

# Real Images Flow: Mullā Sadrā Meets Film-Philosophy

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## Abstract:

The eastern Islamic concept of the imaginal realm, which explains how supra-sensory realities present themselves to imaginative perception, can enrich the imagination of film-philosophy. The imaginal realm, in Arabic 'alam al-mithal, world of images, or 'alam al-khayal, imaginative world, is part of a triadic ontology of sensible, imaginal, and intelligible realms. Diverging from roots shared with Western thought in the concept of the imaginative faculty, the Islamic imaginal realm is supra-individual and more real than matter. The imaginal realm is a radically pro-image concept, affirming the importance of poetry, art, and images in motion. As developed by the Persian philosopher Sadr al-Dīn Muhammad al-Shīrāzī, known as Mullā Sadrā (1571–1640), the imaginal realm flows and intensifies, in a process philosophy we may fruitfully compare with Spinoza, Leibniz, and Whitehead. I sketch the genealogy of the imaginal realm and compare it to contemporary Western film-philosophy. I suggest how this transcendental concept can be made immanent. Finally, I draw from contemporary Muslim thinkers, such as Mohammed Arkoun, who ground a visionary collective politics in the imaginal realm. My central example, the documentary *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joriege, exemplifies film's imaginal powers.

**Keywords:** Lebanese Cinema; Imaginal; Mulla Sadra; Islamic Philosophy; Mohammed Arkoun; Realism.

Film Studies has long been dogged by a suspicion of images as false, misleading, or ideological. This essay suggests that Film Studies' imagination can be enriched by the concept of the imaginal realm,

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developed in eastern Islamic philosophy: an audiovisual world that is both intangible and more real than matter. The concept was most richly developed by the Persian philosopher Sadr al-Dīn Muhammad al-Shīrāzī, known as Mullā Sadrā (1571–1640). Sadrā's philosophy has only recently gained attention in the West, and little of it is translated, but the vigorous recent interest his work has garnered, promises more to come. As we will see, Sadrā argued that the imaginal realm subsists in the soul, mediating between the senses and the intelligence, and that what it perceives is more real than sense-perceptibles. The concept of the imaginal realm explains how extrapersonal, supra-sensory realities present themselves to imaginative perception. From roots shared with Western thought in the concept of the imaginative faculty, the Islamic imaginal diverges, to conceive of a realm that is collective, infinite, changing, expanding, and more real than matter.

The imaginal realm is a radically pro-image concept, affirming the importance of poetry, art, and images in motion. It saves us from the boredom of critiquing images according to the truth of their representation. The Platonic denunciation of images as misleading and false has had a long and sturdy legacy, from Byzantine iconoclasm to Islamic aniconism (particularly in Sunni traditions) to the Protestant Reformation to the twentieth-century culture of media critique and the iconoclasm of contemporary religious fanatics. The critique of representation distrusts images and their power to move the imagination. But the concept of the imaginal realm affirms the importance of images, precisely because they move the imagination toward what does not exist either materially or conceptually.

For this reason, the imaginal realm is extremely relevant to film-philosophy. We will see that, in Sadrā's understanding, the imaginal realm is not static but flows and intensifies, in a process ontology we may fruitfully compare with Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Henri Bergson, or Alfred North Whitehead. The imaginal realm also complements contemporary cinematic concepts from Siegfried Kracauer, Sergei Eisenstein, André Bazin, and Gilles Deleuze. In addition, I will draw from contemporary Muslim thinkers who ground a visionary collective politics in the imaginal realm, and briefly suggest how this transcendental concept can be made immanent. In this way the as yet small, emerging body of literature on the imaginal realm in film and media studies can be greatly enhanced.

I have not come across any scholars writing in English who examine Sadrā's concepts first-hand for a model of the imaginal realm for cinema. However, some contemporary film and media scholars have looked to Islamic concepts of an imaginal realm that discovers images of entities that

do not exist in this world, often relying on French scholar Henry Corbin's explanation of the writings of the mystical thinker Muhyi al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī of Seville (1165–1240). In particular, these concepts have inspired theories of computer-generated worlds. Virtual-reality pioneer Howard Rheingold mentions the Sufi imaginal realm as an inspiration, and Nick Lambert compares the digital simulation of a three-dimensional reality to the suprasensory imaginal realm of Sufism. Antoinette LaFarge, citing Corbin, suggests that the online theater of virtual-reality games create collective imaginal realms, and I have compared computer-generated worlds like *Second Life* to the imaginal (Crumlish 2004, 230; Lambert 2011; Lafarge 1995; Marks 2010, 282–284). Among film scholars, Tanya Shilina-Conte, also drawing on Corbin, argues that the humorous images of Palestinian creative victory in Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002) are not fantasies or surrealism but imaginal images. The concept of the imaginal realm is ingrained in official philosophy in Iran, to the point of being instrumentalized by Ayatollah Khomeini as an image of the nation. Negar Mottahedeh, in *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (2008), refers to the official deployment of these concepts by the Shi'a imam in Iran. Mottahedeh develops a critical theory of imaginal spatiality and temporality that interweave with conventional narrative in Iranian cinema.

Drawing on Sadrā to enrich this growing body of work, all kinds of movies would serve to demonstrate the power of this concept; mine is the documentary *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joriege. The filmmakers are astonished to discover a 1964 commemorative postage stamp depicting a rocket with the colors of the Lebanese flag. Inspired by this fossil-image – an image from a forgotten past – Hadjithomas and Joriege devote themselves to excavating the forgotten fact that in the 1960s Lebanon had one of the most advanced rocket research programs in the world. In a sad testimony to the dwindling of Lebanon's image in its own imagination and that of the world, the term 'Lebanese rocket' now denotes only the rockets that Hizbollah caches in the south to deploy against Israel. Luckily, science professor Manoug Manougian, now teaching in Tampa, kept abundant documents and films, which he allows the filmmakers to use. They show how the project began with student experiments at Haigazian University, the Armenian university in Beirut, in the 1960s. As the experiments increased in scope, the Lebanese Army got involved. The experimenters succeeded in a number of large-scale rocket launches: one rocket shot as far as Cyprus. Soon after, for evident reasons, foreign governments asked Lebanon to call off the rocket project.

The image of tiny Lebanon as a leader in rocket science in the 1960s dropped utterly from collective memory. The filmmakers go on a radio show asking listeners to call in with any memories of the major launch of the Cedar 4, depicted on the front pages of Lebanese newspapers in 1964. But to their great disappointment, not one person calls. It is as though the Lebanese people, in the country's present dependent, poor, and humiliated state, do not have the imaginative capacity to remember those glorious days. *The Lebanese Rocket Society* revives and, we will see, dreams up these events, in a poetic struggle to rebuild collective knowledge in the imaginal. Before I analyse the film further, first, a history of how philosophers have understood the imagination will show why it makes sense to turn to Islamic thought, and specifically to Sadrā, for the concept of the imaginal realm.

### **A Brief History of the Imagination**

World philosophy abounds with theories of the imagination: this essay looks only at the traditions in Greek, Arabic and Islamic, and European philosophy. The Islamic concept of the imaginal shares deep roots with European thought in the concept of the imaginative faculty, but also develops ancient Greek ideas of how the imagination can make contact with a supra-individual reality. Where Islamic Peripatetic philosophy and modern Western philosophy followed Aristotle in conceiving of the imagination as arising from the senses, eastern Islamic philosophy developed the Neoplatonist understanding of the imagination as receptive of divine images. To understand Sadrā's innovations we need a sense of how philosophers answered the following questions: What kind of reality does imagination possess? What is the difference between memory-images and fantasmatic or imaginal images? Where do the latter come from – are they created by the individual psyche, or do they come from beyond the psyche? And after European and Islamic philosophical traditions began to move along separate paths, we need to know how the Western concept of imagination reached its current shape, such that a Sadrian intervention might be warranted.

Plato (437–347 BC) posited that the imagination (*phantasia*) was necessary as a mediator between the base, corporeal world known by the senses and the higher, incorporeal world known by the intellect. He introduced the triad sensory-imaginal-intelligible that would be developed in Islamic thought. Aristotle (384–322 BC), took the role of the body and brain more seriously than Plato, and introduced the theory of faculties including the internal senses (so termed because, like the external senses, they deal with particulars). In *De Anima* he argued that post-sensory images or *phantasmata* combine in the mind, independently

of sense impressions, and this explains memory, dreams, and sensory illusions.

Faculty theory is simple psychology, but in *De Anima* III §5 Aristotle also introduced the concept of active intellect (*nous poiêtikos*), an intellect that is separate, unaffected, and eternal. It was not clear whether Aristotle meant that the active intellect inhered in the human soul (a ‘bottom-up’ theory of the imagination) or some pre-existing, divine mind (a ‘top-down’ theory of the imagination). Let me first unpack the second of these. The top-down theory of the imagination was developed by Greek Neoplatonists: it accorded with their philosophy of emanation, whereby the world emanates from the One. This interpretation suggested that the imagination was a means to connect to a divine reality – at least for prophets or visionaries – and thus that images could relay a higher truth.

**Imagination and the active intellect:** While Plato, as we well know, condemned images as dangerous illusions, the Neoplatonist philosophers argued for the truth of some kinds of imaginal images. Plotinus (204–270 AD) argued that there are two kinds of imagination, a lower, sensory imagination and a higher, intellectual imagination that receives inspiration from above, as in divination and prophecy. Proclus (412–485 AD) held that while the phantastic imagination appeals illusionistically, the imagistic imagination tries to faithfully convey the truth (Brann, 1991, pp. 50–51). This argument, which salvages the representational arts from Plato’s critique, would be essential to the pro-image ideas of the later Islamic philosophers. It also resonates in Augustine (354–430 AD), who argued for a cognitive trinity of mental intuition, bodily knowledge, and spiritual knowledge (the ‘imaginary’) that mediates between them (Brann, 1991, pp. 52–53).

Arabic philosophers (i.e. those writing in Arabic, regardless of where they lived) synthesized Greek philosophy with Qur’anic thought, developing a psychology from Aristotelian sources and a cosmology of emanation from Neoplatonic ones. Extending the top-down theory of the imagination, philosophers including Al-Fārābī (c. 870–950), Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, 980–1037) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd, 1126–1198) maintained that divine truth emanates out from God to the Agent Intellect (Aristotle’s term, which Avicenna redefined as the medium that realises the sublunar world through emanation) to the human intellect, the imagination, and finally the senses, becoming more obscure at each level. In the hierarchy of intelligible, imaginal, and corporeal knowledge, the imaginal mediates between the material body and the immaterial intellect. Avicenna acknowledged that the visions of the imaginal, like accounts of the afterlife as a beautiful garden, were truthful, but he held that the intellect

gains a higher access to the divine (Janssens, 2006, pp. 258–259). Theories of *al-khayāl* explained visionary dreams and the visions of prophets as audiovisual glimpses of divine reality (Shatz, 1998). The term is still used this way, as when Egyptians say ‘I received a dream’: the dream comes not from the interior of the psyche but from an outside reality (Mittermaier, 2011, 6–13).

**Imagination in faculty psychology:** Arabic philosophers including Al-Kīndī (c. 800–870), the Brethren of Purity (tenth century), Avicenna, Averroes, and Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tusī (1201–1274) also developed and systematized the theory of faculties. These were the proponents of the bottom-up theory of the imagination. They held that imagination is an internal faculty, and that prophetic visions are not supernatural but simply require a very powerful faculty of imagination (Hasse, 2010, 305–309; Shatz, 1998). Like Aristotle, Avicenna assumed that images are abstractions from material existents. He posited that the faculty of imagination (*al-khayāl*) stores sensory forms: it explains memory. Another faculty, called the imaginative faculty (*al-takhayyul*) in non-rational animals and the cogitative faculty (*mufakkira*) in humans, acts on forms, combining and separating them, and thus can create complex forms that do not exist in reality (Di Martino, 2007, pp. 19–20; Hasse, 2010, p. 308). But as we have seen, Avicenna also argued, in the Neoplatonist line, that knowledge emanates from God, via the Agent Intellect, to humans.

**Imagination diverges, East and West:** Arabic philosophy was abundantly translated into Latin in the translation movement that began in the twelfth century in Toledo, Spain, and was adapted by the Scholastics (Burnett 2005; Hasse 2008). During the medieval period of intellectual sharing between Arabic and Latin philosophy, understandings of whether the source of imagination is internal to the individual (‘bottom-up’) or external to the individual (‘top-down’) diverged. Up to the late thirteenth century, most Arabic and Jewish and a few Scholastic philosophers accepted Avicenna’s argument that knowledge emanates from God (via the Agent Intellect) to humans, which was consonant with Augustine’s account of divine illumination. Some Scholastics, such as the mystical theologian Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), maintained that the imaginal realm is supra-individual (Black 1998| Black 2011, pp. 320–321, 328). But other Christian thinkers critiqued the receptivity of Arabic concepts of knowledge and imagination and began to view the intellect as internal to the soul. Thus the Christian tradition began to regard the imagination as psychological: not an inspiration from without, but invention, or re-combination, from within. In this history we begin to see the rise in the West of a concept of an autonomous psychological subject.

After Arabic philosophy ceased to be translated for European readers, the Western and Islamic philosophical traditions diverged. Muslim thinkers, especially Sufis and Persian philosophers, continued to develop the Neoplatonist top-down understanding of imagination. They developed the triadic ontology of sensible, imaginal (*'alam al-khayal*), and intelligible realms, arguing that different human faculties perceive each realm. Sense-perception perceives external particulars: the sensible world of matter. Imagination perceives internal particulars: the imaginal. The intellect perceives universals: the intelligible (Chittick, in Sadrā 2003, p. xxxviii). The intelligible is where one is delivered from attachment to the world and into the presence of God. Between sensible and intelligible lies the imaginal realm, the intermediary or *barzakh* between the intelligible and corporeal world. Some identified it with the soul, the mediator between body and spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Shahab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardī (1154–1191), an Iranian who worked in Aleppo, argued that the world of images exists independently of the imagination: the imagination effectively travels to it (Ardakani, 2006, pp 174–175). Ibn 'Arabī described his own visions, for example of Moses' spiritual guide al-Khidr, as examples of the reality of the imaginal realm (Robinson, 1998). Ibn 'Arabī's thought evokes a world of images infinitely greater than the sensible world, because it includes things that never have existed and that could not exist in material reality, rather like Meinong objects. He argued in *al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya* (*The Meccan Illuminations*) that the world of imagination is the most extensive realm, 'because it exercises its ruling property over every thing and non-thing. It gives form to absolute nonexistence, to the impossible, to the Necessary, and to possibility. It makes existence nonexistent and nonexistence existent' (quoted in Chittick, 2002, pp. 55–56). Sadrā's contribution, which I will explain below, springs from these ideas of Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arabī.

The concept of the imaginal realm continues to inspire many Muslims, as in the living tradition of dream interpretation. Many Muslims take dreams and visions seriously as signs of a reality more real than material reality and greater than individual imagination, though Salafi and other conservative thinkers disapprove of the irrationalism of dream

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1. In Qur'an 18:60 Moses tells his servant, 'I will not give up until I reach the confluence of two oceans [*majuma'a al-bahrain*]'. Qur'an 55:19 and 20 read, 'He has set two seas [*bahrain*] in motion that flow side by side together, with an interstice (*barzakh*) between them which they cannot cross.' (*Al-Qur'ān*, 1993, pp. 255, 461.)

interpretation (Mittermaier 2011, pp. 43–44, 130). Contemporary Muslim scholars continue to develop the concept of the imaginal and argue that it describes a progressive collective imagination, as I will discuss later.

During the Renaissance, European thinkers finished discussing and incorporating the Islamic sources and forgot about them. Yet, as Corbin emphasizes, the Western concept of the imagination has a great deal in common with Islamic philosophy (Shariat 1991, Corbin 1977). Giovanni Pico de Mirandola (1470–1533), like his Greek and Arabic predecessors, posited that the imagination is a necessary third realm that mediates between soul and body, rational and irrational; and like them, he argued that the imagination can serve good or evil and therefore must be ruled by reason. Phantasy can ‘strive to draw [the senses] to things celestial ... but if, yielding to the senses, phantasy shall decline to apply itself to the business of virtue, so great is its power that it afflicts the body and beclouds the mind, and finally brings it about that man divests himself of humanity’ (1957, p. 43).

For the most part in the West, however, the idea that an imaginal realm exists external to the psyche became a minor and usually discredited trend. A few like William Blake flirted with notions of an imaginative contact with an outer reality that is greater than the individual, but, to generalize, Western concepts of the imagination moved deep into the creative interior of the individual, whose ground was ultimately determined to be social. Immanuel Kant and David Hume, not entirely departing from Greek and Arabic faculty psychology, described the imagination as a combining and synthesizing agent, which Hume called ‘a magical faculty of the soul’ and Kant termed the productive imagination. Romantic thinkers like Friedrich Schelling emphasized the creative power of the subject whose imagination creates *ex nihilo*, while Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and later Jean-Paul Sartre, emphasized that the imagination exceeds subjective intention and is stimulated by activators that are not only conscious (Iser 2014, Mattenklott 2009, 25–28).

Nowadays in the West the concept of the imaginal occurs most often in Jungian psychotherapy. Karl Jung, following the medieval interpretation of Greek philosophy, argued that the active imagination is able to make contact with an extra-individual, suprasensory world (Hogenson 1998). Jung’s analytical psychology remains practically verboten in humanities scholarship as, since critiques by the Frankfurt School and Louis Althusser, contemporary thinkers reject notions of group psychology or a collective unconscious as fascistic, or at least easily manipulated by ideology. Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious does have parallels with Sufism’s and Sadrā’s conception that the imaginal realm is more real than the corporeal world. However, his theory of archetypes, drawing in



part on Plato's theory of ideal forms, lacks the richness and fluidity of Sadrā's concept of the imaginal realm, as we shall see, and Jung does not acknowledge any Islamic sources.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, with some relief I exclude Jung from the modern Western inheritance of Islamic conceptions of the imaginal. Gaston Bachelard's (1994) theory of the productive imagination, though rich and subtle, makes enough references to Jung and to archetypes that it seems he too relies on a notion of a suprasensory realm whose contents are unchanging and that is therefore, I would argue, less inspiring than Sadrā's concept of the imaginal realm.

Some contemporary Christian theologians build a concept of the imaginal realm that brings in both Jung and Islamic concepts. For example, David T. Hartman (1998) attests that the imaginal realm effectively accounts for the spiritual visions of the faithful as true images. He locates the Western rejection of the imaginal realm in the medieval debates that culminated at the Council of Nicaea. The Church hierarchy was threatened by a concept of the active imagination that would be able to dialogue with angels, and it therefore established that images were not passages to the transcendent but illusions or idolatrous.

Interestingly, contemporary Western thought, tired of the sovereign subject, is trying to conceive of an extra-subjective reality that binds individuals ethically to others and to history. Félix Guattari (1992), for example, sought ways to characterize a collective subjectivity that would not be regressive or fascistic but progressive. Amira Mittermaier (2011, p. 238) finds evidence in the thought of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and others that contemporary Western thought is seeking a politically efficacious concept of the collective imaginary. What we could use now is a positive conception of alterity, of an outside that inspires the imagination to create. Here Deleuze and Guattari's thought conjoins inspiringly with an immanentized Islamic philosophy.

So it's a great time to bring Sadrā's conception of the imaginal realm into the history of the imagination, and also into contact with contemporary film-philosophy, in order to build an understanding of a world of images that is real, infinite, and ever-changing. The following sections introduce some of Sadrā's approaches that are most relevant to cinema: process ontology, the critique of abstraction and celebration of singularity.

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2. Jung considered medieval alchemy to connect modernity with ancient traditions of gnosticism, and he drew on Paracelsus who, like Raimón Llul, was influenced by Isma'ili alchemy, but he does not seem to mention Arabic sources of alchemy.

### Sadrā's Process Philosophy

The undercurrent of process realism that populates the history of Western philosophy, including Lucretius, Democritus, Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze, has a strong counterpart in later Islamic philosophy.<sup>3</sup> As Parviz Morewedge points out, Islamic philosophy, from Suhwarardī onwards, abandoned substantialism for process (Morewedge, 1992; Goodman, 1992, p. 62). The processual nature of Sadrā's philosophy develops from his critique of Avicenna's concept of the univocity of being. This idea, which greatly influenced Deleuze (though he attributes it not to Avicenna but to John Duns Scotus [Marks 2013]), makes it possible to think of a being that subsists in itself while also individuating to give rise to all things.

The problem with Avicenna's influential concept is that it lacks fluidity, because Avicenna drew on an Aristotelian understanding that substances or quiddities, like 'man' and 'horse,' are the basic entities of being: this is substantialism. Sadrā maintained Avicenna's concept of God as the only Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*) on which all other existences are contingent, but redefined it as act or process: *al-sarayān al-wujūd*, the flow of Being. To suggest that substances are not fixed but undergo transformation in the course of their being, Sadrā invented the concept of *substantial motion* (*al-harakat al-jawhariyya*; also translated as transubstantiation or trans-substantial motion). This concept allows Sadrā to describe a universe in which everything is unified by a constant flow of becoming, which he terms *tashkīk al-wujūd*, the modulation of being. In Sadrā's process philosophy, existence is not static but a principle of modulation or individuation (*tashakhkhūs*), and in turn things are modulations of the singular reality that is Being. Sadrā's account of substantial motion thus resonates with Gilbert Simondon's (1992) argument that individuation is prior to individuals, and individuals are simply symptoms or effects of individuation.

Substantial motion implies not only a horizontal transformation, for example of an acorn growing into a tree or a child into an adult, but also a vertical transformation by which things become more real as they get closer to God, the only reality. Crucially, though, this occurs not by simply denying the reality of matter and saying everything but God is an illusion, which is the Sufi approach and that of idealism. Instead, substantial motion respects the potential for intensification in all things. Sadrā wrote, 'The act of being is the most real of things with respect to real

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3. Needless to say, Eastern thought, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and world indigenous traditions also contribute a great deal to process philosophy.

effectuation, because what is other than it becomes effectively real through it' (Mulla Sadrā, *Divine Witness*, trans. and quoted in Jambet 2006, p. 75). In a sort of divine vitalism, things are transforming, becoming more real and more intense, in the process of drawing closer to God. A restless melancholy of love and longing draws all things toward God: it is the energy that traverses and transforms them. They want to shed their privation and become real. 'All contingent beings, in their differentiations and grades of perfection and deficiency, are, in their essences, in need of it [the Necessary Being] and derive their sufficiency in being from it. ... Indeed, they are, in themselves, illusory and perishing and are made real by the Real, the One, the Unique: 'All things are perishing save His Face' ('al-Qasas, Q. 28:88)' (Mullā Sadrā, 2014, p. 53).

For us moderns, the tough nut of Sadrā's process ontology is that he considers matter to be deprived of Being, the least real and the least intense. 'Matter is the source of nonexistence and absence,' Sadrā wrote (2014, p. 55). However, even matter has some glimmer of potentiality, as all things are in the process of becoming more real in the flow of substantial motion.

Know that the form of the natural, elemental body is potentially inanimate, and the form of mineral things is inanimate and potentially plant. The plant's form – that is, the vegetal soul – is a growing, self-nourishing, and reproducing substance and potentially an animal. The animal's form – that is, its soul – is actually a sensate substance and potentially a human. Children's souls are actually sensate and potentially intellecting. Adults' souls are actually intellecting and potentially philosophers. Philosophers are actually sages and potentially angels, so when they depart from their bodies, they become angels) (Mullā Sadrā, 2003, III §67, p. 53).

Sadrā argues that all three realms, the sensible, imaginal, and intelligible, increase in reality and intensity as they approach the divine, where intensity is the capacity to know, act, and fully participate in the flow of being. The intelligible realm, which is closest to God, is the most real and most intense. The imaginal realm is in between: immaterial, but it can be perceived by vision and hearing, as in dreams and visions. It is more real than matter and more intense, and it undergoes continual intensification.

### Sadrā's Imaginal

Interestingly, Sadrā argues that the senses are powers of the soul: 'In an animate being, the first of the powers of the soul to develop *from the perfumes of the world of the Unseen* and the fragrances of the Kingdom is the power of touch,' after which taste, smell, hearing, and vision develop

(Sadrā, *The Wisdom of the Throne*, Part IIA, §2, 134; my emphasis; quoted in Morris, 1981, p. 134). Thus in physical acts of perception (except for cases such as children still learning to use their senses) it is actually the soul that perceives, and it perceives not the sensibles of this world but imaginal images. ‘What are perceived by the five senses, ... are luminous hidden images existing in another world; they are not those qualities (of material things) usually called ‘sensibles,’ except in an accidental fashion. ... Indeed, if you want to know the truth, these powers do not exist in the (bodily) organs, but rather the organs subsist through them’ (Sadrā, *The Wisdom of the Throne*, Part IIA, §3; quoted in Morris, 1981, 134). The stronger the imaginal soul, the less distracted it is by the body, the more manifestly imaginal images will appear. ‘For when these forms have become strengthened and intensified, there is no proportion between them and the things existing in this (physical) world so far as the intensity of their being, actualization, and certainty of effect’ (Sadrā, *The Wisdom of the Throne*, Part IIA, §6, quoted in Morris, 1981, 138).

I like this very much as it suggests that humans’ sense capacities are able to detect the flow of Being across the perceptible entities we encounter. For example, when we hear a person’s voice, notice a weed growing, or smell the soup on the stove, our hearing, sight, and smell—or more precisely, the imaginal power working through them—might feel something vast manifesting in this singular timbre, leafiness, or odor of lentils and garlic. Ibn ‘Arabi certainly supported the idea that the bodily senses can contact the divine presence:

Listen, My lover! I am the entity upon which the created realm is intent. ... I created perceptual faculties for you only so that you might use them to perceive Me. When you perceive Me, you perceive your own soul. Do not wish to perceive Me by your soul’s perception. With My eye you will see Me and you will see your soul, not with the eye of your soul. And you will see Me.

My lover, how long shall I call you and you not listen? How long shall I show Myself to you and you not see? How long shall I wrap Myself in aromas for you, and you not smell Me, and in flavors, and you not taste Me? (Ibn ‘Arabi, *al-Tajalliyyāt al-ilāhiyya* [The divine self-disclosures], quoted in Chittick 2002, p. 59).

The imaginal power in man transcends the physical world. ‘Rather, its being is in another world, one that corresponds to this (physical) world in that it comprises heavens, elements, different species of plants, animals, and so on – only multiplied many times over (the things of) this world’ (Sadrā, *The Wisdom of the Throne*, Part IIA, §6, quoted in Morris, 1981, pp. 137–138). Sadrā insisted that what humans perceive with the

imaginal faculty lies neither in the brain, as Avicenna and Galenic physiology posited, nor in a world separated from the soul, as Suhrawardī maintained. ‘Instead, it subsists in the soul – not like something inhering in something else, but rather like an act subsisting through its agent’ (Sadrā, *The Wisdom of the Throne*, Part IIA, §6, quoted in Morris, 1981, pp. 137–138).

Readers who consider that the soul is too vaporous to do all this perceiving might keep in mind that Sadrā’s account of perception by the soul is grounded in early psychology – the soul is the psyche – while retaining the idea, abandoned by medieval Western philosophy, that the psyche can make contact with entities outside itself. Sadrā’s is an active, vigorous, desirous soul constantly at work seeking the flow of Being.

Sadrā’s innovation of substantial motion allows him to argue that all three realms, sensible, imaginal, and intelligible, are in process. This means that you don’t discover a static world in the imaginal – say, of angels standing on clouds playing harps. Instead, the imaginal is ever changing, infinite, and populated by singularities. Mahmoud Khatami, using language that is Spinozan as well as Sadrian, argues that the imaginal faculty is a faculty of extreme presence, of intensification. ‘I participate in the world through something in me which is capable of being affected, through the substantial and yet nonmaterial density of my presence. The more I lay myself open to the world, the more ‘creatively imaginal’ will I be to its effects’ (Khatami, 2006, p. 224). So imagination is not closing your eyes and dreaming, but being completely present to the world, committed to it and affected by it. Imagination does not abstract but opens you to another thing completely so you perceive it in its intense singularity. Again, this is what I find makes Sadrā’s ontology attractive and more accurate than, for example, the theory of archetypes.

### The Imaginal in Cinema

Readers may detect a resonance between Sadrā’s concept of the imaginal realm and modern theories of cinema as a medium that makes the imperceptible perceptible and reveals the world as a process of becoming. Bazin, as we know, considered reality to be magical and mysterious in itself; cinema just points toward it. Realism involves not just perceptible reality, but what is imperceptible or latent. True realism, he wrote, ‘gives significant expression to the world both concretely and in its essence’ (Bazin 1967, 12). This sounds like a cinematic theory of *mushahada* or contemplation, where an instant can open onto eternity. Movies, images that flow, can give a sense of the flowing multiplicity of being.

Kracauer emphasized cinema's affinity with motion and transformation: an audiovisual flow that suggests the process of becoming. Cinema's subject matter is 'the infinite flux of visible phenomena' (Kracauer, 1960, p. 97). As Miriam Hansen observes, Kracauer, more than Bazin, privileged the way cinema stimulates the imagination. His term 'calico-world' reflects how film, with its defamiliarizing framing and editing, reveals the disorder of the world, but also stirs it up, suspends habits, mobilizes and reconfigures: as in the montage sequences that send a viewer's imagination up 'kaleidoscopic mountains' (Hansen, 2012, pp. 14, 37, 15).

Sadrā's concept of the imaginal also resonates with the cinema's capacity to express transformation in time. Like substantial motion, cinema reveals that time is intensive, not linear. The movie *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) shows the coexistence of horizontal and vertical transformation. Chronologically, only a day passes. For the main character, though, time intensifies as though he undergoes that day over and over, which apparently allows him to undergo a vertical transformation into a knowledgeable (he learns the stories of every person in the town!), skilled (he becomes a great pianist!), selfless, almost saintly being.

Sadrā's process realism also very well describes the diverse temporalities that cinema is able to express that are more true to the passage of time than is clock time. Fast motion, slow motion, and rhythmic time express the Sadrian universe. Animation especially expresses how substance yields to process. Eisenstein resonates with Sadrā, in his emphasis on the 'plasmaticness' of the animated line in Disney films, as he wrote: 'a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form.' (Gunning, 2007, p. 46). What is substantial motion if not plasmatic, a change occurring from within and propelled from without, like Chuck Jones' Wile E. Coyote, continually destroyed and reborn, stronger each time? Abstract films also contain true images, images of the universe as process.

Movies that substitute imagined images for the pro-filmic world also make perceptible events of the soul that are more real than the sensible world. Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* (2013) tells the story of the massacre of the people of his village by the Khmer Rouge not through archival footage and survivors' accounts but in filmed dioramas of little figures. The figures, the more expressive for being crudely carved, lovingly painted with bright, unrealistic colors, seem to act as prayers for the dead people they represent. Panh's imaginal images convey the intensity of Cambodian suffering in a way that lets us perceive them with our souls, not our senses or thoughts.

### Singularity and the Critique of Abstraction

Despite Sadrā's relegation of matter to the realm of least reality, his processual view is effectively panpsychist, as it accords that every entity is conscious and has a soul and the potential to intensify. Not only creatures but everything, even rocks, feels this longing. Rocks too, because even though minerals are pretty undeveloped, they subsist on the extension of being in which everything is in process. (This is very similar to Whitehead's [1978] concept of transformative togetherness, drawn by Creativity). As Ibrahim Kalin suggests, Sadrā proposed 'a doctrine of 'ontological vitalism' according to which all things, animate and inanimate, have some degree of consciousness by virtue of the fact that they exist' (2010, p. xx). All entities strive to transform and differentiate their souls from their material being, as the Qur'an attests: 'Everything sings His praise but you do not understand it'; 'All things in the heavens and the earth worship God' (Qur'an 44:17 and 49:16, quoted in Rizvi [2009], p. 86).

Sadrā argues again and again that reality precedes abstractions. Intellectual abstraction, expectations, and points of view distract from the flow of Being. The names of things constitute one of the abstractions that distract from the process of Being. Quiddity (*māhiyya* in Arabic, 'what it is,'), or Aristotelian essence, is the capacity of something to have a name, like 'man' or 'horse.' Sadrā critiqued quiddity as an unreal generalization that distracts from the reality of being: 'It is not possible to express the real *wujūd* of everything through a name or description, because the positing of names and descriptions is in correspondence to concepts and universal meanings, not in correspondence to existential identities and external/concrete forms' (Sadrā, 2014, p. 13). Categories and abstractions cannot participate in the flow of being, they cannot intensify, they cannot become more real. But concretely existing things have an existence that exceeds any name that might be assigned to them.

Thus, paying attention to non-discursive, phenomenal experience – to the becoming of things – opens one's intuition to the flow of being. Sadrā emphasizes that imagination is better able to grasp Being itself than mental conceptualization is (Jambet, 2006, 80–81). Since being is a process, concepts are too static to capture it: images are more truthful. The fact that the transformative nature of the universe cannot be contained in any image would seem to prompt a radical iconoclasm – if images cannot evoke the infinite, we should not have images (that's the radical Sunni attitude, and also a contemporary image-skeptical attitude). But for Sadrā, as for the Greek Neoplatonists, the absence of adequate images multiplies images in the effort to grasp the act of being. That is, it generates

metaphors. This eastern Islamic view affirms the importance of poetry, art, and images in motion. We know how central poetry is to Iranian culture, as well as painting and, more recently, cinema. They express this belief in the truthfulness of images, the importance of metaphors in trying to get to something inexpressible.

Sadrā also wrote, ‘That which is experienced is being but that which is understood is quiddity’ (quoted in Rizvi, p. 99). This means, unfortunately, that our understanding necessarily abstracts. We need to say ‘man,’ horse,’ etc. even if it does violence to the complexity of the being in question. Quiddity in Sadrā’s understanding is like the habits that Peirce and Bergson grudgingly accept as necessary for thought, though they need to be swept away for creativity to emerge. Hence the importance of intuition for Bergson and Sadrā, and of induction for Peirce.

Sadrā’s understanding of the singularity of existing things resonates with cinema’s capacities to show more than can be named or described. When we try to accurately describe something that occurred in a dream, it takes a very long time because there are no words for the slippery and unusual images of the dream-like events we recall sleepily: that’s the singularity of the imaginal realm. Images have the power to multiply once cognitive needs to classify them are suspended.

The best films do not simply confirm general categories of what can be thought but undermine them with singularities that stimulate the imagination. In showing the infinitesimal, singularities help us imagine the infinite. Cinema with its focus on singularities is close to the universe’s flow of becoming and intensification. Think of the little maid in *Umberto D.* (Vittorio de Sica, 1952), about whom Deleuze writes: Grinding coffee in the morning and chasing the ants down the drain, she suddenly sees her pregnant belly and is overcome by her terrible circumstance: a tiny, singular event opens to something unendurable (Deleuze, 1989, pp. 1–2). But there are also joyous singularities.

The critique of abstraction affirms a Bazinian approach, as well as a Deleuzian one: cinema lets us love the world not in general but in the ways its singularities open us to the world. Then we can connect them to other singularities. Rather like Deleuze’s crystal-image (1989, pp. 68–97), imaginal images grow and expand, all in a world beyond concepts. In both Sadrā’s intensifying imaginal realm and Deleuze’s crystal-image, images collect and multiply. The crystal-image dissolves the distinction between true and false, replacing it with a becoming. Imaginal images are falsifying images in that they replace named things with unnameable things.

Unlike Avicenna, Sadrā gave equal importance to the intelligible and the imaginal, considering them both to be ways to the Divine. The interesting difference is that the intelligible intensifies the Divine presence through



unification, while the imaginal intensifies the Divine presence through multiplication.<sup>4</sup> That is, in the intelligible realm, contemplation moves closer and closer to a single thought: the overwhelming presence of God. Whereas in the imaginal realm, images build upon images, opening the soul to the dazzling splendor of ever-changing Divine creativity. Thus the imaginal realm presents an exciting model of a world of images that does not damage the soul—as in the skeptical tradition from Plato to deconstruction—but grows the soul. And this is still a way of thinking about images that lacks in our present time.

#### How can we distinguish true visions from hallucinations?

Philosophers who believe the imagination can behold true images have always worried about this question. Thomas Aquinas, for example, held that true visions come from angels, false ones from devils (Brann 1991, 60). A hadith of al-Bukhari states, ‘The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, ‘If anyone of you sees a dream that he likes, then it is from Allah, and he should thank Allah for it and narrate it to others; but if he sees something else, i.e. a dream that he dislikes, then it is from Satan, and he should seek refuge with Allah from its evil, and he should not mention it to anybody, for it will not harm him’ (al-Bukhari, no. 6985). The Prophet encouraged people to disseminate good dreams but not evil ones, in seeming recognition that images take on more reality the more they circulate. Mittermaier’s dreaming interlocutors in Cairo distinguish between divinely inspired dream (*ru’ya*), devilish dream (*hilm*), and wish-fulfillment dream (*hadith nafsi*). Some argued that Freudian psychoanalysis can account for the latter two, but not for divinely inspired dreams (Mittermaier, 2011, pp. 6, 184).

Is the dream divine or devilish? If you minimize the religious framing, this is the same question we ask in Film Studies: do cinema’s images lead to fruitful creativity or destructive delusions?

The traditional answer to whether the dream is divine or devilish relies on the exteriority of the imaginal realm (and the Agent Intellect) to human souls: dreams come from this divine Outside. Such an answer evidently doesn’t work in a non-transcendental context, but I think we can consider an immanentized imaginal realm to be the source of truthful visions. We can begin by distinguishing true visions from ideological images, the modern version of devilish hallucinations. Ideological images crowd

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4. Sadrā writes, ‘In the world of the heavens there are two noble books, one soulish and universal, the other imaginal and particular’ (Mulla Sadrā 2003, Part 1, §39, 9). See also Jambet (2006), 87.

the perceptible world – from advertising to pornography to the clichéd conventions on which most cinema relies. Ideological images are quiddities: lacking reality, they paralyze perception rather than open onto the flow of Being.

In this category of destructive delusions I include jihadi videos. These videos, in which someone witnesses that he or she has been called to go on jihad or to carry out a suicide mission, are the most dangerously powerful images in the Muslim world today. Jihadi videos tightly follow generic conventions, which is remarkable given the gravity of the planned act. Sadrā critiqued religious hierarchies that try to control believers' intellectual and spiritual journeys, both Sunni anti-rationalism – which he suggested serves tyrannical governments – and the Shi'a hierarchy that demands obedience to the imam (Morris 1981, p. 31). His critique would doubtless extend to contemporary Islamic fundamentalism. Moreover, the jihadi mission to kill unbelievers arises from a rigid, ahistorical interpretation of the Qur'an. A hadith of Abu Hanifa calls on Muslims to 'read the Qur'an as if it has been revealed to you'; that is, to interpret it in a contemporary spirit (Ibraaz, 2011, p. 69).<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to ideological images, true visions of the imaginal see things not as static but in their act of becoming. As Khatami emphasizes, the imaginal faculty allows us to perceive what is invisible in a given situation, in an encounter that opens you to the event (Khatami, 2007, pp. 223–224). This is how we can ensure that the imaginal worlds we perceive are truthful.

### **The Collective Imaginal**

As we have seen, modern interpreters of the Islamic imaginal realm argue that it is not only individual but collective. Here is another of its most exciting potential resonances for cinema: a model of a collective imaginal realm where the group's most ardently longed-for dreams can come into being. The imaginal is more real than material reality because it distills collective desires, or what Mohammed Arkoun (2003) calls the social *imaginaire*: a vision of what is true but normally unseen.

Arkoun argues that the imagination is not opposed to rational thought; that it uses myth, symbol, and metaphor as part of rational dialogue. Arkoun argues that prior to the Middle Ages all the religions of the Book valued the imagination. A logocentric turn in Islam, and Judaism and Christianity as well, which he attributes to the dominance of Aristotelian

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5. Thanks to Christian Sühr, an ethnographic filmmaker who works with Muslims in Denmark, for asking me to reflect on jihadi videos.

substantialism in medieval thought, diminished the role of the imagination. Modern secular Western thought comes in for Arkoun's critique as well (2003, pp. 31–32). In a Foucauldian manner he critiques the discursive standardization of Islam by Shaf'i'i jurists as shaping what is thinkable and what unthinkable: a critique similar to Sadra's critique of abstraction.

Similarly, Mittermaier (2011, p. 233) argues that to recognize the reality of *al-khayal* acknowledges 'dreamers' embeddedness in larger realities and larger communities' and enables a form of being in the world foreclosed by rational, abstract thought. The imaginal realm, far from being an individual fantasy, accounts for the way people's collective wishes bring the unthought into the thinkable, beginning with dreams, myths, and metaphors.

Arkoun's and Mittermaier's proposals are powerful material for a collective politics that would stress the reality of dreams, poetry, and myth precisely because they begin to suggest what is beyond official discourse. They bring the imaginal into being as a basis for practical concepts. Of course, this idea is useful for collective politics not only in the Muslim world but the world over. How can we tell whether a collective image is truthful? I suggest this criterion: if Being consists of the maximum capacity to perceive and act, then we can consider an image to be truthful if it maximizes people's capacities to perceive and act. Wherever a dream of a better life gains reality because it captures the imagination of many people, it intensifies and increases in truth.

In short, the imaginal realm gives a lot of power to a fresh idea of collective political action based not solely on argument and certainly not on blind obedience to abstractions, but on a time-specific truth that intensifies as more people engage with it. This brings us back, at this point, to *Lebanese Rocket Society*.

The filmmakers of *Lebanese Rocket Society* attempt not only to give perceptible form to collective wishes but to recover them from a collective repression. They do this first by commissioning a reproduction of the last and biggest Lebanese rocket, the Cedar 4, to be installed as a monument to imagination at Haghazian University. To achieve this, they must negotiate a maze of bureaucracy, in order to overcome suspicions that the sculpture might be used or seen as a weapon. The rocket-sculpture is driven through the streets of Beirut, flanked by police cars with sirens blaring. But as Joreige explains on a television talk show, 'It's only in places like art and cinema that such a project can take place. Our territory, the place where we're trying to live, can expand.'

The rocket sculpture is safely installed at the university. Suddenly, yellow and orange animated flames shoot from its base, and the rocket

fires into the sky, launching an animated sequence of imaginal images that show how Lebanon might have become by the year 2026, if international powers had not intervened in the 1960s to stop the rocket program. Ghassan Halwani's giddily colorful, hard-edged Flash animations make visible a Lebanese society that continued to support scientific research into rockets and used the resulting technological and military power for good. Deploying satellites to monitor its borders, this imagined future Lebanon effectively prevented incursions from Israel and Syria. Deploying satellites to survey for offshore oil, this Lebanon became economically self-sufficient and independent of foreign powers. This imagined future Lebanon maintained its place among the modern nations of the world. If the past had been different, the balance of power in the Middle East would be more just, the terrible civil wars would not have occurred, and Lebanon would be independent of foreign influence and a world leader in science and technology – all things that are unthinkable now. Many other things are also imagined: the animation shows the Holiday Inn, which has stood as a cratered shell since the civil war, lit up and ready for business. And the celebrated Beirut nightclubs would in the future have zero-gravity party rooms!

*Lebanese Rocket Society* releases this flow of imaginal images not as a nationalistic message but as a gesture of compassionate, inspiring healing for the wounded and withered imagination. The film ends with Lebanon's contribution to the Golden Records sent into space on the Voyager interstellar spacecraft in 1977: cheerful greetings in the country's main languages of Arabic, French, English, and, acknowledging the central role of the researchers at Haghazian University, Armenian.

### **Immanentizing the Imaginal**

For those of us who are diffident about drawing from religious philosophy, I need to suggest how the imaginal realm and other elements of Sadrā's transcendental philosophy might be made immanent. This entails a process akin to Karl Marx's 'turning G.W.F. Hegel on his head,' though the approach I propose is drawn from Deleuze. Deleuze is probably the contemporary philosopher most concerned with religious philosophy, and his oeuvre shows that most philosophy becomes more exciting when you subtract the necessity for God. We can see in his engagements with Kant, Spinoza, and Leibniz a struggle to convert their theological arguments into an immanent atheistic spirituality (Goodchild, 2011). For example, in his inversion of Leibniz's cosmology, Deleuze lifts away the requirement that there be only one 'best' universe, replacing it with an infinity of impossible universes, thereby liberating the monads from having to obey God's will. To do something similar with Sadrā, we would have to

qualify the Neoplatonist and Sufi element of love that is so central to his philosophy: the longing for the Beloved draws all things toward God, intensifies them, and makes them more real. An immanent approach would replace that teleological motion with a more aleatory movement of energy that, perhaps, we could still call love.

The changing contents of the imaginal realm can be considered a model for political change, in that it reflects collective wishes that are as yet nondiscursive, but real. Cinema not only suggests but actually produces imaginal images that capture the collective imagination. Using its powers of poetry, rather than argument, the cinema stimulates the imagination to bring the unthought into being. As *Lebanese Rocket Society* demonstrates by reimagining history (and this, only one film amongst a range of possible examples that could equally be explored), the imaginal realm is a place to test and grow collective wishes and to give them perceptible form.<sup>6</sup>

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