





A Cinematographic Contemplation  
on Rūmi's Assertion:

آنچه شما به دنبالش هستید، به دنبال شماست

“What you seek, is seeking you”.

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## DEDICATION

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents who sacrificed their lives for their children. My life path has been inspired by their kindness, generosity and commitment to helping others. I remember how hard they worked to support their family as well as the five additional children they fostered.

Rest in peace, my lovely angels.



This thesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

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The concept of identity has been discussed for many centuries in Persian literature, distinctively in the poems of the philosopher and poet Rūmi (Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi - (جلال الدين محمد بلخي) (1207 – 1273). Identity and Rūmi's poetic thinking form the substrate from which this study emanates.

Methodologically the research employs a heuristic, practice-led, inquiry, to consider the poetics of سیر (Seyr) and سلوک (Soluk) through the four Zoroastrian sacred elements آتش، باد، خاک، و آب (fire, earth, water and air movement).

In the resulting two non-verbal films, the lyrical potentials of cameras, lenses and composition are employed to create subtle cultural allusions that function as poetic metaphors. Using this approach the work contributes to a corpus of work by Persian filmmakers who employ poetic abstraction as a means of enhancing philosophical contemplation.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This thesis is both an individual journey and a journey with others. In this regard, I would like to express my appreciation to the following people and organisations for their support of the study.

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The study has also been enhanced by the support of colleagues at the Auckland University of Technology. In this regard, I would like to thank Elwyn Sheehan for her support as a research librarian, especially for the time she spent teaching me how to collect data from diverse sources. I am grateful to Nabil Sabra for his help while I was developing a template for the exegesis. I would also like to thank Soheila Mohammad Yari, for her care, tutelage and advice during the course of this study, and David Yetton who helped me with technology and facilities as I began fine-tuning my films for exhibition.

I would also like to thank David Kayrouz for his poetic knowledge surrounding Rumi and Arabic philosophers.

Finally I would like to express my gratitude to Michael Zahn “NZ Camera Hire” for support with equipment used in realising the project.

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## ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly indicated), nor material which, to a substantial extent, has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Reza Mohammadyari Yari

31 May 2024

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## ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT

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This research was an artistic inquiry that did not involve the use of identifiable models, personal information, clinical trials, or solicited responses from audiences. Accordingly, it did not require ethical approval.

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The structure of the exegesis

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FIGURE 2.1.

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1. See <https://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/fair-use/what-is-fair-use/>

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FIGURE 5.2.

Sequential frame grabs from Soluk showing iconographical shifts between elements and time.



# Chapter 1

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INTRODUCTION

# Chapter 1

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## INTRODUCTION

2. Smith and Dean state that practice-led research describes a type of inquiry where, “creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs [and] the training and specialised knowledge that creative practitioners have and the processes they engage in when they are making art ... can lead to specialised research insights which can then be generalised and written up as research” (Smith & Dean, 2009, p.25).
3. Here, I refer to a range of conflicts in my homeland of Iran that, this century, include the [Sistan and Baluchestan insurgency](#) (2004–ongoing), the [2009 presidential election protests](#), the [Iran–PJAK Conflict](#) (2004–2013), Iran’s intervention in the [Syrian Civil War](#) (2011–ongoing), the [2011–2012 Day of Rage protests](#), the [War in Iraq](#) (2014–2017), the [2021–2022 Iranian protests](#), related to power and water insecurity (and broader demands for democracy), the [2022 Iranian food protests](#), and the [Mahsa Amini protests](#), related to police brutality by Virtue Police against women.

## 1.1 THE INQUIRY

This practice-led<sup>2</sup> thesis adopts a lyrical, filmic approach where the creative use of cameras, lenses and compositional devices are employed to consider the poetics of [سیر](#) (Seyr) and [سلوک](#) (Soluk) through the four Zoroastrian sacred elements [آب](#)، [باد](#)، [خاک](#)، و [آتش](#) (fire, earth, water and air movement).

## 1.2 RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

### Rationale

The psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, history doesn’t repeat itself ... it merely rhymes” (Reik, 1965, p. 133).

As a Persian (Iranian), I have witnessed the rhyming of history many times and this thesis posits that, rather than simply recognising its reoccurrence, we might try to understand it. Accepting as a Persian artist that tensions between anxious, fundamentalist constraint and benevolent understanding will keep reoccurring, the study offers culturally resourced, contemporary compositions that provide insight into ideas of harmony and the pursuit of identity.<sup>3</sup>

## Significance

The study proposes three significant contributions.

First, it develops a lyrical, filmic contemplation on the four Zoroastrian sacred elements, آب، باد، خاک، و آتش (fire, earth, water and air movement) that are both independent and harmoniously dependent on each other. As a dynamic they express an essential truth that life is a series of relationships. All life is composed of these elements. Each seeks the essence of the other, and in this combination, they represent the complexity of relationality in life.

Second, rather than using Visual Effects [VFX], the study demonstrates the potential of diverse technical approaches to camera use, as an aid to poetic communication.

Finally, the films make a contribution to a corpus of film texts by Middle Eastern filmmakers who have been imprisoned or persecuted for metaphorical lyricism where work has concerned itself with political or ideological damage. Indicative of such films are: *Yol* (Guney, 1982); *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, *The Colour of Pomegranates*, and *the Confession*, (Parajanov, 1965, 1969, and 1989 respectfully).

## 1.3 KEY WORDS IN THE STUDY

In this exegesis, I use six terms that warrant an initial definition or explanation.

### Lyrical film

In this thesis, I use the term 'lyrical film' to describe a poetic evocation of an idea that surfaces from either an existing poetic text or from a situation. Lyrical film can be differentiated from 'Poetry film'; a subgenre of film that blends spoken or written poetry (Leropoulos, 2009; Wees, 1984), because it involves a sustained period of meditation that may raise more questions than it answers (Rosenbaum, 1998).

### Rūmi

Rūmi was a 13th-century Persian poet whose thinking is central to this thesis. He was an Islamic scholar, theologian and Sufi mystic who emanated from Greater

Khorasan in Greater Iran. Rūmi is also known as Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Rūmi, Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī, Mevlânâ/Mawlânâ and Mevlevî/Mawlawī.

Rūmi's works were primarily written in Persian (although some of his verse is recorded in Turkish, Greek and Arabic). Gardet (1977) considers Rūmi's seminal work *Masnawi Mathnawi*, as one of the greatest poems of the Persian language.<sup>4</sup> Although his poetry has been influential in Persian literature and the wider literary traditions of the Ottoman Empire, Rūmi's works are still widely read (in their original form), across the Persian-speaking world. His poetry stimulates thoughts and feelings, creating new ways of understanding and better ways of being. His writing is primarily concerned with issues of identity and a form of love that he believes infuses the world when one seeks knowledge of *Tawhid* (the oneness of God) while negating one's own existence. Rūmi is also noted for his belief that diverse art forms (specifically music, poetry and dance) can provide pathways for reaching God.

### سیر (Seyr)

The Persian word سیر (Seyr) is often used in spiritual and philosophical contexts. Broadly, it refers to journey, travel, or movement. However, in a spiritual or mystical sense, it can denote a journey of self-discovery, a quest for knowledge, or a path towards enlightenment. Such a journey may involve both physical travel and inner exploration. Being the title of the first of my two films, the word alludes to the journey across the inexplicable as one seeks the healing of relationality.

### سلوک (Soluk)

Like seyr, the Persian word سلوک (Soluk) is also associated with spiritual contexts. Soluk typically translates as a "manner of conduct" or "behaviour". It is often used in Sufi writing to describe the spiritual journey or

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4. This work is noted for its intricately interweaving of fables, Qur'anic revelations, scenes from ordinary life, metaphysics and exegetical writing.

path towards closeness with the divine. Soluk involves practices, disciplines, and behaviours that purify the soul and enable one to attain spiritual growth. As the title for my second film, it refers to spiritual closeness, divine integration and the resolution of self-alienation.

### Visual Metaphor

Given the lyrical nature of this study, the films employ a series of recurring visual metaphors. I use the term ‘visual metaphor’ to describe a representation of an idea through a visual image that suggests association. In my work, the four principal elements of traditional Zoroastrian thought, written text and an hourglass are engaged as both material substances and visual metaphors invite an audience to contemplate and interpret ideas in a distinctively lyrical manner.

**Zoroastrian sacred elements** آب، باد، خاک، و آتش  
(fire, earth, water and air movement)

Zoroastrianism is an Iranian religion and one of the world’s oldest faiths (with discernible roots dating back to the 2nd millennium BCE). Drawing on the teachings

of the Avesta<sup>5</sup> and the Iranian prophet Zoroaster, the religion is based on the concept of a dualistic cosmology of good and evil where good eventually will triumph over evil. Pivotal to the religion are four sacred elements (Al-Anāsir Al-Arba‘ah’ چهار آتشخیز): water (Aab, آب \_ aban, (آبان), (fire آتش, Atash \_ atar, عطار), earth (Khak, خاک \_ Zamin, زمین) and air movement (Hava, هوا). These four elements are the fundamental constituents of human existence and they are intricately interconnected. Earth is associated with the physical body, fire with insight and the mind, water with wisdom and emotions, and air with the spirit. Water and fire are agents of ritual purity and fire is believed to have its origin in water. Water is the source of wisdom and fire is a medium through which spiritual insight and wisdom are gained. The two heavy elements (earth and water), constitute the bodily organs, while two light elements (fire and air), represent the human soul.<sup>6</sup>

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5. The Avesta are the religious texts of Zoroastrianism.

6. Avicenna (ابن سینا, ibn Sina)

#### 1.4 THE NATURE OF THE RESEARCH PRACTICE

The research practice employs specific cinematic tools (cameras, lenses, and lighting) to develop a lyrical, filmic contemplation on relationality. The two submitted works *سیر* (Seyr) and *سلوک* (Soluk) were filmed in ways that establish a lyrical visual language that utilises flowing camera moves, restrained colour palettes, distorted motion ratios and a shallow depth of field.

The films are designed for display on large screens where the intimacy of close-up photography will result in a change in relational proportion. Here, details that might be conventionally experienced as small are encountered as larger than our physical self.

These works draw on Al-Anāsir Al-Arba'ah, the traditional four elements of Zoroastrianism. These elements are artistically considered enigmatic metaphors that respond to Rumi's thinking about relationality and hope, encapsulated in his assertion:

آنچه شما به دنبالش هستید، به دنبال شماست

“What you seek, is seeking you”<sup>7</sup>

- 
7. This statement has been interpreted in diverse ways. An alternative translation occurs in the closing lines of the following quatrains:

تا در طلب گوهر کانی کانی - تا در هوس لقمه نانی نانی  
 هر چیزی که در جستجی آئی آئی - این نکتہ رمز اگر بدانی دانی  
 You are a treasure, if the gems are your aim  
 No more than a grain, if a loaf is your claim  
 Recall this secret, when you play this game  
 Whatever you pursued- is what you became.

## 1.5 THE STRUCTURE OF THE EXEGESIS

Etymologically, the word exegesis is derived from the Greek *exegeisthai*, meaning to guide, lead or critically analyse an original text (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008, p. 498). However, in contemporary creative practice-led theses, exegesis relates to a critical discourse with the textual work created by the artist or designer where the practitioner unpacks the substance, context and methodological approach taken to an inquiry. In addressing these requirements, this exegesis is structured using six chapters: an introduction, a positioning of the researcher, a review of contextual knowledge, a discussion of the project's research design, a critical commentary on outcomes and a conclusion (see Figure 1.1).

The exegesis is an interactive pdf. Please open your browser before reading. This will enable you to click on links indicated in pale blue type and you will be taken to the appropriate online resource.

Having now outlined the research question, defined terms used in the study and considered the rationale and potential significance of the project, it is useful to contextualise the study by considering its nature and origins.

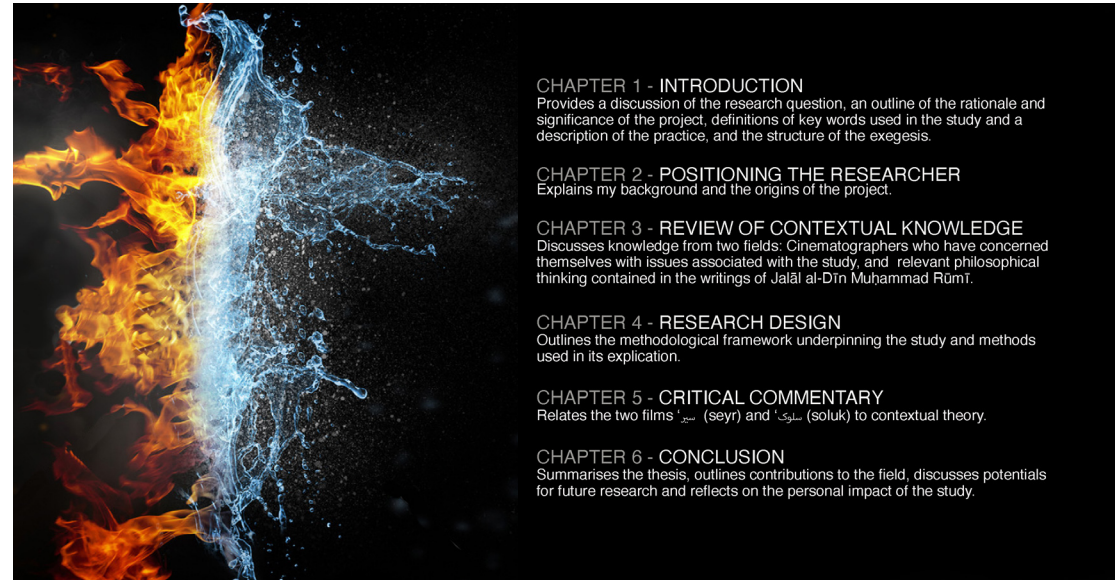


FIGURE 1.1.  
The structure of the exegesis



# Chapter 2

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POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER

## Chapter 2

### POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER



FIGURE 2.1:

The researcher filming on location in the coastal city of Nur, Iran (1992).

This chapter considers the relationship between the thesis project, my past life, and my practice as a cinematographer. Specifically, it explains my affinity with Rūmi's philosophical perspectives on life, love and hope.

“What you seek is seeking you.” *Rūmi*

مولانا آنچه شما به دنبالش هستید، به دنبال شماست

#### 2.1 Researcher identity in context

I was born in Persia (present day – Iran).<sup>8</sup> I am of Persian, Azerbaijani descent and my parents were internal migrants who moved from one territory to another. As the second of four children, I grew up in Tehran (the capital city of Iran) and I received a Muslim upbringing in, what was at that time, a moderate Muslim country that permitted freedom and accessibility to a wide variety of thinking and expression. In my childhood, I became captivated by motion pictures; I was fascinated by the diverse genres that flickered across the silver screen and increasingly, I became determined to be involved in making film. I saw and felt the images as poetic movements that had the potential to express complex thoughts and feelings.

8. Historically, Persia was the common name used for Iran.

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“Don’t grieve. Anything you lose comes around in  
another form.” *Rūmi*

غصه نخور. هر چیزی که از دست می دهی به شکل دیگری می آید. مولانا

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“Love is the bridge between you and everything.” *Rūmi*

عشق پل بین تو و همه چیز است. مولانا

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“Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and  
find all the barriers within yourself that you have built  
against it.” *Rūmi*

وظیفه شما جستجوی عشق نیست، بلکه صرفاً جستجو و یافتن تمام موانعی است که در درون  
خود در برابر آن ایجاد کرده اید. مولانا

### 2.3 Light in Rūmi’s words: Finding meaning in suffering

I found a kindred  
spirit in the ancient works of Rūmi. From brutality, I  
sought the comfort and wisdom of the poetic. In times of  
struggle and terrible circumstances, I tried to understand  
the purpose of my life, finding ways to navigate the  
plague of despondency. Often overwhelmed by a sense of

pointlessness and dullness, I found a window of light and purpose in Rūmi's words.

My encounters with the thinking of Rūmi became profound and uplifting when I listened to his poems in traditional Persian musical form. Not only did I feel the significance of his words, but I was embodied in his space and universe. His words became a window on purpose. According to Rūmi those who find meaning in the deepest of suffering, regardless of how of how terrible life is, must decide on the direction to take through and after the suffering, what direction they will go. Through the shared wisdom in his writings, I understood that we cannot invent the meaning of our existence, but we can detect it.

This thesis is an extension of my political persecution and it forms part of a trajectory of coming to 'know' both myself and the paradox of my art. I sense meaning in the poetic ritual of lost memories and the inexplicable. Rūmi believed that the universe with all its complexity and mystery is only an outward manifestation of man's inner reality. In other words, the universe is a part of man even though it appears the other way around (as if man is a part of the universe). He proposes that there is always a reason to live even in the worst conditions and that there's always a purpose to be found in suffering. In grasping this, I find meaning. According to Rūmi our purpose for being in this universe is to manifest the very nature of our spirit, which is touched by the spirit of God.

#### **2.4 The voice of the elements**

This research filmically pursues the lyrical nature of Rūmi's thinking about hope. Using the iconography of time, water, fire, earth and air movement in space, I consider the inescapable relationships between these elements as objects in a state of change. I pursue thought as a series of images, inspired by the poet's thinking, where each frame is mesmeric, meaningful and interpretive. Thus, as a counterpoint to brutality,

fear and corruption, I consider identity through the subtle poetics of sublime imagery, grace and beauty. I position a philosopher from the beloved land that I left, in a contemporary world through the magical play of cinematography. Here, grace is a key to discovering profound emotion. Thus, the essence of meaning of these films is to be found in images and music, not in dialogue or narration.

“I envisage film as travel in the essences  
of unforgettable pieces of life.”

”من فیلم را سفری در ذات قطعات فراموش نشدنی زندگی می دانم ”

In this thesis, I have envisaged two lyrical films as a journey through the metaphorical essence of my life. In doing so, I draw on the four sacred elements water (Aab, آب \_ aban, آبان), (fire, آتش, Atash \_ atar, عطار), earth (Khak, خاک \_ Zamin, زمین) and air movement (Hava, هوا), sourced in ancient Zoroastrian thinking that initially found its voice in my land.

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They are expressions of hope that find  
their voice in the intricate movements of a camera.



# Chapter 3

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REVIEW OF CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE

## Chapter 3

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### REVIEW OF CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE

The project is contextualised by two bodies of knowledge.

The first comprises the films of significant cinematographers/directors who have used cinematography to consider complex, non-narrative approaches to depicting ideological pursuit and identity. The second relates to the philosophical thinking of specifically attributed to Rūm and his poetry.

#### 3.1 SIGNIFICANT DIRECTORS WHO EMPLOY LYRICAL CINEMATOGRAPHY:

Eight directors who have employed lyrical framing to contemplate complex ideas relating to pursuit and identity, serve as an initial orientation for the project. Five of these are middle Eastern and three are American.

##### 3.1.1 Sergei Parajanov

Parajanov was an Armenian director whose deeply personal films had a significant impact on international post-war cinematography. His work formed a counterpoint to sanctioned Soviet socialist realism and he was repeatedly persecuted and imprisoned. Although nearly all of his film projects between 1965 to 1973 were banned or halted by the Soviet film administrations, he

is remembered for *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1965); *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969); and his unfinished *The Confession* (1990). Parajanov's small corpus of visually lyrical work has a distinctive style that reflects diverse influences including Armenian, Georgian, and Ukrainian cultural motifs, folk art, medieval miniature painting, Russian and European art films, and surrealism (Steffen, 2013).

Parajanov's films often have non-linear narratives that move back and forth in time or are presented in dream-like, non-chronological order. For example in *The Colour of Pomegranates*, (a biography of the Armenian poet Sayat-Nova), the film unfolds as a series of symbolic tableaux. Parajanov is noted for integrating diverse techniques, including ornate production design, intricate camera movements, and saturated colour palettes.

### 3.1.2 Yilmaz Guney

Guney is a Turkish/Kurdish director whose work has garnered significant international respect. He is best known for his film *Yol* (1982). *Yol* is a controversial work that tells a challenging story in a non-verbal, lyrical manner. His cinematography and narrative are powerful, colourful and rich. *Yol* is Gurney's brutal portrait of

Turkey in the period immediately following the 1980 coup d'état. Using the stories of five soldiers on leave for a week, the film considers the human condition in very visceral ways. In Turkey, the film was banned until 1999. However, it won numerous honours, including the Palme d'Or at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival.

Both Guney and Parajanov were directors whose work and quest for identity were shaped by political persecution.

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I draw inspiration from cinematographers and directors who persist in asking deep questions about identity and humanity, drawing on their embodied experiences of persecution.

### 3.1.3 Abbas Kiarostami

Kiarostami was an influential Iranian filmmaker. After graduating from university, he joined the Centre for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, where he created his famous film *Where is the Friend's House?* (1987) (خانه دوست کجاست?). This work provides an insightful look at rural Iranian life. Written and

directed by Kiarostami it relates the story of a tenacious schoolboy's attempt to return a book to his friend and thereby prevent him from being expelled. The film became the first instalment in the filmmaker's *Koker trilogy*. Stylistically, the film is deceptively simple and the director uses this approach to comment on youthful purity and tenacity, pitted against the apathy of an adult world. In the film, Kiarostami's young protagonist (without speaking) conveys a landscape of moral tension. The film is lyrically humane employing the most fleeting of observations to construct a touching insight into Persian culture.

In discussing this film and Kiarostami's two other works, *Through the Olive Trees*. (1994) (زیر درختان زیتون), and *Life, and Nothing More/And Life Goes On* (زندگی دیگر هیچ / زندگی ادامه دارد) (1992). Hetvi Kamdar (2024) described the director's sparse, esoteric and lyrical films as:

... sustained meditations on singular landscapes and the way ordinary people live in them; obsessional quests that take on the contours of parables; concentrated inquiries that raise more questions than they answer; and comic as well as cosmic poems about dealing with personal and impersonal disaster. They're about making discoveries and cherishing what's in the

world--including things that we can't understand.<sup>9</sup>

#### 3.1.4 Majid Majidi

Majidi is another important figure in contemporary Iranian film. Among his many movies is the poignant 'The Colour of Paradise' (1999). In this film, Majidi takes us into a blind eight year old boy's world. The audience learns about the child's sense of sound and touch as well as the loneliness that comes with being unable to see. Ebert (2000, para. 4) in reviewing the film notes, "For all of its apparent melodrama, 'The Colour of Paradise' is not an obvious or manipulative film. It is too deliberately simple, and it is made with delicacy and beauty."

Majidi balances the irony of blindness in the film with access to breathtaking pictures of lush landscapes, and a highly attuned sound palette. Using these devices, the film exhorts the viewer to value life more deeply. Majidi's sensuous, vivid, almost surrealistic technicolour pictures depict the boy's perception of the world. When watching it one develops multilayered empathy for a blind child, whose senses are captured by exquisite cinematography

9. <https://www.purposestudios.in/post/abbas-kiarostami-and-the-poetry-of-cinema>

where perception is rendered as both attentive and luxurious.

### 3.1.5 Nacer Khemir

Nacer Khemir (ناصر خمير) is a Tunisian writer, artist, storyteller, and filmmaker who was born in 1948 (Khemir, 2024). His first feature film, *Les baliseurs du désert* (*Wanderers of the Desert*) (1984) achieved international acclaim, winning the Grand Prix at the *Festival des Trois Continents*. The dialogue of his second feature film, *Le collier perdu de la colombe* (*The Dove's Lost Necklace*) (1991), was written in Classical Arabic. These two films are considered the first parts of a trilogy that Khemir completed in 2005 with *Bab'Aziz: le prince qui contemplait son âme* (*Bab'Aziz: The Prince Who Contemplated His Soul*). *Bab'Aziz* was Khemir's most political film. Co-produced in Germany, France, Switzerland, and Iran, it was the recipient of a Golden Dagger at the Muscat Film Festival (Moheb, 2006). *Bab'Aziz* is a visually lyrical work that relates the enigmatic story of an elderly dervish who, while accompanied by his granddaughter, encounters a number of mysterious strangers in the desert. Khemir described *Bab'Aziz* as an essentially political film, saying:

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 [. . .] this is an Islam that is different from the one depicted by the media in the aftermath of 9/11 (Omarbacha, n.d., Para. 2).

### 3.1.6 Ron Fricke

Fricke is an American cinematographer whose work serves to contextualise my project, but he is not of Middle Eastern descent. However, his films are marked by the sensuous attention to detail found in Majidi's environments, the visual, lyricism of Khemir, and Parajanov's non-chronological, dream-like approach to narrative form.

Fricke is widely associated with four non-chronological feature documentaries, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), (which he filmed, under the direction of Godfrey Reggio), *Chronos* (1985), *Baraka* (1992), *Samsara* (2011) (all of which he

filmed and directed).

In Godfrey Reggio's, non-verbal tone-poem, *Koyaanisqatsi*, Fricke had developed early approaches to pictorial technologies that included slow-motion and time-lapse filming. *Koyaanisqatsi* featured an artistic arrangement of film footage of cities and natural landscapes in the United States. To record the work, Fricke employed two camera systems and a Todd-AO to execute standard frame rates, and to create the time-lapse sequences, he designed a unique camera that combined moment-lapse photography with highly regulated motion capture (Rayton, 2021).

*Chronos* was a 42-minute film that contained neither actors nor dialogue. It reflected on the passing of time at different scales including seasons, night and day, and light and shadow. Like *Koyaanisqatsi*, the scenes of nature and civilization were filmed at high speed using time-lapse cinematography, multiple exposures and multiple frame printing. The film was recorded using a bespoke 65mm camera with a unique motion control system that Fricke further designed and developed for the project (Gold, 1984).

*Baraka* was filmed on a 65 mm camera with a Todd-AO

print format. Roger (2008) notes that it was the first 8K resolution film ever to have been restored and scanned. Like *Chronos*, *Baraka* had no narrator. It reflected on themes that included human life, spirituality, and beliefs that played out across a contemplation on nature and modernity. The work was filmed over a 14-month period, across 24 countries on six continents (Andrew, 2008).

Fricke's (2011) documentary *Samsara*, expanded on themes and techniques he had developed in *Chronos* and *Baraka*. Like *Baraka*, the film was shot on 65 mm film across multiple international locations. The documentary title *Samsara*, in Hinduism refers to birth, death and rebirth (or impermanence), and in Buddhism it relates to an individual's transmigration or rebirth. Stylistically the work explored these themes by juxtaposing and creating relationships between sacred locations, disaster zones, industrial complexes and natural wonders.

### 3.1.7 J. C. Chandor

J. C. Chandor is also an American filmmaker. His second film, *All is Lost* screened at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival. The movie explored themes of resilience, human vulnerability and the indomitable spirit of survival. In the work, the aging sailor as main character and protagonist

(an aging sailor), perseveres against increasing misfortune by tapping into his inner strength, despite being stranded on a lost island in the Indian Ocean. Significantly, only 51 English words are spoken over the entire duration of 1h 46m of the movie. However, it unfolded inside a rich sonic treatment. In a review published in *The Guardian*, [Peter Bradshaw](#), stated that the “near-mute performance [of the] mysterious old man of the sea adrift and utterly alone [...] works as a parable of old age [...] the news of impending mortality pouring in through the windows like seawater.”

### 3.1.8 Terrence Malick

Terrence Malick is also an American film director who is noted for films like [Badlands](#) (1973), [Days of Heaven](#) (1978), [The Thin Red Line](#) (1998) and [The New World](#) (2005). His work often expresses philosophical and spiritual overtones, and explores themes like transcendence, nature, and tensions between love and mercy, beauty and illness, and reason and instinct. Two of his films in particular serve to contextualise my study.

The first is his experimental documentary [The Voyage of Time](#) (2016). This film considered the nature of the universe, documenting time from its beginning until its

eventual collapse. The work explored ideas like science and spirit, birth and death, and the expansiveness of the cosmos, in comparison to the minutiae of life systems populating the planet.

Malick’s (2011) earlier, experimental coming of age film, [The Tree of Life](#) is of significance to this study, as it utilise a poetic visual voice and employed enigma and metaphor in its consideration of journeys, good and evil, nature and grace, and harmony and relationality. *The Tree of Life* was awarded the Palm d’Or at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. However, its deeply lyrical approach garnered considerable criticism. [Sukhdev Sandhu](#), reviewing the work in the *Daily Telegraph* described it as “self-absorbed”, and “achingly slow, almost buckling under the weight of its swoony poetry.” In a similar vein, [Stephanie Zacharek](#), while praising the film’s photography criticised it as “a gargantuan work of pretension and cleverly concealed self-absorption,” while [Lee Marshall](#) described the film as “a cinematic credo about spiritual transcendence which, while often shot through with poetic yearning, preaches too directly to its audience.”

This study acknowledges the criticisms of Malick’s films and they may feel slow and overly ‘indulgent’ to some audiences, but in contrast to those views, the films resonate with poetic approaches taken to

cinematic storytelling evidenced in the dreamlike, richly metaphoric films of Sergei Parajanov, the sustained meditations of Abbas Kiarostami, the vivid sensuousness of Majid Majidi, and the enigmatic associations evident in Nacer Khemir's film *Bab'Aziz*.

### 3.2 THE PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING OF RŪMI

Having now contextualised my study with a consideration of eight film makers who use highly attentive cinematography in sensuous or lyrical ways, it is useful to turn to a consideration of literature that underpins the project.

#### 3.2.1 The nature of Rūmi

Rūmi as 13th-century Persian poet composed over 65,000 verses of poetry in two volumes over the last 25 years of his life. His work covers deeply philosophical issues in a mystical manner. His thinking includes poems of fiery, soulful expression and passionate love verses filled with yearning and desire.

Rūmi was able to verbalise the highly intimate and often confusing world of personal/spiritual growth in

an inclusive manner. Shiva notes, "the world of Rūmi is neither exclusively the world of a Sufi, nor the world of a Hindu, nor a Jew, nor a Christian. It is a state of an evolved human. A human who is not bound by cultural limitations. A gifted person who touches every one of us" (Shiva, 2018, Section 3, Para. 4).

Rūmi's pen name was 'the Silent', and in this, we may detect a discipline and respect for a form of silence that can give expression to the complex and unknown. His epic work *Mathnawi* may be considered a guide to humanity, and Mojaddedi (2004) describes it as "the Koran in Persian." Rūmi's work may be seen as deeply considered, timeless and placeless. Iqbal argues that "Rūmi raises every subject that he touches to the heights of sublimity; he uses every word which helps him in the expression of the feeling which is his paramount concern. His poetry, like his life; is an expression of deep sincerity" (Iqbal, 2014, p. 132). This sense of the sublime and silence may be identified in his statement:

منطق پشت کلمات را بالا بزنه صدايت. باران است که گل ها را پرورش  
می دهد نه صاعقه

(Rūmi cited in Barks, 2016. Quatrain, 1575).

“Raise your words, not your voice. It is rain that grows  
flowers, not thunder.”

(Translation by the researcher).

### 3.2.2 Rūmi and the poetic

Rūmi’s primary mode of disseminating thought was through mystical love songs (written to his teacher Shams al-Dīn, the Prophet Muhammad, or God). These poems took the form of ghazals (short lyric works, that form a unity of subject and symbolism rather than a logical sequence of ideas). Schimmel (2022, para. 6), notes that Rūmi wrote over 30,000 ghazals reflecting on “the different stages of his love, longing and suffering”. Stylistically, she observes that his poetic language,

... never becomes lost in lofty spiritual heights or nebulous speculation. The fresh language, propelled by its strong rhythms, sometimes assumes forms close to popular verses. There would seem to be cause for the belief, expressed by chroniclers, that much of this poetry was composed in a state of ecstasy, induced by the music of the flute or the drum, the hammering of the goldsmiths, or the sound of the water mill in Meram,

where Rūmi used to go with his disciples to enjoy nature (ibid.).

Rūmi also wrote a number of robāīyyātt (quatrains with the rhyme scheme aaba). However, it is the ghazal as its distinctive poetic form where a unity of subject and symbolism is pursued, rather than a fixed meaning, that influences the poetic constructions of my project.

In Schimmel’s (1988) article, *Mystical Poetry in Islam*, she discusses Rūmi’s use of “traditional images and the state of complete spiritual union between lover and beloved: and everything created participates in amazement, [such that] there is no separation that exists anymore” (p. 68). She also notes that his imagery is “often taken from everyday life” (p. 73), and structurally, many of his ghazals “end with the word *khamush*, “Quiet!” or another admonition to stop talking (for the true secret can never be revealed)” (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> These two articles by Schimmel build on a body of work begun by Chittick in 1983 that was later developed through Schimmel’s books; *The Triumphal Sun: A*

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10. Other ghazals she notes, have no formal ending.

11. This article built on Mannani’s (2007) work, *Divine Deviants: The Dialectics of Devotion in Donne and Rūmi*.

study of Mowlana Jalaladdin's life and work (1978); and *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (1982). Considerations of Rūmi's poetry have subsequently been developed by Mannani (2010), (who analysed the content and stylistic features of the poet's writing),<sup>11</sup> and Yusufi, Qolam-Hussein, in his (1997) book, *The Bright Fountain: A Meeting with Poets*.

### 3.2.3 What you seek, is seeking you

Rūmi's statement "What you seek, is seeking you", may be interpreted in different forms, contingent upon one's viewpoint. Mani (2019) suggests that to apprehend the quote, we need to perceive the presence of opposition within the nature of lifecycles. Significant here is the presence of polarity. Mani suggests that a life cycle consists of two poles comprising the light and the dark (which are described as "Yin and Yang" in the eastern traditions). He argues that the existence of this polarity constitutes the dynamic energy in a life cycle and because of this, it is continuously in motion. For instance, the light searches for the dark and the dark searches for the light, the positive searches for the

negative and the negative searches for the positive. If there was no opposition, he suggests, a lifecycle would be a static force that has no movement. Mani proposes that what Rūmi meant by this quote is: "When a man seeks through a desire, goal or an objective, they go into a state of imbalance – the seeking creates an "absence", and therefore the loss of balance, the loss of fullness." (Mani, 2019, p. 2).

Mani (2019) also argues that, if one begins feeling worthless or negative towards this emptiness or absence, one is also negating opportunities for discovery and fulfilment. On the other hand, Mani suggests that acceptance will cause one to be "attracted" to the state of absence or negativity finding in it, which is referred to in Rūmi's statement.

Mani (2019) maintains that there is polarity in all facets of life, e.g., the existence of birth and death; the existence of day and night; and the existence of male and female. Rūmi believed in the power of attraction. He suggests that whatever goals or objectives we are looking for in life if we stay faithful to the law of oppositions (polarity) and not to perceive or feel negatively towards the lack of goals (emptiness), we will produce positive energy to attract

those accomplishments and vice versa. Thus, he proposes that what we seek in life will continue to seek us, up until the point when there is unification and resulting stability. This is the idea that is given voice in my films.

Finally, it is useful to consider Coleman Barks translation of “What you seek, is seeking you” as “Whatever you seek, is what you become”.

Barks is renowned for his translations of Rūmi’s poems, although his work does not offer direct translations in the traditional sense.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Barks reimagined Rūmi’s poetry in an effort to capture its essence and make it accessible to contemporary English speaking audiences.<sup>13</sup> Barks’ translations have been both praised and critiqued. Supporters appreciate his ability to communicate the emotional impact of Rūmi’s writing, while critics argue that his translations often stray too far from the original texts (Zirrar, 2020).

The translation “What you seek, is seeking you” is attributed to Rūmi and is widely recognised as coming from his works (Mojaddedi, 2008; Schimmel, 1988). This quote emphasizes the idea of mutual attraction and the deep connection between one’s desires and their fulfilment. It also alludes to the idea of destiny and the universe aligning with our goals.

“Whatever you seek, you become” is a Barks’ (1995) interpretation that suggests our pursuits and desires

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12. Significant amongst his works are:

- Barks, C. (1993). *The Hand of Poetry, Five Mystic Poets of Persia*. Omega Publications.
- Barks, C. (1995). *The Essential Rūmi*. HarperCollins.
- Barks, C. (2003). *The Book of Love* HarperOne.
- Barks, C. (2006). *A Year with Rūmi* HarperOne.

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13. However, Barks did not speak Persian and his ‘translations’ he removed “most, if not all references to Islam from the work of Rūmi. The Sufism that Barks entertained did not insert, but rather encouraged him to de-couple all Islamic references from the Masnavi.” (Zirrar, 2020, para. 18).

shape our identity and transformation over time. These two translations convey different philosophical ideas and neither may be inherently “right” or “wrong,” but their validity depends on the perspective we adopt. However, being Persian I find deeper meaning in Mojaddedi’s culturally contextualized, linguistically informed translation.

### 3.2.4 Seeking and alienation

Ghavami (2016) argues that during modernity and postmodernity, human beings have suffered self-alienation and a lack of self-awareness that has led to a state of crisis. These states of the human condition have been discussed for centuries in Persian literature (including in Rūmi’s *Masnavi-Manavi* manuscripts).

In his book, *Masnavi Manavi*, Rūmi indicated that the most significant aspects of self-alienation are: the human negation of the numinous, the domination of worldly life, scientism and materialistic desire (Azadibougar & Patton, 2015). Several of Rūmi’s works and other ancient Persian manuscripts offer tactics to resolve the issues.

Ghavami (2016) argues that Rūmi believed that beneficial ways to resolve issues of self-alienation and a lack of self-awareness lie in understanding the plight of our human condition. This understanding is predicated on the prohibition of self-destruction through monotheistic worldviews and maintaining an awareness of love and insight (wisdom).

The study proposes that Rūmi’s concept of “What you seek, is seeking you”, may be associated with the concept of the ‘power of attraction’. The two films, *سیر* (Seyr) and *سلوک* (Soluk) are an expression of harmonies and connections. Their metaphorical roots draw from the Zoroastrian sacred elements *آتش* (fire), *آب*, *باد*, *خاک* (earth, water and air movement). Manifestations of these elements within the films, while seemingly discrete, are integrated with pages of Rūmi’s writing, and through this, they achieve unity through proximity (in space) and connection (in meaning). The films are enigmatic, cinematic expressions of a journey towards relationality and the resolution of self-alienation as a necessity of being human (Helminski, 1998).



# Chapter 4

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RESEARCH DESIGN

## Chapter 4

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### RESEARCH DESIGN

This study, being a subjective artistic project, emanated from an interpretivist paradigm and employed a heuristic inquiry to iteratively develop two, related films سیر (Seyr) and سلوک (Soluk).

### 4.1 RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm is an orientation that operates from “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). Thus, one’s research paradigm influences the position and methods that are adopted in an inquiry. In this thesis, the research paradigm may be described as ‘interpretivist’ because I assume that the knowledge I encounter may have multiple meanings and understandings. Ponterotto (2005), notes that within an interpretivist paradigm, action is contained in lived experiences from the point of view of those who experience them and thus, there are multiple, apprehensible and equally valid realities. Because of this, an interpretivist paradigm accepts a subjective relationship between the researcher and what is researched.

Within an interpretivist paradigm, the study may be delineated as artistic. Julian Klein describes artistic research as a form of inquiry where knowledge or insight is,

... acquired through sensory and emotional perception [...] through artistic experience, from which it cannot be separated. Whether silent or verbal,

declarative or procedural, implicit or explicit [...] artistic knowledge is sensual and physical, 'embodied knowledge'. The knowledge that artistic research strives for, is a felt knowledge (Klein, 2010, p. 6).

Klein notes that artistic research is both dependent upon and inseparable from its processes. Thus, he describes it as "an active, constructive and aesthetic process, in which mode and substance are fused inseparably" (Klein, 2010, p. 4).

#### 4.2 METHODOLOGY

In the study, I sought to create two non-verbal, lyrical films that metaphorically connect relationships to some form of search. To achieve this I employed a heuristic inquiry. Heuristic inquiry involves discovering the meaning of a particular phenomenon through iterative processes of self-reflection, exploration, and strategic observation (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Ings, 2011; Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002; Ventling, 2017, 2018). It offers a qualitative method for solving a problem for which no prior formula exists. Its approach utilises intelligent questioning and guesswork as well as knowledge gained through previous experience (Ventling, 2018).<sup>14</sup> Heuristics is also a system that

embraces self-dialogue and discovery in its process. Douglass & Moustakas (1985) suggest that "In its purest form, heuristics is a passionate and discerning personal involvement in problem-solving, an effort to know the essence of some aspect of life through the internal pathways of the self" (p.63).

By employing heuristic approaches, I have sought "meanings and essences in significant human experiences" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40), through processes of reflective thinking that were self-motivated, iterative, and reflective (Ings, 2011).

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14. My tacit knowing is enriched by thirty years of professional practice as a cinematographer. Although Polanyi (1967) suggests that tacit knowledge envelops the subliminal, the archetypal and the preconscious and Rogers (1959) argues that it occurs inseparably from what he calls the 'actualised self'; it is dependent upon accrual. The utilisation of this non-explicit form of knowing, Ings (2011, p. 229) argues, enables artistic practitioners to "intuitively connect fragments and identify relationships [and] plumb unusual depths of understanding and meaning [using] this depth of understanding as the substrate upon which sophisticatedly articulate texts are generated."

## 4.3 METHODS

The methods I utilised emanated from my past, professional practice as a film director and cinematographer. They may be divided into three phases:

### 4.3.1 Pre-production

#### 4.3.1.1 Reading and discourse

Initially (and throughout the inquiry), I read and reflected on Rūmi's writing. Between 2007 and 2011, I was the president of the Iranian Society of New Zealand, and during our poetry reading nights, I became exposed to a wide range of Rūmi's work. Through this association, I also made connections with three international scholars: Maziyar Moradi, Omid Naderi and Peyman Fathi. These thinkers have formed a critical circle of Persian intellectuals whose insights and interpretations have supported my thinking and progress through the project.

However, contextual reading resourcing the project was also technical. Throughout the study, I sought to stay abreast of camera developments and technical refinements surfacing on the market. These related

particularly to high speed cameras, frame rates, apertures and compatibilities.

#### 4.3.1.2 Location scouting

In establishing the physical and metaphorical 'world' of the film I initially undertook a process of location scouting. Although Soriano (2021, para. 4), defines location scouting as a preproduction process, "through which one finds real locations to bring fictitious locations from a screenplay to life," in this project the method expanded beyond these concerns because I began to consider environments as potentially dialogic, given that they often talked to me about me how I might interpret space, light and narrative content. Thus, I investigated the potentials of both exterior locations (Figure 4.1) and constrained interior environments (Figure 4.2), that might resonate with the inquiry. When visiting exterior locations I considered technical issues like light, access, tide times and permissions for use. When filming in interior environments I considered lighting rigs and potentials for camera positioning and movement.



FIGURE 4.1:

Exterior locations with water-related themes which were scouted during the development of the project.

The sites in order presentation are: Rangitoto Island (Auckland); Te Henga/Bethells Beach, and the swimming pool at Auckland University of Technology's South Campus in Mangare.

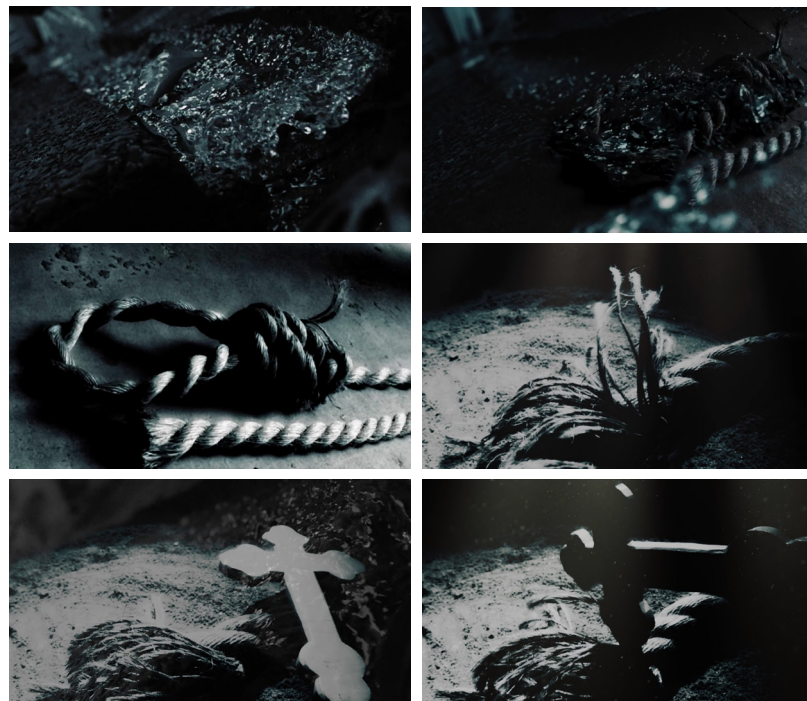
FIGURE 4.2:

Interior environments and 'set ups' constructed for the films *سیر* (Seyr) and *سلوک* (Soluk) at my home and in the greenscreen studio (WE 221A at AUT university).

Using these rigs, I experimented with diverse manifestations of the four Zoroastrian sacred elements and ways in which pages of sacred text might harmonise with their changes in motion, focus and relationality.



At this time I also worked collaboratively on a doctoral project, filming an abstract *mōteatea*<sup>14</sup> for Toiroa Williams.<sup>16</sup> He was aware of my experiments with filming water in slow motion and grading symbolic elements into an expression of meaning. For his gallery work ‘*Kāore te tākiri*’ (The Great Hanging), I expanded my consideration of water and damaged exterior environments (crumbling cement gutters, decayed walls and darkened steps) to create imagery that spoke to grief at the unlawful death by hanging of his ancestor Mokomoko in Auckland prison on the 17th of May 1866. (Figure 4.3).



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15. A *mōteatea* is a Māori form of lament or song of grief. It can also describe a traditional, treasured chant or song handed down from through ancestral lines.

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16. The thesis, *Tangohia mai te taura: Take This Rope: A documentary consideration of historical grievances within Te Whakatōhea and Te Whānau ā Mokomoko* is accessible at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10292/17323>

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FIGURE 4.3:

Sequential frame grabs from ‘*Kāore te tākiri*’ (The Great Hanging).

#### 4.3.1.3 Creating a lens plot plan

I utilised a range of lenses because in this study I was concerned with the cinematic value of constructed images. To maximise potential I created a plot plan. A plot plan is a professional method often used by a Director of Photography (DOP) that enables one to contemplate choices that will shape the cinematic look of what is recorded. Such a plan involves considerations of framing, angle, and camera movement, as well as sound and potential approaches to editing. A lens plot plan also considers action within a scene, and the use of lenses that might compress or alter perspective, for example, ECUs (extreme close-ups), bird's eye shots, dolly zoom shots, micro lenses and Dutch angles.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.3.1.4 Production design and scheduling

Having considered locations, I began to think deeply about Rūmi and Persian ways of knowing the world and strategies to achieve harmony, stability and inner purpose. As a consequence, my focus moved away from a consideration of external environments, towards the deep world of metaphors. From this thinking, I began to consider the four Zoroastrian elements of air, water, fire and earth. However, these required controlled interior environments and detailed, carefully designed movement and lighting. The significance of a low depth of field that might focus the audience's attention on the intimate nature of each element resulted as the obvious choice to relate the metaphorical message to the audience. Consequently, a clear part of the plan crystallised and pointed me towards the design and production of the films around the nature of each element and how one might artistically record them by cinematically.

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17. A Dutch angle (also called a canted or oblique angle), is a camera shot where the horizon line is not parallel with the bottom of the frame, and vertical lines are angled to the side of the frame. As a filmic device it is often used to portray psychological tension.



FIGURE 4.4:

Lighting and camera rigs built for shooting book elements for *سیر* (Seyr) and *سلوک* (Soluk).

## 4.3.2 Production

Methods in the second phase were related to the production (studio recording) of the project.

### 4.3.2.1 Cinematography

This method was concerned with directing and framing transitions within a frame, and frame rates (the frequency at which frames are captured).

In the project, I employed two types of Blackmagic cameras, one at 4K and one at 6K resolution. These cameras were portable and came with interchangeable lenses that enabled me to experiment with diverse elements. When shooting slow-motion sequences I also employed a Genie Cyp tracking system (Figure 4.4). The cameras were effective in low light environments and they delivered cinematic feature film quality images at a minimum 4K resolution.<sup>18</sup>

18. 4K resolution is the required quality for film festival and exhibition screenings and it was necessary for impact on the high-resolution video wall I selected for the exhibition.

When constructing these shots I experimented with frame rates between 960-1461 fps (frames per second). For higher quality shooting of close ups I employed macro lenses (Figure 4.5).

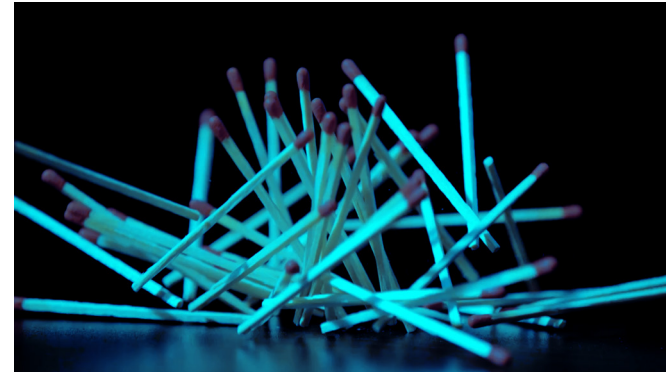


FIGURE 4.5:

Frame grabs of matches falling, depicting elements regarding سلوک (Soluk).

Complex sequences like the slow motion trajectory through printed pages of a book (Figure 4.6), were shot using a Laowa 24mm/f14 Macro Probe Lens, with a Syrp Genie II Pan, 'tilt and linear'. This lens is extremely slim and its narrow structure enables one to film inside objects, in spaces where a normal lens would be inoperable. The lens had a 24 mm focal length, which is unusual for a macro lens which normal has a span of either 50mm, 100mm or 180mm. The lens gives one the ability to move inside a confined space (macro filming). Here the eye of the camera experiences something that the eye of a human can't unless aided by technological devices. The true value of macro filming lies in V, viewers becoming disembodied and being made aware of detail in a new, metaphorical way.

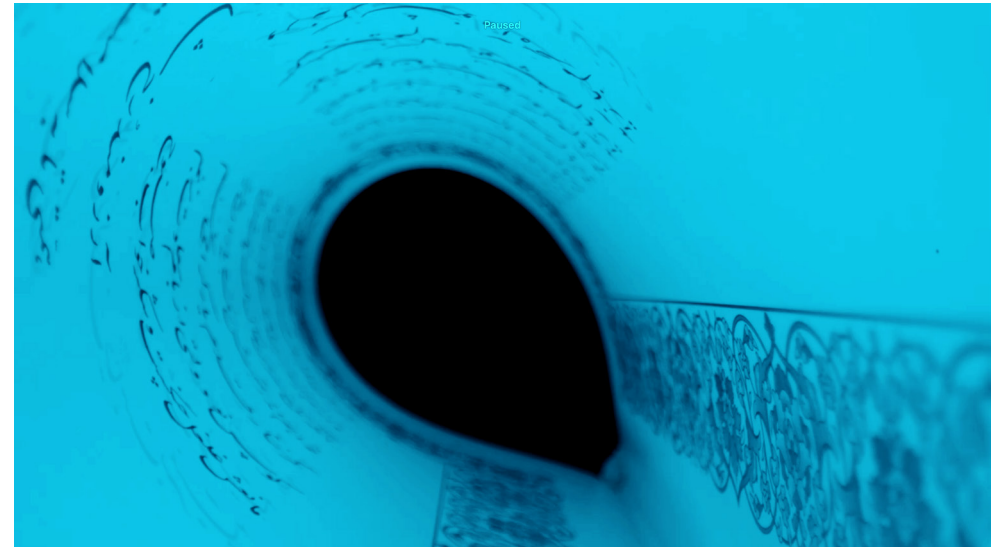


FIGURE 4.6:

Frame grab from سلوک (Soluk).

The photo depicts a trajectory through the cylindrical folding of a single page using a Syrp Genie II Pan, with tilt and linear motion control. The sequence was shot and then reversed in the final film. The lighting system involved an LED light with spot and flood options. This created a very versatile lighting solution because LED lights for spot could be positioned and adjusted with considerable precision.

### 4.3.3 Post-production

Methods in this phase related to processing of data and iterative feedback.

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19. Blender software features a built-in, unbiased path-tracer engine that offers potential of highly-realistic rendering.

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20. An offline edit uses copies of the original footage (only the copy is edited) thus, experimentation does not affect the camera's original footage. Once the work has been refined, I assembled the online edit.

#### 4.3.3.1 Editing

In constructing the two films, I experimented iteratively, with rough cuts of material using DaVinci Resolve, Adobe creative products, Maya and Blender.<sup>19</sup> This range of software enabled me to experiment with the construction of offline edits,<sup>20</sup> colour correction, audio mixing and integrative transitions.

Unlike much of my past, professional practice the process of filming and editing was not consecutive, instead it became an oscillation. By this I mean I shot material, considered and assembled it into potential lyrical expressions, while simultaneously 'feeling' its resonance. During this process the emerging imagery and rhythmical movement 'talked' to me, calling to my consideration further iconography that might refine the quality of initial shoots or introduce new approaches. As a consequence, the editing of material involved an iterative, heuristic process of reflective dialogue with the self, the question and emerging responses (Ings, 2016; Ventling, 2018). This resulted in multiple shoots and reshoots that became the substance of reflective, iterative practice. The production of the two films involved 30 shoots in five locations, using approximately 70% of shoots in film one and 30% in film two – illustrating my personal journal of improvement and growth.

During this process I also considered visual and structural alliteration, assonance and consonance (harmonious rhyme). Thus, literary poetic devices were employed as conceptual anchors for iconography, rhythm and structure. For example, I sought relationships between time and pace, inside framed sequences and related these to rhythms of editing. I also constructed harmonies in colour, construction and tone in different sequences, and this resulted in diverse subject matter being assembled in similar ways.

#### 4.3.3.2 Grading

Once the final edit had been locked off I experimented with digital gradings of selected footage.<sup>21</sup> I used colour grading, lighting and contrast to enrich image quality to optimum levels and create continuity in imagery that had been shot across diverse setups using different elements, different cameras, different lenses and different lighting rigs.

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21. Grading includes the development of a coherent colour scheme and colour correction to enhance the visual tone and mood of the work.

#### 4.3.3.3 Strategic feedback

Resourcing the reflective process of filming and editing was the strategic use of feedback. Reflection on my practice was informed by professional film makers and cultural experts whose interpretations of, and thinking on, Rūmi resonated with my practice.

There is a famous Persian saying that states:

“قدر زرگر شناسد، قدر گوهر گوهری”

“قدر و ارزش هر کار و هنری را خیره و هنرمند در آن می داند”

‘Only the goldsmith understands the value of the gold.’

In accordance with such wisdom I carefully considered and selected who I would approach for feedback. I was cognisant that I wanted criticism or advice to be informed by experience and critical resonant feedback that would enhance the process and creative output. In designing feedback processes, I was also aware that Sela-Smith had cautioned against the uncritical use of feedback in heuristic inquiries because a practitioner importing external review can encounter a “confusion of [...] different perspectives and different meanings” (2002, p. 71). Ings (2011) suggests that this confusion may lead to “the power of the subjective search shifting to

an objective analysis of the created phenomena [and the] work in the final stages of its realisation, losing much of its integrity and idiosyncratic ‘voice’ (p. 231).

However, in line with views of Ventling (2018) and Ings (2011), I believe that as long as feedback is sought strategically and is carefully drawn back into the self (as opposed to simply being applied to the emerging artefact), the emerging outcome will remain connected to the tacit knowing and sense of harmony that drives subjective discernment. Accordingly, I tended to shoot and assemble full iterations of the films in private, asking myself questions about harmony, emphasis, and lyrical resonance. Then, when I felt confident that there were specific issues that I wanted feedback on, I would approach selected thinkers and practitioners seeking reflection on what was troubling me or what needed objective interpretation and constructive feedback.

As my films approached their final iterations I sought further technical feedback. During this stage I began experimenting with projection and because I chose the Light Emitting Diode (LED) screen (Figure 4.7), it quickly became apparent that a small proportion of the footage I had recorded had the necessary sharpness. This meant reshooting certain sequences (approximately 2 hours of shooting for 3 minutes of footage) because the frame rate on the initial shots was not consistent with the resolution provided by the display facility.



FIGURE 4.7:

Light emitting diode (LED) screen used for the examination screening. The video wall comprises a 6624mm x 3744, light-emitting diode (LED) screen.

Its pixel pitch of 3.2mm means that for optimal definition, the screen needed to be viewed from a distance of 3.2 metres.

#### 4.3.3.4 SUMMARY

The research design for this project emanated from an interpretivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). Framed as artistic research (Klein, 2010), the study constituted a heuristic inquiry, where the subjective search for wisdom, knowledge, and self-insight was resourced by an emphasis on tacit knowing and accrued professional experience that interfaced with resonant connections to, and interpretations of, Rūmi's thinking about the pursuit, identity and connection. Structurally, the project's methods were divided into pre-production, production and post-production phases. However, the process of reflective, iterative editing and shooting meant that the last two phases occurred as an oscillation, where progress was informed by internal reflection and the strategic employment of external feedback.

Having now considered the research design employed for the study and contextual knowledge that positions it, it is useful to turn to a critical commentary on the practical component of the project.



# Chapter 5

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CRITICAL COMMENTARY

## Chapter 5

### CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This chapter considers the two films that form the living body of the project. In examining the features of each work, I also unpack content and aesthetic considerations in relation to existing theory and technical knowledge.

### 5.1 OVERVIEW

سیر (Seyr) and سلوک (Soluk) are two parts of a journey. They are metaphorical reflections on the forward movement of a Persian man's life. This man encountered theocratic autocracy, imprisonment, torture and eventual political exile. The films are expressions of hope that find their voice in the intricate movements of a camera. As such they are expressions of Rūmi's assertion:

آنچه شما به دنبالش هستید، به دنبال شماست

“What you seek, is seeking you”.

The first film, سیر (Seyr) considers the calligraphic voice of Rūmi's statement. His assertion is brought into a relationship with three of the four Zoroastrian sacred elements (air, fire and water, excepting earth). The film's title suggests a mystical Persian movement (always in motion) that is both a journey through time and a search for meaning. The work is a metaphorical expression of connection between Rūmi's proposition and a quest for understanding when the inexplicable has occurred.

The second film, سلوک (Soluk), extends the idea of a journey and is a poetic expression of the Sufi behaviour with which one conducts oneself as one approaches the divine. The film is about entering the phase of a journey where one is coming to understand something. However, in this film, all four Zoroastrian sacred elements

آب، باد، خاک، و آتش

(fire, earth, water and air movement)

are present and they form relationships with time and Rūmi's writing on the pages of a book. The elements are used to represent the practices, disciplines and behaviours of Soluk that lead to a purifying of the soul and the attainment of spiritual growth.

In essence, both سیر (Seyr) and سلوک (Soluk) relate to the idea of seeking through the conceptual lens of Sufi mysticism. Seyr emphasises the journey itself, while Soluk contemplates the conduct, practices, and spiritual disciplines associated with the quest.<sup>22</sup>

## 5.2 ICONOGRAPHY

Both films draw into harmony the Zoroastrian sacred elements. These elements are both physical substances and embodiments of cultural meaning. They invite us to contemplate our place within the grand tapestry of existence. Embracing these elements poetically enriches our understanding of life, inspiring us to find meaning in the most fundamental of things.

### Hava, هوا: Air

In Zoroastrian understanding air symbolises the breath of life, the intangible force that sustains all living beings. Poetically, it embodies the essence of existence itself, the invisible yet vital presence that connects everything in the universe. Just as air is essential for our survival, the concept of air reminds us of our interdependence and interconnectedness. In the films, it is the unseen element that weaves meaning, seemingly intangible, yet containing everything. Here, air affects the angle of a flame, the rhythm of a falling drop of water, the graceful movement of smoke (the residue of fire) and pages of Rūmi's writing that gracefully descend from the touch of a human hand.

22. See [https://dekhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/سیر و سلوک](https://dekhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/سیر%20و%20سلوک)

### Aab, آب: Water

Water is the source of life and purity in Zoroastrianism thought. Poetically, it represents the flow of emotions, the tides of experience, and the cycles of life's journey. Just as water moulds itself to the shape of its container, humans are encouraged to adapt and embrace change gracefully. The concept of water also speaks of purification and renewal, washing away impurities and leaving behind a fresh canvas for new beginnings. In the films water carries light (both as reflection and as a conduit for fire). In the second film, water is also associated with glass that is eventually revealed as moulded liquid form. Glass becomes a solid container for the sands of time.

### Zamin, زمین: Earth

In the Zoroastrian faith, earth symbolizes stability, fertility, and grounding. Poetically, it represents the firm foundation on which life surfaces and flourishes. The earth is the physical substrate of life, our sustenance. Like air, it references interconnectedness but its association is with cultivation and solidity. In the films earth marks the passing of time. We see it as sand that falls through an hourglass and accumulates in a new place. However,

as earth accumulates we know that it is transitioning from another phase of time. It is making a journey across borders into a new space.

### Atash, آتش: Fire

Fire is one of the most potent symbols in Zoroastrianism. Both fire and water are agents of ritual purity and fire is believed to have its origin in water. Fire represents divine light, wisdom, and transformation. Poetically, fire embodies the spark of inspiration and the illuminating force that dispels darkness from our lives. It is the symbol of human ingenuity and the driving force behind progress and innovation. The concept of fire encourages us to embrace our passions, channel our inner strength, and forge a brighter future. In the films fire is born of water but it also mimics the calligraphic form of Rūmi's text. In Soluk, fire surrounds and brushes the hourglass. Its pace is aligned with the movement of smoke (air) and it is through this continuity that the two elements are brought in to visual harmony.

### Kharati, خطاطی: Calligraphy

Both Seyr and Soluk make references to written text. While to the modern mind Zoroastrian texts are associated with codices, in Seyr my visual references to paper and calligraphic script allude to an older manifestation of writing sacred words on parchment.

In this film the written word is treated in an ephemeral manner because the Avesta were not written down until many centuries after their composition. Written manuscripts only appeared during the Sasanian period, (around the sixth century CE). Originally, Zoroastrian texts were orally composed, the oldest of them being the ‘songs’ of Zarathustra, the Yasna Haptanghaiti and two prayers. When the texts were eventually written down, an alphabet (developed especially for the purpose) was designed based on a cursive form of the Pahlavi script.

Thus, in Seyr we encounter text as the calligraphic voice of Rūmi’s quote. Its form aligns with the movement of fire. In Soluk we see its evolution into a codex (book),

whose pages fall in dreamlike motion in the realm of smoke (air – the aftermath of fire). Here, Rūmi’s writing is treated as falling pages that interact with air, or as a tunnel; a journey into, rather than across time.

### ساعت شنی: The hourglass

The hourglass references the complex nature of Zoroastrian ‘long’ time (مدت زمان طولانی). This can be distinguished from endless, infinity or eternal time (زمان بی پایان - زمان ابدی) (Gololobova, 2017). The hourglass only appears in Soluk (the second film). Here all of the sacred elements interact with time. Earth is contained within the hourglass and air (smoke), fire and water embrace it.

### Seyr

Being the title of the first film, Seyr alludes a search, a journey to find meaning in the realm of enigma. The film is conceived as a linear search through connections between elements that transition into - or through each other. Here, the journey is unclear. We are lost but we know that change is happening and something is talking to us about relationships. In the film we see beauty, power and grace combined through fluid association. In this hypnotic progression we edge our way forward across a relatively flat dimension.

Seyr begins with Rūmi's quote, materialised as calligraphy. The writing appears to be on dry parchment but it is interrupted when a match disturbs its surface and we suddenly realise that the text is submerged in water. From this liquid - fire is born. This references the Zoroastrian belief that fire and water are connected agents of ritual purity and fire has its origin in water. The flames begin to mimic the curved form of the calligraphy before we transition into the ghost of their passing in the form of air (smoke). Smoke then marks the movement of air and the palette transitions from warmth to coolness and we return to water and then fire in water again; a falling match ignites the impossible, but the poetics of

the journey remain an enigma (Figure 5.1). There is no anchor in this journey, there is no earth. There is no ground upon which to stand. Everything is moving. One of the elements is missing.

It is earth.



FIGURE 5.1:

Sequential frame grabs from *Seyr* showing iconographical shifts between elements and their relationship to Rūmi's text.

## Soluk

As the title for the second film, Soluk refers to spiritual closeness and the divine integration and resolution of self-alienation.<sup>23</sup> In this work all four elements are present (air, water, fire and earth) and they come into the presence of time (Figure 5.2). While the film Seyr spoke to the first part of Rūmi's quote (What we seek...), Soluk is the deeper resolution of the journey to find harmony that results in relationships, because now something is seeking us.

In this second part of the journey we no longer pass across the shallow plane of things, we move into Rūmi's wisdom. In this film there is depth beyond the surface of enigmatic association. The elements are still metaphors and they maintain a poetic suggestiveness that denies closure, but there is a dance of possibility here, and integration of all things now present and connectable. What we have sought in such doubt and uncertainty has found us ... because it was looking for us all the time. In this film, Rūmi's quote is no longer a parchment with calligraphy. It is the spirit of a voice on pages that turn like whispers in the light. Rūmi is not a book. Rūmi is a voice, always in motion but associated with pages is a mysterious bound codex.

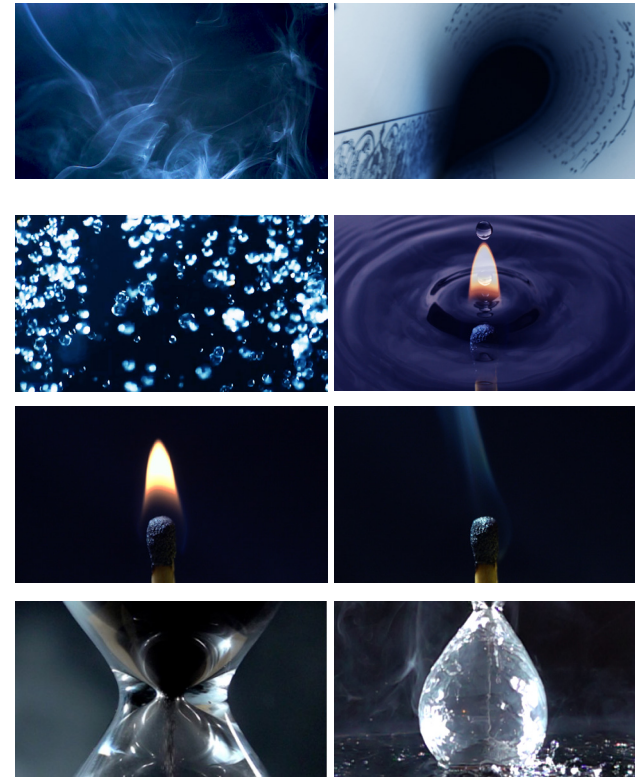


FIGURE 5.2:

Sequential frame grabs from Soluk showing iconographical shifts between elements and time.

23. See <https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/سیر و سلوک>

#### 5.4 TIME

Time in these films is treated lyrically, it doesn't behave in conventional ways. It is slowed to such an extent that we engage with the ephemeral and often overlooked beauty of elements. Time stretches, expanding brief moments so the audience witnesses things in detailed motion and transformation.

##### Seconds and 'long' time

In slow motion each second is elongated, allowing the viewer to observe the intricate dance of swirling air, flickering fire, vibrating water, or shifting sand. Thus, simultaneously we encounter the immediacy and impermanence of natural phenomena, where each tiny change or movement is momentous, yet smoothly replaced by the next.

The duration of each film alludes to Zoroastrian 'long' time (مدت زمان طولانی). This is knowable time, or time in which physical things occur. It is temporal. It is distinguishable from eternal time (زمان بی پایان - زمان ابدی). 'Long' time relates to revelation and the duration of elements in the natural world (Gololobova, 2017). Here things evolve and we can trace cause-and-effect

relationships; a match falls, ignites and burns out. Smoke is released when a flame is extinguished. A drop of water falls and sends ripples outwards when it makes contact with a liquid surface. These are logical sequences of time brought into poetic harmony. Although a second is extended, the inherent reason of 'long' time is preserved.

##### Relationship and roles

The relationship between seconds and 'long' time may be seen as a poetic interplay between the brief and the lasting, the ephemeral and the enduring. Seconds capture the immediate beauty and chaos of nature, while 'long' time provides a canvas upon which relationships play out. Together, they invite one into a meditative reflection on time itself, how moments pass but accumulate into ongoing states of change.

This portrayal might lead us into a deeper understanding of how even the smallest moment contributes to lasting transformations in the natural world. A fragment of personal history is not erased - but it is no longer what it was. It forms part of an accumulating future, a recontextualisation and a mesmerizing reminder of the continuous state of creation and recreation.

### **Time as intangible**

Time is both intangible and omnipresent. It is a dimension that frames our existence and experiences yet, it evades concrete understanding. The concept of time has formed part of human epistemology since we attempted to comprehend the rhythms of day and night and the phases of the moon (Asiain, 1994; Weinert, 2013).

Time may be seen as the medium through which change is perceived. It marks the transition from potential to actuality, from what could be, to what is. In this sense, time is deeply intertwined with the idea of becoming, a fundamental concept in both existential and metaphysical inquiries.

Although some time may be measurable, Bergson posits the idea of time as 'duration'. He argued that our lived experience of time exists beyond mathematical measurements or conceptual abstraction (Bergson, 1911, 1957). Rather, he suggested that time might be a subjective and intuitive experience where the encountered moment is characterised by the interconnectedness of past, present and future. Thus, from the perspective of the inner life, time might increase in speed or slow down, and duration is ineffable

and "can only be shown indirectly through images" that are fragments of a more complex whole (Bergson & Cunningham Anderson, 1965, p. 165).

Time in my work is subjective, it is ineffable and I treat its pace and rhythms lyrically. My sense of time has been shaped by trauma, by the dissolution of day and night in worlds where for months, darkness had no borders, where a minute, an hour, a day, a week - became an embodied experience beyond comprehension. A moment was an eternity and eternity was a moment. Today, time helps me to make sense of change and existence yet, it also remains a profound mystery, a dimension that is at once vital to my understanding of the universe and perpetually beyond my full comprehension.

### Composition and rhythm

Both *Seyr* and *Soluk* have been crafted as lyrical movements in time. Transition and transformation occur inside carefully composed frames where objects and negative space are experienced as kinetically harmonious.

The camera is choreographed so it behaves in a fluid manner. Zooms and tracking shots are gentle. But sometimes the camera is still, watching with mesmerised attention to detail and transition. There are no sweeping establishing or contextualising wide shots. We remain intimately close to what occurs so that subtle nuances are intensified and emotion is mixed with wonder and quiet consideration.

Attention is shaped by proximity and manipulations of focus and depth of field. Although definition is sharp, movement is soft and our plane of engagement is generally shallow. Central to this, is the principle of the visual transition. Here, continuity draws into graceful associations, elements that in the physical world might be considered discrete and incompatible.

### Atmosphere

Schimmel described Rūmi's use of "traditional images as a state of complete spiritual union between lover and beloved" (1988, p. 68). She notes that this union in his work was between imagery "often taken from everyday life" (ibid., p. 73), yet these things were treated with poetic mysticism (Schimmel, 2024, May 9).

Rūmi was a thinker of delicate sensuality and presence. His thoughts were as light as a touch and I made every attempt to create an atmosphere for *Seyr* and *Soluk* that responds to this tone. The mood of the cinematography is sensitive, the ordinary behaves in mystical ways and lighting, focus and grading are used to draw this mystery into heightened emphasis. The ambience is lyrical but attentive. The camera is in a beloved relationship with what is built and recorded.

Nothing in these films is digitally constructed. All elements are filmed in the physical world using physical objects. The liquid that catches fire is a mix of petrol and lighter fluid, the curving flames crawl up from wire wool

soaked in a similar mixture, the smoke that drifts is either the last breath of an extinguished match, or a water-based mixture that contains a small amount of glycerin,<sup>24</sup> the sand that falls, is inside a real hourglass.

The pace of air, fire, water, earth and paper is consistent. They form a smooth, slow whisper, a mystery of repeated ideas in a constant state of transformation.<sup>25</sup>

In these works, I have used my camera as a lyrical voice that is paradoxically deliberate and mysterious. Visual metaphors, rhythmic movements, impossible relationships, and evocative compositions, create a site of contemplation - a journey – a search that moves from uncertainty into harmony and grace.

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24. When this fluid hits a heat exchanger, it is vaporised into rapidly cooling steam that I am able to control in its intensity.

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25. The frame rate variance used to achieve this is between 960 and 1461 fps as compared to a standard frame rate of 24 fps.



# Chapter 6

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CONCLUSION

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSION

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Although this is an exegetical conclusion, a study like this does not have a terminus. This is because it is woven into the journey of a life. Although a thesis is not therapy (Ings, 2013), it has the potential to heal (Maric, 2017) while bringing consideration and physical expression into the world.

The study used filmic practice to craft a metaphorical voice for the journey one makes towards harmony and understanding after an experience of the inexplicable. By exploring the potentials of cameras, lenses and compositional devices, two short films, *سیر* (Seyr) and *سلوک* (Soluk) were crafted to poetically illustrate a quest. Iconographically, the works composed the four Zoroastrian sacred elements *آتش*, *آب*, *باد*, *خاک*, (fire, earth, water and air movement), a statement by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi - (جلال الدین محمد بلخی) (Rūmi), and a consideration of time.

### Contributions to the field

The thesis may offer three contributions to knowledge.

First, artistically it demonstrates how a lyrical, filmic contemplation (as a poetic evocation) can metaphorically express a relationship between Rūmi's assertion that,

آنچه شما به دنبالش هستید، به دنبال شماست

'What you seek, is seeking you.'

... and a journey to understanding. This is achieved through a composition of Zoroastrian metaphors that are both independent and harmoniously dependent on each other.

Second, the study demonstrates how the artistic and dexterous use of a camera can communicate the poetic and seemingly physically impossible, by circumventing the language of post-production digital Visual Effects (VFX).

Finally, the films contribute to a corpus of work by Iranian film makers who have sought to create bridges that connect moral tension to broader ideas by employing lyrical cinematic devices unsupported by dialogue (Kiarostami, 1987, 1992, 1994; Majidi, 1999). Beyond this, Seyr and Soluk also contribute to a small body of work by Middle Eastern filmmakers who have been imprisoned or persecuted for metaphorical lyricism that has concerned itself with political or ideological damage (Parajanov, 1965, 1969, 1990; Guney, 1982).

### Further research

This thesis is both a journey and the resumption of a journey. As a filmmaker I have after 29 years been able to pick up my camera, not in the service of other storytellers but as a connection to my soul. I have found a voice that has the power to communicate that reaches beyond the realm of words.

### Proposed PhD

These films act as a catalyst to a intended Ph.D. For this I intend to write, direct and shoot a feature length metaphorical narrative that resonates with Persian approaches discussed in this thesis but is more

contemporary in nature. To attract funding I will create a treatment<sup>26</sup> and a three minute teaser<sup>27</sup> that can be used as a pitch document for funding both nationally and internationally. It is my intention to shoot the film in Turkey because Rūmi is buried there, the environment (light and geography) is similar to Iran,<sup>28</sup> and Turkey has well preserved, ancient locations.

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26. A treatment is detailed synopsis of an intended film project. It contains important scenes, significant characters and plot points. Unlike a screenplay, it is written in prose and it precedes a full, written screenplay.

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27. In small budget productions a teaser a short indicative film between one and two minutes in length that captures the ethos of the intended film. A teaser will often interface with a 'Director's Vision' document when one is pitching for funding.

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28. I am unable to return to Iran.

## Film festivals

In the interim, it is my intention to enter Seyr and Soluk into international film festivals, specifically those that attract distinctive audiences, some of which are likely to connect with and find resonance in the films. Significant among these are two poetry film festivals; one in New Zealand, the 2025 [the Aotearoa Poetry Film Festival \[APFF\]](#), and one in Berlin, [the Zebra Poetry Film Festival](#). The films are lyrical but may be argued as film poetry because they respond to Rūmi's poetic statement.

There are a range of other festivals that might consider programming my work. These are festivals that screen short works that may be described as avant-garde. Significant among these is [the International Film Festival Rotterdam \(IFFR\)](#). This festival programmes and promotes alternative, innovative and non-commercial films, with a specific focus on work from or about non-Western and developing countries. The festival also hosts CineMart, a facility for film producers who are seeking funding. In addition I will submit the films to [the Ann Arbor Film Festival](#). This festival provides opportunities for exposure and networking within a film community that is interested in experimental and independent films. I will also submit the work to the 2025 [Aspen Shortsfest](#). This is one of the world's leading Academy accredited

short film festivals. It is significant because in addition to public screenings, panels and workshops, the festival also promotes innovation in short form cinema. Similar opportunities for promotion of the films are offered by the 2025 [Mont. Blanc International Film Festival](#). This is a festival with a global orientation that promotes films from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, South America, and Australasia.<sup>29</sup>

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29. I will also enter the films in the 2024 [New Zealand National Design Awards \[BEST\]](#). These awards are managed by the Designers Institute of New Zealand and they recognise innovation and distinctiveness in a range of categories including the moving image.

### Conference presentation

I will also present work from this thesis at the 2024 Auckland University of Technology Postgraduate Symposium. Proposal submissions close on July 5th and the conference is scheduled for the 9th of September. A proposed paper would consider the practice of this thesis and a discussion of how Rūmi's voice was translated into imagery using the Zoroastrian sacred elements and the concept of time.

### Reflection

This thesis found its essence in a single quote from the Persian philosopher and poet Rūmi (Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi). 800 years ago he spoke in a few lines of a journey that I would make in a very different world. This would be a journey of transformation, self-discovery (as recovery from self-alienation), spiritual exploration, and intellectual growth. The act of deeply engaging with his assertion that what we seek seeks us, led me to profound personal insights and a renewed sense of purpose. From the shadows of doubt and disorientation I have retrieved my camera, joined my lyrical voice to the lyricism of his writing, and drawn two short, metaphorical works into the light.

The journey has taken two years. It has not been easy. There is substance that lurks in shadows. I repeated many things, many times, trying to find purity, quality and harmony. This is because Rūmi's quote required me to reflect on my desires and aspirations. It encouraged me to contemplate what I am truly seeking in life, be it love, knowledge, or inner peace. The journey of this thesis has been a process of introspection, personal reflection and self-discovery. The practice of making metaphorical film, exegetically contextualising, and unpacking my thinking has led me to a deeper understanding of my goals and a heightened awareness of my intentions.

I understand that when decontextualised from Persian thought the short films may seem enigmatic and metaphorically obscure, but this is because their roots are steeped in Sufi mysticism. Engaging in this journey has prompted me to explore Sufi philosophy and its teachings on the interconnectedness of all things and the unity of the seeker and the sought. This has provided me with new spiritual insights and a broader perspective on the nature of the universe and my place within it.

This is a place where doubt is allayed, hope is restored  
- and the boy who dreamed of making films touches  
the soul of his camera with a soul that transcends  
brutality and damage.

What he seeks ... finds him.

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