

## Imagination Dead Imagine: On Cantankerous Fantasy<sup>1</sup>

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Imagine a contemporary cultural and political European scene beset by dual forms of impoverished imagination. By “impoverished” I mean forms of imagination and the imaginary that are systematically locked in dead-ends, sabotaged, bereft of the ability to function as vital, social and political energies and forces. If this is indeed the case, an ancient scepticism towards the vagaries of formless and unpredictable imagination, would seem to have proved its point: imagination is perchance an incapacitated and debilitating, hence heinous force. One of the peculiar traits of this arguable triumph of a certain rationalism, is that one of the key doctrines for the political and economical subjects of today, is that we should be constantly “innovative”, be it in our private lives, in our careers, or as national citizens locked in a perennial, global strife with all other nation-states. I contend, that we are all confronted by what I term an *imaginary imperative*: Imagine, or you’re done for. I want to elucidate the paradoxical twists and turns of the concept of imagination via the pairing of two exceedingly odd bedfellows, namely Irish Samuel Beckett on the one hand, and on the other the various set of so-called “reality-shows”, such as e.g. “Big Brother”, “Paradise Hotel”, and so on. The purpose is not merely to modestly elucidate an otherwise obscure conundrum (how come the absolute, paralyzing death of imagination is ensconced in an ubiquitous “imaginary imperative”?), but as well to immodestly suggest possible ways out of an unpleasant paralysis of imagination proper.

First, we have to take a detour via a botanizing round-trip in the historically diverse philosophies of the imagination, the purpose being to confront two opposed, extreme strands in any thinking of that vague concept and phenomenon: either outright rejection, or else jubilant celebration. We’ll then move on to an analytical comparison and confrontation between reality-TV and Beckett’s short prose text *Imagination dead imagine*. Interestingly, these otherwise diametrically opposed and different phenomena (reality-TV, Beckett’s prose) both testify to types and modalities of a contemporary, destitute imagination. At the end, possible political and aesthetic escape-routes or blind alleys will be dwelled upon.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly modified version of a keynote paper given at Goldsmith’s College, London, December 8th, 2006, at a research-seminar arranged by Frederik Tygstrup and Alexander Garcia Düttmann.

## The Split Fate of Imagination

Notoriously – and inveterately – the notion of imagination has had a bad name in the far from venerable tradition of philosophy. Although Aristotle was the one, in *De Anima*, who truly could be said to have discovered “imagination” as a distinct capability in its own right, he speedily abandoned the subject again<sup>2</sup>.

Bypassing the long, complex history of ideas as concerns the twists and turns of the notion of “imagination” as a distinct capability in its own right, I want us to swiftly inspect two important, pre-Enlightenment figures, namely Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). Hobbes and Pascal are interesting in this context, because they appear before the split between enlightenment rationalism and a counter-Enlightenment romanticism (Kant versus Hamann, etc.), and further because they are very far apart philosophically, and yet they converge in their rejection of the force and status of imagination.

Thomas Hobbes for one did not hesitate, in *Leviathan* (1651), to define imagination as “decayed sense”, meaning a purely derivative and faded imprint of an original and sensory impression:

“For after the object is removed, or the eye shut, wee still retain an image of the thing seen, though more obscure than when we see it. And this is it, the Latines call *Imagination*, from the image made in seeing; and apply the same, though improperly, to all the other senses. But the Greeks call it *Fancy*; which signifies appearance, and is as proper to one sense, as to another. *Imagination* therefore is nothing but decaying sense; and is found in men, and many other living creatures, aswell sleeping, as waking”<sup>3</sup>.

And Pascal, in *Pensées* (posthumously published 1669), although he did symmetrically reverse Hobbes’ verdict by calling imagination “cette superbe puissance”, immediately hammered stigmata in the body of that insidious entity by adding, “ennemie de la raison, qui se plait à la contrôler et à la dominer”<sup>4</sup>. So Pascal accorded imagination an immense power, only to quickly castrate it as being inherently damaging and futile, posing a serious threat to the allegedly unimaginative, drab, but far more reliable rule of reason.

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted, as concerns these rather sweeping remarks, to the careful work of Cornelius Castoriadis, cf. his *World in Fragments. Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis and the Imagination*. Ed. and transl. by David Ames Curtis. Stanford University Press 1997, pp. 213-216 in particular.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), Ed. Tuck, Cambridge University Press 1991, p.15

<sup>4</sup> Pascal, *Pensées* (1669), in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Éd. Pléiade, Gallimard, p.1116.

Schematically put, and bypassing many intrinsically interesting chapters in the long, arduous history of the notion of “imagination”<sup>5</sup>, various philosophers have tended to veer between denigrating imagination as a mere dull imprint of an originary sensualism, what Cornelius Castoriadis has peremptorily called the “conventional doctrine of the imagination”. Or else, in the wake of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), describing it as a passive, yet somehow mediating force between the pure sensuous manifold of intuition and the cognitive synthetic activity of Understanding<sup>6</sup>. According to Kant, imagination plays a crucial, ordering role in-between the receptive influx of sensory data, and the organizing spontaneity of pure cognition.

However, as is well known the question of schematism and the transcendental power of imagination was never properly resolved by Kant, and ever since Heidegger’s epochal *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), the notion of “imagination” have enjoyed a virtually full-fledged rehabilitation, bordering on a renaissance, in the realm of philosophy in the twentieth century. We have – scattered across as diverse currents as neo-kantianism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, ordinary language philosophy, and what have you – exemplary and important contributions in the form of Hans Vaihinger’s *als-ob*, Wittgenstein’s “seeing-as”, Cassirer’s symbolic forms, Bachelard’s material imaginary, Sartre’s imaginary, Merleau-Ponty’s *chiasmus*, Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic imagination, Castoriadis’ radical social imaginary, Lacan’s version of the imaginary, Jacques Rancière’s primary aesthetics<sup>7</sup>, etc., etc.<sup>8</sup> It would seem that the initial and ancient scepticism towards the imaginary and imagination have been replaced – at least within the confines of continental philosophy - by an enthusiastic embrace of its liberating potential. Imagination dabbles in possibilities, potentialities, *poiesis*, virtualities – much rather than necessity, actuality, concretion, mimesis.

If in the words of Kant, we distinguish between the passive “*exhibitio derivativa*”, and the inherently productive force of “*intuitus originarius*”<sup>9</sup>, the majority of modern philosophers and cultural theorists seem to have opted for the latter notion, although of course in any number of different versions and visions thereof.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. Kearney 2004. Let me emphasize, that I of course do not find a further contextualization of the argument to be superfluous; only, the strictly historical aspects of the vagaries of the notion of “imagination” are not intrinsically necessary or indispensable as concerns the present argument. I have, however, enjoyed the critical contribution to this history by Luiz Costa Lima, cf. his *The Control of the Imaginary*, Minnesota University Press 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*. London, Verso 1999, p.29.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*. New York, Continuum 2004, p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Although the German romantics notoriously hypostatized imagination: Fichte, Schelling, Novalis. Cf. among many others Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s well-known *L’absolu littéraire*, Paris, Seuil 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger 1929, p.90

Still, part of the problem seems to be that imagination is unavoidable and necessary – we can't do without it. And yet at the same time it is inherently slippery and vague, in the terms of Castoriadis: imagination is impossible to fixate and to place in its proper location. Apparently, it is simultaneously ubiquitous and unlocatable.

### **Bachelard and Castoriadis: Matter and sociality?**

Now, if we cast a brief glance at Gaston Bachelard and Castoriadis themselves, they have both heroically tried to wrest imagination from its late-romantic prison-house of subjectivity and fancy. Bachelard is relevant, because he comes up with an extreme, quasi-phenomenological, totalizing celebration of the imagination, and Castoriadis because he insists on the inherently social and political nature of the exercise of imagination. Between them, they constitute two of the extreme and not entirely unproblematic ends on the scale of positive positions within the present-day predilection for imagination.

Gaston Bachelard, by arguing that we can ascribe matter itself a measure of imaginary traits, so that nature is in a sense imbued with its own limitless imaginary capacity, supplementing our own, dreamlike engagement in and with the world. I quote from Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958): "Imagination has the integrating powers of the three. It is root and branch. It lives between earth and sky. Imagination lives in the earth and in the wind. The imaginative tree is imperceptibly the cosmological tree, the tree which summarizes a universe, which makes a universe"<sup>10</sup>. For Bachelard, imagination bespeaks ontological plenitude, it betokens the ability of the monadic subject to fracture and recreate itself in a fecund encounter with the world in being.

Bachelard's pupil, Mikel Dufrenne, stressed that: "It is the image that arouses imagination, because perception is not equal to the task, and because conceptualization is useless whenever the meaning is so deeply embedded within the object that it would be lost if abstracted". What happens, according to the likes of Bachelard and Dufrenne, is that strictly speaking we do not make use of imagination, rather we ourselves *are used by it* when touching the world: "affectivity and imagination work in close proximity. Affectivity opens a world that imagination can inhabit, and imagination, in its turn, excites feeling (...) through the affective quality we are literally touched"<sup>11</sup>. The central argument is, that *anterior to* the reflectively mediated split between subject and object, we are ensconced in a situation in which the unfinished and emergent vibration of both sides gently touch, as was beautifully phrased by Merleau-Ponty: "There is no break at all in this circuit: it is impossible to

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<sup>10</sup> Cit. in Kearney, p.94

<sup>11</sup> Dufrenne, *The A Priori of Imagination*, Northwestern UP, p.29

say that nature ends here and man or expression starts here. It is, therefore, mute Being which itself comes to show forth its own meaning”<sup>12</sup>.

As we will have occasion to realize a little later, the optimism and exuberance of this phenomenology of the imagination is thoroughly negated in the work of Samuel Beckett, as well as in the popular forms of Reality-TV.

But Bachelard & co. weren't the only ones to attempt to leave behind the intra-subjective or egological vicissitudes of Kantian and post-kantian theories of the imagination. Cornelius Castoriadis tried to do so by pinpointing what he termed the “radical, social imaginary”, meaning by that an irreducible instance of socially mediated invention embedded as a pre-rational genetic element in the creation of human institutions and symbolic structures.

In both cases, imagination is moved *outside* the perimeter of closed, monadic, subjective consciousness, either by way of Bachelard's projective naturalization of imagination, or else Castoriadis' socialization of it.

In so doing, they may have rescued imagination from its batch of heinous connotations to do with the Janus-face of the visual, the image, and the fictional. This may, however, constitute nothing but a displacement and perhaps even a disfigurement of the intractable complexities haunting the very notion of “imagination”.

For, even if we grant Bachelard's flippant, phenomenological naturalization, or Castoriadis' neo-aristotelian proto-socialization, we still find ourselves in the midst of a cultural setting that endlessly seem to cultivate and capitalize on the virtues of imagination, albeit in the shallow shape of so-called “creativity” and “innovation”.

In that overall, socio-historical sense, Bachelard's phenomenological naturalization and Castoriadis' post-marxist socialization, seems to have been supplanted and superseded by a general, quantifiable *commodification of imagination*. What is of the essence, today, is the ability to capitalize on being imaginative. Or rather, what is mortifying is being bereft of imagination; what we're encumbered by today, is a merciless *imaginary imperative*: “Imagine! – or else you're defunct”.

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<sup>12</sup> Cit. in Kearney, p.118

## C: Negative Imagination

Slavoj Zizek, in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), swerve past positions such as Bachelard's and Castoriadis', but indirectly highlight the conundrums of this troublesome scenario.

Via a daring reading of early Hegel and Lacan, Zizek not only accepts Heidegger's radical re-reading of the place and force of transcendental imagination in the work of Kant, but tries to go at least one step further.

Zizek's project consist in portraying the immanent force of imagination itself as split between a potentially benign and productive side; the one cherished by Bachelard, Ricoeur & co; and a rather gruesome, negative and ominous side, to do with violence, lack of form and unity, dissolution, dismemberment.

Zizek quotes Hegel: "The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him – or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here – pure self – in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head – there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes awful"<sup>13</sup>

Now, this somewhat opaque, nightmarish and enigmatic passage from Hegel's early *Jenaer Realphilosophie* is used by Zizek to argue, that Kant and even Heidegger overlooked or thrust aside the frightful, negative, nocturnal aspect of imagination. According to Zizek, Hegel's dark intuition bespeaks imagination's ability to tear reality into dislocated *membra disjecta*, a pre-synthetic and pre-ontological moment that would constitute the abyss of imagination. Zizek reads this *à la* Lacan, that is to say as a universal, repressed but immanent feature of all and every encounter with the impossible Real.

I would like to slightly vulgarize and gloss over Zizek's claim, by suggesting that this entire, gloomy aspect of imagination, its negative work, is one possible way of comprehending what we come across when watching reality-TV and reading Beckett.

My point is, that although this brief, selective stroll through the history of philosophy provide us with a setting for triumphantly re-instating imagination as a trans-subjective stratum in its own right, this very triumph manifests itself as a conspicuous repetition of the initial condemnation of imagination. From its earliest appearance in

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<sup>13</sup> Cit in Zizek 1999, op.cit., p.29-30

Plato, on to today's rampant, mindless and incessant demand to be "innovative" and "creative", things have gone from bad to worse.

So, in essence Pascal was absolutely right, when he intuited that imagination was the ardent enemy of reason, although a formidable enemy to the extent that the phantasmatic and imaginary is solidly located in the midst of pre-transcendental schematism.

These days, the belligerent aspect of imagination occurs in two symmetric, but perhaps indistinct registers. One concerns the attempt to achieve an absolute *proximity* to what is termed "reality", in effect erasing the distinction between imaginary and real being. The other, a fearful *distancing* from the self-same world of "reality". The "real" is heralded and summoned and even severely abused in both the case of reality-TV and Beckett. And in both instances I suggest that we are up against (ironically) opposed forms of posthumous imagination. Žižek's negative imagination is embodied in the contemporary imaginary imperative: The relentless and unending demand to make use of imagination testifies to an almost sadistic impoverishment of the phantasmatic realm.

### **From Temptation Island to Beckett**

My simple suggestion is, that the epitome and symptom of the present impoverishment of our collective notion of imagination, socio-empirically shows itself in the epidemic popularity of so-called "reality-TV". I do realize, that at this point there is a risk of sounding like a grumpy, sour misanthrope bemoaning the reifying decay of late capitalism, the rampant society of the spectacle, and the hegemony of the culture industry; but that's certainly not my intention nor my point – what I'm driving at, or moving towards, is the possibility of sketching and opposing two distinct forms of imaginative impoverishment.

One is embodied in the contemporary wallowing in reality-TV, computer-games, courses and companies cultivating so-called innovation and creativity; a vast and heterogeneous field of social and discursive phenomena.

In this context I wish to focus on a few examples of reality-TV that will serve as a contrastive spring-board to my other, main example, namely Samuel Beckett's short prose text *Imagination dead imagine*<sup>14</sup>.

In Beckett's brief text, an anonymous third-person voice call forth two sets of images; one of a tropical paradise of sorts: "Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*. Ed. Stan Gontarski. New York, Grove Press 1995.

glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit”<sup>15</sup>; and another of a small, white rotunda made of a bone-like material, and containing two naked immobile bodies, “Go back out, a plain rotunda, all white in the whiteness, go back in, rap, solid throughout, a ring as in the imagination a ring of bone”<sup>16</sup>.

So in Beckett we have two distinct imaginary settings: one of tropical idyll and another of closed containment. In both instances, the inspection and examination of those alleged figments embodying signs of life are premised on a paradoxical use of what we might term *posthumous imagination*, encapsulated in the pithy initial words: “No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine.”<sup>17</sup> We are called upon to attempt to imagine the modality of an essentially and unavoidably posthumous imagination.

What I want to do is to single out and compare in passing these two defunct imaginary settings with two opposed favourite haunts of contemporary reality-TV, namely the isolated tropical island temporarily inhabited by a small number of contestants, as well as the closed house occupied by a modest herd of hopeful participants.

What strikes me, is the number of obvious similarities and differences embedded in these two parallel but vastly different, culturally mediated registers of imaginary topography – that of reality-TV and Beckett. My suggestion is, that the central similarity consists in their dual negotiations of the impoverishment of the imagination. They both tend to implicitly negate the exuberant optimism of Bachelard, as well as the robust post-marxism of Castoriadis; and they both of them obey, in ironically differing ways, the painful imaginary imperative, the order and command to imagine although imagination is dead.

Beckett, by carrying out the obscure and inexplicable demand to make use of an extinct imaginative capability; reality-TV by visually and affectively exploring a cultural terrain devoid of any truly productive and fertile imagination – what we meet at the isolated island and in the closed-off house (and often in Beckett as well!) is first of all boredom, inactivity, monotony, inane competition, puerile plots. In brief: The conspicuous lack of any truly imaginative activity whatsoever. The very commercial concept itself is idiotic and insipid, sold off and circulating in any number of countries – and yet it generates vast amounts of economic value and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.182.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.182.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.182.

distributes as well as shapes intense currents of psycho-socially mediated desire and energy.

But let me be clear: What we have here is *not* a *lack* of imagination, far from it. It's something infinitely worse, namely the tiresome stupidity of a posthumous imagination that is never going to stop. TV-producers come up with an endless number of exceedingly silly and obscene concepts for new reality-shows, viewers and participants incessantly invent new modes of becoming semi-known for a little while, or are merely killing time in the service of negative imagination. And it's all taking place squarely in the midst of a terrain of imagination. For are we not we dealing with an opening up of new, possible worlds for a majority of individuals? The literal poiesis of plastic surgery in "extreme makeover", the chance to meet the one and only rich bachelor, for the girl next door; the opportunity to become famous and popular for the lazy and mediocre everyman?

## **Poverty, Beckett**

In an exceedingly odd way, this general, cultural demise is played out in the work of Samuel Beckett.

At this point I would like quote a little from Beckett's first, unpublished novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932). The quotes are meant to demonstrate the way in which Beckett's early aesthetic pre-ontology chimes in with Zizek's description of tarrying with the negative.

But first: To Beckettians it is hardly surprising to mention that his poetics deals with dispossession, poverty, obstacles and failure. Indeed, one of the most cited passages in Beckett says as much: "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living"<sup>18</sup> The artist is first and foremost lacking in resources, he has: "nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express"<sup>19</sup>. This latter turn, which is typical Beckett, points to his dilemma in terms of imagination: even if there is nothing to be done, the artist is duty bound to exert and strain his miserable imagination. The problem is, that the world in which the Beckettian artist is placed is not dissimilar to that turbulent and ghastly night, Hegel wrote of. In *Dream*, Beckett's narrator put it this way:

"I have discerned a disfaction, a désuni, an Ungebund, a flottement, a tremblement, a tremor, a tremolo, a disaggregating, a disintegrating, an efflorescence,

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<sup>18</sup> Three Dialogues in *Disjecta*, p.145.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.139

a breaking down and multiplication of tissue, the corrosive ground-swell of Art (...) the coherence gone to pieces, the continuity bitched to hell because the units of continuity have abdicated their unity, they have gone multiple, they fall apart, the notes fly about, a blizzard of electrons”<sup>20</sup>

On a prim, philological note, we know for a fact that Beckett read and commented on Kant’s first *Critique*<sup>21</sup>, and that in his essay on *Proust* Beckett severely dismantled the niceties of Kantian schematism, but that is not the essential point here. The point is, that early Beckett’s acosmism predisposed his work for an opening unto the ravaging, negative work of imagination; and what I’m suggesting here, is that late Beckett plunged all his texts into the corrosive void envisaged by the juvenile Belacqua in *Dream*.

In so doing, late Beckett perform one possible version of the impoverishment of imagination; a version that crack down hard on Bachelard’s benign phenomenology of materiality, as well as Castoriadis’ social imaginary. *In lieu*, we get something that quite lives up to the scathing attacks of Pascal and Hobbes, imaginary scenarios that stage decayed, posthumous forms of imagination that are indeed enemies of reason.

### **Imagination dead imagine**

Now let’s cast another brief glance at **IDI**. My central hypothesis is, that in **IDI** Beckett simultaneously stages and undermines an empiricist notion of imagination; the effect of this dual manoeuvre, is to exhibit the range and modality of an impoverished imagination. Basically, the narrative voice taunts an absent second-person instance, apparently for having suggested that there is no trace of life anywhere. The narrative voice then outline for fun a ludicrous tropical paradise, quickly omits this mirage and instead focuses on a small, white, bone-like cylinder floating in empty space and containing two naked, human bodies, one of each gender, lying crouched on the ground, “On their right sides therefore both and back to back head to arse”, as the nameless narrator puts it<sup>22</sup>, and back to back. Several things strike the uninitiated reader. According to the voice, there is no entrance and yet the narrative eye easily glides in and begins its geometric measurements? – “No way in, go in, measure”<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> In *Disjecta*, p.49

<sup>21</sup> Cf. e.g. *Samuel Beckett’s Dream Notebook*. Ed. J. Pilling, Reading, BIF, p.164-165.

<sup>22</sup> Beckett 1995, op.cit., p.184.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182.

The two bodies are neither dead nor alive. They seem to breathe, but at the same time their eyes are sometimes open long beyond what is humanly possible<sup>24</sup>. Inside the cylinder weather-conditions are unstable, but the voice at one point state that: “world still proof against enduring tumult”<sup>25</sup>, and yet afterwards we hear of fierce storms raging within. The anonymous voice combines tactile, visual, analytical and narrative skills in coming up with this thoroughly paradoxical description of traces of life, and yet everything fizzles out in a stage of unknowing, a “blizzard of electrons” to borrow Beckett’s own, happy phraseology: “No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they still lie still in the stress of that storm, or of a worse storm, or in the black dark for good, or the great whiteness unchanging, and if not what they are doing”<sup>26</sup>.

Everything is premised on the workings of the posthumous imagination: “imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine”<sup>27</sup>. And all within is measured according to solidly empirical criteria; the diameter of the container, the use of a mirror to ascertain whether or not the bodies are alive, the use of the biologically oriented term “life”. And yet, the entire scenario is shrouded in a distinctive form of mystery. At the end of the tale, we have no idea what the container was all about, and even the narrative profess not to know anything about the state and whereabouts of the cylinder and its two silent bodies.

And as with the two bodies, we can’t be sure whether or not imagination is properly dead. On the one hand it’s still riveted to empirical criteria and standards; on the other, it easily ignores empirical obstacles, e.g. in case of the smooth, unobstructed entrance and the inexplicably long interval of opened, unblinking eyes.

To my mind, this bespeaks a double register in terms of so-called reality and imagination. An infinite distancing from reality, lost in all that whiteness, and floundering in the mad night of softly negative imagination. And yet an almost nostalgic proximity to reality, and an unwillingness to let go of what is obviously ridiculous and untenable.

## **Temptation Island**

Likewise, if we turn for a short while to the glistening world of reality-TV.

As I pointed out, there’s a perhaps interesting similarity between Beckett’s use of the tropical island and the closed container on the one hand; and the dramaturgic use of

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p.184.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.184.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.185.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182.

the island and the closed-off house in some of the early and best-known reality-shows (*Temptation Island*, *Big Brother*).

My contention is, that the peculiar, pointed use of the term “reality” in this specific context (“reality-TV”) reveals the queer status of imagination and fantasy in these TV-shows. Allegedly, they are based on an isolation of a crucial, but partly hidden structure in so-called Real Life, that is, the workings of a reductionist and vulgar neo-darwinism in the arena of love and career-making.

On the face of it, we claim to believe in true, romantic love and in the fair workings of meritocracy. But in reality, the reality that these shows purport to simultaneously uncover and stage, things are much more brutal and simple. Therefore, the official versions of love and merit are denounced as fragile illusions, in a sense brushed aside as imaginary and silly delusions. So although the shows of reality-TV are strictly regulated by any number of rules and conventions, this is all done in order to clarify and foreground the real, essential nature of life itself.

And yet they of course represent an extreme form of naïve reductionism, an almost childish form of cynicism that adds up to a staging of *cantankerous fantasy*, a puerile version of extinct imagination with a view to profit-maximizing. Hobbes’ phrase, “decayed sense” suddenly seems to fit in quite well with the description of these shows, including their blunt and extreme form of empiricism. Reality becomes irrealized in a hazy performance and blurry competition, a spectral hunting and haunting of real reality.

In Beckett’s text, temptation island was immediately omitted and erased, so that we at least got the spare enigma of the white cylinder; in which, as well, the agile eye of Big Brother eventually withdrew. But both Beckett’s text and these shows testify to a cultural stage, in which the potentially vigorous and devastating force of imagination – positive as well as negative - have become stunted and nullified<sup>28</sup>. They represent opposed, yet strangely similar strategies of impoverishment, an almost obsessive insistence on the death of imagination in the midst of a haunting, pervasive and *posthumous* imaginary imperative: Imagine, or you’re done for.

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<sup>28</sup> One of the most striking instances of a lack of imagination, or a defunct imagination, is what we might term the *economistic fallacy*, i.e. the notion that there simply are no viable alternatives whatsoever to the convergence of a capitalist growth-economy and versions of parliamentary democracy, in effect typically functioning as subtle oligarchies, cf. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, London, Verso 2006. But “economistic” as well, in the reductive sense of imagining (sic) to be able to reduce all forms of manmade meaning and structure to the question of economic value. For a scathing critique (of the economistic fallacy), and an attempt to mobilize the European and global masses anew, cf. the collective, anonymous authorship, named *Comité invisible*, behind *L’insurrection qui vient*, La fabrique éditions 2007.

Thus we have come full circle. Hobbes' reductive notion of imagination as decayed sense, and Pascal's verdict on the enemy of reason, Kant's sly evasion, Castoriadis' and Bachelard's heroic attempts to retrieve and invigorate a sane imagination. They have all come to a dead imagination, an odd collapse between the subtle and beautiful nightmare of Beckett, and the horrendously stupid, but unending repetitions of reality-shows like *Big Brother* and *Temptation Island*. The end of it is, that the judges were right all along, and that the perhaps slightly too naïve and blue-eyed phenomenologists lost out. But does this mean, that there is no way out, no exit? No exit from the crossroads of blunted imagination, and no exit from the sadistic and impossible demands of an imaginary imperative? Is it at all possible to imagine either a resuscitated imagination (Adorno's and Bloch's utopian longing for something *otherwise*, a re-stratification of the social imaginary), or else an unexplored escape-route of sorts firmly embedded within the vagaries of cantankerous fantasies? The one would be an alternative proper, the other perhaps an odd default-alternative (along the lines of Agamben's passive, but always immanent withdrawal)?

Large-scale utopian alternatives seem "unrealistic", as the saying goes, so perhaps we need to exercise the right to our free use of imagination in quite other ways, I mean ways other than the liberal, but inane distribution of grand utopias (e.g. the abolition of capitalist economy). Popper advocated the rather unimaginative, but non-violent strategy of "piecemeal engineering"<sup>29</sup>. The only problem with the sympathetic advice of Popper is, that it is entirely inconsequential: if adhered to, nothing whatever will change. And although Popper (a member of the Mont Pèlerin Society!) did importantly gauge the totalitarian abyss of revolutionary utopias in the preceding century, I'm not sure he foresaw the ever more destructive crises of a rampant, global capitalism dead intent on a spiral of endless consumption. It would seem we are situated in an impasse. The utopian-revolutionary byway is closed, due to its inherent plethora of totalitarian and violent risks as *termini ab quo*. The reformist-pragmatic highway is barred, due to the ever more apparent, internally conflicting crises it gives rise to, financial crises, problems to do with inequality and injustice, and so forth. Imagination dead, imagine.

So what to do? Yes, we obviously need to make use of our imagination; but how, exactly, and to what purpose? One might argue, that these questions are simply badly put, i.e. far too general and unspecific. And it's true that between the field of philosophy and that of the social sciences, or political science in particular, the relations are far from clear and transparent; in addition, the dirty, intransigent and complex web of concrete, contextually bounded circumstances of the political and

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<sup>29</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, London, Routledge 19xx, p. At this point we need to bring in Simon Critchley's deeply interesting, most recent work, *The Faith of the Faithless. Experiments in Political Theology*, London, Verso 2012.

socio-cultural settings of diverse European countries further complicate the question of how to make use of imagination *per se*. Nonetheless, I think that the partly obscure, but as well partly revealing and enlightening aspects of the unlikely coupling of Beckett and reality-TV, sufficiently invite us to at least begin to take seriously the question and the stakes of political-aesthetic imagination.

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Any questions, queries, comments or suggestions are more than welcome. Please feel free to mail me at: [Zangenberg@sdu.dk](mailto:Zangenberg@sdu.dk) or [mikkel.bruun.zangenberg@pol.dk](mailto:mikkel.bruun.zangenberg@pol.dk).

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