



THE STRUCTURES OF IMAGINATION IN THE
MANUSCRIPTS OF HUSSERL AND MERLEAU-PONTY¹
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Abstract: In this paper, the structure of fantasy will be analysed through a phenomenological analysis, by comparing the imagining self with the scenario of the fantasy, within the oppositional dialectic between representation and perception. The aim: to define the coordinates of the field of the imaginary as an opening to possible worlds. Specifically, we will refer to Husserlian and Merleau-Pontyan manuscripts on the imaginary.

Keywords: Imaginary, Husserl Merleau-Ponty, possible words, perception.

The concept of 'imaginary' encloses polysemic references (content and form, real world, and multiplicity of possible worlds) and oscillates on the ridge between the visible and invisible: «To imagine is to reach for the real object to make it appear to be here. There is a pseudo-realisation of the imaginary object»².

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²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Structure et conflits de la conscience enfantine* (1949-1950), *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant – Cours de Sorbonne 1949-1952*, Verdier, Lagrasse 2001, p. 230.

The overflow of such a concept into a mixture of different modes of being - perceptual, remembrance, anticipation - can lead to ambiguities in the interpretation of imaginary worlds.

Situating these modes within the phenomenological theory of experience, starting with Husserlian reflections on the imagination as a mode of being of an intentional content, we will attempt, in this article, to resolve these issues to re-describe the imaginary as an experiential content that operates through narrative.



"Ruine Klamm mit Räubern als Staffage"
(1822) by Waldmüller Ferdinand Georg



"View of Tivoli at Sunset" (1644) by Claude Lorrain



"Orfeo ed Euridice" (1648) by Nicolas Poussin

The representation of the imagery we are to describe can be expressed through the art that has been employed to paint these three scenes. Three different landscapes are depicted in them, their common feature being *staffage*³, a technique used in figurative art to designate the presence of human or animal figures in a scene as decorative, secondary figures.

These figures are small elements and do not constitute the main theme of the work itself. They are drawn with ill-defined contours, have evanescent outlines, sometimes with blurred strokes and always imperceptibly indeterminate.

At a first look, these figures appear secondary in size and position to the naturalistic view and to the representation, in the background, of imposing ancient ruins, naturalistic and rural landscapes silhouetted against urban contexts.

Indeed, they're very being there, their being in the scene, orients the observer's view, as they open up before him trajectories of possible visions.

Their small size adds an indication of scale, thus favouring the perception of perspective and at the same time enhancing the visualisation of the main subject, the landscape that encompasses them.

³ Late 19th century from German, from *staffieren* 'decorate'.

Their use would seem to indicate a change in perspective whereby the theme represented, e.g. a mythological theme or a pastoral scene, loses its centrality in favour of the prominence given to the context. The constraint of spatial linearity is broken, the sequential order is interrupted. These figural objects determine a double 'contrastive apperception': these figures, in which human figures can be perceived, attract the observer into the scene, 'as if' the observer was there near Orpheus and Eurydice or beside the shepherd; these figures, not having well-defined contours, do not rekindle images of reminiscences, they do not refer to something, they are not 'in the place of', but 'present themselves' to transfer us into the artistic illusion. Their being draws different lines of the infinite asymptotic curve of the Imagination.

The possible worlds that unfold in this perspective variation, determined by the Staffage technique, can also be found in the fantastic figuration of the fairytale and the fantasy genre more generally. In these, too, the narrated story does not need to stimulate any representational consciousness, what manifests itself is pure fiktum, everything in the tale has the character of the 'as-if', and every figure, narrated in it, presents itself and serves to transfer us into the illusion of the story.

Fantasy images become the framework of the journey into adventurous worlds and through them the narrative plot is woven, but a doubt assails us the moment we try to define their genesis and effectiveness. The direction of meaning for unravelling these doubtful knots, on which we intend to argue in this paper, can be drawn by borrowing, from *The Deathly Hallows*, the last of the seven novels dedicated to Harry Potter, the reply uttered by Albus Dumbledore who turns to the protagonist, incredulous before the imaginative representations, saying: "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"

«Distinction de l'imaginaire et du réel en fait impossible (de l'observable pur, il n'y en a pas: de l'imaginaire pur de mon être, il n'y en a pas: le corps intervient)»⁴.

⁴ «The distinction between the imaginary and the real is in fact impossible (there is no pure observable: there is no pure imaginary of my being: the body intervenes», Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Manuscripts, Notes pour choses faites, Volume VII Le Visible et l'invisible Notes de préparation*, f.172, ff. 274, 1959-1960, Fonds Manuscripts Merleau-Ponty Bibliothèque Nationale De France [translation by the writer].

So, the first piece of our argumentative puzzle is to search our minds for the genesis of imaginative images to find, according to a taxonomic formulation, the specific characters and forms they can take.

Imagination and fantasy images

Let us now attempt to draw a possible order among the many meanings of the word imagination. Certainly, it is to be understood as the capacity of our brain to form mental images. In this regard, it is useful to recall, although not to go into details, the theory of mirror neurons, the scientific basis of which is motor imagery, or motor imagination, a cognitive capacity that allows motor experience in the absence of any muscular activation. In other words, motor imagery consists of imagining a movement without performing it. In other words, the movement imagined has similar characteristics to the movement performed: that is, the neural resources typical of the execution of the movement are employed.

It was Marc Jeannerod⁵ in an article devoted to the analysis of motor imagination who discovered this important link between imagination and visualisation. For example, let us think of a pupil who before a piano teacher is watching him play one of Franz Liszt's 12 *Études d'exécution transcendante*, piano compositions of high virtuosity. The maestro is showing his pupil how to perform a complicated passage, and he is watching him carefully, because he knows that he will soon have to repeat it in turn. To replicate the master's rapid hand and finger movements, the pupil has to form a motor image of them. Now, according to Jeannerod, the neurons responsible to produce such motor images would be the same neurons that are intended to be activated during the learner's planning and preparation of the performance in other words, the activation of mirror neurons would generate an 'internal motor representation' of the act observed, on which the ability to learn derive.

So, from these neuroscientific studies we can assert that imagining is a faculty that has its origin in our brain's capacity to form mental images, the information that allows us to perceive comes from the observed object (o) through a causal concatenation (o1 , o2) whatever intermediate link must contain all the information that reaches the last link in the chain. Wherever

⁵ Marc Jannerod, *The representing brain. Neural cprrelates of motor intention and imagery*, in "Behavioral Brain Sciences", 17 (1994), pp. 187-245.

we intersect this data transmission, it contains the complete perceptual information.

The perceptual act is a proceeding by images, a process from which we start from impressions to construct ideas, thus from sharp images to illumined ones, according to a Humian approach, moving for the formation of ideas from the sharp definition of the impressional image to image associations.

Perceptual datum becomes reproductive datum; what is perceived is also the content of the consciousness of the figural object⁶.

Insofar as the perspective from which we position ourselves to experience this object, it does not affect vision at the perceptual level, but implies a different way of representing the object. It is the intention of this representation that is different in the change of perspective position. Returning to the previous example, the student depicts that passage according to his own tension, according to his own desire, the image that emerges in his mind is not merely a way of rendering what he has seen.

Continuing in this vein, one could close the discourse by asserting that perception is a vivid image (composed of impressions and ideas) and memory in turn an illumined image, there is nothing more to be said.

But, to put us in a crisis, a simple question would suffice; 'how' can we know that that vivid image is a memory or speaks the voice of sensible impressions or is a product of the imagination?

L'imaginaire est ici la substance même de la vie, et dérive du voir. Voir, c'est imaginer. Et imaginer, c'est voir. Non pas dans ce sens justement critiqué par Sartre que l'image ne serait que vision affaiblie, mais dans ce sens que le principe métaphysique de la vision (= la transcendance) est imagination, i. e. dépassement de l'observable⁷.

Moreover, if image formation were to be understood only in a cause-and-effect relationship, the possible experience of the world would be exhausted in perceptual space.

⁶ Cfr. Edmund Husserl, *Sulla fantasia. Manoscritti 1918-1924*, a cura di F. Masi, Giannini Editore, Napoli 2009.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Manuscripts, Projets "Être et Monde, Volume VI Projets de Livres 1958-1960*, f. 186, ff. 386, Fonds Manuscripts Merleau-Ponty Bibliothèque Nationale De France [translation by the writer].

It is true that the impressional image is more definite, the image produced by recollection in comparison to fantasy is more vivid, and both - image recollection and fantasy - appear to us as illumined reproductions of impressional vividness, but to be more precise we should emphasise that such images are ideas and are therefore by their very nature reproductive faculties.

Another difference between recollection and fantasy can be found in the fact that the former does not merely reproduce the content of the individual sensorial impressions, but also repeats the order of the events recalled and places them in relation to one another, in the unity of a story.

Fantasy is by its very nature a free faculty, it alters the order and disrupts it: order and syntax, which characterised the first manifestation of content in our experience, are made free, and thus new and unexpected relations are created between experiences.

Fantasy, in other words, appears as a memory without memory: we are placed in another world, and we are aware that the fantasised world is there for us and is not real.

This awareness characterises fantasy and differentiates it from dream vision.

But can these different use of the imagination, images as productive and reproductive forms, has a common root? What is the knot that unites these forms of the imagination, that does not unify them, but keeps them different?

In attempting to provide answers to the previous questions, we note that visualisation assumes central importance and, with it, the link between imagination and forms of remembrance, as both are reproductive faculties.

What is perceived in the imagination is the individual content that can be quite the same as what is intuited in actual experience. But we can say that it is the same content because the experiences and the corresponding quasi-experiences (or fantasies) are not divided as two components: the component of intuition, which gives the content, and that of the position of actuality, which must give the form. Content and form are not only inseparably linked, but the content of experience is what it is only in its mode of effectuality, just as the content of fantasy [is] in its mode of quasi-effectiveness⁸.

It should be noted that, according to this accepted understanding of imagination, from the noetic point of view, experience and fantasy can be

⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Sulla fantasia. Manoscritti 1918-1924*, cit., pp. 74-75, [translation by the writer].

identified in a synthesis, which we call 'consciousness of equality', and that in principle to every experience there corresponds a possible fantasy and conversely.

Even as we perceive an object, imagination subsists as a protection towards the unity of synthesis of the phenomenal parts we are perceiving. As I observe the inner part of the hand, I assert that I am visualising the palm of the hand, anticipating the whole being of the hand, with a simple glance.

This intuiting, representing in the strict sense, refers to the given content, thus intuitively conscious.

This content and that of an individual fantasising are the same; that is, it brings to consciousness and intuition an equal content, but only in the form of fantasy. To fantasise, however, is not to experience, and a fantasised individual is not a given individual; but insofar as the content of fantasy can be explained and can indeed be described as equal [to the real individual] - in such a way, however, that the content of a fantasy individual is not an 'actually real' content - the dateless of the content in fantasy is also a modified datedness⁹.

It is precisely in this modification that the game of fantasy is played out, the scenario of the imaginary is delimited.

According to this approach, we can locate the genesis of the imaginary in the materiality of existence, in perception as an act of protection and retention, on the other hand, we can turn our attention to the imaginative capacity to rescind the nexus that binds us to our world. Insofar as imagination is to be understood as the faculty that allows us access to what is absent or only possible.

Once we have arrived at this point in the discussion, we can synthesise that by imagination we mean one's ability to visualise an object in its unity or a representation of a scene. Imagination appears to us in its duality: a way of visualising the perceived world or of depicting a possible world.

Let us add a further piece to clarify our argument, the terms 'imagination' and 'image' in Greek are called *eikasia* or *phantasia*, both referring to the faculty of imagining. The object of imagining or fantasising is called *eidolon*, *idol* or *phantasma*. The concept of imagination and that of

⁹ Edmund Husserl, *Filosofia prima. Teoria della riduzione fenomenologica*, Ed. Rubettino, a cura di V. Costa, Soveria Mannelli 2007, pp. 71-72 [translation by the written].

phantasia both refer to the capacity to mentally preserve the product of sensible perceptions.

While the two terms were for a long time considered interchangeable, with the advent of aesthetic studies the imagination was assigned the role of generating mental reproductions of objects of reality within ever new associations or the creation of images, while fantasy was assigned the role of aesthetic elaboration of mental representations or images.

Important is the correlation, which has been pointed out since Aristotle, that one cannot think without images: the image is an impressional idea, memory.

While the positions, such as the Sartrean one, according to which the image is a minor thing compared to the real thing (it has an existence of its own despite being capable of establishing relations with the thing of which it is an image, the latter being simply an 'act' and not an 'object') have failed to capture in the image its being the carrier of a meaning, that symbolism constitutive of it.

Innovative, on the other hand, is the phenomenological investigation of fantasy, of the production of the imaginary scenario, which brings added value to the reflection: fantasy is to be understood no longer as a modality of experience, but as a modalisation of the objects of experience. And this primarily means explaining that fantasy is not reducible to memory, nor to imagination, as it is to be understood as the realm of 'play', as the transformative production of imaginary worlds, in which the figural object does of course not have the connotations of transparency and immediacy, but of opacity. It is not placed in an inside or an outside, but goes on to give itself, in infinite variations that prevent any totality. The construction of these infinite fantasy worlds does not reside in a

obscure faculty of the soul of the one who, having perceived, elaborates or composes in images the contents given in perception, as in Kant, nor, conversely, in the virtue or power of making the non-sensible sensitive, as in Bruno. Here the rule of *fiktum* is simply fantasy as figurative presentation¹⁰.

An object is present in its identity, and this identification follows the modes of its apperceptive expression, i.e. the way in which experience, with regard to its experienced, implies further related experiences.

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Sulla fantasia. Manoscritti 1918-1924*, cit., p. 40.

In the world of the imaginary, one should take as a concept, instead of 'identify', that of 'disidentify', as the fiktum does not have to be identical to the perceived object. It is in this disidentification that the process of metamorphosis occurs in the imaginary scenario: the perceived object is nullified, and the order and perspective towards the object is also changed. Fantasy is thus not an association, a correspondence of images depicting reality, but a shaping of a plurality of forms. An intensification of the figurativeness that surrounds us daily.

Indeed, if we pay attention to the unfolding of one of our classic days, we can note that we are continually immersed in the imaginary scenario of fantasy: we fantasise while walking, while leafing through a book, while watching a film. We fantasise and realise that we are doing so, that images consciously produced by us are in action. We realise that the fantasy world allows us to disconnect from reality, but at the same time we understand that reality is not replaced, it remains localised there, in parallel with the imaginary scenario we are constructing for ourselves.

The relationship between the parallel acts consists in this, that one of them is a real act and the cogito is a real, truly positional cogito, while the other act is the shadow of an act, an improper cogito, not truly positional. The one actually operates; the other is a mere reflection of an operation.

In fact, the 'space of reverie' insinuates itself into the real world, which remains on the scene, determining, in depth, the sense of imaginative design. I read about Lucy, the little girl protagonist of the Narnia tales, who enters with her brothers into the magic cupboard and simultaneously begins to fantasise, the images of the tale remain and at the same time the perspective lines of reference give the possibility of reproducing other images, which disrupt the linearity of the tale.

The imaginary scenario, constructed in this way, arises from a possible project, in the realisation of which we are not interested, since it is the being in the imaginary fantasy, the presentation of the imaginative scene, the ontological fold of the fantasy, that we intend to inhabit.

The forms of the imagination

Continuing the analysis according to this phenomenological approach, for a clarifying description of 'how' the ego relates to images, we can note that we visualise an image if it is closely linked to perception, defined in the idea of the image, a little more blurred but still according to a spatio-temporal order given in the memory of the image. On the other hand, if we are asked to

represent an image to ourselves, we realise that a mental image is by its very nature blurred, that its contours are blurred and that its availability to our gaze is, so to speak, threatened by time.

Mental images fade and do not have the character of a secure possession, we can see the contours, but not the details of the imagined object. Small nuances of context can determine the meaning of what the image says, and then we can try to give our concepts a form that allows us to better understand the meaning of our words. But to find the intertwined knot of these differences, we must implement a kind of phenomenological reduction. The eidetic analysis of imaginative behaviour brings us to the phenomenological residue of consciousness, and it is in being conscious that we find the point of arrival of this analysis.

The imaginative images return to the observer-reader an interrogative representation: everything contributes to the picture - landscape images and secondary figures - to construct that flat intersection of the visual pyramid, and likewise in the narrative - heroes and antagonists and contextual elements - appear tense threads, luminous places of infinite images.

The text thus guides the reader, constituting itself as a stimulating condition. The author gives us the instructions to follow, he gives us the perspective to interrogate, but it is up to the spectator/reader to stage the story depicted for himself, in the unity of its meaning.

Thus, we are in the presence of a production of images that do not present a reality but make present a representation of meaning. Therefore, it is in the perspective of the epilogue that the plot must be interpreted, to justify, in the light of the goal, the character of a character, his or her vicissitudes.

Fictional images, i.e. non-impressional images, are capable of making us understand the story painted or narrated not on the back of our real world, but of a background that arises from the narrative itself, as a set of possible events and possible relations between events.

We do not move towards a defined measurement of space, the secondary figures, which we barely distinguish, are not staged to provide us with detailed indications, as even in a fairy tale the assumptions underlying the narrative instructions need not be known to those who imagine, such as knowing the space-time characteristics of the parallel universe of Narnia, or the characteristics of the mythological creatures and animals capable of speaking that the Pevensie brothers encounter in the ancient legend in which they are protagonists.

These represented images bring the story to the scene, they make the scene present. They do not refer to anything else, and the reader must position

himself in the imaginative project that supports them. On the one hand, these depictions represent the boden from which the imagination moves, and on the other, the echo of imaginative moves, of possible worlds in which to live.

Experiencing possible worlds

The theoretical context we have outlined provides us with the possibility of re-reading in a new way that intentional overflow that is contained in the fantasy worlds of fairy tales.

The imaginary scenario that is produced is a fantasy-in, that is, fantasies of a fiktum, in a piece of opaque actual reality of experience.

Fairy tales [...] can be most instructive and revealing about the inner problems of human beings and the right solutions to their difficulties in any society [...] not by means of abstract ethical concepts but by means of what appears in them to be tangibly right and thus of recognisable significance¹¹.

This is the 'mode' of fantasy in fairy tales and fantasy more generally, which allows the reader to experience not only situations, but also values that are not 'abstract', because they are 'tangible'.

Such literary genres, with their experiential content, as an educational setting, act through storytelling: from terrifying fear to the reassuring balance of the victory of good over evil, from the precariousness of the unknown to the dominance of meaning. They also assume a generative function by constructing traces of forms of desire, based on emotion rather than logical abstraction, and capable of moral and spiritual uplift.

The aim is to transform the reader into a centaur, to borrow the image of the Narnia tales as our illustrative canovaccio, who follows the steps of his master's dance, thus initiating a transformation through the experimentation of the ideals fantastically hypothesised in the metamorphosis of the hero's journey.

The forms of fantasy therefore shape the way we perceive emotions and provide the necessary exercise to shape emotional intelligence, because understanding means imagining emotions.

Emotions in the mode of 'as if'. I imagine the emotion I would feel if I were in the position of the Pevenise brothers grappling with the witch. This

¹¹ Bruno Bettelheim, *Il mondo incantato. Uso, importanza e significati psicoanalitici delle fiabe*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1977, p. 11 [translation by the written].

imagination can then bind or even produce fantastic images, in which the imagined emotions take shape.

Meanings have become images, but in these images imagined emotions are condensed, emotions in the way of what-ifs. Imagining allows us to give form to emotions and the world those emotions uphold. What the image must allow us to imagine is not the real thing, but a world, and this happens as we imaginatively transpose ourselves into an emotion, so that rather than depicting the imagination deforms the images.

In imagining emotions, it is therefore the self that changes: it becomes a fantasy self. In the fantasised landscape, however, there is necessarily also a co-fantasised 'I', not 'I' who is here and now, but a fantasy modification of myself, of me who is virtually in this landscape.

There is thus here a division of the self, a multiplication of it: self, this real self, imagines itself to be another self. We have said that, with respect to perception, the imagination has absolute freedom, hence the character of the imagination with respect to the spatial and temporal determinations of perception. The witch emerges from the floor, then appears behind the hero, without having moved in space in accordance with the rules according to which 'real', perceptual objects are constituted. Imagination, consequently, is not integrated into reality, which is instead defined precisely by certain spatio-temporal regularities. It places us on another plane of 'reality', that of the as-if, of a reality as if it were real. And yet certain fixed rules remain even in the imagination. The imagined scene has a foreground and a background, a high and a low, a right and a left. But right and left are structured from a certain point-zero of orientation, and this is represented by me imagining. The imagining subject is thus always present in the imaginative scene, even when he is not directly involved in that imaginary world.

Hence there is a relationship between imagination and reality. The point of attachment is precisely the subject.

So, in this case, in the imagination, the subject is separated, it does not necessarily remain external to the scene, on the contrary, in a peculiar sense, it is always involved in it, even when it does not take part in it.

Therefore, in the imagination we live another life, infinite lives: we experience possible, imaginary worlds.

Imagination is, therefore, a form of consciousness of our being in the world, of our inhabiting and understanding it, it is the faculty of the possible, called into play by the dimension of projectuality.

Beingness, as understanding, projects its being into possibilities. This understanding being-for possibilities-because of the recoil that possibilities, insofar as they are open, have on Being-is a possibility of being. The designing of the understanding has a possibility of its own development. To this development of the understanding, we give the name of interpretation [Auslegung]. In it, the comprehension, by understanding, appropriates what it has comprehended. In interpretation, the understanding does not become other than itself, but itself. Interpretation is existentially grounded in the understanding: it is therefore not derived from the understanding. Interpretation does not consist in the assumption of the understood, but in the elaboration of the possibilities projected in the comprehension¹².

This is the formative value of the imagination, and practising refining this faculty makes the human being complete.

We thus become capable of reacting to complex situations that might happen to us and that it is useful to 'stage', to understand them before they make their way into real life; and thus the imagination also puts us in a condition to be able to give ourselves or others directives to act.

The invisible of the visible is

pensée ou possibilité interne de la vision à plusieurs exemplaires, ce n'est pas un autre visible [...]. C'est un invisible qui est synonyme de la visibilité, qui en est la profondeur ou l'autre côté - c'est un négatif vu à travers positif¹³.

The faculty of imagination transforms the visible object into the invisible image and allows us representation - the making present what is absent for the senses.

¹² Martin Heidegger *Sein und Zeit*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1960, pp. 73-74.

¹³ «Thought or the internal possibility of vision in several copies, it is not another visible [...]. It is an invisible which is synonymous with visibility, which is its depth or other side - it is a negative seen through positive», Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Manuscripts*, Vol. III *La Prose du monde* (263 ff.), f. 202[v], transcribed and translated in full in the volume by D. De Leo, *L'improvvisazione tra dicibile e indicibile*, Mimesis, Milano 2013, p. 88.

This is because thought always arises from experience, but no experience can acquire meaning if it is not subject to the action of the imagination. "Without reliving life in the imagination, one can never live fully"¹⁴.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Isak Dinesen 1885-1963*, in *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York 1968, p. 169.