

## Book Review: Moser, K. and Sukla, A. Ch. (Eds). (2020). *Imagination and Art: Explorations in Contemporary Theory*. Brill

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Aristotle thought that *phantasia* (imagination), perception, and mind were equally important. In one of his works, Aristotle described imagination as “that virtue of which an image occurs in us.” (*De Anima* iii 3 – 428aa1-2) The notion of what Cicero called “the mind’s eye” has recently been researched quite extensively as a “transdisciplinary project” in a solid and elegant collection of essays entitled *Imagination and Art: Explorations in Contemporary Theory* (2020) edited by Keith Moser and Ananta Ch. Sukla, who worked with an eclectic group of international researchers to compile a comprehensive study of the various facets of imagination. Organized in nine parts and presenting 38 essays, this collection is the most comprehensive contribution to the contemporary concept of imagination to date.

As Keith Moser asserts in his introduction, a major contribution of this book is its fresh approach to the idea that “the study of imagination is a quintessential inter-discipline bifurcating in all directions that seemingly knows no bounds.” (p. 2) “Gendered imagination”, the biosemiotic imagination, the Sufi imagination, and the notion of “imaginative resistance” inspired by Freud’s theory of repression are just some examples of sections that are epitomized as “novel frames of reference.”

The idea that the products of our imagination are constantly changing and developing is sometimes overlooked or less researched. In an obviously praising effort, the editor finds names such as David Collins, Michel Dion, Samuel Kimball, and Chandra Kavanagh, who widely recognize this special power of imagination in studies of “how human identity is mediated, constructed, and renegotiated through imagination.” (p. 3)

From the postmodernists and their re-appraisal of debates regarding imagination, the discussion segues to the originality of the whole project, mainly its rethinking of the “Non-Western Perspectives” section, which extends the focus to non-occidental cultures and civilizations around the world. In this seemingly debatable approach, there are completely different views regarding the Arabic, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese cultures, where imagination and art are built, analyzed, and shared socially in what theorists call Orientalism – as opposed to Occidentalism, the pervasive simplistic “colonial” formulation.

Although the sources of inspiration come from a wide array of philosophical, cultural, and artistic traditions, and therefore viewpoints may be not only diverse, but also conflicting, art will always seem to be “a catalyst for stimulating the imagination.” (p. 6) In such a context, Keith Moser contends, art should be treated as quintessential in our understanding of who we are and how we connect with the outside world. In Maxine Greene’s opinion, “the arts have the potential to provoke, inspire, and, most of all, to move,” to which Richard Rorty is quoted to add that literature, for example, will connect us with people who may hold completely different viewpoints, but they are still quite relevant. Nevertheless, when we engage in

discourse on the role of imagination, the concept of “what sort of imaginings to which someone is referring” (p. 8) should be common ground for the sake of clarity.

When imagination is brought together with other mental states like believing, supposing, and conceiving, theorist Neil Sinhababu clearly separates imagination from belief, and to continue the same idea, Anna Ichino adds that “imagining that you have won the lottery is not the same as believing that you have won.” (p. 9) The complexity of the distinction between imagining and conceiving is further tackled by other scholars, including Jody Azzouni in Chapter 12.

The significance of imagination and its role in historical thinking is given ample space in the first section of the book, in which David Konstan, Claude Calame, and Allen Speight expand the idea that imagination is indispensable not only in knowledge acquisition, but also in historical judgement. Therefore, when historical facts are missing, the theorists claim that cultural myths, being available to large masses, may hold a significant function in nation building. This is what history has created through “collective memory that shapes a given society.” (p. 11)

The first two sections “Historical Imagination and Judgement” and “Gendered Imagination” present imagination as an inter-discipline, not subservient to the philosophy of the mind, but a necessary tool in understanding our thirst for knowledge in all disciplines. Furthermore, in Chapter 20, Justin Humphreys, through observation and documentation, discovers that imagination and sciences are associated with major achievements in both Euclidian and Non-Euclidian geometry, with mathematical innovation and reasoning being supported by visualization and therefore imagination.

“Imagination,” writes Aristotle, “is different from either perceiving or discursive thinking, though it is not found apart from sensation or judgment without it.” Aristotle is, in addition, insisting that the act of understanding is always accompanied by imaginative activity. Chapter 1 of *Imagination and Art: Explorations in Contemporary Theory* includes David Konstan’s essay about imagination and art in Classical Greece and Rome, with an entertaining presentation of the Greek and Roman pictorial and literary art able to recreate reality – historically recognized as *mimesis* – “the imitation or representation of an object in another medium” (p. 38) The famous principle that a composition must have a beginning, a middle, and an end comes to us from Aristotle, who was also the first one who thought of parts of speech. In his provocative *Poetics*, he argues that “poetry is more philosophical than history, for history simply records what has happened, but poetry, that is, narrative art, reveals the kinds of things that happen. It is, if anything, truer than history.” (*Poetics* 9.1451a38-b7)

How is the concept of imagination viewed today? As presented in this collection, in her introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Imagination* (2016), Amy Kind refers to the four basic claims about imagination universally agreed upon: “(1) that not every use of the word imagination signifies an act of imagination; (2) ‘imagination is a primitive mental state type (or group of types), irreducible to other mental state types’; (3) imagination is intentional, that is, it is about or has an object (I imagine such and such); and (4) ‘imagination is not constitutively constrained by truth,’ that is, it is speculative and not simply descriptive.” (p. 42) In other words, what we create using our imagination does not have to be real or true. Here the essayist adds that literature, for example, was perceived as an active, social experience of reading together as a group and the imagining was viewed as a conversation with the author, his purpose and his technique. (p. 47)

In a smooth transition from a dialogue with the author to a dialogue of understanding, Allen Speight makes a connection to Hannah Arendt, whose *Life of the Mind* is analyzed from two perspectives: the relation between politics and intellectual life, followed by the effect of poetry and narration within the political world. These two will constitute a plea for the value of imagination in historical thinking and judgement in Chapter 3 of Part 1. To further explore the relevance of historical imagination, Hannah Arendt resorts to Goethe’s *Faust*, still the play with the largest audience numbers on German-language stages, with a small but significant change in the end when Faust is not damned for signing the pact with Lucifer because, as the German poet intended to emphasize, Faustus was in the pursuit of knowledge and therefore was not damned. According to Speight, narrative and suffering become even clearer when he calls on the notion of narrative integrity, which he deems as necessary for “the fullest understanding of relevant historical circumstances” (p. 79), to which he adds “the requisite distance of solitude and the reciprocity of action and suffering.”

Along the same lines, a more recent historical approach to imagining treated as a radical process is carefully examined in “Gender and Imagination: A Feminist Analysis of Shahrnush Parsipur’s *Women without Men*.” (1989) Chapter 5 is therefore dedicated to “Parsipur’s radical imagination through the surrealist technique of automatic writing in addition to how she weaves aesthetic experimentation, Iranian women’s right issues, and resistance to the patriarchal state ideology altogether.” (p. 111) *Women without Men* relates the events that took place after the 1979 revolution in a story of five women in search of freedom. The stereotypical image of the Muslim woman as “a docile subject” is completely changed when the main characters of this novella “break the taboos surrounding virginity and the sexual desire of the female body and use their bodies and minds as interchangeable identities and astatic spaces to resist the bio-political warfare and the control of female bodies.” (p. 113) What makes this surrealistic mode of writing so powerful lies in its aesthetic experimentation as well as its critique of ideology. Furthermore, by posing questions about life and death, Parsipur “takes the reader’s attention towards the unconscious mind.” (p. 126)

A thorough presentation of imagination and its importance for the moral psychology of virtue ethics makes Chapter 8 a necessary return to Aristotle and his discussion of imagination/*phantasia* as it is found in *De Anima* and other psychological writings. By taking into account Aristotle’s imagination, essayist David Collins reminds us that “*phantasia* is a capacity or mode of cognizing possessed by all creatures that have perceptions and desire.” (p. 175) Several essential features of *phantasia* can be found and they are: (1) “it requires perception”; (2) “an image acquired through *phantasia* is similar to the

perception from which I arose”; (3) it “is explicitly described as being possibly either true or false.” (pp. 176-177) Aristotle’s account of perception clearly connects it to *phantasia*, and in doing so, a bridge is formed that “would otherwise be a gap between perception and reason.” (p. 179)

Whether we talk about a novella or any other type of narrative prose, imagination can be explored as a mental power. In Chapter 11, Charles Altieri strives to re-assess the contemporary value of imagination in his essay entitled *The Work Texts Do: Toward a Phenomenology of Imagining Imaginatively*. In his well-developed and extremely well-researched study, the theorist contends that:

1) “In most situations there will be several levels of embedded imaginative activity – and in how the author establishes a presence, in how characters emerge as something with more density and presence than they would have as elements of argumentative structures.” [...]

2) The selection of details is how imagination produces a world in which it solicits our responding imaginative creativity. [...] One could say that Joyce’s originality in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* consists largely in emphasizing the degree to which the author’s choosing is everywhere constitutive so that only the working of self-evidence will enable us to offer coherent interpretations of the several levels composed by such choosings.

3) Within aesthetics this claim to self-evidence has been asserted as a special power of imagination.” (pp. 277- 278)

From perception to images in our mind, if recognition fails, thinking begins because we are trying to make sense. As Erik Bormanis claims in Chapter 18, imagination “is simply one faculty among others, organized by a common sense.” (p. 431) Furthermore, imagination as presented in Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* is “understood in relation to the image of thought.” This leads us to argue that imagination may be “the aim of which is to rediscover and re-create.” (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 1994, p. 138) (Quoted in *Imagination and Art: Explorations in Contemporary Theory*, p. 431) Detached or separated from common sense, the imagination in question should have its own creative abilities. “Like thought and sense, however, the imagination would have to be solicited to imagine, or called to imagine precisely by something we cannot imagine, something to which the imagination cannot adequately and immediately respond.” (p. 432) For further analysis in the same chapter, Deleuze and Guattari’s work entitled *Anti Oedipus* (1983) is used to introduce the concept of desire and its connection to imagination. “Imagination, they would seem to think, is the merely representational faculty in which desire produces not the real, but images of the real.” (p. 435) If we refer back to Aristotle, “a distinct characteristic of the imagination, [...] is precisely its connection with desire, its capacity to be exercised whenever we want it.” (p. 436)

In Chapter 19, Fiona Salis goes even further when she claims that “imagination is often construed as mental imagery” (p. 456) and then refers to Levy’s *Modeling without Models* (2015) arguing that “imagining typically involves having a visual or other sensory-like mental state – a ‘seeing in the mind’s eye.’” (p. 457) In an analogy with literary works, Salis provides a plausible explanation when she says that “the author of fiction creates a new story and the characters involved therein through the activity of storytelling. [...] She tells a story created through her own imagination and she presents it to an audience that is expected to imaginatively engage with it.” (p. 462) Such manipulation leads researchers like Justin Humphreys in his essay entitled *Geometry and Imagination* to elaborate that Aristotle, Proclus, and Kant understood “imagination to be necessary for geometrical cognition.” (p. 475) In Humphreys’ view, we enjoy looking at diagrams, figures, or other similar images because in the process we learn and this gives us pleasure. Why? Is it because we find a meaning in everything we do?

Wendy Wheeler’s essay entitled *Art and Imagination* provides a plethora of surprising ideas, one of which relates to meaning: “Cultures are made of meanings – very often narratives of some sort, sign systems which hang together. [...] Meaning-making is, of course, an act of imagination.” (p. 521) And from meaning-making, we are only one step closer to image-making. “The power of the imagination is, for many of us at least, intimately connected to visual imagery. Our most vivid imaginings commonly revolve around mental visual imagery, and there is a great deal of toing-and-froing between our imaginations and non-mental visual imagery.” (p. 536) Furthermore, if we agree that we start from an imaginative idea and proceed to make that possibility a reality, we find Aaron Copland, who laid claim that “a composer is a kind of magician; out of the recesses of his thought he produces, or finds himself in possession of, the generative idea.” (p. 607)

Compiling all this information was a monumental task, considering the huge volume of encyclopedic information for such a relevant topic. In a fruitful conversation with the reader, the editors managed to find the best way of organizing and channeling a multitude of expert opinions towards a single goal – the revival of interest in the concept of imagination and its profound significance in the study of the human mind.