space for the post-cinematic medium. Instead of a

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<sup>2</sup> “Within the building, veritable rooms take shape and change each hour with the utmost order and ease, just as if clothes were being changed, or as if scenes were passing across a cinema screen. We can say even that numerous little rooms are constantly being created in each of those scenes” (Nursî, *The Words*, p.71) and “The universe, a factory producing numerous goods, such as human actions, for the levels of the Abode of Bliss; and a movie-camera with a hundred thousand lenses continuously taking pictures of this world to show to the spectators in the eternal realm and especially in paradise” (Nursî, 1998: 21).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Murphie claims that VR has more in common with music and this visual arts. This inference is due to the fact that conventional cinema is produced within defined criteria and in a specific way. As a matter of fact, performative art and ritual construct the new while still looking for the unknown, relying on transformation and variety (Murphie, 2002: 188).



radical shift toward conventional cinema, we should think of it as othered cinema. Cinema has evolved into the other by itself (Balsom, 2013: 16). In this context, some media practitioners and scholars have theorized and practiced Sufi imaginal (*takhayyul*) in virtual reality and other computer-generated systems (Marks, 2016: 26).

Before I delve deeper into Said Nursi's visions, I would like to refer to the word imaginary, which is the word that he frequently uses. Henri Corbin uses the Latin words *mundus imaginalis*, which means "a very precise order of reality that corresponds to a precise mode of perception." The term "imaginary" is often misunderstood to mean "unreal," "non-existent," or "Utopian." Corbin takes the expression imaginary and applies it to Islamic philosophy, where it raises concerns about its relationship to ideas like consciousness, thought, and "being there." The term "imaginal" is more real than matter for Corbin as he states "a world that is ontologically as real as the world of the senses and that of the intellect" (Corbin, 1976: 5). For Nursi, a cinematographic image is "a gateway to the imaginary world, which is superior to the real"<sup>4</sup> (Balan, 2016: 48). In addition, imagination is a cinematograph itself (Nursî, 1977: 90); each element in the realm is like an image, a beautiful and a magnificent dome theater of the "cinema of Rabbaniye (Allah)"<sup>5</sup> (Nursî, 2010: 360).

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<sup>4</sup> "Indeed, just as things like glass and water act as mirrors to physical objects, so the air and ether, and certain beings of the World of Similitudes are like mirrors to spirit beings; they become like means of transport and conveyance of the speed of lightning and imagination. The spirit beings travel in those pure mirrors and subtle dwellings with speed of imagination. They enter thousands of places at the same time. Despite being restricted particulars, through the mystery of luminosity impotent and subjugated creatures like the sun and semi-luminous beings restricted by matter like spirit beings may be present in numerous places while being in one place, thus becoming like absolute universals, and with a limited power of choice being able to perform many matters simultaneously" (Nursî, 2006: 211).

<sup>5</sup> Parallel to this, we can consider Bergson's concept of the universe of images who states that matter, in our view, is an aggregate of "images. And by "image" we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing - an existence placed halfway between the "thing" and the "representation" (Bergson, 1912: 9).

Nursi's handling of all relevant times in a single moment is analogous to Deleuze's time theories (1985: 66-94), who suggests the time image as an antidote to movement-image critique, due to his discussion of the universe in a meaningful climate. Furthermore, Nursi's intellectual stance is critical in broadening our perception of the cinematic world. Nursi uses the phrase "tableaus of cinema" by combining the imagination method and *tableau vivant* ("living pictures") with the term *levh-i mahfuz* for its counterpart in Islamic philosophical terminology.<sup>6</sup>

The final product of the cinematographic apparatus must be this *levh-i mahfuz*, the state of being and seeing something in a single moment and period.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Some of the truths indicated in this parable have been set forth in the Seventh Truth. However, let us point out here that the figure of the "supreme photographer devoted to the service of the king" is an indication of the Preserved Tablet (*al-Lawhu 'l-Mahfuz*). The reality and existence of the Preserved Tablet has been proved in the Twenty-Sixth Word as follows: "A little portfolio suggests the existence of a great ledger; a little document points to the existence of a great register; and little drops point to the existence of a great water tank. So too the retentive faculties of men, the fruits of trees, the seeds and kernels of fruit, being each like a little portfolio, a Preserved Tablet in miniature or a drop proceeding from the pen that inscribes the great Preserved Tablet — they point to, indicate and prove the existence of a Supreme Retentive Faculty, a great register, an exalted Preserved Tablet. Indeed, they demonstrate this visibly to the perceptive intellect" (Nursî, 2006: 64).

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze, in *Time-Image* book, states "the indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual, is definitely not produced in the head or the mind, it is the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature double" (2005: 69) when talking about the crystal-image.

## PROJECT CONCEPT - I

### “Walking Cinema: In The Virtual Feet of Said Nursi \_ VR Installation”

“We go eastward to realize history, and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race, – we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure.”

Henry David Thoreau

“Remain seated as little as possible, put no trust in any thought that is not born in the open, to the accompaniment of free bodily motion- nor in one in which even the muscles do not celebrate a feast. All prejudices take their origin in the intestines. A sedentary life, as I have already said elsewhere, is the real sin against the Holy Spirit.”

Friedrich Nietzsche.

Frederic Gros states in *A Philosophy of Walking* that walking is an artistic act, not simply a back and forth between two distances. It is the epitome of simplicity: you can only step on two knees, one foot in front of the other. This simplicity, however, serves a strategic function. Walking brings a poetry of repetitions to one’s lips, straightforward words as simple as the sound of footsteps on the lane. The regularity of the waves’ sound does not disturb the calm when they softly crash against the shore; it can be influenced and heard (wavy divine reading). Nursi’s philosophy includes sensing the world’s presence and associating it with the same rhythm. The march demonstrates the immense force of repetition. Hymns are born during sleep, and they are recited and comprehended as the body moves. The repetition of scriptures and prayer readings demonstrates the importance of repetition: “Jesus Christ, our lord, son of God, I am a sinner, have mercy on me (a christian prayer)” or “Do you not mind

at all, do you never wonder (Quran, Saffat, 37)”. The importance of regulating the breath is stressed in the prayer; the first part is for addressing while inhaling, and the second part is for voicing requests while exhaling. These breaths are metaphysically important. Breathing signifies the union of the angels, a compulsory relaxation in breathing.

Feet serve as an interface for nomads, exiles, pilgrims, runaways, travellers, hermits, and refugees. The affection-image originates in the feet, which are a part of the body. You will get away from the sense of identification itself, from the need to be somebody with a story, by walking. Isn’t being anyone, though, a social imperative that forces us to stick to our self-image? Since the walking body has no past, it is merely ancient life in action, we discover the freedom of not being one while we walk.

### **Vision:**

“Come, today is the vernal equinox. Certain changes will take place, and wondrous things will occur. On this fine spring day, let us go for a walk on the green plain adorned with beautiful flowers. See, other people are also coming toward it. There must be some magic at work, for buildings that were mere ruins have suddenly sprung up again here, and this once empty plain has become like a populous city. See, every hour it shows a different scene, just like a cinema screen, and takes on a different shape. But notice, too, that among these complex, swiftly changing and multifarious scenes perfect order exists, so that all things are put in their proper places. The imaginary scenes presented to us on the cinema screen cannot be as well-ordered as this, and millions of skilled magicians would be incapable of this artistry. This monarch whom we cannot see must, then, have performed even greater miracles.” (Nursî, 2006: 66)

A Walk-in VR Mixed Reality installation that integrates Thoreau with Nursi and his walking theory can be proposed by considering walking, nature, visions, images, civil disobedience,

the forest, and the building of a wooden hut. I am hoping that you will be able to associate this VR idea, which I explain below, with Nursi's dreams.

The participant wears a VR headset and walks in a natural forest, feeling the real grass with his bare feet and seeing images of the walk in nature through the headset, but listening to the sounds of the real nature with his ears. In other words, an asynchronous situation occurs; however, this experiment may be useful in terms of seeing how the listener perceives it as a single experience while feeling and perceiving both the virtual and the real at the same time. This walk lasts a few minutes, before the viewer no longer experiences anything more than a walk or starts to wonder what will come next. The audience enters a real wooden hut at that stage, feeling the wood in his step and smelling the wood by his nose. He sees Nursi in the virtual image. He is seen working, chanting, nervously and excitedly hopping, screaming, and so on. The viewer is compelled to watch this guy as he walks and pan-tilts his head and body to keep following Nursi. The scene abruptly shifts:

**Vision:**

"I saw in a vision an awesome bridge built between two high mountains situated opposite one another. Beneath the bridge was a valley of great depth. I was on the bridge. A dense darkness had enveloped every part of the world. I looked to my right and saw a vast grave swathed in an unending dense gloom, that is, I imagined it. I looked to my left and as though saw violent storms and calamities gathering amid terrifying waves of blackness. I looked beneath the bridge and imagined I saw a profound abyss. I had a dim torch in the face of this terrifying darkness. I used it and could see a little with its light. A most horrific situation appeared to me. In fact, such awful dragons, lions, and monsters appeared around me and on the bridge in front of me that I exclaimed: "Oh! This torch brings me only trouble!" and I angrily cast it to the ground and broke it. Then on smashing it, the darkness suddenly dispersed as though I had turned on the switch for a

huge electric lamp that lit up the whole world. Everywhere was filled with the lamp's light. It showed everything as it was in reality. I saw that the bridge I had seen was a highway through a plain passing over even ground. The vast grave I had seen on my right I realized consisted from top to bottom of beautiful, verdant gardens and gatherings for worship, service, conversation, and the remembrance of God under the direction of luminous men. The precipices and peaks on my left which I had imagined to be tempestuous and stormy I now saw fleetingly to be a vast, lovely, and elevated place of feasting, recreation, and enjoyment behind mountains that were adorned and pleasant. And the creatures I had thought to be terrifying monsters and dragons, I saw were familiar domestic animals like camels, oxen, sheep, and goats. Declaring, "All praise be to God for the light of belief," I recited the verse, God is the Protector of those who believe; He leads them out of darkness into light, and I awoke from my vision. Thus, the two mountains were the beginning and end of life; that is, this world and the Intermediate Realm. The bridge was the road of life. To the right was the past, and to the left, the future. As for the small torch, it was the human ego, which is egotistical, relies on what it knows, and does not heed the heavenly revelation. The things imagined to be the monsters were the events and strange creatures of the world" (Nursî, 2006: 321).

New scene following the first scene in the hut: In the POV (point of view) style, the participant finds himself on a bridge between two mountains at night. As Nursi defined in his vision, participant experiences imagination in a virtual reality environment.

## **PROJECT CONCEPT - II**

### **Imaginations of Other(ed) Nursi \_ VR Film Experience (As a Continuation)**

“There are politics in all films. Any film that is anchored in a society, any film that deals with humanity is necessarily political.”

Abbas Kiorastami

For Nursi, the cinema of God is a multidimensional time travel machine that allows him to travel through various time frames while simultaneously linking “here” and “there,” as well as “here, then, and beyond.” Nursi experienced tragedies and epiphanies as he travelled between various countries and states of life (often in jail or exile), which may have contributed to a fascination with what he refers to as the “changing environments of cinema” (Balan, 2016: 49). After participating in a large-scale Kurdish rebellion, Nursi retired from politics and concentrated exclusively on welcoming people to the Islamic faith. His involvement with both the Islamic and Kurdish revolutions got him into trouble, and he spent more than half of his life in exile or jail as a result of it. In the Nur order, he rose to prominence. During World War One, he entered the Ottoman army, became a prisoner of war in Russia, and was deported to Siberia. He had problems with the emerging Republican state as he returned to Turkey, spending many years in jail and exile between 1925 and 1952 (Balan, 2016: 50).

Given Nursi’s contempt for life’s flavors, the major power’s oppressive regime, the harm done to himself and his students, and the collective value of his ideas, it is clear that he is a valuable figure who can be addressed through the characteristics of minor literature developed by Deleuze and Guattari(2000: 25) based on Kafka’s works.

According to Deleuze and Guattari (2000: 25), minor literature is the literature of a minority group in a major language rather than the literature of a minor language. Its key feature is that language’s powerful deterritorialization feature influences it in all situations. Nursi, also

known as Said-i Kurdi, conversed and wrote in Ottoman Turkish rather than his native Kurdish. In this regard, we identify the existence of a deterritorialized figure here.

The second distinguishing characteristic of minor literature is that everything in them is political (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000: 26). The Old Said (1877-1920), the New Said (1920-1950), and the Third Said (1950-1969) are the three phases of Nursi's life as per his own classification (Vahide, 2003b: xvii-xxiv). The New Said is motivated and acts in a mind-heart alliance, while the Old Said is rather rational. Consequently, we see that Nursi was a political person in the Old Said era, discarded politics in the New Said and Third Said times, and dedicated his entire life to serving faith. However, he occasionally addresses the political pressure of the major power in his works from both of these later periods. In other words, despite Nursi's transition from the political and rational to the spiritual, political power never abandons him.

Everything in minor literature has a collective meaning, which is the third feature of this field. Whatever the author says or does alone constitutes a collective action, and whatever he says or does is inherently political even if some disagree (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000: 27).

In fact, Said Nursi lived during the "secular" Turkish Republic's establishment and was ignored and misunderstood by both the country's founding authority and the religious and philosophical scholars of the time. He lived almost his entire life in droves, jails, and prisons; was repeatedly homeless, and was forced to live in wooden homes, huts, and sometimes in trees and in nature, away from humans. His personal items included a soup cup, spoons, two cotton wool clothes, and other items made of old rubber and punctured shoes from endless walks and long distances. They are basic instruments. He is said to have survived for a month on a plate of honey and a piece of bread, refusing all presents from strangers.

Nursi's minoritarian practice explains Deleuze's cinematographic idea to us and reminds us of the words "the act of resistance" by saying "the close relationship between an act of resistance



and the work of art” and that it is an active struggle against the separation of the profane and the sacred ( [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a\\_hifamdISs&t=11s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_hifamdISs&t=11s)). One can say that Nursi, a philosopher who lived a life of constant displacement and deterritorialization, eventually became “imperceptible” by mutation.

In “The Forest” (1993) is the VR work of Tamás Waliczky. The forest and tree images made up of black and white images are together with the viewer (see: [http://www.waliczky.net/pages/waliczky\\_forest1-HTML5.htm](http://www.waliczky.net/pages/waliczky_forest1-HTML5.htm)). Gabriella Giannachi, when explaining this project, states that “While listening to the soundtrack, alternating what appears to be the sound of distant trains with the gentle lyrics of a female voice singing an old German children’s song, perhaps hinting at the deportation and annihilation of hundreds of innocent children during the Holocaust, the viewer cannot help but lose themselves, time and again, in this forest, which in its barrenness is so sadly resonant of all those deaths. The world of the forest is like a Limbo within which the viewer can do nothing but wait for something to happen.” (Giannachi, 2004: 158) “...The viewer is suspended, powerless, in an evocative space that could be a real space, a space of memory or the aftermath of the Apocalypse.” (Giannachi, 2004: 159).

## **Vision**

“One time, I was sitting by my window in Eskishehir Prison during the ‘Republic Festival.’ Opposite me, the older girls of the High School were laughing and dancing in the schoolyard. Suddenly their condition fifty years hence appeared to me, as though on a cinema screen. I saw that of those fifty to sixty girl students, forty to fifty had become earth in their graves, and were suffering torments. While ten were ugly seventy to eighty-year-olds who were despised where they might have expected love because they did not preserve their chastity when young. This I observed with complete certainty and I wept at their piteable states. Some of my

friends in the prison heard my weeping, and came and asked me about it. I told them: ‘Leave me alone for now, I want to be alone.’

“Yes, what I saw was reality, not imagination. Just as the summer and autumn are followed by winter, so the summer of youth and autumn of old age are followed by the winter of the grave and Intermediate Realm. If there was a cinema which showed the events of fifty years in the future, the same as those of fifty years ago are shown in the present...” (Nursî, 1998: 219).

In fact, this instance clarifies Nursi’s vision of time as conveyed through cinema in his vision. Nursi uses the concept of cinema to describe his thoughts on the universe, bearing in mind the universe’s relentless excitement and motion. He looks at the afterlife from the prison window, almost like a sudden change of image in the cinema, and sees the wretched circumstances of the young girls there. Nursi also contrasts the universe to “a movie-camera with a hundred thousand lenses,” referring to the function of cameras at the time that recorded a single frame and through a single angle:

“The universe, a factory producing numerous goods, such as human actions, for the levels of the Abode of Bliss; and a movie-camera with a hundred thousand lenses continuously taking pictures of this world to show to the spectators in the eternal realm and especially in Paradise.” (Nursî, 1998: 21)

I am thinking of integrating Said Nursi's visions within the concept of minor cinema and VR film practice with the previous project called *A Pariah in your land a stranger in your body*. Nursi’s vision from the one seen in Eskisehir prison bears an important resemblance to my practice. The viewer is an observer at the first stage. In a prison we see Nursi’s figure looking at from prison's small window. The viewer can interact with the space and can come closer to see what Nursi is looking at. Nursi looks at a walking woman: while the seasons change (with using ready assets) woman get older quicker than the time we perceive in reality. This scene changes and viewer become the spectator. Nursi's vision(s) reflects on the continuation of the

window of previous project and it can be used as interface between the viewer as a first person and Nursi's visions and his figure himself. The previous VR room becomes a memory which reflects Nursi's visions on the walls and interacts with the window we have. Thinking of the extension of the space, extra scenes can be included. For example, The VR space can be created based on the idea of telepresence in which the viewer (this can be me as a subject or the participant as a POV) and Said Nursi interacts in VR space.

Creating a VR space that resembles a view in the current context is based on the vision Nursi saw in prison years ago (prison bars, a bed, or the idea of a prison in general), at least from Nursi's perspective when gazing at the present and current political events. Looking through the same bars and basements as before, and recalling Giannachin's words: "what is so striking about this space is how much one can see within it, given that the work itself offers so little, if any, interaction. And this is the final major characteristic of virtual reality: by interfering with the viewer's sense of presence and imagination, it can, at least for a moment, remove them from the world they are in and allow them access to a different universe, one where a person could become another" (Gianacchi, 2004: 159).

We see political struggles in Kiarostami's films, but they are not clear to everyone. In the Deleuzian sense, these are imperceptible "thinking images" that reterritorialize cinematic language in terms of its history, language, and physical space.

In certain ways, this is similar to telepresence, which is one of the VR interfaces.

Telepresence refers to the ability of "allowing the surgeon to be there without being there" (Heim, 1993: 114). Telepresence is now feasible thanks to the combination of "holography" technology and widely available realistic technologies. In this context, we go a little further and listen to Peter Weibel's quantum cinema from a futuristic point of view which states that "In distributed or dislocated interactive virtual worlds, we will find the same inseparability. The interaction will not only be unidirectional from observer to the image, from real to

virtual, but also bi-directional-from the virtual back to the real, from the image back to the observer. Reversible computing will allow reversible relations between real space and image space. This interaction will not be locally bound but correlative between distant virtual worlds, or between dislocated real and virtual worlds” (Weibel, 2003: 601).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “My Dear, Loyal Brothers! Last night I dreamt that I had come to you and awoke when I was about to lead the prayers. When, according to my experience, the dream was going to be interpreted, two of our brothers from among the heroes of Sava and Homa arrived in the name of all you to interpret it. I was overjoyed, as though I had seen all of you” (Nursî, 1998: 332).

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