

Practices of Imagination

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Hana Gründler and Jakob Moser

Practices of Imagination

An Introduction

In 1960, the German-born art historian and philosopher Edgar Wind (1900 – 1971) held the famous *Reith Lectures*, a series of annual radio lectures broadcasted by the BBC. For this Lecture series Wind chose the simple, yet at that time certainly provocative title *Art and Anarchy*. This is particularly provocative if one takes into account that these lectures were held at the peak of the so-called Cold War, between the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the Berlin Crisis of 1961. Under these political circumstances, that went along with a rhetoric of power and order, the opening sentence of Wind's first homonymous lecture is a veiled parrhesiastic act. Wind states: »I hope that the word ›anarchy‹ in the title of these lectures does not suggest that I shall speak in defence of order. I shall not.«¹ In the twenty-eight minutes that followed, Wind explored the importance of turmoil, confusion, creative disturbance, and the forces of imagination that according to him lie at the very heart of all great art.

Wind displays a highly productive, transhistorical and transdisciplinary approach not only to the polysemantic concept of imagination or phantasy. He insists importantly that imagination is by no means only an intellectual capacity or an aesthetic category: Rather, it possesses an ethical as well as a political dimension. Wind's lectures are more than sixty years old. But also today, against the backdrop of contemporary debates over the creative potential and embodiment of cognitive processes, as well as discussions on the possibility and limits of artificial intelligence and its relation to the much-disputed idea of creativity, imagination has again acquired particular topicality.² Considering that there has been a ›rediscovery‹ and ›reevaluation‹ of the topic of imagination and phantasy over a long period and in many disciplines such as neuroscience, philosophy of mind, sociology, anthropology, aesthetics, as well as in historical and cultural studies, the question

¹ Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy. The Reith Lectures 1960*, London 1963, p. 1. Frankfurt/M.

² See for instance the book by Marcus du Sautoy, *The Creativity Code. Art and Innovation in the Age of AI*, Cambridge, MA 2019.

arises whether we need to explore and discuss these well-known concepts again.³ What problems could we address that have not yet been explored in great detail?

Our starting point for ›rethinking‹ imagination is the surprising fact that while its positive role as productive faculty and agency of knowledge is often underlined, concomitant ethical and political problems, traceable in the *longue durée* of the critique of imagination, remain rather unilluminated. The inherent ethical-political ›danger‹ residing both in the imaginative and its misuse, is evident, for example, in current public – populist and propagandistic – discourses, where the negative power of the imagination is frequently played off against the rational framing of scientific discourse. We believe that a greater sensitivity to the multidimensionality of the historicity of imagination enables us to grasp contemporary questions and problems in all their ambiguity and incongruity. Thus, the objective of the present volume is first to address these ›dangers‹ in a transhistorical perspective and to analyze the double and often contradictory role of imagination from different disciplinary as well as methodological viewpoints. This is also the reason why despite a focus on the epochal transition from the late Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period, these insights come to bear on the twentieth and twenty-first century. Secondly, we aim to explore the practical and praxeological aspects of the critique of the imagination. Or to put it differently: we seek to recover the ethico-aesthetic dimension of imagination that is to be sought in its manifold applications – Wind, after all, refers to the fundamental fact that art is an »exercise of imagination«.⁴ As the subsequent articles of our special issue will show, every critique and theory of imagination is constantly accompanied by subtle epistemic, aesthetic and ethical practices that deliberately involve and affect imagination. In addition – and in productive contraposition to a defensive attitude –, we find numerous ›practices of imagination‹ that develop in the shadow of their polemics even among the hardest ›censors of imagination‹.

³ To give just a few examples: Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, Paris 1940; Martin Kemp, »From ›Mimesis‹ to ›fantasia‹: The Quattrocento Vocabulary of Creation, Inspiration and Genius in the Visual Arts«, in: *Viator* 8 (1977), pp. 347-398; Dietmar Kamper, *Zur Soziologie der Imagination*, Munich 1986; Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination. Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, Chicago 1993; Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge 1997; Klaus Krüger and Alessandro Nova (eds.), *Imagination und Wirklichkeit. Zum Verhältnis von mentalen und realen Bildern in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Mainz 2000; Tonino Griffero, *Immagini attive. Breve storia della immaginazione transitiva*, Florence 2003; Jane Kneller, *Kant and the Power of Imagination*, Cambridge 2007; Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, New York 2009; Anna Adams (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Imagination*, Cambridge 2020.

⁴ Wind (as note 1), p. 14.

I. Fear of Imagination

Of course, there have been countless attempts to disentangle the history of the powerful and ambivalent conceptual pair *phantasia / imaginatio*.⁵ As is well-known, this conceptual pair has mediated between sensuality and intellect on a theoretical level since Antiquity. But at the same time, this pair has delineated a practical-ethical battlefield, where ›higher‹ and ›lower‹ forces of the soul and – depending on the cosmology in question – demonic powers struggle for supremacy. It is in the borderlands of ideas and illusions that intra-, inter-, and supra-human conflicts are staged and the psychological hierarchies that ultimately determine the good and evil of religious-political life are determined. In Western culture, an exceptional seductive power is attributed to the visual potential of the imagination, which may influence the individual in positive as well as negative ways.

Significantly, this oscillation is related to the possibility of a double, one could say horizontal and vertical, transgression: Imagination is transgressive because it breaks through social norms, values and classes, but also because it can transcend the here and now to a spiritual, supernatural order in the Platonic sense. This might explain why sometimes the concept of fantasy can be conceived in two opposite ways. In Plotinus and his successors, for example, a distinction is made between a ›negative‹, that is purely sensual, and a ›positive‹ intellectual imagination.⁶ Imagination thus proves itself an ambivalent faculty: It is either in the service of true knowledge and virtue or it unleashes an uncontrollable life of its own – an excess of figuration that can no longer be rationally tamed, that threatens to undermine the prevailing scientific, religious and political systems. As Giovanna Targia explores in her article to our collected volume, it is precisely this possibility of unsettling normative orders through the power of imagination that is one of the main points not only in Wind's *Art and Anarchy*, but in many of his writings. Indeed, unlike many interpreters of Plato's (c. 428 – 347 BC) famous critique of poets and artists in his *Politeia*, when Wind speaks of »a sacred

⁵ Besides the literature mentioned above see for instance: Murray W. Bundy, *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought*, Urbana 1927; Marta Fattori and Massimo L. Bianchi (eds.), *Phantasia / Imaginatio. Atti del V colloquio internazionale del Lessico Intellettuale Europeo*, Rome 1988; Gerard Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought*, Galway 1988; John Cocking, *Imagination. A Study in the History of Ideas*, London, New York 1991; Marieke J. E. van den Doel and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, »Imagination«, in: Wouter J. Hanegraaff (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, Leiden, Boston 2006, pp. 606-616; Anne Sheppard, *The Poetics of Phantasia. Imagination in Ancient Aesthetics*, London, New York 2014; Lucia Pappalardo, *Gianfrancesco Pico: fede, immaginazione e scetticismo*, Tournhout 2015; Marieke J. E. van den Doel, *Ficino and Phantasy. Imagination in Renaissance Art Theory from Botticelli to Michelangelo*, Leiden, Boston 2022.

⁶ Cf. Watson (as note 5), p. 97 ff.

fear of the imagination⁷, he moves far beyond questions of mimesis, poetics and aesthetics. Instead, Wind insists on the political dimension of the power, and therefore also of the fear of imagination and artistic inspiration, and brilliantly analyzes what he calls Plato's strategies of »state censorship«.⁸ The relationship between the law of the *polis* and the apparently excessive power of imagination is fundamental to understanding why the disciplining of imagination becomes an ethical and socio-political practice that relies on complex procedures of domination and control, especially of the so-called other.

Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that the excess of imagination is often pathologized, demonized, and sexualized. This is evident for instance in the connotative assumption of a specifically female physical predisposition to imaginative-affective overstimulation – a tradition that will culminate in modern discourses on ›imaginary sickness‹, hypochondria and hysteria, which Elisabeth Flucher will address in her contribution to the volume. Such discourses and the fear of imagination are deeply rooted in the long history of melancholia and monastic *acedia*: both the sexualized and melancholic states are characterized by a lack of rationality and control.⁹ Indeed, notions like *acedia* or *tristitia* – sometimes equated with each other –, were seen as vices. It was commonly thought in the Middle Ages that those afflicted by these conditions failed to control their imagination and sensuality through reason.¹⁰

II. Controlling Melancholy

Let us examine the question of melancholy against the backdrop of the fear of imagination in further detail. In ancient medicine and philosophy, the negative excesses of imagination were intimately linked with melancholy and an imbalance of the four humors, or, more precisely, an excess of black bile. Mediated by Islamic and scholastic medicine, instructions on how to protect oneself from pathological melancholy circulated widely in the Early Modern Period – both in medical knowledge and therapeutic practice. Such circulation took place not only in the works of the *literati*, but also in the tradition of popular ›health guides‹ (*regimina salutatis*). Proper diet, exercise, change of climatic conditions, the right amount of sleep, sexual asceticism, pharmaceutical substances, and so

7 Wind (as note 1), p. 3.

8 Ibid., p. 6.

9 Cf. Michael Theunissen, *Vorentwürfe der Moderne. Antike Melancholie und die Acedia des Mittelalters*, Berlin 1996, pp. 25-38; Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays. Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion*, New York 2016, esp. pp. 67-90.

10 See the still seminal work by Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, London 1964.

on, were believed to be the adequate instruments for preventing the pathological excesses of the imagination on a physiological level. But in addition to dietary requirements, these holistic instructions also included psychological measures: The overstimulated imagination of the melancholic could be positively impacted and calmed by music, theatre, conversations, smells or colors.¹¹

Marsilio Ficino (1433 – 1499) brilliantly synthesized the ancient and medieval tradition in his famous *De vita libri tres* (*The Three Books on Life*, 1489). In the first book, Ficino wrote about the symptoms and possible therapies of the saturnine character, and then sketched the image of the inspired melancholic, which was to remain of fundamental importance for subsequent generations.¹² Nevertheless, even as the figure of the melancholic genius emerged, it must not be forgotten that Ficino always had the negative aspects of melancholy in mind.¹³ *De vita*, after all, is a dietetics in which various therapeutic approaches are offered. Ficino concisely describes how a wrong way of life accentuates the negative aspects of melancholy – that is the predominance of the black bile – and hence destroys the melancholic's capacity for contemplation.¹⁴ Following an ancient Christian topos, Ficino notes that contemplation requires a movement from the periphery – the outer world – to the center – the inner world. And this movement always involves a reduction and contraction that endangers the delicate physical balance of the philosopher, because it destabilizes the *krasis*, the ideal balance of the four humors. It creates instead a state of ›half death‹ (*semianimum*), predisposing the individual to a negative form of *mania*.¹⁵ According to Ficino, this condition ›harms the wisdom and the judgment, because when that humor is kindled and burns, it characteristically makes people excited and frenzied, which melancholy the Greeks call mania and madness«. ¹⁶ Ficino thus invites the contemporary *literati* to take precautions, in order to prevent an excess of black bile and to fight against the darkening of the mind. Among other things, because the night is a dangerous time, the philosopher should absolutely avoid nocturnal work. At night, the rational capacities are disturbed and the mind is more anxious. And

11 On the history of the psychological treatment of melancholy see: Jean Starobinski, *Histoire du traitement de la mélancolie des origines à 1900* (Acta psychosomatica, vol. 3), Basel 1960.

12 Cf. Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl (as note 10).

13 See for instance the excellent introduction to the German edition of *De Vita libri tres* by Michaela Boenke, »Einleitung«, in: Marsilio Ficino, *De vita libri tres / Drei Bücher über das Leben*, ed. by Michaela Boenke, Munich 2012, pp. 6-32 as well as the seminal considerations of Martin Büchsel, *Albrecht Dürers Stich Melencolia, I.: Zeichen und Emotion – Logik einer kunsthistorischen Debatte*, Munich 2010, especially chap. 2: »Melancholie – Der Schatten der göttlichen Inspiration?«, pp. 89-134.

14 Cf. Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books of Life*, ed. and transl. by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, Binghamton, NY 1989, esp. the reflections in book I.

15 Cf. *ibid.*, book I, chap. IV, pp. 113-114.

16 *Ibid.* book I, chap. V, p. 117; see also book I, chap. III, p. 113.

once overexcited, fantasies can provoke erroneous judgments: »Rightly, therefore, those who against nature use night as day and, conversely again, day as night, like owls – these people also unwillingly imitate owls in this: that, just as the eyes of the owls grow weak under the light of the sun, so too the mental sharpness of these people grows weak beneath the splendor of truth.«¹⁷

These cursory reflections show that even though Ficino ennobles melancholy and associates it with ingenuity and divine *furor*, he clearly warns against melancholia's destabilizing character. In the end, as Ficino writes in the 26th chapter of the first book, only the disciplining *cura sui* (care of the self), which involves both the body and the mind, can save the philosopher from the dangers of melancholy and sustain them in his (or her) never-ending search for truth.¹⁸ Significantly, this work on the self is inextricably linked to the philosophical concept and practice of the *advertere animum*. This refers specifically to an attentive inclination of the soul, an exercise in which perturbations and negative fantasies are removed through a careful act of looking at things and the self, rendering the latter alert and well-balanced.¹⁹ In this regard, Ficino also believed that contemplating »green things« calms the mind and the soul of melancholics in specific and humans in general, and prolongs their lives.²⁰ As Raymond Klibansky (1905 – 2005), Erwin Panofsky (1892 – 1968) and Fritz Saxl (1890 – 1948) put it in their seminal study *Saturn and Melancholy* (1964), the Neoplatonic philosopher recommends »a sort of psychological autotherapy, a deliberate ordering of his own reason and imagination.«²¹ Ficino writes, for example, that the imagination of »solar things« purifies our mind: »[...] also put on solar clothes and live in, look at, smell, imagine, think about, and desire Solar things.«²² But he also explicitly insists on the healing power of music, an aspect that is beautifully epitomized in a woodcut for the first partial German edition of Ficino's *De vita* (Fig. 1). The elderly melancholic woman, who is depicted in the classical saturnine pose, with her heavy head resting on the left hand, is listening to an elegant young man playing the harp. That music has an immediate calming effect can be observed in the face of the listener: even if the eyes of the melancholic are still veiled with sadness, a subtle smile plays around her lips, clearly mirroring the gracious facial expression of the musician.

17 Ibid. book I, chap. VII, p. 127 f.

18 Ibid. book I, chap. XXVI, pp. 160-163.

19 For the concept of the *advertere animum*, so the attentiveness of the soul see for instance Augustine, *On the Trinity. Books 8–15*, ed. by Stephen McKenna and transl. by Gareth B. Matthews, Cambridge 2002, XI, II. As Bernhard Waldenfels has shown, in Augustine the *attentio* cannot be separated from the *intentio*, which in turn means that the attention that intervenes in the process of sensory perception is to be understood as an orientation of the will itself. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit*, Frankfurt/M. 2004, pp. 18-19.

20 Cf. Ficino (as note 14), book II, chap. XIV, p. 205.

21 Cf. Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl (as note 10), p. 270.

22 Cf. Ficino (as note 14), book III, chap. XIV, p. 313.



Fig. 1: *Das buch des Lebens Marsilius ficinius zu Florentz von dem gesunden und langen leben der rechten artznyen, von dem Latein erst nüw zuo tütsch gemacht durch Johannem Adelphum Müllich [...]*, Straßburg: Johann Grüninger 1508, vol. 1, fol. 14r

Not least, Ficino advises his readers to avoid the company of melancholics and instead to keep »regular company with pleasant people«. ²³ In many of his writings, the humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404 – 1472) recommended something similar when he addressed the ambivalence of melancholia. For instance, in his dialogue *De commodibus litterarum atque incommodis* (*The Use and Abuse of Books*, 1428 – 1429), Alberti states that without the experience of solitude and melancholy true study is not possible, but he regards these bitter efforts of study with great concern. ²⁴ As we shall see shortly, especially in his dialogue *Della tranquillità dell'animo* (*On the Tranquility of the Soul*, first half of 1440s), Alberti offers some therapeutical and practical exercises for taming the excesses – both imaginative and emotional. Significantly, these disciplining »techniques of the self« ²⁵ are inextricably linked to an idealized model of virtuous masculinity that represents the positive counterpart to Alberti's deeply misogynist descriptions of uncontrolled and irrational women.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Cf. Leon Battista Alberti, *De commodibus litterarum atque incommodis*, ed. by Mariangela Regoliosi, Florence 2021, p. 198.

²⁵ For the »Techniques of the Self« see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3: *The Care of the Self*, London 1990.

III. Demonizing Imagination

It is thus not surprising that this ›fear of imagination‹ expressed itself not only in the long history of melancholy, but also in the so-called witch craze that repeatedly afflicted Europe in disastrous ways from the 15th to the 18th century. Though it had numerous causes, this ›craze‹ can be understood not least as a symptom of a ›crisis of imagination‹. The massive demonization and feminization of the imagination and the obsession with evil powers is a symptom of an era in which numerous epistemic and imaginary orders began to collapse.²⁶ In this context, the legal persecution of witches and sorcerers as well as the systematic elaboration of demonology into an ideological doctrine can be understood as an attempt to provide indirect proof of the ›reality‹ of the Christian world view and to stabilize the ecclesiastical and political order.²⁷ This could explain why the witches' flights previously mostly considered a demonic illusion and imaginary experience, were now regarded as a real possibility by many theorists.²⁸ Many witch-persecutors – unlike their ›enlightened‹ opponents who argued against the culpability of the witches and who were often physicians – tried to distinguish the witches' experiences from the medically explicable phantasms of the melancholics.²⁹ The ›reality‹ of the demonic experience was not decisive for the condemnation itself, but it was supposed to empirically support the ›conspiracy theory‹ of the Inquisition. The power of imagination was therefore partly transformed into a ›physics of evil‹ in the service of provoking and eliminating the fears of imagination.

The complex connection between imagination and witchcraft can be explored more in detail with regard to the work of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1468 – 1533). The humanist and supporter of the radical preacher Girolamo Savonarola (1452 – 1498) is particularly interesting since his book *De imaginatione* (*On the Imagination*, 1501) represents the first printed monographic work on the imagination that was not intended as a mere commentary on Aristotle.³⁰ At the same time, Gianfrancesco promoted the fatal witch-hunt in the territory of Mirandola and advocated for it in his dialogue *Strix sive de ludificatione daemonum*

26 Cf. Lyndal Roper, *The Witch in Western Imagination*, Charlottesville 2012, esp. pp. 25-47.

27 Cf. Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers. Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief*, Chicago 2001. On the relation between demonology and scientific revolution: Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons. The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford 1997, esp. p. 294 ff.

28 Cf. Werner Tschacher, »Der Flug durch die Luft zwischen Illusionstheorie und Realitätsbeweis. Studien zum sogenannten Canon Episcopi und zum Hexenflug«, in: *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte. Kanonistische Abteilung* 85 (1999), pp. 225-276.

29 Stephens (as note 27), pp. 131-144.

30 Cf. Katherine Park, »Picos *De imaginatione* in der Geschichte der Philosophie«, in: Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Über die Vorstellung / De imaginatione*, ed. by Eckhard Keßler, Munich 1984, pp. 21-57, p. 44 ff.

(*The Witch or the Teasing of the Demons*, 1523).³¹ While in the early treatise *De hominis dignitate* (*On the Dignity of Man*, 1486) Gianfrancesco's famous uncle Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463 – 1494) still propagated man's apotheosis in his interpretation of the parable of ›Jacob's Ladder‹, his nephew is taken over with the fear of a lapsing into the realm of the animalistic and demonic. In Gianfrancesco's eyes, imagination proves to be a rotten rung preventing ascent to God by our own strength. When at the very beginning of *De imaginatione* he simplistically sums up the Aristotelian tradition of *phantasia*, he does not explain – unlike the scholastics before him – the interplay between imagination and the other conventional ›inner senses‹ (*sensus communis*, *memoria*, *vis aestimativa* and *cogitativa*). On the contrary, he aspires to declare imagination, which for him becomes the only link between sensuality and intellect, to be the root of all evils. He would like to prove: »[...] that all errors, which occur as much in civic life as in the philosophic and Christian life, take their beginning from the vice of imagination.«³² Subsequently, Gianfrancesco proposes practices that should constrain the excessive powers of imagination through »art or exercise« (*arte vel exercitio*). He advises his reader to tame their imagination through dietary measures, the control of attention, correct judgement and religious-pedagogical exercises.³³ We should subjugate our imagination to reason (*ratio*), intellect (*intellectus*) and faith (*fides*). Only in this way, he claims, can we save our dignity as creatures: »He who strives to dominate imagination persists in that dignity in which he was created and placed, and by which he is continually urged to direct the eye of the mind towards God [...]. But he who obeys the dictate of the perverted sense and deceitful imaginations, at once loses his dignity, and degenerates to the brute.«³⁴ Gianfrancesco sees the *dignitas* of man, which his relative Giovanni once celebrated in parables, threatened by the very imagination that underlay his uncle's figurative language. For Gianfrancesco, imagination is not only a faculty that can distort our perception of reality, it also keeps the door open for demonic influences. Thus, in the last chapter of the treatise, he speaks of evil angels that are able to influence our imagination, a danger that only the ›light of faith‹ is able to banish. However, since we cannot completely cast off the imagination, we must occupy our imagination with orthodox ideas such as the punishments of hell or the rewards of heaven in order to protect it from harmful influences.³⁵ In the same vein, Savonarola claims in his *Predica dell'arte del bene morire* (*Sermon on*

31 Lucia Pappalardo, »Introduzione. Filosofi e streghe«, in: id. (ed.), *La Strega (Strix) di Gianfrancesco Pico. Introduzione, testo, traduzione e commento*, Rome 2017, pp. 15-247.

32 Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *On the Imagination*, intro. and transl. by Harry Caplan, New Haven 1930, S. 45. Slight modification of the transl. by the authors.

33 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 53.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

35 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 89.

the Art of Dying Well, c. 1497) that we should contemplate daily a painted picture of paradise and hell. In the frontispiece of this sermon on the *ars moriendi*, we see a man who has to decide in the face of death if he will go ›down‹ (*o quaggiù*) or ›up there‹ (*o quassù*) (Fig. 2). That is to say, the guidance of the imagination is not only pivotal for our living, it includes the art of dying as well.³⁶

Although Gianfrancesco warns against the demonic manipulation of our imagination in *De imaginatione*, in his latter work, *Strix*, with explicit reference to the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*, 1486), he emphasizes that the witches' blasphemous meetings do not merely take place in the imagination but rather they come together physically as well. With the threat of torture, the witch has to embody the reality of diabolic excesses and pagan myths.³⁷ Gianfrancesco's works *De imaginatione* and *Strix* exemplify the fears, ethical consequences and socio-political dangers that accompanied the newly awakened interest in the imagination in the Early Modern Period. The dichotomies of reality and imagination, reason and sensuality, faith and fiction, retreat and excess, which *De imaginatione* draws all too schematically can only be separated on a very abstract theoretical level, whereas on a concrete and practical level they are always already intertwined and interacting. Ultimately, and paradoxically, even to contrast the witches with the rational and spiritual order, the excesses that fuel the anxiety must first be imagined. Analogously, the boundaries of reason and reality must already be crossed in the imagination before they are drawn. The unthinkable has to be imagined.

IV. Magic Manipulations

On the one hand, there are attempts to brutally subjugate the apparently dangerous, pathological and heretical excesses of imagination. While, on the other hand, throughout history we repeatedly encounter magical practices that instead seek to increase the power of the imagination in order to manipulate ourselves and the world with its help. These practices are magical insofar as they assume that the imagination can influence the outside world ›telepathically‹, as it were. The already mentioned Ficino sums up this disconcerting notion, which has recurred since Late Antiquity, in his *Theologia Platonica* (1482): »Thus the phantasy, like the life-giving power, also forms its own body, as we said, whenever it is troubled

36 Cf. Daniel Arasse, »Le portrait du diable«, in: Maria Chiabò and Federico Doglio (eds.), *Diavoli e mostri in scena dal Medioevo al Rinascimento* (12. Convengo di studi, Roma 30 giugno-3 luglio 1988), Viterbo 1989, pp. 209-252.

37 Cf. Armando Maggi, *In the Company of Demons. Unnatural Beings, Love, and Identity in the Italian Renaissance*, Chicago 2006, pp. 48-59.



Fig. 2: *Choosing Between Heaven and Hell*, Woodcut,
in: Girolamo Savonarola, *Sermon on the Art of Dying Well*, Florence: Antonio Tubini
c. 1520

by the more painful emotions. But it forms a foreign body too by way of charms and wicked spells.«³⁸ This conception of a ›transitive‹ or ›effective‹ imagination includes, among others, such ideas that demons and angels can form their aerial bodies according to their imagination. It also suggests that imagination can change our bodily form; that the imagination of pregnant women transforms the physiognomy of the fetus in the womb; that imagination can affect objects by means of rays or effusions; or, that evil thoughts and looks can harm other people.³⁹ Last but not least, the love theory of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance ascribes a magical effect to the erotic imagination or phantasm, which can blur the boundary between subject and object, thus mixing eroticism and magic. It is against this background that in his commentary on Plato's Symposium *De amore* (*On Love*, 1569), Ficino characterizes Eros as ›demonic‹ in the Platonic sense and warns of the dangerous arrows of the gaze of love.⁴⁰ Ficino's concepts of imagination feed on numerous sources and, conceptually speaking, his notions are extremely powerful, complex and diverse. His notion of a transitive imagination, i. e. an imagination that affects its objects, draws both on the Neoplatonic tradition (Synesius of Cyrene, Iamblichos, Porphyrios), which sees the imagination as an astral vehicle of the soul, and the Arabic medical tradition (Al-Kindi, Avicenna).⁴¹ Ficino's revaluation and magical exaltation of the imagination was not only met with approval.⁴² Ficino himself, who feared falling into the disrepute of ›demonic magic‹, develops a ›natural‹ or ›spiritual magic‹ in his already mentioned *De vita*. At the center of this book is not a transitive but intransitive self-manipulation.⁴³ He emphasizes that we can manipulate the reception of astral rays in our soul not only by means of certain materials, talismans, drugs, music, dance or dialectical reasoning, but also by means of our imagination.⁴⁴

38 Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, ed. by James Hankins, transl. by Michael J. B. Allen, Vol. IV, Cambridge, MA 2004, book 13, chap. 4, p. 193.

39 On this topic see e.g.: Griffero, (as note 3); Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition. Studies in Western Esotericism*, transl. by Christine Rhone, New York 2000; Jean-Claude Schmitt, »L'imagination efficace«, in: Klaus Krüger and Alessandro Nova (as note 3), pp. 13-20.

40 Cf. Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, transl. by Margaret Cook, Chicago 1987, esp. p. 38 ff.; Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas. Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, transl. by Ronald I. Martinez, Minneapolis 1993, esp. p. 90 ff.

41 Cf. Van den Doel (as note 5), pp. 45-68; Paola Zambelli, *L'ambigua natura della magia. Filosofi, streghe, riti nel Rinascimento*, Venice 1996, pp. 53-75.

42 Savonarola and Gianfrancesco were opponents of Ficino. Cf. Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola. The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2-1498*, Leiden, Boston 2008, p. 205 ff. and 388 ff.

43 Daniel Pickering Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic. From Ficino to Campanella*, London 1958, pp. 36-53.

44 Ficino (as note 14), book III, chap. XIV, p. 313.

The magical dimension of the practices of imagination has an impact far beyond the Early Modern Period and extends well into the Modern Era. It forms a unifying feature of a wide-ranging Western tradition, which Antoine Faivre describes as ›esoteric‹.⁴⁵ This tradition can be traced from pagan theurgy, medieval judeo-christian mysticism, different kabbalistic and alchemical undercurrents, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* through Ficino, Giordano Bruno, Agrippa von Nettesheim, Paracelsus and Jacob Böhme to Romantic natural philosophy (Novalis, Franz von Baader) and from there to modern occultism. Of course we find magic and theosophic conceptions of the imagination outside European contexts, for example in Sufism.⁴⁶ In Western tradition however, the power of imagination reaches a climax especially in the work of Paracelsus and Böhme, in which the latter's understanding of the powers of ›cosmopoetic imagination‹ in his theosophy approximates that of the biblical Creator.⁴⁷ In her article Giulia Baldelli will highlight how this power of imagination is reflected in Böhme's textual and poetic practices. But in fact, all of the magical practices mentioned above cannot be strictly demarcated from other practices involving the imagination, as our distinctions between philosophy, medicine and religion are often drawn retrospectively.

V. Rhetoric of *Phantasia*

The comparison between magic and rhetoric goes back to Antiquity – both of them share a desire to control the ideas and affective life of oneself and others. Already the sophist Gorgias of Leontinoi (c. 483 – 375 BC), in his famous *Encomion of Helen* (late 5th century BC), compares the power of speech that transforms the soul of the listener to sorcery, magic (*goēteia kai mageia*) and drugs (*pharmakon*).⁴⁸ The fear of the irresistible and uncontrollable rhetoric famously motivates Plato to mention the sophists and mimetic artists in the same breath – we see this in the dialogues *Gorgias*, the *Sophistes*, the *Republic* and the *Phaidros*. The sophists, like poets, painters or actors, participate in an ›image production‹ (*eidōlopoiikē technē*) that under certain well-defined circumstances Plato wants to regulate and censor. In Plato's eyes, *eidōlopoiikē technē* prevents both the philosophical search

45 Cf. Faivre (as note 39), pp. 99-136.

46 Cf. Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone. Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*, transl. by Ralph Manheim, pref. Harold Bloom, Princeton 1997, p. 179 ff.

47 Cf. Niklaus Largier, *Figures of Possibility. Aesthetic Experience, Mysticism, and the Play of the Senses*, Stanford 2022, p. 191 ff.

48 Gorgias, *Encomion of Helen*, ed. and transl. by Douglas M. MacDowell, Bristol 1981. See also: Richard Heinrich, »Sprache der Verführung – Gorgias über den Fall Helena«, in: id., *Verzauberung, Methode und Gewohnheit. Skizzen zur philosophischen Intelligenz*, Vienna 2003, pp. 9-23.

for truth as well as the ideal state of coexistence. The Platonic ›fear of imagination‹ goes hand in hand with the sophistic justification of rhetoric as a teachable art.⁴⁹

Against this backdrop, the concept of *phantasia* becomes increasingly important in post-Aristotelian rhetoric. Only two aspects of the complex interplay between rhetoric and imagination need to be mentioned here: First, imagination forms the basis of the art of memory, the *ars memoriae*. It is a sub-field of rhetoric that focuses on the fixation and imaginary spatial arrangement of ›inner‹ images. One could even think of those images and spatializations as ›architectural‹. The *ars memoriae* may have been once considered a prerequisite for the construction and penetration of discursive contexts, but it develops into a spiritual and epistemic practice. In the Early Modern Period, this practice is furthermore transformed and expanded into a universal scientific method.⁵⁰ Secondly, all rhetorical artifices that served to produce evidence aimed to ›put‹ something ›before the eyes‹ of the audience or the reader. The technique of the *ante oculos ponere* was usually affectively charged. Since these procedures are based on imaginary vividness and visuality of language, when the Greek concept of ›clarity‹ (*enargeia*) was translated into Roman rhetoric in visual terms, it became *evidentia*, *illustratio* or *imaginatio*. The haptic metaphor of ›apprehension‹ was thus largely overridden.⁵¹ Numerous rhetorical procedures, which can be variously classified but are too many to be properly listed here, undoubtedly serve the affective illustration of absent facts. These include, to name but a few, the metaphorical dynamization of things (the Aristotelian *enargeia*, which has often been conflated with *enargeia*), the production of evidence through similitudes (*similitudines*), the meticulous description of objects or images (*ekphrasis*), the hypothetical dissection of an event (*hypotyposis*) or its effective detailing and amplification (*amplificatio*).⁵² In his influential *Institutio oratoria* (*Institutes of Oratory*, c. 92), the Roman rhetorician Quintilian (c. 35 – 100) himself gives a standard example of creating *evidentia*. Instead of simply speaking of the ›destruction‹ of a city, the process is to be described in vivid detail: »[...] there will come into view flames racing through houses and temples, the crash of falling roofs, the single sound made up of many cries, the blind flight of some, others clinging to their dear ones in a last embrace, shrieks of children and women, the old men whom an unkind fate has allowed to live

49 Jean-Pierre Vernant, »The Birth of Images«, in: id., *Mortals and Immortals. Collected Essays*, ed. by Froma I. Zeitlin, Princeton 1991, pp. 164-185.

50 Cf. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge 2008; Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London 1966.

51 Cf. Jakob Moser, »Manifest gegen die Evidenz. Tastsinn und Gewissheit bei Lukrez«, in: Helmut Lethen, Ludwig Jäger and Albrecht Koschorke (eds.), *Auf die Wirklichkeit zeigen. Zum Problem der Evidenz in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt/M. 2015, pp. 85-105.

52 Cf. Bernhard Asmuth, »Imago«, in: Gert Ueding (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, Vol. 4, Darmstadt 1998, col. 228-235.

to see this day [...]».⁵³ From the start, Quintilian's example demonstrates the purpose of detailing: it aims to capture our imagination and affective life. Not only rhetorical figures and techniques, but also literary forms certainly appeal to the imagination of the reader. Katharine Stahlbuhk will elucidate this point in her article on a dream-vision narrated in a dialogue by the Italian Dominican Giovanni Caroli (1428 – 1503).

Long before Burke and Kant, in his fragmentary treatise *Peri hypsous* (*On the Sublime*), Pseudo-Longinus (probably 1st century) highlighted the affective dimension of the rhetorical imagination in an ›aesthetics of the sublime‹. Even though Pseudo-Longinus touches on questions of rhetoric – especially that of the high style – the intention of his text is rather to define the sublime not so much as a rhetorical technique but as an opening towards ethical questions. Speech and rhythm affect the audience strongly and open up the audience's experience to that which could not be said or represented. Hence, Pseudo-Longinus emphasizes the enthusiasm and pathos of imagination: »[...] the term *phantasia* [...] has now to come to be used predominantly of passages where, inspired by strong emotion, you seem to see what you describe and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience.»⁵⁴ This applies above all to poetic imagination which for Pseudo-Longinus stands in contrast to rhetorical imagination.⁵⁵ The *pathos* of imagination, according to Pseudo-Longinus, transcends the limits of *enargeia*, whereas sublimity will, according to Immanuel Kant's (1724 – 1804) prospective in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 1790), transcend our power of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*). The sublime eludes immediate representation and poses the problem of the limits of the imaginable.⁵⁶ This specific aspect of the Kantian sublime will be addressed in Christoph Paret's essay on a recent book by Jacques Rancière (* 1940).

VI. Spiritual Exercises

Practices of imagination can obviously be found in other areas than rhetoric. Spiritual retreats across various epochs and cultures make use of the imagination,

53 Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and transl. by Donald Russell, vol. III, Cambridge, MA 2002, book VIII, chap. 3., p. 68 f, p. 379.

54 Longinus, *On the Sublime*, transl. by W. H. Fyfe, rev. Donald Russel, in: Aristotle, Longinus, Demetrius, *Poetics. On the Sublime. On Style*, Cambridge, MA 1995, 15.1, p. 215 f.

55 Cf. Eugenio Refini, »Longinus and Poetic Imagination in Late Renaissance Literary Theory«, in: *Translations of the Sublime. The Early Modern Reception and Dissemination of Longinus' Peri Hypsous in Rhetoric, the Visual Arts, Architecture and the Theatre*, ed. by Caroline van Eck, Stijn Bussels, et. al, Leiden 2012, pp. 33-53.

56 Cf. Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime. From Longinus to Kant*, Cambridge 2015, pp. 266-289.