



“MEDIA IMAGINARY”

The critique of the imaginary in the philosophy of Dietmar Kamper¹

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The following considerations concern the philosophy of Kamper in respect to two traditions. The first is in regard to Kant's transcendental philosophy and the second to Lacan's psychoanalysis, which is in itself hardly conceivable without the philosophy of Kant. In the following paper both traditions will be discussed in relation to the core ideas of Kamper. The first tradition leads Kamper to the concept of imagination, phantasy [“Einbildungskraft”]² the second to the imaginary [“Imaginäres”]. The focus of the following remarks concerns Kamper's critique of the imaginary.

I

Throughout the history of philosophy the imagination has been regarded as subjective and therefore contingent and delusive.³ Although it is strongly represented in Kant's philosophy of cognitive subjectivity, finally it is stripped of its power [Kraft] and reduced to mere functionality.

In answer to the question how knowledge is possible, it is well known transcendental philosophy encounters two heterogeneous areas which are juxtaposed to each other. On the one hand the internal cognitive world of the subject and on the other the perception of the outside world. To connect the two, a "medium"⁴ is needed. Kant finds it in the internal sense of time and thus in the synthesis of the productive imagination. This controls the anarchy of the perceptions in a temporal context by schemas which come out of the power of the imagination.⁵ But this synthesis is not sufficient to provide meaningful perception to the consciousness. The synthesized images





are in an obscure association don't fit together and must be stabilized in a unity. This unity consists of the categories in conjunction with the transcendental apperception "I think". Only this connection allows for the stable world of clear and distinct knowledge.

Kamper noticed occasionally that Kant's philosophy makes it possible to understand the importance of the imagination. But Kant also disempowers it by his strict division between a productive and a reproductive dimension. On the one hand, configured to the *pure* imagination, it is a function in the system of control in the service of cognition. On the other, configured to an empirical and reproductive dimension, these are the unpredictable parts which could destabilize the process of knowledge which are isolated. These are excluded from the field of the philosophical discourse and appear only as exuberant and sometimes unbridled imagery with clear pathological tendencies at the edges of imagination. It develops from involuntary imagination, to dreams, phantasy, ecstasy even to the point of madness.⁶

From this situation philosophical investigations can follow two directions. The first traces the direction of the undervalued imagination, its origins and the way it works. According to Kant, this had already begun with Hamann and the Romantics (GE 23). The second analyses the dominance of the cognitive-logical domain and the resulting consequences for the formation of images.

Kamper pursues both directions. His philosophy is to a large extent a critique of the dominance of the cognition and its technological and mediocratic consequences within the imaginary. And he also tries to formulate a fundamentally new view of the imagination, following the traces left by its original form. He endeavours to develop a language as far as possible.





II

Now the core ideas of Kamper will be approached along the second tradition, Lacan's psychoanalytic philosophy. In his writings Kamper often refers to both of the following topics.⁷

According to Lacan every newborn child is in an initial phase of helplessness. Over a long period of growth its body cannot exercise voluntary motoric control. This incoordination leads to an discordance of the drives and a state of self-perception, that reflects the body as dismembered, fragmented, as a "corps morcelé"⁸. This situation forms the innermost core of the self-relationship, which in later life, although displaced or discarded, can never be extinguished. In an early essay Lacan writes alluding to Kant, that this failure will embrace any activity of the "I" and even the cognitive categories.

Lacan then picks out a later significant stage, in the ontogenetic development, "le stade du miroir"⁹. The infant sees its reflection, which is the view of the (m)other in the mirror with triumphant joy. This virtual image outshines the insufficient self-perception. For Kamper the imaginary works as a "screen against the angst".¹⁰ The superficial image evokes the phantasmal appearance of wholeness. Any further relationship of the self to the other and itself is derived from this visual relationship. It proves to be an anthropological constitutive prevalence. In spite of this the imagination will be more embracing and the fantasies of the "dismembered body" break through the surface in the dreams and the suppressed. It destabilizes the relationship to others and the self. So Lacan describes the subject as a nothing but a double reflection of the image of the other and of its own image.

The problem of transcendental philosophy is not just that it firstly recognizes the importance of imagination and secondly disempowers it, but that the apparent stability of the transcendental apparatus is constituted and acts out of the imaginary, as the reading of Lacan shows. This understanding implies that the imaginary reflects not only a psychoanalytic experience, but also holds the rank of an anthropological constant – at





least for now. This means that the imaginary must also become a core topic of sociology. Human society is in all facets permeated by the directives of the imaginary. This is particularly clear in the time of the media age and its technological manifestation of the imaginary in the "screen culture".

In this sense Kamper also quotes Guy Debord's analysis of this in "La société du spectacle" (GE 31f), where Debord writes: "The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation. The specialization of images of the world is completed in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living."¹¹

III

The following is a quotation from Kamper, that summarizes the above and shows the approach of an alternative thinking:

We have known since Freud, certainly since Lacan, that human consciousness is a defence system that knows it is besieged.(...) With respect to this knowledge, for a long time, I have preferred the 'other' of the consciousness: body, desire, wishes, passions, but also the perception until the severing of connection. From this follows, for me, the main theme of the last decade: the 'Einbildungskraft', imagination, phantasy¹² in its fundamental form as a transcendental synthesis of the sensory [Sinnlichkeit], as an inner sense of time, and, in its *split form, as media imaginary, as it currently compulsively structures the audiovisual image-media*¹³(GE 273).¹⁴

Kamper's thinking challenges this flat and seemingly unshakable imaginary and demands a 'bodythinking' ["KörperDenken"] that gives the imagination a hearing and reflects time as the transience and the mortality of the body. The imagination [Einbildungskraft] is not expressible in the imaginary consciousness, but in the "other"¹⁵,





bodies, desires, wishes, passions. As a power [*Kraft*], it is dynamic and proactive and will be preceded by the bodies in the sense that life power [*Lebenskraft*] precedes and empowers the bodies potentially, although the actuality of the body itself is life and a life without the body is hard to imagine without esoteric sophistry.

The imaginary owes itself to a Luciferesque spin-off from the imagination, so it cannot really be situated beyond it. Just because the imagination is more original than the imaginary, the subsequent imaginary works like an impenetrable barrier that denies the review of the imagination. The "reflexion" bounces off like from a mirror (GE 43).

The imaginary in the state of simulation refers recursively only to itself and not beyond. Although merely split, it slides in a "hysteron proteron rotation" as a *generative phantasm*¹⁶ *before* the world and its images – veracious devine in its assumption having created the world.

With this process of structuring also a type of activity is connected, but is not dynamic in nature. It follows a static mechanism. The compulsion [*Zwang*], executed by this process, is not a matter of power, but rather a sign of its drying up. Images just suggest power [*"Kraft"*] but they don't have it (AK 67). To say that the imaginary confers structure to the media means that its innermost is copied into the media. It precedes like a *model pre-scription* (UG 10-11; DS 538) and a *pre-view*. "Neither living nor dead" (GE 73)¹⁷, media exist in the realm of simulation which means nothing else other than the continual repetition of this imaginary *pre-script*.

From a wider perspective, it does not stop with *pre-scription*. Kamper's thinking is tied to a kind of negative utopia. The power [*Kraft*] that is connected with the imagination cannot be switched off. It accumulates in the imaginary; it charges internally and heads to the catastrophe of its explosion, without really exploding. The imaginary is in a state of metastability in which everything is overheated without actually boiling.¹⁸ This is reflected in psychology, society and the economy. In fact all should be mad, war should prevail, the global banking system should collapse, but all this does not happen. The imaginary has





perfidious methods of control. Beyond the "structuring", different methods of *pre-scription* and control are hidden. Kamper often thematises this directly and sometimes indirectly, but does not develop it systematically. Some of these methods or rules are outlined here:

- △ *aestheticization* is fundamental and reduces the world to imaginary superficiality;¹⁹
- △ *transformation* transforms bodies into images;²⁰
- △ *telematisation* brings the body to a maximum distance from reflexion;²¹
- △ *abstraction* reduces the multifaceted world to a data-skeleton of default values;²²
- △ *normalisation* cuts the extreme phenomena and assimilates them to a mean;²³
- △ *fractalisation* copies the structure of the imaginary into every edge of the periphery;²⁴

Eventually the imaginary secures its "immanence" (DS 541)²⁵. For it, nothing is more repugnant than the outside. Its operations are not settled within the opposition of centralisation/decentralisation but on the layer of "in" and "out". This means that the turbulences are to be found in the periphery. Therefore it spreads its tentacles to the edges. This leads the traditional critique to its limits. The critique is based on the believe that it can look on the conditions of a system from beyond the system. But the critical position must assume that it is only a perfidious expression, a desirable disturbance in the control loops of the imaginary itself. The disturbance is finally beneficial only for the further stabilization.

In this lies a fundamental difficulty with which the philosophy of Kamper and the understanding of his readers are faced. How to help a power to express itself without falling back into the trap of representation or simulation, especially when it is true that language is self-referential and repeats only itself, without being able to reach an outside ever? Where can one find the power [Kraft] when the imaginary is a mirror-like hollow





sphere spanning the thinking? In the images of dreams and phantasies? Beyond the mirror surface which would presuppose its fragility? "How shall one open a prison made of images? How shall one escape an ubiquitous cloud?" (ZS 110). How to write when the standard usage of the language is based on the normalized understanding that subventionizes the imaginary?

If no normal or conventional form of discourse can escape the imaginary, the writer can only use the means of the imaginary itself. So writing against the spectacle requires a certain cautious and mimetic circumspection which does not work without "awareness" (AK 152)²⁶ and "reflexion" (GE 43, 282; AK 88). This, let's say paradox, leads Kamper to the question of style. In his work this question is answered with an essayistic form of writing (AK 180f) which is not always easy to understand because it must use the normal language and must escape the normalized way of understanding. It intentionally leaves much open and sometimes only orbits or loops around its target, rather than willing to hit it. To hit always means to signify. The hit destroys its target by signification, by making signs of it in order to be understandable. So Kamper must "constitute a non-language within the language"²⁷ (AP 6). That is a "language-thinking ["Sprachdenken"] ... that radically moves against its habits, against its self-evident truths, platitudes and figures of speech" (AK 63).

The only gap in the system of exploitations and subsumptions that systematically takes over any alternative is the play, the crazy dream, the system-horrifying laughter, the mimed madness. Make oneself unrecognizable in the close-tied context of the recognition services, keep one's incognito in the world of furious identifications, become pseudonymous or anonymous on the stage of rapidly wasted numbers, go the way from the religious offender back to the player, disappear in the flora and fauna of the animated earth instead of singling oneself out etc., all this seems to suggest a way that of course leaves the road of the occidental way of life. (MSM 2; GE 196).

But Kamper does not rigorously attack the methodology of science, but its monopoly of truth. The scientific discourse can certainly contribute, but he has to develop





a common language with the arts, for example in a “‘poetic’ anthropology” (GE 267, 273), or an anthropology that collaborates with the visual arts. For Kamper this is the Historical Anthropology (HA pass.). There are no fixed rules and everything goes out of it, trying out²⁸ possible levels of reflexion of the imagination of time, and of the body. In fact trial, testing, experimentation, tentative acting, all have an important role which includes the freedom to invent one's own models and rules.²⁹

In conclusion a quotation of Kamper that comes back to Kant and the “Einbildungskraft” and was published in 2001:

The imagination, rather neglected in the Critiques of Kant, is anthropologically indispensable and dangerous at the same time. The imagination from which one can know nothing directly is recognized by its fruits and is differentiated into a productive and reproductive faculty. It is a mixture of spontaneity and art that is an expression of both the original passivity of the human being and also the negation of this passivity. It is rupture and endeavoured link [“versuchter Brückenschlag”] between the can and the ought, between the sensual material of the diversity of the world and the fully formed [“formvollendet”] human universe. It is the end of sleep, the end of twilight, the end of the inner pain and the beginning of the great, genuine human activity of thought and action, still dreaming, but willing to go to the extremes of human possibility. (...) Just as the intellect is the faculty of terms, and the reason the faculty of rules, how these terms are used for the common good [“zum allgemeinen Nutzen”], the imagination is the faculty of inventing rules and regulative principles for which there are no rules. This open place - that the play of imagination is indispensable for the progress of the species and essential and dangerous at the same time, that means not completely controllable [“regulierbar”] - leads already in Kant to an epistemological break that puts the anthropology into the open and makes it unattainable for all coherent theories. (GF 45)



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UG: Unmögliche Gegenwart. Zur Theorie der Phantasie. - München: Fink, 1995

AK: Abgang vom Kreuz. - München: Fink, 1996

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GF: Die Geschoßbahn der Frage: Was ist der Mensch? in: PARAGRANA, p. 38-50





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1 The works of Kamper are quoted within the text, with abbreviations (see Cited Literature) and page numbers. German phrases of Kamper are quoted [...]. German words as explanations are quoted [...].

2 „Einbildungskraft, Phantasie, Imagination and their derivatives fully apply as many names for the one subject“ (GE 11, 277; AK 88; cf. Wulf , p. 274).

3 Kant, AH, p. B84, B86

4 Kant, KV, p. B194





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- 5 Kant, KV, p. A130, B179; cf. EWD 336f
- 6 ...wherein the difference between productive and reproductive imagination fades. With Deleuze/Guattari, one must say these unpredictable parts only appear in their "reterritorialized" form, completely deprived of their "deterritorializing" power.
- 7 GE 124-138, 220ff; ZK *pass.*; UG 61-82.
- 8 Lacan, p. 94
- 9 Lacan, *pass.*
- 10 cf. UG 44
- 11 Debord, § 2
- 12 ["Einbildungskraft, Imagination, Phantasie"]
- 13 Italics the author's (E.H.)
- 14 cf. GE, chapter 8.III; SI chapter 3.4 and 5
- 15 cf. Böhme/Böhme, *pass.*
- 16 ... to avoid the term "productive"
- 17 „Zombies“, AK 112, 117
- 18 cf. GE 284; HZ 100
- 19 cf. SP 3; AK 118; UG 85
- 20 cf. AK 113
- 21 cf. AK 42
- 22 cf. SP 539; AK 137
- 23 AK 138, 149
- 24 cf. UG 88, 121. For another form of Fractality, see GE 284
- 25 cf. a.o. GE 273; ZS 110; SP 543; UG 193; HZ 46
- 26 Kamper uses the english word "awareness" and the german word "Geistesgegenwart".
- 27 ["innersprachlich eine Nicht-Sprache zu konstituieren"]
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28 Sometimes Kamper chooses the word “ausprobieren”.

29 DS 539, 541; GE 168, 278, 282; AK 52, 98, 142

