

A Society Without Imagination: A Lament

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Abstract

This paper explores the loss of imagination in contemporary society as a consequence of the modern tendency to associate the 'real' with the material and quantitative. With reference to the development of Realism by Marx and Freud and its current role as the foundation of modern capitalism, the author draws on the work of Carl Jung, Brazilian theologian Ruben Alves, and cultural theorist Mark Fisher to expose this development and reassert the vital role of the imagination. The subjugation of imagination to Realism is regarded as especially tragic because Realism as an ideology underscores and sponsors a social structure in which the world is divided between those who have power and those upon whom power is exercised. The loss of a proper recognition of the place of the arts in socio-political re-imagination and hope for change is exposed and lamented. Imagination is viewed as not altogether lost, being particularly vested in children and the creative arts, but rather suppressed. In conclusion, despite the way that contemporary social reality presents as permanent and incontrovertible, the paper makes a fervent plea for the recovery of space in which the human soul can reassert its needs and longings into the world.

"All the works of man have their origin in creative fantasy. What right have we then to depreciate imagination?" - C.G. Jung¹

A tragedy of modern society is our loss of faith in the visionary power of imagination to bring forth as yet unconceived possibilities. This depreciation of imagination has its origins in the modern tendency to associate the 'real' with the material and quantitative. What counts is what can be counted. The natural corollary to this is the world of the unreal, into which we now lump imagination, fantasy, illusion, and delusion as interchangeable modes of unreality. A world of facts has become privileged over against the world of the imagination. Our world now belongs to the Realists. Rubem Alves lays out the essential dogmas of the Realist worldview:

"Imagination must be displaced by science, dreams by analysis, our wishes by an objective understanding of the historical processes. The essence of Marxist

¹ C.G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Taylor and Francis, Routledge Classics, 2014), 67.

science, accordingly, is ‘the knowledge of the independence of the forces that actually move history vis-à-vis the psychic consciousness that men might have of them.’ This is the basic dogma of all forms of realism.”²

The primary motif of all Realisms is the disparagement of imagination and its denigration to the realm of unreality. In Freudian Realism, the magician and the dreamer are possessed by the same kind of illusion, springing from the “excessive valuation of their wishes”.³ The way out of these neurotic and maladjusted fantasies, says Freud, is “education to reality”. Imagination must be liberated from its captivity to the pleasure principle and put into the service of reality, where it can be usefully creative rather than neurotically fixated on the fulfilment of primitive wishes.⁴ Thus, for Freud, the goal of psychological health is to become reconciled to the repression of our aspirations and the frustration of our desires.

For Marx this adaptation to reality involves the embrace of scientific analysis as the only locus of engagement with what is real. Marx consistently draws distinctions between what exists *merely* in the imagination and what exists in reality:

“The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.”⁵

Thus, for Marx and Freud, history moves ahead by virtue of its material reality alone. “It is totally irrelevant what this proletariat or even the whole proletariat directly imagines. What matters is what is.”⁶

² Rubem A Alves, “Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment.” In *Christianity and Crisis*, 33 no 15 (Sep 1973), 173-176.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Charles Rycroft, *Imagination and Reality* (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2018), 38.

⁵ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*. 1845. <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a2>>

⁶ Friedrich Engels, quoted in Rubem Alves, *Tomorrow’s Child: Imagination, Creativity and the Rebirth of Culture*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 48.

These ideas have taken a grip on our age because they provide potent ideological support for the economic and political hegemonies of modernity. The Capitalist Realism described by Mark Fisher is the ultimate flowering of the ideological and economic dimensions of Realism into an intractable power structure.⁷ The pantomime of Realist politics has pitted Capitalism and Marxism against one another as alternatives. Yet (ironically) both depend on the same ontological and epistemological categories of Realism. The whole structure has become permanent because it has succeeded in prohibiting the only means available to dismantle its claims and access possible alternatives: Imagination. But what the rationalist assumptions of modern epistemologies have ingeniously concealed is that *all* of our dominant social structures - money, markets, nations, corporations - are in fact imaginary constructs. “We are often fooled”, says William Cavanaugh, “by the seeming solidity of the materials of politics, its armies and officers, into forgetting that these materials are marshalled by acts of the imagination.”⁸ The evangelists of Realism, says Jung, can be likened to the missionary “who pronounces the gods of the ‘poor heathen’ to be illusions...as if what we call the real were not equally full of illusion.”⁹

Imagination is thus not lost but suppressed – it is forced into passivity by our belief in the claim that it can show us nothing real. Imagination is permitted to our children, who are expected to grow out of it before they enter *the real world*. Artists and creatives are granted social permission to explore the world of imagination but can only do so through the patronage of those who make their money doing *real work*. Meanwhile, our political imagination remains energetically invested in the world as it is. We are presented with social reality as permanent; incontrovertible; the way things are, have always been, and will always be. The imagination of the social body slips into unconscious obedience, upholding the present socio-economic order as though it possessed an *a priori* reality, and were not itself a just a conjured invention.

This subjugation of imagination to Realism is especially tragic because Realism as an ideology underscores and sponsors a social structure in which the world is divided between those who have power and those upon whom power is exercised. Dreams of a different order, as expressed by those who are dehumanised by our current arrangements, are dismissed as utopian fantasy. While the keepers of the Realist hegemony find the world too agreeable to imagine anything different.

⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley, Hampshire: Zero Books, John Hunt Publishing, 2009).

⁸ William T. Cavanaugh, “Killing For The Telephone Company: Why The Nation-State Is Not The Keeper Of The Common Good”. In *Modern Theology* 20: 2 (April 2004).

⁹ Jung, 74.

For the rich, the fulfilment of consumer desires prevents the kinds of suffering and conflicts which might give rise to visionary encounters. The mind is kept moving from one thing to another, without ever being able to move beyond things. 'The transience of things is a means towards the permanence of the economic system', said Toffler in 1970.¹⁰ The social imagination remains captured precisely because it is so overstimulated at a surface level. Hegemonies once nullified the search for alternatives by their sheer appearance of permanence. In postmodernity our systems are preserved by the presentation of endless novelty. As Fisher has said

"'Realistic' may once have meant coming to terms with reality experienced as solid and immovable. Capitalist realism, however, entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment...the 'reality' here is akin to the multiplicity of options."¹¹

Meanwhile to live outside of the world of Realism is to lose access to its 'goods'. Those who dare to desire alternatives - inevitably those for whom the current arrangement produces suffering - as a final insult, are dismissed as dreamers:

"A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces Capitalist Realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily is painted as naive utopianism."¹²

C.G. Jung broke with Freudian realism in his affirmation of the discerning validity of our fantasies. For Jung, the '*tap-root*' was not the pleasure principle, but the profound tendency of the psyche towards individuation. Our fantasies are an overflowing into consciousness of the libido energies which propel us towards the possibility of change, growth and greater meaning. "In the ordinary course of things, fantasy does not easily go astray; it is too deep for that, and too closely bound up with the tap-root of human and animal instinct. In surprising ways it always rights itself again."¹³. The arbitrary masks which we are forced to wear in adaptation to our social arrangements block the

¹⁰ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (NY: Random House, 1970), 54.

¹¹ Fisher, 54.

¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

¹³ Jung, 67.

soul's pursuit of wholeness and fulfilment. Fantasy, insofar as it arises in response to these frustrated tendencies, is therefore a rational response to irrational social conditions.¹⁴ We cannot simply sublimate this impulse to more pragmatic concerns. The fantasies which Realism dismisses as illusions may in fact be the whispers of a world waiting to be born.

Imagination is therefore a vehicle for the deepest moral intuitions of the human soul. When the deepest values of the self-conflict with the social structures which have been imposed on the self from without, then it is the social structures which stand in judgement, not the intuitions and fantasies of the imagination. It is our social world which must prove itself to be more than illusion and irrationality. We can, says Alves, trust the desires of the human soul over a world that refuses to meet them. In this sense imagination is the most real expression of our human subjectivity:

“Imagination and personality cannot be separated because personality is imagination made flesh. Whatever is true of personality must hold true for imagination also. Imagination knows, although in an unconscious way, that the order of things we call reality is built upon irrational assumptions.”¹⁵

Our desire to live in a world that makes sense is not a neurotic refusal to live with the facts of existence, but a sign that reality as we know it is not final, fixed or closed. Reality is fluid, and we might, by means of imagination, call forth an alternative situation.

“When man feels, on the contrary, that his intentions are frustrated and his desires repressed by the dominant order, of necessity a magical intention will arise. Why? Because of the very dynamics of consciousness. It must live in a world that makes sense. And a world which denies the aspirations of man as insane does not make sense.”¹⁶

Imaginative fantasy is born in the struggle of living in a world which is inhospitable to the soul and its expansive desire to unfold towards wholeness. The human soul asserts its needs and longings into the world through our tendency to imagine that the world could be other than it is. Is an ideology

¹⁴ Stein Murray, *Jung's Map of the Soul: An Introduction* (Illinois: Carus Publishing Company, 1998).

¹⁵ Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*, 140.

¹⁶ Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*, 81.

which dismisses the agency and power of this fundamental human faculty grounded in reality? Or is it a life-denying fiction?

The structures of Realism must work very hard to overcome the power of imagination. The Powers That Be recognise that dreamers and visionaries have it in their gift to call time on the current social arrangements. Therefore the onslaught against those who dare to dream includes the deployment of shame, insults and contempt - even threats of destitution. 'Utopian', 'dreamer', 'idealist', 'romantic' – these have all become insults – marshalled in dismissal at those who dare to imagine alternatives. Is it any wonder that we choose the mode of adaptation? We surrender and invest our imaginal power into maintaining the jobs, economies, borders, electoral rolls, and systems of education which are the products of the ideology of Realism because alternatives are too costly:

“Thus illusions are born when one discovers that the creative act involves pain, suffering, endurance, and postponement of pleasure. Very often life itself is included in the risk. But this runs counter to our comfortable habits! For the sake of present satisfactions man decides to forget his love. Why go through the pains of pregnancy and the pangs of childbirth? It is easier simply to get fatter.”¹⁷

But how do social structures which so deliberately blight human lives and decline to serve humanity's most profound needs persist through time? Malcolm Gladwell, in his masterful podcast *Revisionist History*, has explored this question.¹⁸ Gladwell starts by questioning the stubborn persistence of private country clubs and golf courses in his home city of Los Angeles – an urban environment with a notorious lack of public green space. How, he asks, is it possible that in the second most populous US city huge tracts of green space are enclosed for exclusive use by a tiny handful of the city's most wealthy residents? To explain, Gladwell invokes the philosophical concept of 'spacio-temporal continuity'. We are familiar with this concept through the parable of *The Ship of Theseus*, which remains the same ship despite the replacement of every single one of the boards comprising its physical structure. In the same way the country club remains an independent and continuous entity - despite the revolving door of its membership.¹⁹ Through the principle of spacio-

¹⁷ Ibid., 144.

¹⁸ Malcom Gladwell, "A Good Walk Spoiled." <http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/11-a-good-walk-spoiled>.

¹⁹ Cf. S. Marc Cohen, "Identity, Persistence, and the Ship of Theseus" <https://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/theseus.html>. (Copyright © 2004).

temporal continuity the country clubs of LA have achieved independence from the circumstances and people involved with their establishment. This ontological permanence allows them to continue their colonisation of the city uninterrupted, exploiting tax loopholes to further entrench their claims over the land.

We might say this differently: The city of Los Angeles has been landscaped by the dead. The ghosts of the country club's founding members - city elites from the Jim Crow era - patrol the course, warding off those who might have different ideas about the use of these green spaces. Parks, allotments, recreation centres, inner city farms, public gardens – and all other ideas about alternative uses that could serve the community are dismissed by the ghosts as impractical - unrealistic! The country club is a zombie organisation. Its soul is dead, but its physical form lumbers on through time, sustained parasitically on the tax subsidisation and stunted imagination of the city's residents. Inner city golf courses are just one example. We are in fact surrounded by such zombie organisations – the zombie apocalypse is already upon us 'What is an aristocracy', asks Gladwell 'but a political formulation of the spacio-temporal continuity principal?' More zombies in our midst!

The real zombies are immaterial. They exist only in the invisible recesses of the collective imagination. Rather than attacking and consuming human bodies like their movie counterparts, zombie organisations draw their sustenance through their parasitic relationship to the collective psyche. We cannot say that the human imagination is lost. Humans are irrepressibly imaginative creatures. Instead, we can say that imagination is captured or colonised. Zombie organisations dwell as tapeworm-like parasites in the human psyche; absorbing its energy; sucking its power into themselves; growing as we passively allow them to take up residence in our organs of perception; swelling whenever someone is fooled by the organisation's claims to be natural, immutable, and inevitable. Just like their bumbling movie-cousins, zombie organisations are, I suspect, surprisingly easy to dispatch. Despite their appearance of invincibility, the zombies who haunt the modern psyche would disappear in puff were we ever to radically and collectively divest our imaginations and start dreaming seriously and intentionally about alternatives. It is the ideology of Realism which prevents this. For by describing the imagination in relationship to delusion, Realism has nullified the only human faculty that can be used to challenge the claims of the Realist hegemony.

The pretence of ontological permanence, says Walter Brueggemann, is not a bug in the system but its objective. “The Royal Consciousness”, as he calls the dominant socio-political imagination:

“...means to overcome history and therefore by design the future loses its vitality and authority. The present ordering, and by derivation the present regime, claims to be the full and final ordering. That claim means there can be no future that either calls the present into question or promises a way out of it.”²⁰

In our age the captivating ideology is a modernist Realism which depreciates imagination to a lower order, outside the bounds of ‘reality’ - therefore aborting alternatives at the point of their conception. The particular mechanics vary from age to age. But all systems of Royal Consciousness in whichever age, have in common the effective nullification of the possibility of alternatives to the current arrangements of power.

And so, the *Ship of Theseus* sails on. We replace one board with another and call it change, lacking the courage to ask if we might build something different. Our situation seems hopeless. The present moment does not contain the material needed for the construction of alternatives.

“By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.”²¹

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²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 101.

²¹ Psalm 137:1. ESV Study Bible. English Standard Version, Crossway, 2011.

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