



# Bal

**Director:** Semih Kaplanoglu

**Country:** Turkey

**Date:** 2011

*A review by Andrew Schenker for [slantmagazine.com](http://slantmagazine.com):*

Semih Kaplanoglu's *Bal* walks a fine line between affecting, character-based drama and long-take academicism, nearly always coming down on the side of the former thanks to the film's close alignment with the viewpoint of its preteen protagonist, Yusuf (Bora Atlas). The third part—and first chronologically—in a trilogy detailing the life of this central character, *Bal* establishes the boy's close relationship with his beekeeper father, his isolation at school due to a debilitating stutter, and a carefully sketched milieu of mountainous, rural Turkey through a series of unhurried fixed-take shots whose reliance on natural light often renders scenes taken in the family's dimly lit house in a striking chiaroscuro.



In one such setup, Kaplanoglu frames father and son in long shot through a doorway that opens a pocket of light into the surrounding darkness. His dad the only person he feels comfortable enough to speak to without stuttering, Yusuf starts to relate a dream to his old man. His father explains that dreams are not to be

told out loud and insists the boy whisper its contents in his ear. As the boy obliges, his words become inaudible to the viewer, as if Kaplanoglu holds the sacredness of dreams as dear as the father and wouldn't dare of violating their secrecy, and Yusuf's father puts his son's shoes on for him as he listens. In such scenes, the stillness of the framing and the hush of the soundtrack—otherwise conspicuously filled with sounds of rain falling, forks clattering on plates or tea boiling—provides the perfect frame for these stolen moments of father-son tenderness.

There are many more such purposeful shots in *Bal*, from sequences detailing the process of extracting honey from the comb (Yusuf sneaking a tiny taste of the sweet stuff adds the perfect touch) to the classroom sequences, several of which are shot through the distorting perspective of a glass holding the ribbons the teacher gives out for excellent classroom performance, and which the boy holds little chance of winning because of his stutter. But after the father heads off on an extended journey to look for new honeycombs, the film sets itself some rather severe problems, mostly because Yusuf won't talk to anyone besides his old man, including his mother. As the days go on and no word comes from the beekeeper, Kaplanoglu makes the boy's disquiet palpable through a perfectly lensed nocturnal scene when the kid arises from bed to watch the night-time rain.

But mostly these sequences, while never less than strikingly photographed, lack the confidence of the film's first half. In one scene that's completely lovely, but whose beauty is of an almost academic irrelevance, the boy stares at the moon reflected in a pail of water, shaking up the image by stirring the liquid, then watching the moon reform in the pail. Fortunately, such useless beauty proves the exception in *Bal*. (Or perhaps unfortunately, for is there any such thing as "useless" or, for that matter, "useful" beauty?) Either way, by the time of the film's haunting conclusion, Kaplanoglu has decisively regained command of his work, his visually inspired set pieces no longer blowing helter-skelter in the wind, but firmly realigned with his lead character's sense of irrevocable despair.

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