Thinking as if Already Dead
The Imaginal Life of Gilles Deleuze

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How does one imagine the life of an author? Do we account for the entire corpus of their works? Should we factor in further their lives, transgressions, apprehensions, and their misdemeanours? And what of their shameful compromises with power? Should we acknowledge their "errors" in thinking? And should the author be subjected to those critiques from the future, whose lines are already working to condemn them to a past that no longer has any critical purchase? Might we even subject them to their own critical standards and judge them on account of some perceived fallibility? While some of these questions are invariably inviting all too theological responses, we find our own repose to such lines of enquiry in the thought and life of Gilles Deleuze. No author since Nietzsche understood better the need to affirm a life against the petty dogmatisms and fashions of the times. And no author understood how power would also seek to appropriate what it could from the critical, inverting its energy and taming what was singularly creative to its outrageous expressiveness.

But we should make a qualification from the outset. The Deleuze we have in mind is not simply the Deleuze of the event or the Deleuze of the becoming. Such thinking is now too passe. Nor is it the Deleuze who ended up getting too entrapped in technical thinking through his allegiance to the machine. The machinic in Deleuze is something we never really understood. The way we imagine Deleuze is through a different lens. It is a vision of Deleuze who understood most fully the importance of the abstract in thought. A philosopher who found just as much critical meaning in the barbaric words of Kafka or the brutal lines of Francis Bacon as he would insist upon bringing a creative violence to all predetermined frameworks. This is a Deleuze whose thought refuses all modes of capture, including the wilful capture of the self. A Deleuze who puts creativity central to any viable notion of critique. A Deleuze who wages the power of the imagination directly against the predicable will to identify.

What a beautiful sight it therefore is to imagine Deleuze taking his final line of flight. How wonderous and sublime is it to picture, not the author suffering and finding life too unbearable, but determined to end the event of his life on his own terms! Like Yves Klein taking that leap into the void, might we not see the most literal flight happening for a philosopher for whom movement was everything? And yet was this not also the philosopher who challenged the Platonic vision for philosophical enquiry? A philosopher we might therefore argue, who would further subvert the Platonic command that "to philosophise is to learn how to die"? We cannot know how to die, until it is too late. That much is certain. And yet as Paul Celan showed as he took his final leap into the Seine, learning how to die is never quite enough. It too has become rather passe when it comes to thinking about life. What Is required, and what we detect in the thought of Deleuze is an attempt to live as if already

dead. Deleuze's Imaginal life is not then some Heideggerian being-towards-death. It had after-all already emerged from the void into which it will eventually and eternally return. Having already put oneself on the other side of the threshold, imaginal life is all about thinking as if one is already dead. It is to welcome the pre-existent extinction of being, mind-fucking the resiliently minded, while finding as much joy in the final fall as Alice found in the descent to wonderland.

Mindful of the affirmation of the fall, the purpose of this essay is to offer a more poetic reading on the thought of Deleuze. Foregrounding what we elect to term Imaginal Life, it places a Deleuzian reading of the imagination as central to any viable conception of freedom. But contra Deleuze, this is not a trite account of the imagination that neatly fits into identitarian frameworks that are proving to be so fashionable and yet so suffocating to the so-called "radical left" today. And it is certainly not an account of the imagination that finds reasons once again to invoke the Sovereign right to ban based on resurrected moral ideals of the common good and its logic of common sense. In fact, it is not an account at all. Working against the nihilistic algebras of death, which keep a body alive as it lives out some catatonic state of imagined being as harmonious as it is dull, it is an imagination that faces the intolerable, shatters the representational with the outrageous, and looks upon the future not as some endemic terrain of catastrophe and crisis, but of an opening onto an impending death whose threshold is inviting us to cross over into the void of existence. A philosophy where life and death as but matters of "perspective" and where the fires of death literally becomes us all.

The Crisis of the Imagination

We can only imagine today how Deleuze might have felt seeing the left collapse so fully back into the dialectical vicissitudes of identity politics today. He might recoil at the realisation that the leftist bourgeoisie have appropriated some of his language on "difference"; yet bound it to an entirely broken notion of species being whose overdetermined narrative of victimisation means it's notion of subjectivity has literally become rather meaningless. He might even laugh out loud having put down Nietzsche's beyond *Good and Evil* for the last time, amusing himself with the way the left has given up the argument and returned to moral certitudes. But if there is a crisis of the left today, it is not simply a crisis of identity. And it is certainly not about the question of having power. What the left faces today is a crisis of the imagination. Still, this is nothing new. Such a crises was after all there in the late 1960's, merely continuing apace through to the denial of the poetic in favour of more moralising, technologizing and strategizing notions of resistance. Could it be any coincidence that despite the endless volumes dedicated to their thinking, none have been dedicated to "Deleuze & the imagination" or "Foucault & Poetics"? If there is a poetic point to make, it must be put to service in the pursuit of power, progress, and gain – which in turn can all fall back upon familiar hyper-moral grounds. A pursuit in short, we maintain, that truly results in the clamour of being.

To gets us out of this quagmire, we need to develop a more aesthetically nuanced theory of identity, notably of its limits in terms of the imagination, which the left so evidently lacks today. Our initial sources for rethinking this are Henri Bergson and Deleuze. Indeed, if we follow these two thinkers then images themselves are racial and embodied phenomena. For Bergson there is always an economy of images, such that it makes no sense to attempt to

classify them according to one frame of description or make claim to a theory of 'the image' as such. Images are neither deep nor shallow by definition, just as the real is neither deep nor shallow by definition. Indeed, the real itself is to be understood as composed of images, if we follow Bergson. Not in the naive ways by which we might speak of ourselves as making images *of* the real as if the real were somehow merely a product of the images we make of it, but a thing itself made up of images, self-existing images as it were[1]. Within the economic totality of images that composes the real there are major differences between the ways in which images can and do affect us. Just take the colour white in all its totality as an example. For some it appears as a sign of purity, for us its more terrifying than the blackest black. Some images are also more powerful than others, or at least their powers are in each case different, and some images thus attain greater importance for us, becoming seemingly more real, on account of their depth. Many images, we do not, in fact, see at all. For images themselves can be present without their being seen, so long as we remain oblivious to them[2].

But within this economy of images both seen and unseen, there is a particular kind of image that Bergson regarded as 'privileged'[3]. An image that is 'perceived in its depths and no longer only on the surface' in contrast with other less privileged and less powerful images of which we see only the 'outer skin'[4]. Yes, images possess skin, and in possessing skin, bodies, according to Bergson, which we penetrate, more or less, depending on where they stand in the economic totality of images constituting our worlds come to have a life of their own. They are as bodies in real space, possessing the same stability as such bodies, while weighing much less, and being more agile, conducive to movement, and easier to deal with than bodies in real space. Within the economy of bodies that constitutes the world of images the most privileged image of all is that which we receive of our own bodies. 'The body', that which we call and think of as our own body, is the image that is always there, the image without which we feel that we cannot live, cannot act, cannot think, or indeed feel as such[5]. In this regard we are always "image conscious". And it is, you might say, a heavy image, an image we have the sense of carrying around with us, being dependent upon, as well as often bothered by, as well as a source of immense pleasure. That which is most real for us, in a sense, our own body, is not distinct from the worlds of images which surround it and to which it is subject, but an image among images.

Bergson is important, therefore, in so far as images provide him with an 'ontological ground floor' for a theory of the real in ways that was hitherto unrivalled[6]. This did not make Bergson an idealist in the ways that idealism has opposed itself to crude realism since the 18th century. Bergson's aim was to go beyond both realism and idealism, by neither reducing the real to the perceptions we have of it *a la* idealism, nor by crediting the real with producing our perceptions of it *a la* realism[7]. Bergson's ontology of the image, therefore, has to be understood in its distinction from George Berkeley's ontology of the idea, whereby the real is merely reduced to its representation[8]. A position the abstract painters had been notably at

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[1] (Bergson 2005: 10; Deleuze 1988: 17-18)
[2] (Lacey 1993: 88-92)
[3] (2005: 61)
[4] (Bergson 2005: 61)
[5] (Matthews 1999: 126)
[6] (Lacey 1993: 89)
[7] (Bergson 2005: 9)
[8] (Bergson 2005: 9)

pains to break apart. Instead the real is to be understood as an aggregate of "images'', and by images, Bergson meant a certain existence which is more than that which idealists call representations and less than that which crude realists call things; an existence halfway between things and their representations. Images are what are, irrespective of debates over the relations and differences between real things and the representations we have and make of them. They are not reducible to real things, but different from. At the same time their existence is different to and more than that of mere representations and surface level "appearances".

Bergson's influence on the development of philosophy, and the importance of his theory of images as a basis for advancing our understanding of the nature of the real, would become apparent, in the late 20th century, on account of the work of Deleuze, the greatest exponent of Bergson's image based ontology. While his entire project was committed to interrogate the "image of thought", Deleuze broached the question of the relation between the real and the image most extensively in his two-volume study of cinema[9]. In fact, these works constitute a profoundly Bergsonian philosophy of the image rather than the theory of cinema that their titles and subject matter would otherwise suggest, and which it has to be said, they have largely been read for. There, and in ways that are indebted to Bergson, he argued that the real and the imaginary are to be construed as distinct and yet following each other, 'running behind each other and referring back to each other around a point of indiscernibility'[10]. This point of indiscernibility organizing the relation of the real to the image does not affect, he argued, their ultimate and more fundamental difference. They are different. If, or when, we confuse one with the other, we make a simple error of fact[11]. This poses a particular problem for us, especially when it comes to *identification*. How to make sense of a relation between two things, such as the image and the real, which is effectively, indiscernible, or possibly even absent? And how to create an image of a relation of indiscernibility, an image that is to say, of something which cannot be seen?

By following Bergson and insisting on the fundamental difference between the image and the real, as well as their relation, Deleuze was able to set out an analysis of the field of forces within which the image and the real interact. Deleuze valorized the force with which human beings are, in exceptional circumstances, he argued, able to project images into the real, images drawn from ourselves, and our friends, which in their intensity, take on 'a life of their own'[12]. This is what we would call "imaginal life". For Deleuze, T.E. Lawrence was precisely such a figure, a man, with a disposition and a tendency 'to project – into things, into reality, into the future, and even into the sky – an image of himself and others so intense that *it has a life of its own*: an image that is always stitched together, patched up, continually growing along the way, to the point where it becomes fabulous. It is a machine for manufacturing giants, what Bergson called a fabulatory function'[13]. What inspired Lawrence, Deleuze argued, was this desire and capacity 'to be a truly dangerous man' on account of being defined neither by a relation to the real, nor to the imaginary, 'but solely in relation to the force through which he projects images into the real'[14]. Creativity as such is antithetical to identity

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[9] (2005; 1989)
[10] (1989: 69)
[11] (1989: 69)
[12] (1998a: 118)
[13] (Deleuze 1998a: 117-8)
[14] (1998a: 118)

for what it seeks is anything but the identical. It is that capacity for force, and that positioning of himself neither on the side of the real or the imaginary, but in-between, connected to both by the force with which he projected images into the real, which made Lawrence the dangerous man he was said to be. He was, to use another Deleuzian term "imperceptible" to the ordinary schematics of identification. Thus, as the Arabs join the Revolt, they are molded on the projected images that Lawrence has made for them, making giants of them[15]. Lawrence's projection machine fabulated in that he evoked the collective identity of an Arab 'people to come'[16]. His writings, and the force with which he projected images into the real, by way of his writing, were inseparable, Deleuze maintained, from the Revolt itself.

Lawrence himself lauded his own ability as a dreamer of great and powerful images. 'All men dream, but not equally', he wrote[17]. 'Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible'. Such statements will smack to many as vain and elitist. But the argument is an important one in terms of our understanding of the relations between imagination and reason, the powers of the image in comparison with the power of the real. For as we argued in our previous book, *Resilient Life*, it is true that every idiot dreams[18]. The question, the political question especially, is which image works. We have to learn to redeploy reason, not to simply place limits on where our imaginations can go, and which images it gives birth to, but to sort through our images, and govern, by ourselves, the circulation of cliché in the dream life of the subject, such that it is able to take its place in the real with force. Pre-existing normative conceptions of identity are the last place we should look.

Felix Guattari, Deleuze's frequent collaborator, credited a similar force of imagination to the writer, Jean Genet. Genet himself, as Guattari explained, challenged the very distinction between the real and the imaginary, or what Guattari labelled 'the Real-Imaginary dyad'[19]. What motivated him was the fear of becoming a prisoner of the imagination, someone who has fallen entirely into the imaginary, and become the imaginary personified[20]. Perhaps this was the same fear which motivated Guattari, as well as Deleuze, of becoming armchair philosophers, purveyors of philosophical images the existences of which bear no consequences for the real. In Genet's case, this fear, notoriously led to him becoming involved in the Palestinian struggle in the Occupied Territories during the 70s as well as working with the Black Panthers in the United States. But, on Guattari's account of Genet at least, this fear generated a different form of engagement with the real than his simply becoming an organic intellectual of and for political movements and struggles. Guattari admired how Genet was able to engage with the 'historical realities' of such struggles and problems while at the same time never giving up 'his dreams and his infantile 'perversions''[21]. In was possible, then, it put oneself on the side of the oppressed without falling back into the desire for similitude.

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[15] (1998a: 121)
[16] (Bogue 2009: 21)
[17] (1997: 7)
[18] (2014: 202)
[19] (2013: 218)
[20] (Guattari 2013: 216)
[21] (2013: 218)

The imagination itself, following Deleuze, faces two threats; one of its being 'sullied by reason', the other of its being 'sullied by memory'[22]. The task is to make, if possible, a pure image, unsullied by neither; 'one that is nothing but an image, by reaching the point where it emerges in all its singularity, retaining nothing of the personal or the rational'[23]. The power of an image is not to be defined by its content but by its form, or 'the force it mobilizes to create a void or to bore holes, to loosen the grip of words, so as to free itself from memory and reason[24]. It is to open oneself onto the great void of existence and find true meaning in the singularity of being. If we can conceive of a language of images then it is not a language of names or voices or even words. What is tedious about a language of words is the way in which it is always burdened with the task of telling stories, evoking memories, and making calculations. A language of images tells no stories, makes no calculations, evokes no memory. For the pure image stands 'apart from words, stories, and memories, accumulates a fantastic potential energy, which it detonates by dissipating itself'; it is an incendiary device, that which brings an end to itself and all that which it affects[25]. What counts in the image is not its content but this energy it harnesses and lets loose. There is no art to be invented, Deleuze argues, for the making of images that endure. Endurance is not a property of the image proper. This is not to say images exist outside of time. There is a time for images, 'a right moment at which they can appear or insinuate themselves, breaking the combinations of words and the flow of voices'[26]. It is a moment 'near to the end, an hour close to the last'[27]. The energy of the image is thus to be understood as fundamentally dissipative and not constitutive, because it is itself the mean of having done with itself[28]. This is not to say that the image has no life, but quite the opposite. The image 'is the spiritual life, the "life above"[29]. 'And as a spiritual movement, it cannot be separated from the process of its own disappearance, its dissipation…the image is a pant, a breath, an expiring breath, on its way to extinction'[30]. This is why, we might say, identities are always nullifying, for eventually they will close down. Once consecrated, no identity wants to accept its expiry date, welcome its exhaustion.

So many philosophical and theoretical problems are expressions of the poverty of our concepts, especially the limits of our understandings of the range of concepts, and their distinction from as with all as relations with other concepts. It may well be that this rule applies to the philosophy of the image and imagination too, especially when those images offer a continuum in the history of theology and its attachment to the sacred as a way to continually imagine a meaningful life. We would venture to say that the entire history of western philosophy, its origins and development, can be explained in terms of an unrest concerning the problem of what counts as imaginary and what counts as real, as well, crucially, as what can be understood to be the nature and value of the real versus the imaginary, as well, thirdly, as what the relationship to imaginary and real things are. Practical questions, also, concerning what one should do with imaginary things, how one should comport oneself towards them, arise, of course, following upon philosophical decisions concerning the value

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[22] (1998b: 158)
[23] (1998b: 158)
[24] (1998b: 159)
[25] (1998b: 160)
[26] (1998b: 161)
[27] (1998b: 161)
[28] (1998b: 161)
[29] (1998b: 169)
[30] (1998b: 170)

of those things determined as either real or imaginary, as well as the relationships of valuable to less valuable entities, either real or imaginary. Suffice to say, that on the whole, we have tended historically, as a philosophical class to assign value to the real over the imaginary. And this in turn paved the way for the dominance of the technical over the poetic, science over the arts.

But rather than repeat the often now trivial separation between the analytics and the continentals, perhaps there is another space, a third space, other than these spaces of the real and the imaginary, requiring another concept to describe it. A space located in-between the real and the imaginary. Perhaps it is a space where human beings actually live in constant appreciation and denial of the void of existence. It would seem obvious that neither the real nor the imaginary are especially habitable spaces. No one can bear living in the real without the guard of the image, as much as nobody can manage living in the imaginary for very long until the real makes its intervention and 'the bubble bursts'. Perhaps such a third space, one existing between the real and the image, is that where the real and the image coalesce in some way. That space where all manner of intensities collide and in which reality avails itself to representation; for what is representation other than the process and the practice by which the real is represented by way of images? A space then where the life of the imagination literally runs wild.

The Life of the Imagination
Representation has its long line of critics. We no longer tend to believe in the classical idea of a disembodied schema of representation, an objectified perspective, productive of a universalizing image, by which the real may manifest its truth to all, regardless of position within that schema[31]. Nor do we believe any longer in the theatrical space which the concept of representation has tended to presume[32]. But from where does this notion that representation occurs as a process akin to the staging of a scene in a theatre come from? It is not, Lyotard argues, simply some accident of history, of an errant failure of epistemology. It is itself a stage, in the temporal and not simply the physical sense, that accounts for the construction of the stage in the spatial sense in the development of human being. The formation of the child in the object-Mother's gaze means the creation of a specular partition between them and thus in that moment a division between stage and audience[33]. The construction of the stage, by the child, is itself the prelude, the necessary prelude, to a lifetime of hurt, loss and suffering, for only representation of a theatrical kind suffers loss, experiences it as aggression[34]. But why does this construction of the world as stage, the theatre of representation, lead to a life of loss and suffering. Why, because the division of the space of the world into stage, such that representation can take place, means the drawing of the distinction between what Lyotard called 'the over there not-this' and the 'here the this'[35]. What's then being imagined in the is beginning of the drawing of the value distinction, in other words, between the real and the imaginary. It is the beginning of the task of the application of the reality principle, as the child must learn when to spit. Not only, for it is also, of course, the moment in which the child must find its own way onto the stage. For no one wants, or at least should want, to spend a life gazing at images, consuming the image of the over there

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[31] (Crary 2001: 218-20)
[32] (Lyotard 2004: 21)
[33] (Lyotard 2004: 22)
[34] (Lyotard 2004: 22)
[35] (2004: 23)

not-this. One wants to be on the stage, living the life, of which others make their images of. The stuff from which images emanate. To act and not be the passive consumer of the spectacle of another's theatre. In the musical days of Punk, it became a practice for the band to spit down upon the audience. Learning to abide by the reality principle, learning to spit, enables one to occupy the stage, and spit upon, rather than paying to be where one is spit at.

The life of images is unthinkable other than in its relationship with the life of the real. The question of this relation, between the image and the real, has vexed philosophers throughout the entire history of the Western tradition of philosophy, from its classical beginnings in Ancient Greece to the present. In a sense it is the question that founds the entire tradition. Let's just recall Plato's cave and its enduring influence over mimesis and debates concerning the authentic its mere imitations. Exercised by this vexation we have been taught to associate images with the experience of illusion. Images are that whereby we are brought into contact with illusory worlds that, as for Aristotle, are not really living, and the opposite of knowledge[36]. Worlds which lead us astray from the real, existing as they tend to, far from the true. For acts of imagination are nearly always false, we have been told, in contrast with acts of perception that are held always to be veridical[37]. They are a species of 'movement' that occur in beings that perceive and in connection with things that are perceived. Movements within movements which gives rise to the possibility of the being that is thereby motored by false movement[38]. In a sense they are that which give rise to the power of being affected falsely, if we may credit false movement with being a species of power, and thus the multiplicity of ways of being which are entailed in being human, especially[39]. The subject of western philosophy has lived much of its life in fear of this experience of illusion, anxious not to be deceived or affected falsely, and penetrate the real as far as it can go. The invention of science being its final furnishing. But as hard as psychoanalysis has tried to scurry through the depths of the unconscious, the image is that which has stood in its way, blocking its access to the real, leading it down false passages, towards lives where it makes mistakes, errs, and falls. That is why there is always more to be learned in the company of a Rothko than a room full of Freudians.

Mindful of this, it has been said that the arts and other forms of aesthetic practice and experience have tended to explore the powers of the false which images give rise to. The images created by the arts are valued for the very ways in which they allow human beings to stray from the real, in spaces, and into worlds, the value of which is their unreality and imaginary character. The human, we have been taught to believe, gains and develops from the exercise of this freedom to live out an imaginal life, be it as an artist, or in reception of artistic practices, as an audience. The life of the real, and our sense of the possible, is continually being developed on account of the ways in which our powers of the false rebound upon our understandings of the relations between image and reality. Not least in the sense of what elements of the real can be depicted or captured in imaginal form. The powers of photography, doubly artistic and political, over the last two centuries, have emitted from the ways in which it has consistently challenged conventional understandings of which lives can be 'a subject of history and an object of art' and likewise who has the right to be included in

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[36] (1986: 197)
[37] (Aristotle 1986; 198)
[38] (Aristotle 1986: 200)
[39] (1986: 200-201)

'the image of common humanity'[40]. Or those powers have stemmed from their abilities to capture in an image the intolerability of a reality which would otherwise go unrepresented or recognized; such as the photographic images which came out of Vietnam during the American war there, showing the reality of the violence, destruction and killing being done to the Vietnamese[41]. Such images blurred the lines between art and the representations of the real. At the same time, images created by the arts, are systematically questioned as to their origins and ends for the purposes of ascertaining how they each 'affect the ethos, the mode of being of individuals and communities'[42] for fear of the ways in which they may, possibly, corrupt the ethical lives of real peoples who continue to fear the power of fabulation.

And yet there can be no question, we have been taught to believe, of the distinction between the imaginary and the real. As the 20th century French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, expressed it, 'if I am able to speak about "dreams" and "reality", to wonder about the distinction between the imaginary and the real, and to throw "the real" into doubt, this is because I have in fact drawn this distinction prior to the analysis, because I have an experience of the real and of the imaginary'[43]. The philosophical task of the western subject has been to make explicit what is known primordially of the difference between the life of the image and that of the real, by exercising perception, that power which philosophers from Aristotle to Merleau-Ponty have decreed to be that which distinguishes real from imaginary phenomena, and access truth and knowledge of the world as such[44]. For it is truth that mediates our perception of the real, as well as being the product of that perception. Reality and truth are different substances, thus conceived, as reality refers to that element of a thing that is not dependent on the truths, we can ascertain of it. Truth, on the other hand, is entirely dependent on the real. We cannot make the former without the latter. Truth depends upon it!

If perception is that power which enables us to extract truth from out of the real, where does that leave imagination? For imagination is different, we have been taught to believe, from perception, even while admitting that perception cannot occur without imagination[45]. It is certainly cheaper – we can be affected by its power whenever we wish, producing an image, by choice. Perception on the other hand depends on the presence of something else independent of us, something pertaining to life and its reality. Something that makes an image for us in contrast with those images which appear to us on account of our exercise of imagination; an imagination that creates in ways that we supposed to be independent of reality itself. And yet that which really lives, that which we perceive as being real and not merely imaginary, that which is of real life and not merely imaginal life, requires, for its verification as real and alive, that we see it. In other words, it has never been a problem of the hard and fast distinction between the real and the imaginary, but of which images give us the greater access to the real; which image is more real than that of others. The entire history of Western art, marked as it is by the privileging of geometric perspective, inflecting Western art from the Renaissance onwards, and, centuries later, the reification of the camera and photography as the principle means through which the real could really be captured, indicate

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[40] (Ranciere 2010: 51-2)
[41] (Ranciere 2011: 84)
[42] (Ranciere 2006: 21)
[43] (2012: lxxx)
[44] (Aristotle 1986: 197-201; Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxx)
[45] (Aristotle 1986: 198)

as much[46].

It is not just the pictorial images of photography and other arts that are understood to be the means by which we can get closer to the real, but the images that our bodies create for us. If we follow Hannah Arendt, 'imagination is concerned with the particular darkness of the human heart and the peculiar density which surrounds everything that is real'[47]. Imagination is the faculty, which through its provision of images of the real, allows us to catch glimpses of the 'frightening light of truth'[48]. Such instants of truth are, for Arendt, not the opposite of reason, but its most exalted expression, alone enabling us to see the real in its proper perspective by putting that which is too close for us to see at a more conducive distance, or likewise by bringing that which is too far from us, closer, such that we can see it better[49]. It is that faculty, in other words, which allows us to 'take our bearings in the world' and find our balance. Hence, the ability to make an image is not only fundamental to our functional abilities to see the real, but also to the real itself. Real objects of every kind can assume an imaginal status at any time because every object becomes an image as soon as it presents itself to our vision[50]. Every object not only becomes an image, but makes an image of itself, as it seduces us into its realities. Our powers of persuasion, our abilities to seduce, and command attention, as realities, depend thoroughly on the ways in which we are able to deploy ourselves as images in the fields of vision of others. The imagination is a resource of the real, without which, the real cannot maintain its status as real. We depend on images, in the most practical sense, to guide our way through the world, to convince us as to what is more or less real, in order to stay close to the true, as much as the real itself is dependent on its abilities to deploy images in order to maintain its mantles of truth. We can think of this in terms of our continued fascination with spheres and the circularity of life. As Peter Sloterdijk puts it, 'what they (philosophers) do is *imagining*, in every possible sense of the word. They envisage the orb by making it an actually present model: and, by attempting to see in the envisaged orb the existent as a whole, and ultimately the manifesting God, the over-good reason, the supra-essential essence itself, they provide the way of thinking that reaches for the One, whole and universal with an instrument both massive and subtle to objectify the totality of the existent'[51].

The world is what we live[52]. But in living it we have to live off the life off images. For images are also, in an uncanny way, of this world; necessary resources for us in our quests to penetrate its reality, while not to be confused, we are told, with the world as such. Instead they occupy a 'stage' out there 'in front of the world' guiding us to the real while forever preventing us from seeing the real as such[53]. We encounter a similar idea, of the errant spatiality of the image, in the philosophy of Guy Debord when he argues that images are not somehow 'out in front' of the real but 'exist above it' while simultaneously imposing themselves upon it[54]. The life of the real, we must suppose, exists either *beyond the stage* of the imaginary, or below it. How can we tell the difference between what is real and what is

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[46] (McQuire 1998: 18-26)
[47] (1994: 322)
[48] (Arendt 1994: 322)
[49] (1994: 323)
[50] (Langer 1953: 47)
[51] (2014: 24)
[52] (Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxx)
[53] (Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxiv)
[54] (Debord 2010: 36)

image then when the image is both a necessary resource for guiding us as to the nature of the real as well as being that which mystifies it? We might start to answer these questions by taking imagination, as did Aristotle, to be the specifically human faculty for the making of images[55]. But there are different ways of making an image. We can make an image of an object which is in our presence. Or we can make an image of an object without its presence. Kant distinguishes the latter from the former as imagination from sense[56]. Then, there are those operations by which we make an image of something we have encountered in the past and on the basis of experience, in distinction from those operations by which we make an image out of nothing, as it were.

Key to our concerns must be the continued interplay between the imagination, identity and the force of moral law, which ultimately reduces things to mere spectacle. The imagination is by definition expansive. It is open to the infinite in thought. By this token it is also abstract and demands a transgression in order for the very alteriority of its condition to become part of the real. This doesn't mean to say it is disembodied. On the contrary, the abstract is precisely that which takes us into the intimate depths of the human condition. Moral law, in contrast, is by definition contractive. It established and fixes the boundaries, violently policing their limits, while overseeing the normative contours of guilt and shame. Such power is also embodied, but in a way that seeks to sever and castrate the expansive potential of a poetic life. Identity lies somewhere in between these two poles. The history of identity is in this regard rather consistent. What emerges as resistive in the most affirmative sense too often quickly turns back in upon itself to the exclusion of others. Identity, in short, can be useful in the collective fight against a particular injustice, but it is politically devastating when it falls back into a system of authentication and moves away from transgression to imposing its own limit conditions. Moreover, we also need to be mindful here of the links between identity and economy, notably the commodification of identity in the name of liberation. As already mentioned, nationalism was dreadful when it came to regenerating capitalist expansion. And yet capitalism has now realised that it no longer needs the vast majority of the world's population to become active consumers of material goods. The fall back into sovereignty was in fact less about the shoring up of the borders than a realignment in global power thorough which a post-liberal order could properly emerge. In this regard, like both the left and the right, capitalism has also turned inward as it seeks to profit further from the illusion of democracy and radicality now waged in the metropolitan zones. Let's just take the example here of Colin Kaepernick, who was also systemically "cancelled" for having the audacity to exercise his own freedom of expression. The kneeling of Kaepernick was radical, dignified and proved to be a potent spark in the Black Lives Matter movement. But no sooner was he getting to his feet, corporations such as Nike recognised the marketing potential. We would see the same later with the 2020 boycott of Facebook through the "stop hate for profit", which could also be seen as an attempt to commodify ethical dissent in a way that is eerily familiar to the fair trade campaigns that started gaining traction from late 60's.

What we are dealing with here is still, obviously, that very same problem which Debord brought attention to in the 1980s and which artists like Bacon and Kahlo were addressing in their work too. Indeed, the power of Debord's concept of spectacle may well have been reinforced over historical time. Consider the proliferation of pictorial images enabled by social

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[55] 'Imagination is that in virtue of which we say that an image occurs to us' (Aristotle 1986: 198).
[56] (2006: 45)

media, the 'image-charged' relation with our worlds which we inhabit and have possessed for some time now (Auge 1994: 64-5), the density of image-environments made a reality by social media, and the endless proliferation of technological devices with which photographic images are now made and circulated. Research into the lifecycle of photographic images conducted by the Hillman Photography Initiative at the Carnegie Museum of Art suggests that the average networked individual currently encounters around 5,000 photographic images a day (Hillman Photography Initiative 2014). The consequence of these media and their utilization is that the spectacle is no longer a property of states or top-down regimes of economy but an everyday practice which queer peoples subject upon themselves. Our imaginations are said to be governed by the pictorial images that are circulated through these media, facilitating a sense of false intimacy with our worlds, as we become used to discussing images as if they were realities (Auge 1994: 65). Even our basic capacities for memory, it is said, are being outsourced to digital devices such as the camera phones on which so many photographic images are made and circulated every day (NPR 2014). Imperceptibly, this works to limit 'our relation to the world and others to that which can be had through images' (Auge 1994: 122). The turning of the world into spectacle represents, the anthropologist Marc Auge argues, 'the most perverse trait' of the 'supermodernity' we now inhabit such that 'the only world that we can speak of today is the world of the image' (Auge 1994: 122). Indeed perhaps not only has Debord's concept of spectacle been reinforced by the technological developments that have occurred in the time since he wrote, and by the ever denser image environments which we inhabit. Perhaps it has, as Baudrillard suggests, been surpassed by a new strategy of 'virtuality', one that develops out of that of the spectacle but which is different, in so far as it leaves no room for critical consciousness (1996: 27). During the era of spectacle we could at least declaim our alienation from the world of images into which we were cast, abhorring our reduction to the situation of being an abject spectator of abject images. But today, as Baudrillard points out, 'we are no longer spectators, but actors in the performance, and actors increasingly integrated into the course of that performance' (1996: 27). The critique of images is more difficult when we are not simply their spectators but actors within the images themselves – especially images of inescapable ruination.

Black Mirror
Let's conclude by bringing this back to the question of thinking as if we are already dead. In aesthetic terms the hyper-aroused culture of the spectacular image which we now inhabit can be identified with the shift from traditional arts of representation, whereby a given work was displayed, exhibited or staged for an audience to receive by standing or sitting 'in front of' to that by which the 'audience' is invited to participate in, by standing or sitting inside of, interacting with the work and figures within it[57]. This interpellation of the spectator within the image itself is what distinguishes the present strategy from that of spectacle, such that one is no longer merely spectating or viewing but participating in and acting out. This is not just to assume the role of a living witness. It is to live living to the fullest. Or so it is claimed. But with the technological narrative already set and the ruinous scene already determined like the cracked glass on Charlie Bookers Black Mirror, which is replete with many wonderful examples of life in a post-liberal age, this acting out is also simply about out-performing those within our networks of affective relations. In short, it is to accept the rules are already stacked against you, assume without question the affective status of the victim, while replace the

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[57] Baudrillard 1996: 28-9

ethics of transgression with a new virtual mindset that's as introverting as the devices that literally "capture" one's attention and makes one *feel* part of a world in all its spectacular mediocrity and distractiveness. Truly a "world interior" far more observed than the building of the Crystal Palace exhibition centre in London over a century and half ago, which Peter Sloterdijk notes was not only a technical wonder of the world, but a conscious attempt at aesthetic immersion whose magical immanence fulfilled the bourgeoise dream, much to Dostoyevsky's revulsion.

'Time and again', Tom McCarthy writes, 'we hear about a new desire for the real, about a realism which is realistic set against an avant-garde which isn't, and so on. It's disheartening that such simplistic oppositions are still being put forward half a century after Foucault examined the constructedness of all social contexts and knowledge categories; or, indeed, a century and a half after Nietzsche unmasked truth itself as no more than 'a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms … a sum of human relations … poetically and rhetorically intensified … illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions'. Realism itself, as McCarthy further writes, has always been 'a literary convention – no more, no less – and is therefore as laden with artifice as any other literary convention'. With this in mind, our interest cannot simply be with the question of death as it appears in the declared death of liberalism. Rather, the real aim is how to interrogate a more poetic analytic of finitude to offer new creative ways for imagining the political, as we imagine our own political death, which never fully arrives, exactly on time, at least. What does it mean after-all for our understanding of life of the subject, when the idea of liberalism is destroyed, its experience shown to be truly violent, and its presence exhausted? And more pressing still, how can we be alert to the new priests now on the horizon, who are bringing with them the need for a new confession?

And so, we find ourselves today haunted by the spectre of Deleuze. But Deleuze is no Virgil. He doesn't want us to start in the depths and then ascend into the light. Deleuze encourages us to take flight across the abyss. He has a vision of the aerialist that belongs to an entirely different kind of transcendence. But we must smile all the same, armed with the knowledge that every threshold can be transgressed. Deleuze often wrote about and engaged in conversations with ghosts from history. As we read him today, we note his poetic sensibility signing through as loud as any musical score. His thought still trembles across the valley floors and his vision on the possibility for human existence still yet to be fully grasped in its singular magnitude. We still don't know what a Deleuzian politics looks like as much as we still don't know what a mind can do. But if there is an escape, it cannot be found by collapsing the critical into the clinical and buying into the conceit that embodiment brings us closer to theory. We don't need another bio-politics. Its already exhausted enough. What we need is a theory, which like the imagination, explodes a life, dances with the rapturous stars, and welcomes the cutting shards of the ineffable. What we need is to think thinking as if the thought of life were already dead.