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The Inescapable Inspiration of the Artist: Imagination¹

Abstract

This article presents the way in which the role of imagination as a driving force of artistic creation has undergone a dynamic process up to this day. Unpopular in Antiquity and throughout most of the Middle Ages, the use of imagination changed in the so called Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes at the end of the seventeenth century. The role of the imagination exploded with Romanticism, only to be suppressed by the Avant-garde and Conceptualism. However, as Arthur Danto remarked in his last book, art is more than an embodied concept; it is also a "wakeful dream." Following motifs like Don Quijote or the dantesque "kiss of Paolo and Francesca," recurring in modern literature, the article traces the boundary that separates a sufficient amount of imaginative power from its excess, that serves artistic creativity or dissipates it, respectively.

Keywords: *conceptualism, creation, fantasy, imagination, inspiration, literature, Romanticism*

In the past half century, or perhaps some time more, almost all traditional aesthetic categories have been discredited: the ideal of beauty, the concept of art, autonomy, the artist, the work of art. All of these concepts – like the classic institutions and the once so self-evident authority of the critic – became subjects for discussion.² Skepticism, both universal and radical, regarding all major aesthetic principles made it inevitable that the world of art would become increasingly concerned with the question of what is – and what is no longer – to be considered art.

One of the leading thinkers in this field was Arthur C. Danto (1924-2013). In his work he analyzed how art (mainly visual arts) gradually became more and more conceptual. His frequently used example is Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964), which so resembled genuine soap boxes that they could no longer be understood as art without a theory of art.³

Such an approach seems miles away from various romantic notions of art that had appeared quite authoritative in past centuries. Due to the growing

1 Ideas developed in this paper were initially studied in Maarten Doorman, *Paralipomena: Opstellen over kunst, filosofie en literatuur* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2007).

2 Cf. Marc Jimenez, *La querelle de l'art contemporain*, folio essays (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

3 Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). Danto, *Art after the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Cf. David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton / Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

importance of reflection, the autonomy of art was indeed undermined. As Arthur Danto provocatively stated, relying ironically on Hegel, art eventually turned into philosophy. As a result of this, fundamental principles of art implicitly came under pressure – especially the romantic conception according to which art is ultimately traceable to the expression of the worldview or state of mind of individual artists. Expression, inspiration, and imagination were gradually assigned a secondary role in this conceptual approach.

However, in an attempt to distinguish between what constitutes art and what does not, Danto in his last book, *What Art Is* (2013), implicitly arrived – albeit via a detour – at such romantic notions again. The reason is that he no longer defines art merely as *embodied meanings*, as in his previous work, but adds a new element: in his view, art, apart from being a meaning (1) that is embodied (2), is also a *wakeful dream* (3).⁴ This is a step forward, insofar as art as ‘embodied meaning’ represented far too broad a definition, for it would even include traffic signs. On the other hand, the concept of a ‘wakeful dream,’ i.e., something dreamlike about which we can think and speak with one another, brings us closer to the romantic conception of art, in which the inspired artist appeals to the imagination of both himself and of the viewer, reader, or listener.

Until the Eighteenth Century, imagination and inspiration had been an unimportant factor in art, philosophically speaking. The *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* caused that to change. In this debate, poets such as Boileau and La Fontaine argued that antiquity could at most be emulated but never surpassed. Modern artists such as Fontenelle and Perrault, however, objected that this unchanging ideal of beauty was problematic. Man is not growing better all the time, Perrault said, any more than lions in Africa have become more civilized – but people do build on results from the past. The fact that this revolutionary idea has now become a truism is due to the obviousness of imagination since the romantic era. Until the Eighteenth Century, the existence of values as something absolute and immutable was taken for granted, and the ability to invent new things was not valued positively. Or rather, only valued positively insofar as it contributed to the perfection of what had already been given in principle.

In Charles Perrault’s *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes* (1688-1692), however, we encounter more or less for the first time the thought that criteria in art depend on taste (‘bon goût’), and are therefore co-determined by the time in which they occur. Was there not among the Greeks themselves already a difference between Ionic, Doric and Corinthian style principles? Did we not need, therefore, a distinction between ‘beautés universelles et absolües’ and a ‘beau relatif’ that was tied up with a particular time and which had been created by people? In other words, in addition to *imitatio* (imitation), was not also *inventio*, the inventing of something new, crucial for the arts?⁵

4 Arthur C. Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2013), 46ff. For the inevitability of Romantic notions in art, see Maarten Doorman, *De romantische orde* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2004), chap. 5-6. Cf. Arthur C. Danto, *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1994).

5 For the preceding, see Maarten Doorman, *Art in Progress: A Philosophical Response to the End of the Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 30-43; Hans Robert Jauss, “Aesthetische

In England, the positive valuation of imagination in the Eighteenth Century emerges from a debate about taste and the sublime. Against traditional attacks on supernatural phenomena in literature – i.e., the ‘fairy way of writing,’ the positively-valued, spontaneous creative power of the poet is now brought to bear. Thus Shaftesbury ascribes to the poet ‘genius’ and ‘originality’ and calls him “a second maker, a just Prometheus,” the kind of observation that eventually leads to William Blake’s radical conception. In a reversal of Plato’s mimesis-thought, Blake refers to imagination as precisely “the real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow,” which brings us to the romantic era in all its glory.⁶ Here inventing is no longer lying, but indeed speaking the truth. One can only rely on the heart and the imagination, as John Keats believed: “What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not [...]. I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning.”⁷

In Germany in the Eighteenth Century, imagination became more widespread, partly under the influence of debates such as the ones that took place in England. Johann Gottfried Herder characterized man as a microcosm of creative power, as ‘an imitative God’ who, it is true, does imitate, but who is at the same time ‘a second Creator.’⁸ And in his influential *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1793), Schiller contends that the instinct for play bridges the gap between theoretical thinking and the realization of ideals. The aesthetic mind – i.e., inspiration and imagination – brings optimal harmony to life and society.⁹

With German Idealism, imagination soared high from the turn of the century onwards. While for Fichte, creative activity – which is at the basis of reality in the subject, the ‘I’ – is presupposed, we see the exact opposite in Schelling, for whom creative nature precedes all knowledge. Yet, remarkably enough, the imagination of the artist is crucial to Schelling, because for him the creative activity of nature is identical with human creative activity, a view that can also be found in August Wilhelm Schlegel and Wackenroder. It is precisely in art that the world and the ‘I,’ the conscious and the unconscious, nature and spirit, appear as one. In Schelling’s then-influential work there appears once again the idea that imagination brings truth. Realistic paintings are less real and true than

Normen und geschichtliche Reflexion in der Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,” in Charles Perrault, *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes en ce qui regarde les Arts et les Sciences* (München: Eidos, 1964), 8-64 (‘Einleitung,’ 47ff).

6 René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*, Vol. I, *The Later Eighteenth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955), 109-110. Cf. James Engells, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, 1981), 48.

7 Letter to Benjamin Bailey (November 22, 1817), cited in Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (Tuscaloosa/London: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 255. Cf. C.M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (Oxford/London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 7ff.

8 Cf. Engells, *The Creative Imagination*, 217-43; H. Madland, “Imitation to Creation: The Changing Concept of Mimesis from Bodmer and Breitinger to Lenz,” in R. Critchfield and W. Koepke, eds., *Eighteenth-Century German Authors and Their Aesthetic Theories: Literature and the Other Arts* (Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House, 1988), 29-43; Erich Ruprecht, *Geist und Denkart der romantischen Bewegung: Durchgedacht bis zur Gegenwart* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1986), 37ff.

9 Friedrich Schiller, “Ueber die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen, in einer Reihe von Briefen,” in *Schillers sämtliche Werke im zwölf Bänden* (Stuttgart: Verlag J.G. Cotta, 1887), vol. 12, 3-105.

pictures that leave behind classical *imitatio* and appeal to imagination.¹⁰ Poetry is quite the reverse of an imitation of nature, Novalis says, in an opposition of opposites that is so typical of romanticism.¹¹ But how does this imagination inspired by the artist work?

Take the famous scene at the beginning of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, the moment when the poet along with his guide, Virgil, descends into the second circle of hell. It is dark. The wind is blowing. Moaning adulterers are being chased around like withered leaves by a storm – the way in which they were driven by their passion while alive. Finally, at the end of the fifth canto, amidst howling whirlwinds Dante succeeds in addressing a couple clinging to one another. The beautiful Francesca da Polenta, crying, tells him how she once was sitting with Paolo while reading *Lancelot*, and how they had looked at each other and blanched when they came across the passage in which Lancelot pressed a kiss upon the sudden smile of Queen Guinevere. Without realizing it, Francesca and Paolo also kissed one another. Then follows the beautiful understatement: *quel giorno piú non vi leggemmo avante* – that day we read no further.¹²

This 'wakeful dream' has been an inspiration for many works of art: from Ingres's painting depicting the deceived husband emerging from a dark background, about to stab the adulterous couple to death (*Paolo and Francesca*, 1819), to Auguste Rodin's famous sculpture *The Kiss* (1886), to several operas, including one by Rachmaninoff, all the way to *Francesca da Rimini* by Gabriele D'Annunzio (1901). The power of those lines has dwelt in the inspired imagination since the romantic era. The origins of this, of course, lay in the manner in which Dante – with a few words, in a rhyme scheme as rigid as it is smoothly flowing – evokes those hellish scenes which since the Eighteenth Century would be called sublime. He then suggests how passionately the two will fall into one another's arms, without using any words other than that they never returned to their reading. This is a stylistic trick that appeals to the reader's imagination and causes it to immediately fill in what is missing. Art compels the reader, viewer, or listener to create their own representation, which for exactly this reason works with the inescapable directness of the dream.

And finally, imagination blossoms within those lines by revealing how the imagination of someone else, i.e., the author who composed the adventures of Lancelot and Guinevere, can enchant reality so deeply that Francesca and Paolo can no longer offer resistance to the feelings that they had encountered. Dante's contemporaries and later readers of the Renaissance would have been

10 Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*, 231-34; cf. Mayer Howard Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971), 209-11. For A.W. Schlegel, who wonders, when mimicking nature, "warum man sich quälen sollte, ein zweites jenem ganz ähnliches Exemplar von ihr in der Kunst zustandezubringen," see Paul Kluckhohn, *Das Ideengut der deutschen Romantik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1966), 161.

11 Paolo d'Angelo, *L'estetica del romanticismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), 96; cf. 64ff., 118-22. Cf. Gabriele Rommel, "Imagination in the Transcendental Poetics of Novalis," in Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein, eds. (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1996), 95-122. For similar views, see the Schlegel brothers in Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 74ff.

12 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* (Milano: Ed. Emilio Pasquini, Antonio Quaglio, Garzanti, 1982), Canto V, 70-142, 48-53.

carried away by this kind of imagination, though presumably to a lesser extent and in a different way than we readers since the romantic era. For those earlier readers took far more seriously the condemnation of imagination that is expressed in this story than we do now, as uncritical admirers of fantasy and inspiration – if we still notice that condemnation at all. The moral message of the passage – that you ought not let your mind be overtaken by books, i.e., by imagination – has barely touched our hearts for two centuries.

One would rather add a bit more imagination from the literature. So, Jorge Luis Borges, in *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (1982), interprets the scene as an expression of Dante's desire for Beatrice. The fact that Dante loses consciousness in this scene results not from pity and shock, but from the extreme desire to forever be close to her, just like Paolo and Francesca – even if it were in hell, driven on by relentless cyclones. So strong is Dante's imagination, says Borges, that he is jealous of these two unfortunate lovers, who are at least still together and know they covet each other, whereas his beloved remains inaccessible.¹³

We know quite well, of course, that Borges is an author who is eminently obsessed with the role of imagination: his stories defy our sense of the real, challenge reality by testing the borderlines between dream, fantasy, memory, reportage and essay. Therefore it comes as no surprise that Borges gives no notice to criticism of the imagination. But such criticism does not really fit into our worldview anymore anyway, because imagination and inspiration have become a fundamental trait of our culture. In other cultures, and for the romantic era, so outside the romantic order in which we now live, they are questionable capacities.¹⁴ They arouse desire and then leave us disappointed. However, for the last couple of centuries such moral disapproval has been unthinkable within the now almost worldwide Western culture. How we could maintain ourselves without imagination is hardly conceivable – and if we did want to imagine it, we would be forced to appeal quite strongly to precisely that imagination.

Think of the adventures of Don Quixote. He identifies so strongly with the heroes of those knightly romances that had become outlandish by Cervantes's day – with the dragon-slayers and the almost mythical singers of courtly love – that he attacks sheep that he mistakes for the enemy's army, sings the praises of a homely peasant girl whom he mistakes for a lady, and fights windmills because he thinks them to be evil giants. His imagination has run wild during sleepless nights of wondrous reading. When the barber, the priest, a niece, and his housekeeper decide to burn his library for the sake of his health, it causes us to react with dread.¹⁵ We associate such things with totalitarian practices and with censorship, so often contested since the Enlightenment. Now Cervantes does not entirely sympathize with the bookburners who have been called to life by himself: his own *Galatea* appears to be among the very volumes to be destroyed. However, Dante's moral opposition to the temptation of imagination played just as strong a role to Cervantes's readers as the pleasure of its

13 Jorge Luis Borges, *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1982).

14 Cf. Maarten Doorman, *De romantische orde* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2012).

15 Miguel de Cervantes, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha I* (Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1978), chap. 5-7.

excesses. It was education *and* entertainment. Since the romantic era all of that has changed completely.

The German Romantics saw precisely in the excesses of fantasy a value, an attack on the superficiality of a petty bourgeoisie stifled by moral dogmas. According to thinkers like Schelling and Schlegel, Don Quixote taught us how literature, i.e., imagination, was able to help rid the world of its unambiguity and meaninglessness. Cervantes's knight changed from the kind of cartoon character that one laughed at into a tragic hero who – because he elicited a smile from us – personified melancholy all the more. As Byron wrote: "Of all tales 'tis the saddest – and more sad, / Because it makes us smile." Byron chooses sides here in this thirteenth canto of *Don Juan* a few lines later, in favour of the hero Don Quixote and against his creator Cervantes, whose ridiculing of the imagination does not please him at all:

*Cervantes smiled Spain's chivalry away;
A single laugh demolish'd the right arm
Of his own country; – seldom since that day
Has Spain had heroes.*¹⁶

Romanticism transformed the book *Don Quixote* from a masterful critique of the imagination into the exact opposite: the ultimate hymn to it. Don Quixote became a tragic hero, and his struggle has since grown into an attack on an unimaginative, uninspired world to which he does not want to surrender. It is the defense of the imagination rejected by society. And it won ground gradually: with novels, paintings and theater, and later film and television, advertising, the internet and games.

Since the imagination became more positively valued in the course of the Eighteenth Century – and in romanticism started to become the ultimate human capacity for animating the world and life – desire and the entrepreneurial spirit were spurred on in all fields. To what extent can we therefore still understand the question that seems to have disappeared as a result of the romantic upheaval; to what extent is the criticism of imagination still relevant? A thinker who has been trying to answer that question is the philosopher and anthropologist René Girard. In his view, our culture is imbued with what he calls the *romantic lie*, the imitation of models from the imagination. According to Girard, authenticity is a fiction, since all of us continually identify with others – or, to use this thinker's vocabulary, we mimic them. The 'mimetic desire' is beautifully illustrated in great novels, says Girard. Don Quixote is pushed into action by imitating the lives of his examples: Amadis of Gaul and Lancelot and all those others.¹⁷ The love of Paolo and Francesca constitutes another of his fine examples: the kiss that has been imagined thanks to the book becomes real as a result of that imagination. This is something which, since the romantic era, is a little disconcerting: that love must be aroused by reading. Were not books 'a dull and endless strife,'

¹⁶ Lord Byron, *Don Juan: The Sixteen Cantos* (Halifax: Milner and Sowerby, 1837), Canto XIII, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/21700/21700-h/21700-h.htm>.

¹⁷ René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961).

according to Wordsworth's famous lines in "The Tables Turned," part of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)?

Girard's criticism of the imagination seems like an exception, but it is apparently not entirely absent from the romantic vocabulary. In more recent literature such criticism again becomes more prominent. An already almost classic example is Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2002), in which a fanciful girl accuses others and ruins them. But the book itself is her account, thus revealing the novel to be a deception of the imagination and leaving everything unreliable. In a completely different way, the work of the French writer Michel Houellebecq shows us what the ever longed-for cry of 'imagination in power' has given us: pornography, sexual exploitation, and loneliness. In various other ways the imagination has been under fire for years in numerous films and in many forms of art, a trend that has only been exacerbated by the explosion of images in the new media. Imagination is displaced in this way by recycling existing images into new configurations.¹⁸

A world without imagination is simply unimaginable: we would not be able to solve problems and would live like machines. Rather, it is the over-appreciation of the imagination, its excess, that causes suffering – as when Paolo weeps bitterly while Francesca reminds him of the blissful memory of their first kiss, whereas now they will whirl through hell forever. And Dante faints because he can imagine their future suffering so very well. It is too vivid a representation of what was the past – melancholy – and of what lies ahead – misplaced utopianism, vain hope, or fear of what may come. Animals, for example, suffer much less than humans, says Arthur Schopenhauer, since they know no yesterday and no tomorrow, and therefore can not call to mind the horrors of the past, nor imagine with fear and trembling what kind of things may take place tomorrow.¹⁹

At the same time, however, the imagination is a blessing, morally speaking: a blessing that allows us to empathize with the suffering of others. It is a crucial capacity that allows us to condemn, prevent, and combat cruelty. Precisely amidst a plethora of images, projections, interpretations, and other manifestations of the imagination, it is through the imagination that you can mobilise yourself to fight its own excesses, just as Cervantes and Danto once did. An example of this point of view is what the philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman describes in his book *Images malgré tout* (2003).²⁰ It discusses four photographs that had been taken by prisoners of a *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz. Those pictures, which had been smuggled out, show something of a reality that cannot properly be grasped. They present the truth of something that is unimaginable, and thus help you to imagine something of the unimaginable. In order to know, so the book begins, you must be able to imagine something. This is not a simple postmodern relativisation of truth. It points out that the truth often only comes about with difficulty, and that here imagination plays a vital role.

18 See Joselit, *After Art*, passim.

19 Arthur Schopenhauer, *Zürcher Ausgabe. Werke in zehn Bänden* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1977), vol. 9, 319ff.

20 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Minuit, 2003).

This is still relevant to contemporary art, which can *a fortiori* stimulate such imagination in the direction of truth. In contrast to the early Danto's view, Andy Warhol's art cannot be traced back to a 'theory': it is also a product of imagination – inspiring imagination, though Danto calls it 'wakeful dreams.'²¹ This is not unbounded hallucination: imagination is embodied in things with meaning. Imagination is both vital and lethal, in art just as in life. Actually, Don Quixote's is, in a stunning way, up-to-date. Just like those lines from the *Divina Commedia*. They show that imagination is like water. We cannot do without, but we can also drown in it.

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21 Danto, *What Art Is*, 48.