

Harold Pinter's *Old Times* and the play of indistinction

The confluence of memory, imagination and the real

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Abstract

This article analyses the fluid frontiers of imagination, memory and the real in Harold Pinter's *Old Times*. While the latter notions of memory and the real in Pinter's works have been extensively explored, the concept of imagination has not. In this article I argue that the concept of imagination as it has been interpreted since the mid-1900s—which exactly tries to grasp or even dissolve these fluid frontiers—offers a way of rethinking both Pinter's discussion of dramatic truth, the notion of 'the real' as it appears to his characters, and how memory is presented in his plays. An attentiveness to the concept of imagination as an analytical approach, will also allow us new ways for understanding how the text implies a potential engagement with his audience.

KEYWORDS

August Strindberg, drama, dream, Harold Pinter, imagination, memory

1 | INTRODUCTION

Henry Woolf, a long-time friend of Harold Pinter, once stated that: 'In Pinterland the frontiers between memory, imagination, and the "real", world we seem to inhabit are fluid'. (H. Woolf, 'Where is Pinterland? A few thoughts about *Ashes to Ashes*'. *The Pinter Review*, 2011, p. 146, cited in Ali, 2018, 7). This ontological 'fluidity' of his plays was also the point of departure when Pinter famously opened his Nobel lecture by citing his essay 'Writing for the theatre' (1958):

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'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.' Because, he continued, 'the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many' (Pinter, 2006, 22). Pinter draws a distinction between 'the exploration of reality through art' and the exploration of truth and falseness 'as a citizen' (p. 22). While he is adamant that the political truth must be pursued, and indeed that there is a definitive truth to be found, dramatic truth is 'forever elusive' and continuously contested (p. 22). As he states: 'These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost' (p. 22).¹

While the notions of memory and the real in Pinter's works have been extensively explored, the concept of imagination has evaded closer inspection. Exploring, qualifying and contextualising the concept of imagination in relation to Pinter would, I posit, deepen our understanding of his works and allow us to recognise how he was not only in line with, but also anticipated, the theories and empirical studies of imagination that have been emerging since the mid-twentieth century. Taking *Old Times* (1971) as an example of how the concept of imagination might be more broadly applicable to Pinter's works for the stage, I will argue that the concept of imagination as it has been interpreted since the mid-1900s—interpretations that try to grasp these fluid frontiers—offers a way of re-thinking Pinter's discussion of dramatic truth, the notion of 'the real' as it appears to his characters, and how memory is presented in his plays. An understanding of imagination, and the recognition of imagination as an analytical approach, will also allow us to see how Pinter's plays—along with the texts of other playwrights, such as Samuel Beckett—imply a potential engagement with his audience.

Old Times, together with plays such as *Landscape* (1967), *Silence* (1968), *Monologue* (1973), *No Man's Land* (1975), and also the dramatic sketch *Night* (1967), have traditionally been categorised as 'memory plays' (e.g. Dukore, 1988, 87–100). As summarised by Varun Begley in *Modern Drama*:

These works rest on the premise that memory, when expressed in language, is a way of transforming the self, of negotiating one's relations to others and defining a place within the objective world. Collectively, the 'memory' plays are often seen as a kind of extended mediation on damaged consciousness, with the new stress on inwardness considered as a complement or response to the harrowing objectivity of his earlier works.

(Begley, 2002, 639)

Earlier scholarship has tended to stress the interpretation of *Old Times* as a 'memory contest' (Kreps, 1979, 54). This contest for 'superior knowledge' (Billington, 2009, 367), primarily with the characters Anna and Deeley 'competing to re-create the past' (Quigley, 1987, 17), has been described as an ongoing 'language struggle' (Knowles, 1995, 130) for the 'ultimate possession' of Kate (Billington, 2009, 367). Accordingly, 'memory is a weapon' (Dukore, 1988, 93), and recollections of the past are consequently 'tools for gaining advantage' (Batty, 2005, 52). Indeed, '[m]emories arouse rivalry and battles for domination through participation in a past or through one's ability to persuade another to accept an interpretation of it' (Dukore, 1988, 93). Another interpretive strategy has been that of stressing the 'fallibility of memory' (Knowles, 1995, 130) and how the past cannot 'be a verifiable record of the past' since '[t]he past is presented as possessing fluid, amorphous qualities that ultimately belie any attempt to construct present certainty from them' (Batty, 2005, 52, 53).

I hypothesise, however, that the consensus categorising a significant part of Pinter's writing for the stage as 'memory plays', zooming in on either the dominance or accuracy of memory, has perhaps hindered interpretations from other (cognitive) angles that might both complicate and go beyond the nature of memory. I propose that imagination may offer an alternative perspective, which might also serve to inform the often noted 'problems' of 'uncertainty' and 'puzzling' qualities in Pinter's plays. Studies of imagination, especially since the 1960s, be they in cultural and social theory or neuroscience, have specifically challenged the dichotomy between the real and unreal, suggesting that the lines between perception, imagination and memory are at the very least blurry or even,

in the extreme consequence, non-existent. Via *Old Times* this article will explore the following questions: How do imagination and memory inform our perception of reality? How do imagination and memory inform our sense of self and others? What are the relations between imagination, memory and fictionalisation? How does the confluence of imagination, memory and perception engage the spectator in the performance of the play?

2 | TOWARDS A CONFLUENCE OF THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY

In his December 1971 conversation with Mel Gussow (1933–2005), Pinter considers the difficulty of discerning the real and the imaginary: 'The fact is it's terribly difficult to define what happened at any time. I think it's terribly difficult to define what happened yesterday. [...] So much is imagined and that imagining is as true as real' (Gussow, 1994, 17). This blending of memory and imagination and the elusiveness of reality is a recurring concern for Pinter. In 'Writing for the theatre', for example, he describes the difficulty of remembering and of establishing the veracity of the real:

I don't mean merely years ago, but yesterday, this morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened? If one can speak of the difficulty of knowing what in fact took place yesterday, one can I think treat the present in the same way. What's happening now? We won't know until tomorrow or in six months' time, and we won't know then, we'll have forgotten, or our imagination will have attributed quite false characteristics to today. A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth.

(Pinter, 1977, 11)

Pinter here calls attention to the ontological challenge both of recalling the past *and* of experiencing the present. Indeed, Pinter specifically points out the elusiveness of memory and contribution of imagination to the experience of the present moment and thus to future memories. If indeed, as he says, '[a] moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth', and this moment is already conditioned by elusive past experiences, then how can we know reality? This confluence of memory, imagination and reality seems to me pertinent to understanding Pinter's dramaturgy, and perhaps it is time to turn our attention from 'the difficulty of knowing what in fact took place yesterday' to—what's happening now? And to recognise the key role imagination plays in creating this now.

The cognitive turn in drama and literature has brought attention to topics such as conceptual blending theory, emotion and memory (see, e.g., Cook, 2010; Zunshine, 2015), but studies of imagination and drama are still scarce, despite growing interest in the topic in various fields, such as philosophy and neuroscience. In my book *The Theatre of Imagining: A Cultural History of Imagination in the Mind and on the Stage* (2018), I have traced the history of imagination and its relations to drama and theatre. The notion of imagination appears to be conspicuously taken for granted as a fundamental human capacity, while also being considered as essentially elusive.

Ever since the very first attempts to describe imagination, its role—and problem in relation to sensory experience and memory has presented a core epistemological challenge in the annals of philosophy and science. In *De anima* (*On the Soul*, c. 350 BC), Aristotle conceptualised imagination as an intermediary faculty functioning as a 'messenger' that transformed, or 'mirrored', sensory impressions into mental images, which were then passed on to the faculty of reason and stored in memory (Aristotle, 1986). Imagination was thus categorised as a *precondition* for knowing and remembering reality. With shifting balances, examination of the role of imagination in shaping reality has continued throughout the millennia and is still at the core of contemporary theory and the science of imagining. Whether conceived as idealising and beatifying reality (in the long nineteenth century)² or irrealising and annihilating reality (in the first half of the twentieth century),³ neither imagination nor perception are ever neutral, and reality is never objective—and thus it follows that memory cannot be either.

In his study of the creative imagination of Romanticism, James Engell describes how the 'faculties of the mind affect each other; they mix and transfer power, until they abolish the partitions between them and form one flow

of sensation, ideas, reflection, and language' (Engell, 1981, 339). With reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), Engell explains imagination as the medium through which the subjective and objective 'interpenetrate', so that it is impossible 'to talk of subjective and objective facets in the mind' (p. 339). However, the Romantic, or Idealist, conception of imagination retains the idea of imagining as involving a mental image derived from sensation.

In contrast, theories of imagination that appear around the turn of the twentieth century tend to emphasise 'imagination's prowess to *fashion* truth rather than merely represent it' (Kearney, [1991] 1998, 5). This shift was initiated with Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) theory of phenomenology in, for example, *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901), and developed by, among others, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), the first philosopher of the century to undertake a full-scale study of imagination, *L'imagination* (1936). 'Intentionality—this is the essential structure of all consciousness', Sartre writes (Sartre, 2012, 129), echoed in 1954 by François Lyotard (1924–1998) who states that: 'All experiences, actual or inactual, are equally intentional' (Lyotard, 1991, 55). The phenomenological interpretation of imagination rejects the idea of the existence of intermediary mental images, rather deeming it 'a form of organized consciousness that relates' to an object (Sartre, 2012, 132). In consequence, Sartre would later characterise the imagining conscience as the opposite of the consciousness of sensory perception, as an 'irrealizing' or even negating or annihilating consciousness—'the imaging consciousness posits its object as a nothingness' (Sartre, 2004, 11).

In the latter part of the twentieth century, theories of imagination, across the range of academic disciplines, have interpreted imagination by way of the ambiguity, and even confluence, of imagination and perception, the imaginary and the real, imagination and memory. In consequence, recent research on imagination points to an intertwinement of imagination and sensory perception, so closely entangled that they cannot be separated but instead blend and even work through the same neural mechanisms.

Distinctions have by now collapsed, giving way to that which I have characterised as a confluence of the real and the imaginary; a confluence in which memory also plays a central role. In this confluence the streams can no longer be distinguished, and it is unclear from which stream the water originated.

In neuroscience, for example, imagination has been the subject of growing interest. Intriguingly, neuroimaging (fMRI) studies have not served to demarcate between imagination and perception, but rather to underscore their interdependence. For example, imaginary stimuli generate emotional responses via the same neural pathways as stimuli that we perceive with our senses (Schroeder, 2006). The imagination is intrinsically tied to the body and embodied experience; fictions not only feel real, but *are* real—what we imagine shapes our perception and what we imagine is rooted in our body. Professor of psychobiology Vittorio Gallese (b. 1959) thus criticises the prevalence of Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief' as a purely cognitive capacity, stressing that 'at the core of our perceptions, of our understanding and of our imagination is the body' (Gallese, 2011, 199). Gallese thus argues for an 'embodied simulation theory', which explains how we understand, or 'decode' (Gallese, 2005, 42), one another's actions, emotions and sensations. This embodied simulation not only implies an integration of imagining and cognising, but also a 'strong interaction of emotion and action' (p. 36). Gallese's theory is complemented by a series of studies by neuroscientists Christopher C. Berger and Henrik Ehrsson detailing how the belief that the rational perception of reality and subjective imagining are fundamentally distinct is false. They make the radical proposal that our perception actually relies on a 'fusion of mental imagery and sensation' (Berger & Ehrsson, 2014, 13684). Their studies show that imagination is not only like sensation, or interacts with sensation, but may even change sensory experiences. Our perception of reality is thus inherently imagined. What we imagine we are seeing affects what we actually see. Furthermore, they have pointed to a multisensory integration, an overlapping of different sensory input, where a sound that we imagine hearing affects what we actually see (Berger & Ehrsson, 2017).

Martin Esslin (1918–2002) is thus right on point when he observes of *Old Times* that 'behind all these menacing images is the opaqueness, the uncertainty and precariousness of the human condition itself. How can we know who we are, how can we verify what is real and what is fantasy, how can we know what we are saying, what is being said to us?' (Esslin, 1973, 52).

Correspondingly, imagination and memory are recognised as being closely intertwined. In their book *Consciousness: How Matter Becomes Imagination*, Gerald M. Edelman (1929–2009) and Giulio Tononi (b. 1960) have highlighted the relation between memory and imagination, claiming that 'every act of perception is, to some degree, an act of creation, and every act of memory is, to some degree, an act of imagination' (Edelmann & Tononi, 2000, 101). This statement strongly echoes Pinter's words at the opening of this section. fMRI studies, too, have concluded that imagination and memory share a common basis where 'a distributed brain network, including the hippocampus, is recruited during both episodic memory recall and the visualization of fictitious experiences' (Hassabis, Kumaran & Maguire, 2007, 14373). The problem of establishing the veracity of the real, which Pinter pinpointed as being due to the confluence of imagination, memory and experience, can thus be detected at the neural basis of cognition. Anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano's (b. 1939) study of how various cultures imagine the otherworldly, *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* (2004), thus sets out to describe 'the paradoxical ways in which the irreality of the imaginary impresses the real on reality and the real of reality compels the irreality of the imaginary'. Crapanzano poignantly describes how: 'These ways cannot be separated. They are in dialectical tension. They are like lovers so entangled in each other that any determination of a singular body—or soul—is almost arbitrary' (Crapanzano, 2004, 15). This metaphor of the real and imaginary as entangled lovers, being as one, might allow us to grasp the ontology of *Old Times* where Pinter's lovers, too, are 'entangled'.

3 | THE AMBIGUITY OF PAST, PRESENCE AND THE IMAGINARY IN OLD TIMES

In his conversation with Gussow, Pinter also stated that: 'What interests me a great deal is the mistiness of the past' (Gussow, 1994, 16). This 'mistiness of the past' is at the centre of *Old Times*, which not only explores how memories are remembered, but also how memories are acts of imagination and fictionalisation. Indeed, it becomes impossible to distinguish where 'real' memories end and fictive memories begin. Moreover, the play also suggests that the reality of imagined memories, which have never in fact occurred, is as valid, or real, as memories of actual events. Imagination and memory merge and become indistinct as they come into being. As one of the characters, Anna, famously puts it in an oft-quoted passage: 'There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened, but as I recall them so they take place' (Pinter, 1971, 32). With this statement, Anna (like Pinter) seems to imply that remembering is a creative act of fictionalisation that becomes real by being imagined. *Old Times* explores the blurry lines between the real and the imaginary by contesting, exploring, revising and ultimately dissolving the borders between them.

Deeley and Kate, a middle-aged couple, are waiting for Anna—Kate's one-time roommate and possibly best (or only) friend—to arrive. From the very beginning of the play, the spectators are denied any sense of certainty. Anna was 'fuller than' Kate, she 'think[s]' (Pinter, 1971, 7), Kate 'suppose[s]' that Anna remembers her (p. 9); indeed, Kate says of Anna that she 'hardly remember[s] her'— 'I've almost totally forgotten her,' she says (p. 12). Anna, however, is already present on stage when the play opens—visible and physically present to the audience but apparently unrecognised by and physically absent to the characters—standing in the dim light at a window, but she does not speak until midway through Act One. She thus literally embodies—as 'a phantasmagorical role' (Batty, 2001, 62)—the ontological in-betweenness of the real and the imaginary, past and present, which will become central to the play.

Halfway into Act One, Anna suddenly turns to engage with Kate and Deeley, and the play transforms into what—rather than the above-mentioned memory contest—might be called a negotiation of memory and imagination, with Deeley and Anna both offering their respective memories of Kate. As they reminisce about the past, it soon becomes apparent that their respective memories diverge. What really happened? What are they imagining happened? Are the characters at all trustworthy? The spectators are left to guess. Kate herself remains vague as

to whether their recollections are real or not. While Kate is not offering any 'factuality' herself, and in fact *cannot* remember herself—for instance, 'I was interested once in the arts, but I can't remember now which ones they were' (Pinter, 1971, 37)—she only comes into being for the audience, and only vaguely so, when Deeley and Anna recall their memories of her—as a reversal of Deeley's and Kate's speculations about Anna in the first part of Act One. What is more, at times both Deeley and Anna struggle to remember and repeatedly revise their memories as they recount them. Anna, for instance, recalls an episode when an unknown man was in the flat she shared with Kate, at one point lying across Kate's lap on her bed, at another point sobbing in their armchair: 'The man came over to me, quickly [...] No, no, I'm quite wrong ... he didn't move quickly ... that's quite wrong ... he moved ... very slowly' (p. 32). The revision is substantial enough to call into question Anna's credibility as a witness or narrator (or creator) of the event. There is also a vagueness to her remembered experience when she 'only saw two shapes' (presumably Kate and the man) and 'never saw his face clearly' (p. 33). At times, Deeley's and Anna's recollections of Kate even seem to be at odds; for example, with whom did she watch the movie *Odd Man Out* (pp. 29, 38)? The audience is left speculating which story 'really happened' and whether the memories are confused or downright invented. Or imagined. Or, perhaps, dreamt?

This ambiguity not only involves memories of the past but also the scenic presence. As Act One progresses, it even becomes unclear whether the spectators are witnessing the past or the present; for example, as Kate and Anna discuss what to do and whether or not to go out (Pinter, 1971, 43 ff.), are they there in the present with Deeley, are they *simulating* a memory, or are they there in the past, in a flashback, when they were living together? Past and present also converge with the dialogue in the scenic 'now' echoing memories recounted earlier; for example, when Anna responds to Kate's 'I said you talk about me as if I *am* dead. Now', her line 'How can you say that, when I'm looking at you now, seeing you so shyly poised over me, looking down at me—' (p. 35) echoes her earlier recounted memory of the man who 'looked down at me' (p. 32). Anna has deliberately not responded to Deeley's questioning: 'What kind of man was he?' remains unanswered; 'What did he look like, this fellow?' is answered with a vague 'I never saw his face clearly'. Indeed, 'It was as if he'd never been' (p. 33). By not giving the spectators any specific visuality in the narrated memory, Kate becomes the on-stage, present visualisation of the representation of the past. Maybe we can already observe an attempted simulation of the past. And perhaps this is why Deeley breaks off their conversation with a sharp 'Stop that!' followed by a pause? If so, remembering becomes a more playful act of imagination that fictionalises not only the past, but also the present.

A turning point comes when Kate leaves to take a bath, and Deeley reveals that he has a memory of Anna. He recalls meeting Anna in a pub, The Wayfarers Tavern. Anna pretended to be Kate, wearing her underwear, and Deeley was gazing up her skirt (Pinter, 1971, 48 ff.). Of this, he is sure: 'I never forget a face' (p. 49), he asserts, later reinforcing this with 'It's the truth. I remember clearly' (p. 50). However, Deeley later admits that 'If I walked into The Wayfarers Tavern now, and saw you sitting in the corner, I wouldn't recognize you' (p. 57). Anna vehemently denies their meeting, but later reveals a similar memory of having borrowed Kate's underwear and being at a party where a man 'had spent the whole evening looking up my skirt' (p. 65). Has she initially been forgetful, has she repressed this particular memory, or has she decided that she does not want to remember? Dramaturgically, her 'reversed' memory contributes to establishing the uncertainty of the real and the imaginary. After all, as David Saltz has put it, in a Pinter play 'one cannot simply take the truth of a character's description of the past for granted' (Saltz, 1992, 228).

Towards the end of Act Two, Deeley's originally solid memory seems to disintegrate, and he recounts a different version of their meeting, even blurring the characters of Anna and Kate: 'Maybe she was you. Maybe it was you, having coffee with me, saying little, so little' (Pinter, 1971, 69). But as Deeley seems to waver, Anna suddenly remembers: 'I remember you well,' she retorts (p. 70). This is the point at which Kate, having barely spoken beforehand, finally offers an account of her own memories: 'I remember you dead,' she says to Anna, demonstrating that just as memory can create, it can destroy. Kate recounts how Anna's corpse was lying in her bed, her 'face scrawled with dirt' (p. 72). She proceeds with an account of how she brought a man—Deeley, we might infer—into the room, how he took over Anna's bed, where she also 'plastered his face with dirt' (p. 73). This time, Kate is

blurring the characters of Anna and Deeley. The final tableau is yet another blurring of scenic images of past and present, with a reprise of Anna's earlier recollection of the man first lying across Kate's lap, later sitting, slumped, in the armchair; this time performed—or re-enacted (?)—by Deeley (p. 74).

4 | OLD TIMES—A DREAM PLAY?

This dramaturgical structure of ambiguity invokes that of August Strindberg's (1849–1912) *A Dream Play* (1901), in which Agnes, daughter of the god Indra, has come to earth to experience and understand the nature of human suffering.⁴ In his note to the play, Strindberg describes a fictive reality where '[a]nything can happen; everything is possible and probable'. Strindberg goes on to state that: 'on a slight groundwork of reality, *imagination spins and weaves new patterns* made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations' (Strindberg, 1955, 193, my italics). This observation of imagination spinning and weaving new patterns seems to me an extremely relevant description of the fluid ambiguity in *Old Times*, which leaves the audience speculating upon not only what is real, imagined and remembered, but also whether or not the characters are real or imagined, alive or dead; for example, Kate's 'You talk of me as if I were dead' (Pinter, 1971, 34)—later corrected to 'as if I am dead. Now' (p. 35). Strindberg describes how his characters in *A Dream Play* 'are split, double and multiply; evaporate, crystallise, scatter and converge', while a single consciousness 'holds sway over them all' (Strindberg, 1955, 193). In the same way, the three characters of *Old Times* are, as we have seen, difficult to grasp and discern, and so too is the reality they inhabit. Rather than one ruling consciousness, they all seem to be contributing to the shaping of and the struggle for domination of their reality.

Several critics have taken a 'dream play' approach to an understanding of Pinter's dramaturgy, including that of *Old Times*. Lucina Gabbard, for example, looking from a strongly Freudian perspective, saw *Old Times*, together with *Landscape*, *Silence* and *No Man's Land*, as a group of plays 'that can be viewed as punishment dreams because in every case the husband figure is bereft of the wife/mother's love; he is always the loser—punished' (Gabbard, 1976, 209). Gabbard argues for the 'validity of approaching this play as a dream where behaviour is bizarre and characters are frequently split in accordance with the antithetical forces warring within them' (p. 249). Martin Esslin, likewise taking a psychoanalytical approach, detects three possible levels to the play: as realistic feud (where Deeley and Anna are antagonists vying for the attention and love of Kate), as a dream (which in Esslin's view would be a nightmare of Deeley's), or as a game (acting out a *marriage-à-trois*). 'But of course,' he concludes, 'the three levels must mingle: the dream is fraught with reality; reality and the memories of which it is composed has a dreamlike quality; and games are dreams made up from fragments of reality' (Esslin, 1973, 189).⁵ While Esslin interprets the play as possibly being a dream of Deeley's, it is, in fact, Kate who is described by the other characters as the dreamer. For example, Anna says of Kate that 'She was always a dreamer' (Pinter, 1971, 23, repeated on p. 24) and 'Sometimes, walking in the park, I'd say to her, you're dreaming, wake up, what are you dreaming? And she'd look round at me, flicking her hair, and look at me as if I were part of her dream' (pp. 24–25). But rather than interpreting the play as a dream image exposing unconscious desires, or as a nightmare, I suggest, based on recent and current theories of imagination, that we should understand the dream as the imaginary condition of reality.

Of Strindberg's dream-play technique (which also appears in, for example, *Ghost Sonata* and *To Damascus*), Richard Bark has stated that:

In Strindberg's dream plays there is always a sort of reality (fictitious, of course) established, but this reality is either suddenly or gradually transformed into a dreamlike one and then, in a permanent motion, returned to its original state. Sometimes 'objective' reality and dreamlike reality appear simultaneously. The boundaries are impossible to draw. It is through special relationships, changes, and contrasts between these two levels, that the dream atmosphere is created, above all as it is

expressed in the relation between the protagonist and his or her reality. Dream atmosphere is always created in contrast with the 'reality' of the fictitious world of the play. I shall delineate these structures beginning with the protagonist, who may be confronted with a dreamlike reality as the spectator of a play-within-a-play, or perhaps drawn into it, becoming a dream character.

(Bark, 1988, 100–101)

There are several important points in Bark's observations that we can apply to Pinter's dramaturgy, and which not only apply to *Old Times*, but to his plays more generally. Like Strindberg, Pinter establishes and takes his point of departure in a recognisable 'objective' reality, such as the apparent realism of Deeley's and Kate's sitting room, which becomes obscured, infected or replaced by a 'dreamlike reality', a fictive, imagined reality, to the degree that they cannot be told apart. Perhaps, I would propose, rather than seeking out delineation of the real and unreal or crowning a winner of the 'reality contest', we should attune ourselves to the nuances, 'the relationships, changes, and contrasts' between the *multiple simultaneous* levels of sensory perception, imagination and memory that make up reality. After all, as Agnes explains to the Poet towards the conclusion of *A Dream Play*: 'This world, its life and its inhabitants are therefore only a mirage, a reflection, dream-image' (Strindberg, 1955, 257). Rather than viewing *Old Times* as an experience of reality as dream, an investigation of the nature of memory, or the re-shaping of the past in relation to the present, I suggest that what becomes apparent in *Old Times* is that reality itself is elusive. The recent theories outlined in this article about the relations of imagination and memory to reality may help us understand this elusiveness as a basic condition of being.

5 | MEMORY, IMAGINATION AND FICTIONALISATION

Mark Batty has noted the 'fiction-like qualities of remembrance' in *Old Times*, in particular how the characters are authoring (Kate and Deeley of Anna) and re-authoring (Anna) each other (Batty, 2001, 62, 64, 67). This fictionalisation of memory might allow us to look more closely at the role played by imagination in the (re)creation of the past and present. In the article 'Three emotional stories: Reflections on memory, the imagination, narrative, and the self', Siri Hustvedt (b. 1955), author of the novel *Memories of the Future* (2019)—which grapples with similar themes of the intertwining of imagination and memory—compares the act of writing fiction to the act of remembering, both being equally dependent on imagination and emotion. 'Writing fiction is like remembering what never happened,' Hustvedt says, echoing Anna's statement on manifesting the presence of memories that might never have been (Hustvedt, 2011, 187). Accordingly, 'the mental activity we call memory and what we call the imagination partake of the same mental processes' (p. 187). With reference to psychoanalytical and neuroscientific studies, Hustvedt elucidates how:

Fictions are born of the same faculty that transmutes experience into the narratives we remember explicitly but which are formed unconsciously. Like episodic memories and dreams, fiction *reinvets* deeply emotional material into meaningful stories, even though in the novel, characters and plots are not necessarily anchored in actual events. And we do not have to be Cartesian dualists to think of *imagination as a bridge* between a timeless core sensorimotor affective self and the fully self-conscious, reasoning, and/or narrating linguistic cultural self, rooted in the subjective–intersubjective realities of time and space. *Writing fiction, creating an imaginary world, is, it seems, rather like remembering what never happened.*

(p. 195, my italics)

According to Hustvedt, remembering is therefore a narrative act. Memories are reconfigured as they are narrated, and as fictional narratives they are reconfigurations of a fictionalising consciousness.⁶ The narration relies

on the individual emotions associated to the event or the time of reinvention.⁷ The understanding of memory as a narrative and emotionally conditioned act thus allows us to understand why some details of an experience are remembered clearly, while others have faded, and why the memory of one character can significantly differ from another's recollections of the same event. Pinter explores this entwinement of memory and fictional narration not only in *Old Times*, but also in *Landscape* (1968), where the characters Beth and Duff have conflicting memories: Beth, in her internal monologue, remembers tenderness in what might be an imagined memory; Duff, in his monologue directed towards the audience, remembers raping Beth. Memory blends with the imaginary and fictionalising processes. We can compare this to Deeley and Anna 'writing' alternate versions of Kate's history by way of their separate memories in a fusion of what *might have happened* with what *might have been*. That is: a fictionalisation of the memory, which simultaneously shapes, or fictionalises, the present. The dramaturgy of *Old Times* can accordingly be viewed as a dramaturgy of playing with (or inventing) potentialities of different versions of the past, imagining, or shaping several 'possible realities' (Kreps, 1979, 47), which to the audience are ultimately indeterminable—but are constructed as a process of fictionalisation.⁸ If memory is imaginary, and a process of fictionalisation, the characters' strategies for their shaping of the memories are also important to note; for example, Kate's withholding of her memory until the conclusion of the play, and her refusal either to confirm or deny the memories of Deeley or Anna. She thus seems to utilise the ontological confluence to gain advantage until she erases the prior narrative and creates another.

Stephen Martineau has noted how Pinter's dramaturgy of the past becomes 'essentially dramatic when explored through conflicting memories' and points of view. The dramatic potential lies in the uncertainty that keeps the audience in 'continuous suspense' (Martineau, 1973, 291). Martineau alleges that 'the question, what really happened in the past, does not concern Pinter beyond its function as dramatic suspense; what does deeply concern him is how each character tells of the past and what motives lie behind such contradictory and fantastical accounts' (p. 291). However, a central challenge in *Old Times* is, as I have shown, the interpreting or untangling of the characters. It is uncertain as to whether the three characters of *Old Times* are in fact separate characters or perhaps aspects of the same consciousness, as we shall explore below.

5.1 | THE CONFLUENCE OF THE SELF AND THE OTHER

Esslin, among others, has noted that while Pinter's 'dialogue and [...] characters are real, [...] the over-all effect is one of mystery, of uncertainty, of poetic ambiguity'. Pinter's dramaturgy is thus characterised by an 'element of uncertainty about the motivation of the characters, their background, their very identity' (Esslin, 1973, 37). In *Old Times*, there is thus not only an uncertainty about whether the characters are separate characters or aspects of one consciousness, but also whether they are all there in the present or appearing from both past and present.⁹ Who are Kate, Deeley and Anna? Are two or three of them aspects of one another? Should we conceive Anna as an imagined or dreamt-up character, or a projection of a repressed memory? Or, as Billington speculates, 'Are all three characters dead and simply re-experiencing some past meeting?' (Billington, 2009, 366). The play leaves its questions unanswered—or perhaps, more precisely, with several possible answers.¹⁰ In her article 'Time and Harold Pinter's possible realities: Art as life, and vice versa', Barbara Kreps asserts that the ontological problem in the 'difficulty in verifying " what happened"' is intrinsically related to 'the problem of verifying identity' (Kreps, 1979, 48). Mark Batty, too, has pointed to the problem of constituting one's identity when faced with an elusive memory: '[...] memory is elusive and uncapturable. As such it not only serves as a rich source of content for an artist, but also has powerful metaphoric qualities when paralleled with an individual's confrontation with what constitutes their own identity' (Batty, 2005, 53). The questions of who is who—and for the characters, who am I?—seem impossible to answer. As Deeley says to Kate: 'Maybe she [Anna] was you' (Pinter, 1971, 69). So how might we make sense of the three characters? Again, exploring the concept of imagination will allow us not only to note, but to understand the nature of this elusiveness of identity.

Perhaps we should revisit and revise Pinter's/Anna's above-mentioned statement to: There are things I remember about my character, which may never have happened, but as I recall them so I come into being. Or: There are things I remember about *your* character, which may never have happened, but as I recall them so you come into being. With reference to a statement by Pinter on his characters' often unverifiable pasts, Batty has argued that Pinter's characters 'seek to fictionalize themselves in narratives' (Batty, 2001, 59). In *Old Times* this is evident when, for example, Deeley blatantly fictionalises himself as a film director, and even as Orson Welles. Underlining Pinter's tendency to merge art and reality, Kreps notes that both art and reality are products of creation: '[...] if perception and point of view can change reality, perception creates reality; reality is thus an artifact, subject-like all works of art—to different interpretations by different perceivers (or to different interpretations at different times by the same perceiver)' (Kreps, 1979, 59). Ironically, Kreps claims, for Pinter the interconnectedness of the I to the other does not bring the characters closer together, but keeps them isolated:

The solitary nature of the mind leaves perception, imagination, and memory free to function on the 'facts' of every life in the same way that they function on both the creation and apprehension of art. In other words, the uncertain boundaries between where reality ends and art takes over in the creation of life, either in the public theater or in the privacy of one's own rooms, are determined by the existential fact of isolation. We are alone with what we perceive.

(p. 59)

Perhaps, I would suggest, the question of character is not one of isolation, but intertwinement—and perhaps we should revise this presupposition of the 'solitary nature of the mind'. In her aforementioned essay, Hustvedt considers the relation of the narrating self to the other, the narrated, asking:

How exactly does an imaginary story I am generating about you, or her or him, not involve me? Aren't all of these narratives—recalled, recreated, or imagined—related to my self, a part of my subjective experience? [...] When I think of you, are you not a part of me? What is being processed here?

(Hustvedt, 2011, 190)

Recent re-conceptions of imagination address this challenge of distinguishing the self from the other. These re-conceptions of the imaginary (i.e. 'of imagination') extend beyond the mind and no longer solely denote the mental products created by the imagination. Rather, the social or cultural imaginary as proposed by, for example, philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1977) extends beyond the individual subject and signifies collective, shared ideas, the creation of images that sustain these ideas, and the social spaces of images through which we navigate (Castoriadis, 1997b).¹¹ This implies not only a blurring of individual and collective identity, but also a fundamental experiential and epistemological indeterminacy. According to Castoriadis, '[the question] "what is it, in what we know, that comes from the observer (from us), and what is it that comes from what there is?" is, and will forever remain, undecidable' (Castoriadis, 1997a, 4). Might this uncertainty be exactly what Pinter dramatises when his characters seem to merge and transform?

In another article, Castoriadis develops his theory, stating that:

There is no way of getting around the solidarity of these two dimensions—the 'subjective' and the 'objective'—their perpetual intertwining. Each new step in one of these directions refers us back once again to the other—and vice versa. All knowledge is coproduction; and, in nontrivial cases, we cannot truly separate out what 'comes from' the subject and what 'comes from' the object. This is what I would like to call the 'principle of the undecidability of origins.' [...] We play this game—but we cannot play it all alone, neither all alone as 'individuals' nor all alone as a 'collectivity of subjects'.

(Castoriadis, 1997c, 345)

This 'perpetual intertwining' of identities allows us to recognise that we should not set out to distinguish individual characters, nor even draw clear lines between the characters ('the observed') and the spectators ('the observer'). By way of Castoriadis and Hustvedt, I propose that we might interpret Kate, Deeley and Anna as co-creating each other out of past and present, *through* being and not-being and *by* both being and not-being. Anna, for example, by being a visible presence on stage, but not there in the first part of the play, 'is there, but not there', as Pinter has described her (Gussow, 1994, 18). If the three characters gain existence via each other, they ultimately also gain existence, or become real, via the spectator. Such a perspective will allow us to reassess the construction of an intertwined character such as, for example, Rebecca and her account of the woman carrying a child in Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*—which also involves a narrative transition from *she* to *I* (1996).

6 | SPECTATING AND IMAGINING

Finally, I will turn my attention to how the play engages with its potential audience. The perspective of the audience is an often neglected aspect of drama, especially in relation to imagination. However, I believe that Pinter's structuring of the dramaturgy of the audience's perspective is integral to the dramaturgy of the characters.

Social psychologist Tanya Zittoun and director and actress Adeline Rosenstein have suggested a number of ways in which the spectators use their imagination in performance as follows:

For imagining, the viewers use the guidance of what is proposed on stage, as well as all the semi-otic resources they are disposed of (e.g., images seen, stories heard, personal experiences, movies, factual knowledge), and recompose them in new ways. Hence, paradoxically, the less the theater 'shows,' the more the members of the audience become the co-authors of the play they see—with all the pleasure and frustration this might also cause.

(Zittoun & Rosenstein, 2017, 237)

This is, for example, what happens when Deeley and Anna take turns singing a line from the song *The Way You Look Tonight*, but notably omit the crucial line—'Still I'll always, always keep the memory of...'—leaving this to the audience to sing in their imagination. But we need to develop an analytical framework if we are to analyse confluences of perception memory and imagination.

I have elsewhere suggested strategies for analysing the complex ways in which drama engages spectators and their imagination (Kallenbach, 2016, 2018, 279–301), proposing the analytical triad *ascription-mode-dynamic*. These describe: (1) how the spectator adds to and valorises the performance (comparable to Zittoun and Rosenstein's above-mentioned 'co-authoring'); (2) in what way or from which point of view the spectator imagines; and (3) how the rhythm of the spectator's engagement with the text in performance develops. In *Old Times*, we can observe how there is a high degree of *ascription* (or inference) on the spectator's part—there is simply very little that the spectator can know for certain.

What is more, the spectator is continually prompted to imagine in new *modes*; for example, by engaging in the various characters' points of view. Modes of imagining also concern how the spectator perceives the actor as character. The physical body of the actor might be imagined as embodying a present character, as a disembodied memory of a character, or as (possibly) imaginary characters. The mode of imagining may even involve the spectator's engagement in conflicting modes of imagining; for example, when it is unclear whether the action on stage takes place in the past or the present. Consider, for example, Anna's revised recollection of the man sobbing in an armchair: what she first describes as his swift movement towards her is immediately amended to 'very slowly'. This would require the spectator to 'see' first one, then another visualisation of the episode, erasing the first visualisation—which of course is not possible. Such a strategic use of modes of imagination situates the cognitive actions of the spectator as part of the performance itself.

The dynamic, often syncopated *rhythm* of the performance is thus a form of cyclical repetition and conflict, where the spectators must continually revise *their* memories of what has just happened or what has been recounted, to construct parallels between preceding and present actions, to link the invisible, recounted, with the visible, and to re-imagine the narrative of the play—and also to re-imagine the characters as different beings. Austin E. Quigley, along with, for example, Manuela Reiter, has noted Pinter's meticulous attention to the 'shaping' of his plays, citing Pinter's statement of how 'I think I can say I pay meticulous attention to the shape of things, from the shape of a sentence to the overall structure of the play. This shaping, to put it mildly, is of the first importance' (Quigley, 1987, 8). Pinter's dramaturgy has been described as 'elliptical' (Reiter, 1997, 176), relying on rhythms and structures of 'narrative repetition, progress, regress and circularity' (Quigley, 1987, 14) and a 'highly rhythmical and musical language' (Reiter, 1997, 177). What is notable in Pinter's plays is that they make use of several 'contrasting narrative movements' and hence: 'Their characteristic structure is pluralistic, consisting of several narrative strands unevenly arranged, not susceptible to final resolution, but rhythmically related' (Quigley, 1987, 18). My argument above entails the need to lift these structures from the dramaturgy of the text in order to include the way in which the playwright has composed the dramaturgy of spectatorship.

The challenge for the spectator of *Old Times* is the ultimately impossible task of grasping and deciphering the layers of the real, the imagined and the remembered. Formally, the dramaturgy of the play mirrors the play's thematic premise of the ontological challenge of the confluence of perception, imagination and memory. Analysing the play from a performative, theatrical point of view, taking the presence and positioning of the actors' bodies and the theatrical space into account, adds to the complexity of the play's theme of ontological uncertainty and unreliability of the cognitive faculties. The performative view underlines that what the audience members actually see might not be consistent with what they are supposed to perceive. What the spectator is prompted to imagine might be as real as or even more real than the theatre's sensory, material reality. The unseen or unheard might be more truthful than the performed actions.

Experiencing *Old Times* is thus much more complex than being 'forced to compare versions of the past, and take note of what tallies and what does not' (Martineau, 1973, 291). For example, the final tableau of the play parallels, without words, an earlier orally recounted memory: the tableau only works by an interplay with the audience members' memory of what they have heard earlier; by the audience inferring that Deeley might have been 'the man' that Anna—perhaps—saw and imagining that memory as visible; and by their capacity simultaneously to entertain multiple possible interpretations of the tableau.

Richard Allen Cave has analysed Pinter's employment of body language and tableau as 'enacted symbol or physicalised metaphor', which allows Pinter to 'contain the representation of violence in his plays'. '[I]n the theatre,' he continues, 'such action is more immediately direct in its impact on an audience's imagination [than cinema and television], because of the actual physical presence of the actors enacting the violence within the same space as the audience' (Cave, 2009, 138). As Cave notes, Kate is the only character to remain standing upright, while Anna is lying on the divan and Deeley is slumped in the chair (and this would, perhaps, support the aforementioned interpretation of Kate as the 'dreamer'). To the spectator who sees and experiences the play in performance, the body language and positioning of the actors become 'the correlative of the psychological, emotional and spiritual conditions of the three characters' (p. 137). Such fictional processes of signification arise via the confluence of embodiedness and imagination—and indeed also the result of the confluence of the self and the others.

We can explain this effect on the audience in terms of the 'permeability relation between reality and fiction', as defined by philosopher Michela Summa (2018, 53), which describes how fiction produces physical effects in the body of the spectator. Audience memory, imagination and sense of the real also form part of the play in performance. Gallese, who together with Giacomo Rizzolatti (b. 1937) made the discovery of mirror neurons, has stated that: 'If viewed from a neuroscientific perspective, the border separating real and fictional worlds appears thus much less sharp and clear than what humans thought for centuries' (Gallese, 2011, 199). When we read or hear literary fiction, or watch a theatrical performance, the reader's, listener's or spectator's

sensorimotor system is activated on multiple levels. Engaging with fiction means embodying fiction. The spectator reacts to the bodily action that he/she observes on stage, as well as to the words uttered and the voice of the actor:

When we imagine a visual scene, we activate the same cortical visual areas of our brain normally active when we do perceive the same visual scene. Similarly, mental motor imagery and real action both activate a common network of cortical and subcortical motor centers [...] Visual imagery is somehow equivalent to simulating an actual visual experience, and motor imagery is somehow equivalent to simulating an actual motor experience.

(p. 198)

The confluence of the real and the imaginary in engaging with fiction involves two paradoxes. One is expressed by Summa, who states that '[o]n the one hand, our experience of reality influences our shaping of fictions; on the other hand, our experience of fiction also has an impact on our sense of reality' (Summa, 2018, 42). The other by Gallese, who calls attention to the paradox that '[o]ur relationship with fictional worlds is double-edged: on the one hand, we pretend them to be true, while, on the other, we are fully aware they are not' (Gallese, 2011, 199). Gallese refers to Italian philosopher Alfonso Iacono, who describes this intersection of the imaginary and the real as being in 'intermediate worlds' (cited in Gallese, 2011, 199), but perhaps more fittingly we should describe it as being in blended worlds, or as being in the confluence of multiple streams of beings and consciousnesses.

Old Times acts out the ontological uncertainty that is made up of memory, imagination and actual perception. What Pinter shows us is, perhaps, how to exist in, navigate in, create and challenge a world of confluence. The more diffuse the boundary between imagination and sensation, the more our reality is defined by, or perhaps even as, the imaginary, and the more pertinent it becomes to examine this grey area, the confluence of sensation, imagination, real, imaginary, past, present, I, the others. The more complex or fluid the imagination, the more pertinent it is to examine the interplay of all its various aspects and interconnections. The theatre does not claim to have any answers or solutions. But it offers rich opportunities for studying the confluence and indeterminacy at play, showing us plainly that there are many simultaneous truths that the characters and spectators alike experience, imagine and remember—and that the distinctions between them are not hard, but fluid and flowing.

It is easy to overlook the significance of the location where the play takes place. Deeley's and Kate's house is placed somewhere in the countryside, but notably near the water. The element of water is associated with Kate, and it is crucial to note why. Kate likes the softness of the countryside and living close to the water, because, she says: 'You can't say where it begins or ends. That appeals to me.' Conversely: 'The only thing nice about a big city is when it rains it blurs everything [...] and blurs your eyes' (Pinter, 1971, 59). This 'blurriness', the confluence of beginning and end, seems to me to be the crux of the play. There is no telling where reality begins or ends, where memory meets imagination. By placing the action of the play in a landscape and a context of fluidity, Pinter seems to underscore not only the paradoxical confluence and confrontation of the characters' memories and imaginings, but also of the spectators' engagement with the performance.

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ENDNOTES

¹ We can compare Pinter's statement to Salman Rushdie's in *Midnight's Children* (1981), where main character Saleem maintains that: 'I told you the truth.... Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous

but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own' (cited in Misztal, 2003, 115). See, e.g., Quigley (1975) and Schechner (1966).

² Coleridge (1983).

³ Sartre (2004). I discuss these contrasting developments in Kallenbach (2018).

⁴ Pinter's and Strindberg's plays have occasionally been paired in performance; e.g. Peter Hall's 1962 double bill of Pinter's *The Collection* and Strindberg's *Playing with Fire*, or Michael Billington's 1997 pairing of Pinter's *The Lover* and Strindberg's *The Stranger*. See Knowles (2001), who notes the legacy of Strindberg on Pinter's dialogue and structures of silences. See also Ghasemi and Tavassoli (2011), which studies the theme of entrapment in relationships 'originating from different forms of pathological communication' (p. 69). Examples of *The Dance of Death/Ghost Sonata* and *The Caretaker* respectively.

⁵ Michael Billington, too, has noted that 'the action [of *Old Times*] has the seeming inevitability of a guided dream' (Billington, 2009, 365).

⁶ See also Brockmeier (2002), which also questions the dichotomy of individual and collective memory.

⁷ With reference to an 1895 study by Alfred Binet and Victor Henri, Hustvedt also highlights how memory retains the *fabula* of an account, and how the 'narrative mode contextualizes the meaning or valence inherent in every emotion. It pulls together and makes sense of disparate sensory and affective elements' (Hustvedt, 2011, 190).

⁸ Or, as Thomas P. Adler phrases it in his analysis of Pinter's *Night*: 'The landscape of memory is fraught with infinite possibilities which can become subjective truths, truths more true than those of objective reality' (Adler, 1974, 461).

⁹ Samuel Beckett's works also present blurred characters, for example the Reader and Listener in *Ohio Impromptu* (1980).

¹⁰ The indistinction between Anna and Kate was explored in Ian Rickson's 2013 production in which Kristin Scott-Thomas and Lia Williams took turns playing Anna and Kate.

¹¹ The notion of the social imaginary has also been suggested by Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), see, e.g., Ricoeur (1994).

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