The transmission of an idea, the genealogy of its sentence: The ‘world of image’ (ʿālam al-mithāl) from the twelfth century up until today

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In this presentation I analyze the reception of the idea of a world of image, as was first developed by Suhrawardi (d. 1191) and Shahrazūrī (d. 1288). This world of image was thought of as a world beyond our earthly world, containing all kinds of creatures in all their particular details, but without being bound to any physical laws and unobservable by our five senses. Only by crossing the boundaries of the physical world, such as in sleep, meditation, or after death, can we reach this world. The mode in which the soul can do that is the imagination.

Though I shall briefly discuss the conception and the philosophical relevance of this idea, I shall spend the majority of my time on showing the many twists and turns the idea makes throughout the centuries all the way up until our day, involving about forty authors ranging from philosophers to Shi‘ī traditionists. I shall show how many of these authors would not suspect that their writings rely on Suhrawardi, as the idea had by then gone through a number of intermediary step.

The unravelling of this reception history is possible by using a novel approach that seems to work particularly well for late medieval and early modern Islamic intellectual history. This novel approach rests on the premise that there is much to be learned from not looking at all texts of one author, but to look at all authors of one text. In the case of the idea of a world of image, the text as signifier of this idea which carries it from text to text, can be pinned down to one sentence.

Looking for all texts with this same sentence, the often noted characteristic of this later period as ‘repetitive’ is used to our advantage. In fact, by seeing these repetitions in the context of the entire transmission of the idea more often than not there are interesting aspects to the incorporation of the idea into a text. My presentation therefore does not only shed light on the idea of a world of image, but equally well discusses more generally the mechanics of the production and transmission of knowledge in the Islamic intellectual discourse.