The ethics of imagining and the dramaturgy of spectatorship

Ulla Kallenbach

ORDIC 0000-0003-3045-6298

Universitetet i Bergen

Ulla Kallenbach, Ph.D., is associate professor at the Department for Theatre Studies, University of Bergen, Norway. Her principal field of research is the cultural history of imagination and dramaturgy, especially the performativity of drama and the point of view of the spectator. Her monograph *The Theatre of Imagining – A Cultural History of Imagination in the Mind and on the Stage* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2018. Her other publications include '"Beautiful dream" or "loathsome delusion": Imagination and ideality in nineteenth-century Denmark', *European Romantic Review*, 29, pp. 51–61. She is co-director of the Centre for Historical Performance Practice, Aarhus University, Denmark.

Contact: Universitetet i Bergen, Postboks, 7805, N-5020 Bergen.

E-mail: Ulla.Kallenbach@uib.no

Abstract

This article will address the ethical aspects of imagination and spectating. Since Plato's denunciation of imagination in *The Republic* and Aristotle's judgement in *De Anima* that 'imaginings are for the most part false', the notion of the human imagination has been controversial. In relation to theatrical performance, key issues concern how performance

acts on the imagination of the spectator – and what actions of the spectator's imagination might perform in return. In this article, I will address the ethics of imagination: as an examination of truth and falseness, as an issue of responsibility and choice, as a social imaginary and a narrative imagination that allows one to relate to the other, and finally as an exploration of the embodied basis of imagination, which again involves a questioning of the line between the real and the imaginary. In conclusion, I will take Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and Tim Crouch's *The Author* as examples of two plays that explicitly address the ethics of imagining.

Keywords

imagination

dramaturgy

spectator

ethics

Sarah Kane

Tim Crouch

Some of the most poignant dramaturgical climaxes have not taken place on the stage. Oedipus' gouging out of his eyes, Macbeth's killing of King Duncan, Nora's slamming of the door, Miss Julie's suicide, Tim Crouch's abuse in *The Author*, do not occur on the stage, but rather take place in the minds of the spectators. Yet these unseen acts stand vividly in our imagination.

And some of the most controversial visual stage imagery – like the slaughtering of Lady Macduff and her child in *Macbeth*, the stoning the baby in Edward Bond's *Saved* or the torture of Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*, which include the stage direction, 'Tinker

produces a large pair of scissors and cuts off Carl's tongue' (Kane 2006: 118) – did not take place either. They were fictive acts that we imagined as real.

And then, there is scenic action that fuses the real and the imaginary, as in *Cleansed*'s: '[w]e hear the sound of baseball bats hitting Grace's body and she reacts as though she has received the blow' (Kane 2006: 131).

As Mark Johnson has stated in the opening of his book, *The Body in the Mind*, '[w]ithout imagination, nothing in the world could be meaningful. Without imagination, we could never make sense of our experience. Without imagination, we could never reason toward knowledge of reality' (Johnson 1990: ix). Imagination is a crucial aspect of our cognitive perception of the world – and thus also of our perception of performance. The topic of imagination in theatre and performance studies has been curiously overlooked. This is all the more surprising given that even hard science often refers to and speaks of imagination in theatrical terms such as '[s]cholarship on the human imagination has been delegated to waiting in the wings for far too long. It is time to bring it center stage' (Abraham 2016: 4208.).

In this article, I will address the ethics of imagination: as an examination of truth and falseness, as an issue of responsibility and choice, as a social imaginary and a narrative imagination that allows one to relate to the other and finally as an exploration of the embodied basis of imagination, which again involves a questioning of the line between the real and the imaginary.

The concept of imagination is notoriously difficult to define, its history diverse and its uses often controversial. Studying and teaching imagination and its history, to me always involves considering four dimensions: ontology, epistemology, aesthetics and

ethics. The ethical implications of imagination have, from the onset, been complex, with two conflicting positions having continually been at odds.

Already Plato (c. 427–347 BC), who was among the first to treat both the ethos of imagining and of theatrical spectatorship, installs a deep suspicion of both. The problem, according to Plato, was rooted in the mimetic relation of the representation to the reality. Plato judges the representation inferior to – or a falsification of – reality and thus corrupting to the mind (1987: 599a, 630b). Conversely, Aristotle (384–22 BC) in the *Poetics* (c. 335 BC) advocated *mimesis* (conceived as an imitation of action) as a truthful, propositional poetic mode of representation, rendering reality more truthful than in actuality. Imagination, or *Phantasia*, Aristotle regarded as a cognitive function that reinterprets sensory perception, and, he advised in *De Anima*, 'imaginings are for the most part false' (Aristotle 1986: 428a). The human capacity for imagining was thus from the onset established as problematic and dubious, while its use as fiction was either conceived as morally depraving or an instrument of moral good.

The ethics of imagination in dramaturgy and poetics of theatre has thus persistently posed a challenge to scholars. In the context of aesthetics, several essential questions have repeatedly been subjected to debate, both regarding the creative artist and the co-creative spectator: What imaginings are the artist offering to the spectator? How is the spectator prompted to imagine in response? What moral question does the performance pose? Which possible answers are the spectator prompted to imagine?

The answers to such questions as how they have been addressed and how they have been interpreted and developed into dramaturgic compositions have depended on the historical context, including the conception of the human body and mind, the

conception of science, the theatrical conventions and so on. In this article, I will trace how the ethics of imagination have been addressed and how the interpretation of imagination has impacted the ethics of dramaturgy and spectatorship.

What is imagination and how do we imagine?

Any study of imagination must inevitably start with the question 'what is imagination?' In a historical perspective, the answers are surprisingly diverse, as I have documented in my book *The Theatre of Imagining* (Kallenbach 2018). The interpretation of imagination impacts both the conception of the human body and mind and accordingly also the conception of the ways in which playwrights structure plays for performance – to be encountered by a spectator.

In the article 'Imagination as discourse and action', Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) outlines four main terminological aspects of imagination: The evocation of existing things that are absent; representational images that 'take the place of' that which they represent (e.g. portraits); fictions, that is, non-existent things; and illusions, that is, representations that momentarily seem real (Ricoeur 1994: 119). With philosopher Edward Casey's phenomenology of imagining, we might say that what Ricoeur describes are more precisely objects of the imagination, 'imaginal content', as Casey would term it. Casey further stipulates that imagining is also an act, an intentional act, comprised of an act-phase in which several acts or kinds of imagining may be performed. This might involve imaging or visualization, imagining that or imagining how. The object-phase, as he terms it, involves not only various forms of imaginal content, which might include the forms described by Ricoeur, and which has an imaginal space and time, and an imaginal margin, that is, a 'fading frame' encircling 'the total imaginative presentation in its

givenness' (Casey 1976: 53, 55, 120). The ethos of imagining accordingly involves both how we imagine (and how we are set up to imagine) and what we image (and what we are set up to imagine). Transferred to a theatrical context, a study of imagination entails that the ethical dramatic content and the ethical theatre practice are thus at all times intertwined.

The scope of imagination

Ricoeur has described the scope of the theories of imagination via two axes: the first axis describes the relation of imagination to the object, being an axis of presence and absence (1994: 120). At the one end is the notion of imagination as a reproductive faculty, its images being traces of sensory perceptions. At the other end is the idea of imagination as a productive capacity, which gives presence to the absent or the unseen (such as divine truths or fictions). We can see these two positions represented in the early modern versus the romantic poetics. Philip Sidney (1554–86), for example, in *An Apology for Poetry* (1595) defined poetry as 'an art of imitation' derived from the artist's sensory perception of the empirical reality (Sidney 1977: 101). Conversely, the poetics of Romanticism viewed the imagination of the artist as a creative, unique artistic invention, mimicking the divine act of creation *ex nihilo*, as, for example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), who conceived imagination 'as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation' (Coleridge 1983: vol. I, chapter 13, 304f) and the poetic, creative imagination as 'a magical power' (Coleridge 1983: vol. II, chapter 14, 15–16).

Ricoeur's second axis describes the relation of imagination to the subject, being an axis of critical distance or fascination towards the imagined. That is of the subject's being able to distinguish reality from the imaginary, which may either be 'a complete

lack of critical awareness' or which 'is fully conscious of itself' and serves as an 'instrument of the critique of reality' (Ricoeur 1994: 120). This was the pivot of the early modern debate on imagination, whether the mind, and, in particular, the faculty of reason, could distinguish reality from *phantasmata* (mental images), and whether the faculty of imagination could change sensory perception (Kallenbach 2018: chapter 3). Francis Bacon (1561-1626), for example, likened the human understanding to 'a false mirror', which would distort 'the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it' (Bacon 1962: 54). The debate concerning the ethos of imagination and performance, in consequence, revolved around the question whether the theatre was corrupting the minds and 'stain' the wits of the spectators (Beard 2004: 167), or 'to teach and delight' (Sidney 1977: 101).

I will propose that a third axis be taken into account, which I find particularly relevant both to the ethics of imagining and to the role imagination plays in the theatre: namely the relation of imagination as bound to either the physical body or to the intersubjective, collective 'social imaginary'.

First, however, I will address two main aspects central to the ethics of imagining: namely imagination in between truth and falseness, and imagination as responsibility and choice.

Truth and falseness

A central discussion of the ethos of imagining has been whether the theatre presents false images that leads the spectator to corruption or whether it presents truthful images that direct the spectator towards goodness 'by stirring appropriate, desirable emotions [… and] the proper, moral response' (Rossky 1958: 71). The former position dominated until

the nineteenth century, where a significant transformation took place – spurred by the Kant's Copernican revolution, which redefined imagination as a productive, transcendental force, rather than a reproductive faculty (see, e.g., Kearney 1998b: chapter 4).

The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–present) has aptly described this transformation as a shift 'from the image as lie to truth as image' (Nancy 2005). The Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) voices one of the firmest arguments for the truth of imagination, which he terms '[t]he great instrument of moral good' and 'the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man' (Shelley 1977: 33). To Shelley, poetry, therefore 'acts in another and diviner manner' than ethical science in that it 'awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought' and 'lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world' (Shelley 1977: 33).

With the postmodern era, a new problem of the relation of truth and falseness, or a new relation of the reality and the image, appears, which Richard Kearney refers to as 'essentially one of *parody*' (1998a: 178). Kearney asserts that the image in the postmodern era no longer refers to an original, 'situated outside itself in the "real" world or inside human consciousness', but in referring 'only to other images […] circulates in a seemingly endless play of imitation' (1998a: 178). Kearney likens this play of imitation to a 'labyrinth of mirrors' or a 'circle of looking glasses' (1998a: 178), where images are reproduced, but where an original is no longer discernible and a truly creative imagination no longer possible. However, he pleads, '[t]o permit the replacement of imagination by simulation would be to abandon not only imagination's poetic powers –

recognized through the centuries – but also its crucial ethical powers' (Kearney 1998a: 226). Countering this parodic paradigm by reinterpreting imagination is first and foremost an ethical challenge, 'an ethical reinterpretation of imagination capable of responding to the challenges of postmodernism' (Kearney 1998b: 363). But, he adds, 'it would also be *poetical*' (Kearney 1998b: 366). The narrative imagination, which I will explore below, seeks to respond to this ethical challenge.

Responsibility and choice

Another key issue of imagination is the question of how the human fashions him/herself, what he/she imagines him/herself to be, the uses of imagination, so to speak. That is, how imagination acts and what possibilities imagination offers to life.

Such questions are addressed by, for example, existentialist philosophers Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80).

While Kierkegaard views imagination as an idealizing capacity, he voices the concern that '[t]he fantastic is generally that which leads a person out into the infinite in such a way that it only leads him away from himself and thereby prevents him from coming back to himself' (Kierkegaard 1980: 31). Imagination, or fantasizing, is thus a mode of escapism that diverts the human being from reality and the challenges life poses. As David Gouwens has explained Kierkegaard's view of imagination:

> To live in imagination is to live in possibility, the very opposite of the actuality that gives the self an historical situation (as gift) and an ethical definition (as task). The imagination may attempt to incorporate the actual and the finite, but as long as the imagination is itself the medium of that attempt, it is doomed to failure.
>
> (1989: 70)

To Kierkegaard, it is religion, Christianity, and never imagination, that bridges this gap between the actual and the possible, and thus imagination belongs only to the first of the three stages of life's way, the aesthetic, the ethic, and the religious stage.

Therefore, the theatre can never adequately tackle essential issues of reality, such as suffering. That, Kierkegaard asserts,

> is something the imagination cannot represent, except in a rendering which represents it as already perfected (idealized), that is, softened, toned-down, foreshortened […] An actor clad in rags (even if in defiance of stage conventions they were actual rags) is, as the mere deceit of an hour, a totally different thing from being clad in rags in the everyday life of reality. No, however great the effort of imagination to make this imaginary picture of reality, it cannot be accomplished.
>
> (1967: 185f)

The scepticism of imagination and the theatre is paradoxical since Kierkegaard was an enthusiastic theatre-goer and characteristically played with theatricality in his works. What the theatre offers, to Kierkegaard, is a forum where possibilities can be embodied and be played out; a shadow play where one can discover oneself, as he writes in his 1843 *Repetition* (Kierkegaard 1983: 156). The 'sophistical inclination of imagination', he writes, is 'to have the world in a nutshell this way, a nutshell larger than the whole world and yet not too large for the individual to fill' (Kierkegaard 1983: 157). For possibilities to matter, however, is that they transition from imagination and aesthetic to actuality and ethical choice.

Sartre too addresses the issues of imagination and possibility. Following Husserl, Sartre defines imagination not as an image-making faculty, but as a *mode* or an intentional *act* of consciousness, which informs our phenomenological being in the

world. The ethical concern of the relation of image to reality as discussed above is thus neither relevant nor valid in this perspective. Sartre even, radically, divorces the real and imaginary, stating that 'the real and the imaginary, by reason of their essences, cannot co-exist' (Sartre 2004: 146). The imaginary is thus 'nothingness', or the negation of reality (i.e. negating the actor in order to imagine the character [Sartre 2004: 191]).[1]

As Kearney explains it, Sartre posits that 'man is, by virtue of his imagination, a being who creates himself ex nihilo, that is, out of the sole resources of his own subjective consciousness' (Kearney 1998b: 240). However, Sartre's analysis of imagination, says Kearney, 'seems to imply that every attempt to negate reality is in some sense a symptom of pathological self-deception' (Kearney 1998a: 85). This also involves a certain narcissistic solipsism, in which the imaginer is fascinated by his/her own imaginary, fictitious unreality. In imagining, Sartre states, 'the dreamers can choose from a store of props the feelings they want to put on and the objects that correspond to them, as actors choose their costumes' (Sartre 2004: 147).

In his later works, including *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946), Sartre holds that in the unrestricted freedom of choice, to become what one imagines oneself to be there is an ethical, moral choice and responsibility. Imagining what is not yet existing is an ethical act comparable to creative aesthetic practice:

> Moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art […], there are no aesthetic values *a priori*, but there are values which will appear in due course in the coherence of the picture, in the relation between the will to create and the finished work.
>
> (cited in Kearney 1998b: 242)

Sartre is well aware of the effect of the theatre on the mind and imagination of the spectator and recognizes that the spectator is actively involved even though distanced

from the stage: ‘we should never underestimate this distance; whether we are author, actor, or producer, we should not try to reduce it, but should exploit it and show it as it actually is, even manipulate it’ (Sartre 1976: 11–12). ‘Manipulating’ the spectator’s distanced, yet active, partaking in performance is a dramaturgy of imagination. Understanding the *narrative imagination* brings us closer to this dramaturgic imagination. The narrative imagination is inscribed in the context of the *social imaginary* – the idea of imagination that extends beyond the individual mind.

The social imaginary and the narrative imagination

Recent discussions of imagination have pointed to the role played by imagination in an extended social, collective context.

The notion of the social imaginary was first presented by Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–97) in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Castoriadis 1997). Here, Castoriadis addressed how society is collectively imagined, for example, by imagining specific social practices and norms. The social imaginary thus signifies collective, shared ideas, the creation of images that sustain these ideas, and the social spaces of images through which we navigate.

Ricoeur’s abovementioned article, ‘Imagination in discourse and action’, published one year after Castoriadis’ book, also proposes a redefinition of imagination as a social imaginary, involving ‘imaginative practices such as *ideology* and *utopia*’ (Ricoeur 1994: 126–34). While the former is a legitimatizing function, the latter is a subversive constituting mode to ‘radically rethink’ ideology.

As a socially extended phenomenon, the ethics of imagining is often addressed via the notion of the narrative imagination as a ‘narrative process of socialization’

(Kearney 1998a: 248). In her book *Cultivating Humanity* (1998), Martha Nussbaum (1947-present) lists the narrative imagination as one of three capacities necessary for cultivating humanity (Nussbaum 1997). Together with the capacity for critical self-examination and the ability to see oneself as part of a larger (global) community, the capacity of the narrative imagination allows the imagining individual to understand and emphasize with others. That is,

> the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different than oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.
>
> (Nussbaum 1997: 10–11)

As an ethical, narrative capacity, imagination forms a thread between the future, the past and the present (Kearney 1998a: 228). To Kearney, narrative imagination is not only able to imagine possible futures – the *utopian* imagination of 'emancipatory possibilities' (Kearney 1998a: 228). It is also a *testimonial* imagination that bears 'witness to "exemplary" narratives legacied by our cultural memories and traditions' (Kearney 1998a: 228). And it is an *empathic* imagination, which is 'the powers of receptivity to the other' (Kearney 1998a: 232). In that way, imagination

> can serve an indispensable function of ethical *responsibility*. By recounting the story of one's life in response to the other's question – who are you? – the narrative self constitutes itself as a perduring identity over time, capable of sustaining commitments and pledges to the other than self.
>
> (Kearney 1998a: 247)

Significantly, Kearney underlines that the narrative, ethical imagination is also a poetical, playful imagination:

> Indeed one might even say that imagination, no matter how ethical, needs to play. One might even say that it needs to play because it is ethical – to ensure it is ethical in a liberating way, which animates and enlarges our response to the other rather than cloistering us off in a dour moralism of resentment and recrimination.
>
> (Kearney 1998b: 366)

In its playfulness, the ethical imagination is also the narrative play is a shared and dialogic process: 'Self-identity', Kearney states, 'involves one projecting a narrative on to a world of which one is both a creative agent and a receptive actor' (1998a: 248). This also allows us to see spectatorship as a multifaceted practice – not as a passive act, but as an active co-creative practice – which is at one time empathic in it is taking the position of the other, and distanced in its critical ethical judgement.

The narrative imagination also holds the potential for cathartic release, which, following Aristotle, is brought about through the purgation of pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*). With reference to Ricoeur, Kearney detects a paradoxical complexity of the cathartic narrative imagination: '[a]s catharsis, narrative fosters wisdom by encouraging us to sympathize with the characters of imitated and plotted action while simultaneously provoking a critical attitude of withdrawal' (Kearney 1998a: 243). Kearney points to a 'dialectic' of pity, calling for the spectator's empathic involvement, and fear, provoking the spectator's withdrawal (which as a shock-effect seem reminiscent of Brechtian *Verfremdung*). This dialectic as 'narrative imagination effects a "purgation" of our emotions inducing a paradoxical attitude of empathic detachment' (Kearney 1998a: 243).

The social imaginary and the narrative imagination approach imagination in the social domain. In the following, we shall look closer at how imagination is physically connected to the body and ask which ethical challenges the embodied imagination pose.

Embodied imagination

While we might define the social and narrative imagination as an extended mode of imagination, another scientific tendency is to consolidate, or incarnate imagination in the body. Put briefly, while we have traditionally believed in the dichotomy of reality and imagination, the theory of embodied cognition and neuroscientific research suggests otherwise. Not only is the mind, and thus imagination, 'inherently embodied' as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proclaims in the introduction of their magnum opus, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 3) – but interestingly, this embodied, incarnated imagination, like the social and narrative imagination, also concerns the relation of the self to others.

The effects of one individual's action on another were already observed in Renaissance psychology: '[h]ow can otherwise blear eyes in one man cause the like affection in another?', asked Robert Burton (1577–1640) in *An Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621); '[w]hy doth one man's yawning make another yawn?' (Burton 1977: 257). The discovery of mirror neurons in the 1980s offered the tacit knowledge of theatre practitioners a scientific basis. As Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia note in the foreword to *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions, Emotions and Experience* (2007), director and playwright Peter Brook has

> commented that with the discovery of mirror neurons, neuroscience had finally started to understand what has long been common knowledge in the theatre: the actor's efforts would be in vain if he were not able to surmount all cultural and linguistic barriers and share his bodily sounds and movements with the spectators, who thus actively contribute to the event and become one with the players on the stage. This sharing is the basis on which the theatre evolves and revolves, and mirror neurons, which become active both

> when an individual executes an act and when he observes it being executed by others, now provide this sharing with a biological explanation.
>
> (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2007: ix)[2]

Both the actor and the spectator are actively employing their imagination – the actor to transform a fictional material into a bodily and sensory experience, the spectator to conceive the fictional representation as reality. Imaginary stimuli have been shown in several studies to lead to emotional responses via the same pathways that generate emotion from real stimuli (Schroeder 2006). Fact and fiction, in other words, trigger the brain via the same pathways. When the actor acts 'as if' the spectators' brains and bodies too react as if they themselves were active, as if the performed, fictional, action or emotion was really performed by their own bodies. 'As Peter Brook reminds us', Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia proceed,

> the players on the stage overcome all linguistic and cultural barriers to encompass the spectators in a shared experience of actions and emotions. The study of mirror neurons appears to offer, for the first time, a unitary experimental and theoretical framework within which to decipher this form of shared participation that the theatre provides and which is fundamentally the basis of our common experience.
>
> (2007: xiii)

More radically, a series of recent studies by Swedish researchers Christopher C. Berger and H. Henrik Ehrsson have documented what they called a 'fusion of mental imagery and sensation' (Berger and Ehrsson 2014). Imagination is not only like sensation, they propose, but may even change sensory experiences. That is, there is an interaction, and even a blending, of what we imagine and what is in reality there to perceive. 'We usually believe that the things we imagine in our mind and the things we perceive in the external world are perceptually distinct from one another; and therefore, that what we imagine

should not influence what we perceive', they state. 'However, decades of research on mental imagery – one's willed simulation of sensory perception – has found that this is not always the case' (Berger and Ehrsson 2017: 1). This blending of the real and imaginary involves not only similar stimuli, such as a real visual input integrating with imagined visual imagery, but also a cross-modal or 'multisensory integration', where that which we imagine hearing affects and even changes what we see (Berger and Ehrsson 2017: 1-9). In consequence, our basic human condition is an experiential indeterminacy, which returns us to the question of truth and falseness where the line between the real and the imaginary is dissolved.

Imagination as dramaturgy: The ethics of spectating

Different aspects and problems of imagination are thus evidently at the fore in different eras. An understanding of this fact, to me, is crucial for contemporary dramaturgic practice, be it during a creative process, in the analytical interpretation of a work, or, as Sartre put it, in the 'manipulation' of the audience (Sartre 1976: 11–12).

Understanding the context of imagination not only helps us to understand what, why and how playwrights write for performance, to understand how performance acts, and to understand the public's reactions to performances. Understanding the context of imagination help us assess the actions, thoughts and choices of characters, and to recognize the range of ways in which imagination is brought into play in dramatic works. The ethics of imagination affect dramaturgic practice in its engagement with and responsibility for the world, in imagining possibilities and questions. Ultimately, understanding the context of imagination aid both artists and audiences in questioning the relation of fiction to reality – be it in the theatre or in life.

To me, it is indispensable to ask what, how and why spectators are asked to imagine in performance. Elsewhere, I have proposed *ascription* (what does the spectator add to the performance), *mode* (through which perspective) and *dynamics* (in which rhythm) as analytical schemes for approaching imagination dramaturgically (Kallenbach 2016, 2018). In that way, it is possible to track the narrative development of the spectatorial dramaturgy. Being required to imagine fictive action as real is an entirely different mode than being required to make unseen action 'visible'. Being asked to, or choosing to, imagine through one character's perspective rather than that of another character's is an ethical choice. A sustained 'attack' of a series of visual or imagined imagery is rhythmically different from the prolonged dwelling on one image.

Returning to where we began, we can take Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and Tim Crouch's *The Author* as examples of how the ethical imagination plays into the dramaturgies of the two plays. Both plays set out to tackle the ethics of violence via the imagination, posing (to both their fictive characters and their spectators) the question of the ethical response to violence. Both Kane and Crouch explore a social imaginary of sustained violence and demand that the audience make an ethical judgement of their own complicity and choice.

Cleansed and *The Author* premiered at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1998 and 2009, respectively. The location is significant since the Royal Court Theatre has had a long tradition for staging violence, including Edward Bond's aforementioned *Saved* (1965). In particular, *The Author* is a site-specific play, its stage directions stipulating that the play 'is set in the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court Theatre – even when it's performed elsewhere' (Crouch 2011: 164), thus inviting the audience to ascribe to the

performance history of the theatre into the play and engaging them in what Kearney called a 'labyrinth of mirrors' where the real and the imaginary blur (Kearney 1998a: 178).

Cleansed, conversely, takes place in an unlocalized dystopia, in what Kane specifies as a 'university'; a chamber of horrors where torture and medical experiments are performed by the sadistic guard/doctor Tinker on twin siblings Grace and Graham, lovers Rod and Carl, and a young boy, Robin. Tinker tests their limits of love for one another through subjecting them to, for example, force-feeding, beatings, amputations and rapes. The performance of violence shifts between the extremely graphic, but not realistic, and the unseen – which is given reality by the spectators' own imaginings. The dramaturgy thus employs an oscillating dynamic where the audience is constantly changing perspectives from victim to perpetrator. The play, which according to playwright Mark Ravenhill had been triggered in Kane's imagination after reading Roland Barthes' line that 'being in love was like being in Auschwitz' (Ravenhill 2006) also echoes George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the 'university' being reminiscent of Orwell's 'Room 101', where each prisoner is confronted with his/her worst fear, pushing them to inevitably betray their beloved (Orwell 1949). By having the spectator imagine in the mode of the victim, Kane posits the audience to ethically consider their own breaking points: 'Rod not me don't kill me ROD NOT ME ROD NOT ME' as Carl screams when he is facing torture to death (Kane 2006: 117).[3] By positioning the audience in the mode of the torturer, they are required to consider which (imaginary) acts they perform on their victims.

Crouch's play never *shows* any violence, but *narrates* it: '[t]his is a play that happens inside its audience', states Crouch (2011: 164). Seated amongst the audience (placed in 'two banks of seating facing each other' [Crouch 2011: 164]), an author (named Tim Crouch, played by Tim Crouch himself), a male and a female actor, and a spectator – their names being the same as the actors playing them – recount their involvement in a play dealing with extreme violence. A theatrical illusion is never attempted. Instead, the characters detail how they encountered violence – real and fictive – and how they were affected by it. The author and actors, for instance, recount how they watched beheadings online, how they conducted fieldwork in a war-torn (unnamed) country and a 'shelter for women who had suffered domestic violence' (Crouch 2011: 185) and how their working on their characters and the run of the performance affected them. The fictive author has at one point stated that the fictive play is about 'violence in a culture, what happens to you when you live with that violence around you all the time. About how we have to recognize it, confront it, absorb it' (Crouch 2011: 183). The demand on the actual audience is the same. As Crouch has explained it, the play is about the responsibility of the audience and spectating as a *choice* and an *act*. 'I have the choice to continue I have the choice to stop', says the fictional Tim Crouch (2011: 202), while Tim Crouch himself has stated that *The Author* is 'a play about spectatorship, it's a play about representations, it's a play about ideas of realism or reality in art and how dangerous they are' (Radosavljević 2013: 223). Although the audience never actually *sees* the violence during the performance, they will have seen or heard about similar acts of violence – online, in the news, in real life. Each person in the audience will thus ascribe their own images and experiences onto the performance, and thus question their

own personal complicity as spectators, or bystanders, to violence. They have the choice to stay or to leave the auditorium.

Moreover, *The Author* asks the audience to reflect on the nature and impact of theatrical violence. Is the aestheticized violence less affecting than real violence? In the playing with the blurring of reality and fiction, *The Author* seems to echo the experiential indeterminacy noted by Berger and Ehrsson (2017), questioning the responsibility and consequences of the spectacle of real and fictive violence alike. The audience is accordingly also prompted to question whether the narrated violence is less severe than the scenic representation of violence.

Both Kane and Crouch use the theatre as a forum for the social imaginary and the narrative imagination, demanding a critical self-examination of its spectators (cf. Nussbaum above). Kane's social imaginary is a surreal dystopia of severe violence, which asks its audience to imagine the limits of brutality. Crouch's is a contemporary imaginary of mediatized violence, which asks its audience to question spectating as an act of violence. Both authors also ask for the spectator's empathy and their understanding of the other – including that of the perpetrator – thus offering what Kearney called a cathartic release exactly via the 'dialectic' of pity (the spectator's empathic involvement), and fear (the spectator's withdrawal from shock).

The plays each carefully 'manipulate' the imaginations of their audiences and both offer dramaturgies that require the audience to shift their points of view and engage with the positions of both victims and perpetrators. Their dramaturgical development differs, however. Kane's *Cleansed* 'attacks' the audience with its overwhelming violence from the onset, where Tinker kills Graham by injecting heroin in his eye. As a parallel

act, the eyes and minds of the spectators are 'attacked' and 'injected' with violence. Crouch, in contrast, lulls the audience into a sense of comfort and community, which is gradually disrupted or challenged. Maltesers are being passed around while the fictional spectator recounts the horrors that he has witnessed in the theatre – 'the safest place in the world' where 'nothing really happens […] Nothing real' (Crouch 2011: 183). Yet the play questions whether that is so – for the actor and spectators. *Cleansed* tests the violence, in particular as bodily mutilation, to its limits – testing what horrors the audience can imagine as real. The violence of *The Author* is recounted with a sense of distanced curiosity. And, in contrast to *Cleansed*, the culmination of *The Author*, where the fictional author chooses to watch the sexual abuse of a child online, takes place in near darkness while the abuse is described as happening 'not violently' (Crouch 2011: 183). Any visuality given to this moment is thus purely the spectator's through the point of view of the offender, while they are also prompted to consider the ethical problem of abuse as an act of violence that is not happening 'violently'.

Both plays thus subject the spectators to a sustained violent scenic attack – but with scenically contrasting means: Kane's graphic sadistic and unreal torture in *Cleansed* and Crouch's invisible, narrated, distanced yet realistic violence and abuse in *The Author*. Yet for both plays, reports have been made of spectators, not only walking out but fainting during performances (Ellis-Petersen 2019: n.pag.; Langley 2012: n.pag.). The neurological understanding of imagination helps us understand, why staged fictive acts and unseen acts that are imagined by the audience can provoke similar bodily responses in audience members. The experiential indeterminacy of the embodied imagination that reacts as if real, and even fuses the real and imaginary also puts into question the artistic,

ethical responsibility for the audience. The challenge remains whether the plays also contribute to the circulation and representation of violence that they problematize.

While the various theories of imagination in each their context offer separate interpretations of imagination, theatrical performance facilitates a simultaneous co-presence of multiple concepts of imagination. Studying the dramaturgy of imagination in performance may thus enhance our understanding of fundamental questions of *what* imagination is, *how* we imagine, and *in what way* fiction enables us to reflect on the ethical challenges of imagination.

Acknowledgements

This article was funded by the Carlsberg Foundation for the research project 'Imagining Imagination in Philosophy and Drama 1960–'.

References

Abraham, Anna (2016), 'The imaginative mind', *Human Brain Mapping*, 37:11, pp. 4197–211.

Aristotle (1986), *De anima: On the Soul*, London: Penguin Books.

Bacon, Francis (1962), *The New Organon*, Stuttgart: Frommann.

Beard, Thomas (2004), 'The theatre of God's judgments', in T. Pollard (ed.), *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 166-69.

Berger, Christopher C. and Ehrsson, H. Henrik (2014), 'The fusion of mental imagery and sensation in the temporal association cortex', *Journal of Neuroscience*, 34:41, pp. 13684–92.

Berger, Christopher C. and Ehrsson, H. Henrik (2017), 'The content of imagined sounds changes visual motion perception in the cross-bounce illusion', *Scientific Reports*, doi:10.1038/srep40123.

Burton, Robert (1977), *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, London: Dent.

Casey, Edward S. (1976), *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1997), *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1983), *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, London and Princeton, NJ: Routledge and Princeton University Press.

Crouch, Tim (2011), 'The author', *Plays One*, London: Oberon Books.

Ellis-Petersen, Hannah (2016), 'Five people faint due to violence in National Theatre's *Cleansed*', *The Guardian*, 24 February, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/24/five-people-faint-40-leave-violence-cleansed-national-theatre-sarah-kane. Accessed 9 July 2020.

Gouwens, David J. (1989), *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination*, New York: P. Lang.

Johnson, Mark (1990), *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kallenbach, Ulla (2016), 'Imagination at play', in U. Kallenbach and A. Lawaetz (eds), *Stage/Page/Play: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Theatre and Theatricality*, Copenhagen: Multivers Academic, pp. 111-23.

Kallenbach, Ulla (2018), *The Theatre of Imagining: A Cultural History of Imagination in the Mind and on the Stage*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kane, Sarah (2006), 'Cleansed', *Complete Plays*, London: Methuen Drama.

Kearney, Richard (1998a), *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-modern*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Kearney, Richard (1998b), *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture*, London: Routledge.

Kierkegaard, Søren (1967), *Training in Christianity*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren (1980), *The Sickness unto Death*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren (1983), *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren (1989), *The Concept of Irony*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark (1999), *Philosophy in the Flesh*, New York: Basic Books.

Langley, Annabel (2012), 'Samuel Barnett: The best performance I've ever seen', *The Guardian*, 29 January, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jan/29/samuel-barnett-best-performance-ever. Accessed 9 July 2020.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2005), *The Ground of the Image*, New York: Fordham University Press.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven (1997), *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Orwell, George (1949), *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Plato (1987), '*The Republic*', *Plato in Twelve Volumes, the Loeb Classical Library* (ed. G. P. Goold), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Radosavljević, Duška (2013), *Theatre-Making: Interplay between Text and Performance in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ravenhill, Mark (2006), 'The beauty of brutality', *The Guardian*, 28 October, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/oct/28/theatre.stage. Accessed 9 July 2020.

Ricoeur, Paul (1994), 'Imagination in discourse and action', in G. Robinson and J. Rundell (eds), *Rethinking Imagination Culture and Creativity*, London: Routledge, pp. 118-35.

Rizzolatti, Giacomo and Sinigaglia, Corrado (2007), *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rossky, William (1958), 'Imagination in the English Renaissance: Psychology and poetic', *Studies in the Renaissance*, 5, pp. 49–73.

Ryle, Gilbert (2009), *The Concept of Mind*, London: Routledge.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1976), *Sartre on Theater*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (2004), *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, London: Routledge.

Schroeder, Timothy (2006), 'Imagination and emotion', in S. Nichols (ed.), *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction*, Oxford: Clarendon, pp. 19-39.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1977), 'Shelley's defence of poetry', in H. F. B. Brett-Smith (ed.), *Peacock's Four Ages of Poetry; Shelley's Defence of Poetry; Browning's Essay on Shelley*, Philadelphia, PA: Folcroft, pp. 21-59.

Sidney, Philip (1977), *An Apology for Poetry or the Defence of Poesy*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Notes

1. Sartre (2004: 191) writes:

> The dramatist constitute irreal objects through verbal analogons; […] the actor who plays Hamlet makes himself, his whole body serve as an analogon for that imaginary person. […] He [the actor] lives entirely in an irreal world. […] It is not that the character is *realized* in the actor, but that the actor is *irrealized* in the character.

2. See Peter Brook's lecture in Tel Aviv 2005, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyPl86_g-Ec&feature=youtu.be. Accessed 9 July 2020.

3. Note the echo of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s protagonist Winston's 'Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia!' (Orwell 1949: 289).