

The Living Imagination in Theatre. Paul Ricoeur's Concept of Productive Imagination and Acting Techniques

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Abstract

The present article explores the potential of Paul Ricoeur's concept of productive imagination, as developed mainly in his *Lectures on Imagination*, in a theatre studies context. Given the broad scope of imaginative activity in theatre, it focuses on the processes of role creation and interpretation, analyzing the function of imagination in two contrasting acting methods: those of Lee Strasberg and Michael Chekhov. Ricoeur's distinction, drawing on Kant, between reproductive and productive imagination offers a conceptual framework for understanding the different ways in which actors access their material: Imagination is thus not merely connected to recollection but constitutes a capacity for creative transformation. The focus on performance practice may help to clarify Ricoeur's conception of imagination and illuminate the intertwining of both modes of imagining. Ricoeur's conception of an imagination freed from reference to empirical reality opens the possibility of conceiving theatre as a space for the reconfiguration of reality. Theatre art can thus be given a philosophical function: it becomes a way of questioning and reshaping our understanding of the world, and a practice through which reality may be augmented.

Keywords: *Productive imagination, reproductive imagination, Paul Ricoeur, Theatre, Acting Techniques, Michael Chekhov, Lee Strasberg.*

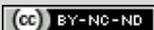
Résumé

Cet article examine la pertinence du concept d'imagination productive chez Paul Ricoeur, tel qu'il est développé principalement dans *L'Imagination. Cours à l'Université de Chicago (1975) (Lectures on imagination)*, pour penser le travail de l'acteur au théâtre. En me concentrant sur les processus de création et d'interprétation des rôles, j'analyse la fonction de l'imagination dans deux méthodes de jeu contrastées : celles de Lee Strasberg et de Michael Chekhov. La distinction établie par Ricoeur, d'après Kant, entre imagination reproductive et imagination productive fournit un cadre conceptuel pertinent pour appréhender les diverses modalités d'accès au matériau de jeu par les acteurs : l'imagination n'y est pas seulement liée à la mémoire, mais constitue une capacité de transformation créatrice. Ricoeur conçoit une imagination affranchie de la référence à la réalité empirique, ouvrant ainsi la voie à une définition du théâtre comme espace de reconfiguration du

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réel. L'art dramatique se voit dès lors attribuer une fonction philosophique : il interroge notre perception et notre compréhension du monde, tout en constituant une manière d'augmenter la réalité.

Mots-clés : imagination productive, Paul Ricoeur, théâtre, jeu d'acteur, imagination reproductive, Michael Chekhov, Lee Strasberg.

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Introduction

This essay is inspired by Paul Ricoeur's recently published *Lectures on Imagination*, delivered in Chicago in 1975, which outlines a "general theory of imagination" aimed at developing a distinct account of productive imagination.¹ The following study may be read as an attempt to bring Ricoeur's reflections on imagination into dialogue with the field of theatre, thereby extending them into an area he did not fully explore: the application of the concepts of productive and reproductive imagination to theatrical performance practice. To this end, the essay focuses on two influential acting techniques—Method Acting and Michael Chekhov Technique—in order to illuminate and contrast their respective tendencies in rehearsal and performance, examining how each may be understood as oriented more toward reproductive or productive modes of imagining.

For the sake of analytical clarity, the discussion is limited to traditional role-playing forms of theatre and does not address other performance approaches, for instance such as Brecht's gestural acting and strategies of alienation, forms of postdramatic theatre as conceived by Hans-Thies Lehmann, Grotowski's corporeal actor training or non-Western body techniques. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two modes of imagination, as described by Ricoeur, may offer a fruitful analytical instrument for understanding different acting processes and stimulate further research into acting techniques and rehearsal practices.

In order to deepen the analysis, the essay moves cyclically between philosophy and theatre studies, deliberately oscillating between the two disciplines to advance the exploration of the topic.

Imagination and the paradox of the theatre

The terms "imagination" and "fantasy" are conceptually and intuitively straightforward yet also mystifying. In German, the terms "*Phantasie*", "*Vorstellung*" and "*Einbildungskraft*" are sometimes differentiated and sometimes used interchangeably. Since antiquity, attempts have been made to understand imagination, the formation of inner ideas and pictures, in its relation to external reality and its perception. From Plato onwards, imaginary images were considered kind of mental copies or shadows of reality, capable of producing illusions. What we perceive in the external world provides the standard by which we judge the mental image, and consequently the mental image may appear deceptive or illusory, if mistaken for real. This is illustrated by the grapes, painted by Zeuxis so realistically that birds were enticed to peck at them. Thus, images can deceive. When considering dreams, fantasies, and delusions, this perspective may seem plausible.

¹ Taylor, "Editor's Introduction," xii.

Art, too, has long been associated with the realm of illusion and “as-if reality,” which can deceive and mislead us. We are also acquainted with the psychological phenomenon of wishful thinking, which can influence our actions, only for us to realize, upon further reflection, that we were mistaken. The notion of fantasy and imagination as illusion or deception has been a recurring theme throughout the history of philosophy, arts, and theatre. It was not until Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) theory of knowledge and his reflections on aesthetics that the conception of the inner imagination as a kind of mental copy of things underwent a fundamental shift. Accordingly, Paul Ricoeur, in line with Kant’s insights, formulated a theory of the imagination that does not reduce it to a mere mental image of the external world or of sensory perceptions. By emphasizing the dynamic and productive power of the imagination, Ricoeur’s theory has far-reaching implications for the conception and understanding of the arts and theatre.

In his treatises on fiction and imagination, Paul Ricoeur did not extensively address theatre in detail. When he spoke about theatre, he did so primarily in dialogue with Gabriel Marcel, the French philosopher and playwright. Both focused mainly on the play, the written text and its cultural significance.² In the *Lectures on Imagination* Ricoeur points, for example, to the similarity of the narrative structure of drama to human existence.³ Regarding Aristotle and the subject of mimesis, he is mainly interested in the narrative structures. Acting and performing are not taken into consideration. I will return to the missing dynamic aspect of action in his *Lectures* at a later point.

Modern theatre studies reflect on theatre in its specific function as a medium and considers the practice of live performance. Theatre goes beyond written drama. So let me briefly clarify three central aspects:

Theatre as performance practice: Theatre is not merely the written play, as many still may think. Contemporary theatre studies focus on the theatrical event.⁴ Theatre is to be seen as an event that takes place in real time and in real space. It unfolds in a physical setting, creating a relationship and communication between actors and spectators. The German philosopher Christoph Menke points out the essential simultaneity of actors and spectators as a central feature of performance.

Presence in the theatre is the presence of playing and watching *for each other*: watching plays, playing in front of an audience. In the theatre, watching and playing, that is, the spectators and the performers, share the presence of a space and a time. This spatio-temporal presence brings them together. Spectators and actors in the theatre exist only in this simultaneousness, which thus becomes a togetherness, even a for-one-another; if one of them is absent, not yet or no longer there, the other is also absent—so there is no theatre at

² Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel, *Entretiens Paul Ricoeur Gabriel Marcel*.

³ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 281.

⁴ See Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*.

all. But they are only there for each other as essentially and therefore irrevocably unequal. Their indissoluble presence for each other is at the same time divided in itself.⁵

Thus, theatre must also be considered in its material dimension as both a social practice and a form of work.

Theatre as process: Theatre in this sense is not a picture. It is a process unfolding itself between stage and audience, actors and spectators, in real time and real place. We know that Ricoeur's whole effort in the *Lectures on Imagination* is to show that imagination is not explained by a theory of the image (as we find it in the philosophical tradition from Plato onwards). "I am attempting to distinguish fiction as much as possible from picture, picture being the heir of the reproductive imagination and fiction another name for the productive imagination."⁶ Ricoeur seeks to break with the tradition of mental image and with the concept of fantasy and imagination as an illusion or deception—an idea that permeates the history of philosophy and continues to influence the understanding of art and theatre to this day. "(...) what interests me is a theory of fiction (...) as absolutely and unrelentingly opposed to a theory of portrait and of illusion."⁷

Theatre as paradox: What we see on stage is not real, it is kind of fiction, part of a play, and performed with phantasy and unusual, often uncommon gestures and postures. Everything on stage both exists and does not exist at the same time. This creates a paradox which is closely related to the paradox of fiction. Ricoeur states that fiction itself is a paradox and another name for imagination.⁸ Due to the previously mentioned paradox of theatre, we encounter a conflict of interpretation. With this third point, we are already facing a problem: Is theatre, when seen as performance, a kind of fiction? Is it not at the same time real action? There are, quite obviously people on stage—holding hands, gesticulating, pushing, and pulling. Sometimes you can even hear them breathing and smell their sweat. The physical reality of the performance in motion distinguishes theatre from painting and poetry, which Ricoeur primarily refers to in the *Lectures*, when explaining fiction and productive imagination. Theatre is neither a picture nor a poem. Rather, it is *real action* within *fictional circumstances* featuring fictional characters and plots, as the renowned Russian acting teacher and director Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) put it.

⁵ Menke, "Das Spiel des Theaters," 39. My translation. "Die Gegenwart im Theater ist die Gegenwärtigkeit des Spielens und des Zuschauens *füreinander*: Schauen *von* Spielen, Spielen *vor* Zuschauern. Im Theater teilen das Zuschauen und das Spielen, daher die Zuschauer und die Spieler, die Gegenwart eines Raums und einer Zeit. Diese räumlich-zeitliche Gegenwart versammelt sie. Es gibt die Zuschauer und Spieler des Theaters nur in diesem Zugleich, das dadurch ein Mit-, ja Füreinander wird; wenn einer von beiden abwesend, noch nicht oder nicht mehr da ist, ist es die andere auch – gibt es also gar kein Theater. Aber füreinander da sind sie nur als wesentlich und daher unaufhebbar Ungleiche. Ihre unauflöbliche Gegenwart füreinander ist zugleich in sich gespalten." (emphasis in the original version)

⁶ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 259, cf. also 249f. Ricoeur contrasts picture and fiction, but his aesthetic examples of painting want to show the productive imagination in paintings (pictures) and do not engage in the active, dynamic dimension of theatre as we will see below.

⁷ *Ibid.*, He also fights the Platonic tradition of mimesis as a kind of shadow, always less than reality, cf. 252f.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 259. "(...) the inexistence of the object of fiction allows the fiction to provide its own referent (...)"

Theatre between Reality and Fiction – Negation

Ricoeur posits that imagining entails the coexistence of the real and the unreal, of reality and fiction. This is what generates new meaning. It is not a matter of representing the external world; rather, it is about *producing* meaning. What Ricoeur says regarding the possible references of fiction applies to theatre as a whole:

We have to question not only the tradition of the image as a shadow of something (Plato I.H.), but also a frozen concept of reality. We tend to call reality what we know already as reality, what has been agreed upon as reality.⁹

However, theatre does not merely reproduce reality. On stage, everything is at least doubled, or twofold, or even manifold. Theatre can be described in a manner analogous to metaphor as Ricoeur puts it when discussing concepts of model and metaphorical transfer: "(...) in metaphor, as I also try to show, one word has several references at the same time."¹⁰

Ricoeur's dynamic understanding of imagination, which goes back to Immanuel Kant's concept of productive imagination, corresponds to a contemporary understanding of theatre art as a dynamic event between stage and audience. In each performance, a new meaning is created through the uniqueness of the event at a particular time and with a different audience, that brings its own horizons of understanding and expectations. Theatre engages with concrete relationships to the world (what is known as *Weltverhältnis*). These relationships are established between the actors and the audience. Theatre performance continuously creates and re-establishes these relationships through the poetic power of imagination. Ricoeur also refers to the productive dimension of imagination as "the poetic," in contrast to the "reproductive." We will return to this distinction later. It is important to emphasize that a theatrical event always involves more than just the function of creating meaning. Theatre builds a lived experience—an event—for both the actors and the audience, something that happens anew in every performance with every audience. As Ricoeur states, self-understanding is achieved through the interpretation of signs, symbols, and texts. In a theatrical performance, a person on stage becomes a sign—simultaneously representing more than just themselves, yet at the same time existing as a living human being. This offers an amalgamation of fiction and reality that seems to be more complex and challenging than the issues of poetry and painting which Ricoeur discusses in depth in his *Lectures*.

Watching a theatre performance involves a complex process of meaning-making. It is not only the actors' and performers' expressions that convey meaning, but also elements such as lighting, sound, stage design, costumes, and atmosphere. All of these must be perceived and interpreted. This multiplicity of referents creates an oscillation—an interplay between understanding and not understanding unfolding in the spectator's mind and emotions. In theatre, we see things *as if* they were real, while at the same time everything is obviously staged and produced in real time and existing before our very eyes.¹¹ As an art form, theatre operates with

⁹ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 256.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 268.

¹¹ Ricoeur invites us to distinguish more precisely between the "as if", a hypothetical form of variation in meaning, and the "seeing as", which changes our understanding of reality. Both apply to the theatre.

gaps—spaces that must be actively filled by the spectator’s imagination and understanding.¹² Ricoeur develops a theory of fiction centered on the notions of negation and absence (in critical reference to Sartre). When discussing modern abstract painting—such as Mondrian’s work with vertical and horizontal lines and blocks of primary color—he emphasizes the absence of any direct reference to the external world. The fictitious figures and compositions on the canvas create their own autonomous sphere—just as lyric poetry exists in and for itself without referring to anything beyond itself. It is present, and yet at the same time does not exist elsewhere. The double nature of theatre, however, complicates this aspect of negation. Performances never operate without references, regardless of the stylistic approach; yet these references remain unstable, since they point to fictional realities while being grounded in the material presence of actors as human beings and in stage design. Theatre thus oscillates between absence and presence, between fictional worlds and the palpable bodies that produce them.

To illustrate this point, consider the example of a classic character actor: Actor A presents the character Hamlet B. We see both, A the actor (perhaps the famous Kenneth Branagh) and B, the character. We recognize the actor within the role, yet we simultaneously perceive the character as separate and somehow independent. This oscillation between actor and role is often what makes theatre so compelling. But what is Hamlet? We know what the actor is—a flesh-and-blood human being with a body, a history, a voice. But what is Hamlet? And how can it be that every actor—A, B, C, D, E, F, G—shows a different Hamlet, even when using the same text, the same translation of the play? So, where does Hamlet exist?¹³

Besides the ontological question—which would be a highly fruitful subject for further discussion in relation to Paul Ricoeur’s contributions¹⁴—we will narrow our perspective and look at the role-playing actor.

¹² Also, the traditional European concept of theatre is interrogated, the special relationship between performer/actors and spectators remains at the core of the notion theatre: “Even today, the concept of *Theater* subsumes a very broad range of performances, no matter whether they take place in a theatre building or at some other indoor or outdoor urban or even rural venue. Be it action or performance art or other kinds of performing arts that experiment with the relationship between *Schauspieler* and *Zuschauer*, they are covered by the concept of *Theater*.” Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction – Performance-Related Concepts as Epistemic Systems,” 7. (emphasis in the original)

¹³ Ricoeur also points to the question of the status of a character within a play that is not being performed. But what if it is being staged? “[W]here, descriptively, is Hamlet? He’s not in history. Are there as many Hamlets as there are brains? In a way, but in another way, there is only one, who is in Shakespeare’s play. The play is the place where Hamlet is. Where is that place when the play is not being performed?” Ricoeur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 118. The ontological nature of theatre is characterized by its unique ephemerality, whereby a performance exists solely in the moment of its enactment, subsequently dissipating into nonexistence. In contrast to the enduring forms of literature and film, theatrical events are ephemeral in nature, dissipating once the performance concludes. A discussion of the ontological problem is beyond the scope of this essay.

¹⁴ Cf. Grondin “The Metaphysical Dimension”; Lythgoe, “Ontology of Actuality;” Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.3.

Acting Techniques: Method Acting and Chekhov Technique

The human being who acts is the human being who lives. That is a terrifying circumstance. Essentially the actor acts a fiction, a dream; in life the stimuli to which we respond are always real. The actor must constantly respond to stimuli that are imaginary. And yet this must happen not only just as it happens in life, but actually more fully and more expressively. Although the actor can do things in life quite easily, when he has to do the same things on the stage under fictitious conditions, he has difficulty because he is not equipped as a human being merely to playact at imitating life. He must somehow believe. He must somehow be able to convince himself of the rightness of what he is doing in order to do things fully on the stage.¹⁵

What the famous acting teacher Lee Strasberg (1901–1982) describes not only raises once more questions about the ontological state of theatre but also dives into the practical work of actors. The difficulties he speaks of encompass numerous practical challenges and obstacles for actors. Acting is not merely the reproduction of scenes, plays and characters. An actor must master the dual nature of theatre: To create fictitious characters to move the audience in a real way. This entails a twofold task for the actor: both to authentically feel and behave according to the fictitious circumstances of the play, while also maintaining control over what they need to do on stage. It is important to emphasize that while the characters, the plot of the play, and all circumstances are imaginary, the audience's response is real. And so are the mental, emotional and bodily processes for the actor. Therefore, actor training consists of a wide range of exercises to help manage the complex tasks. The various traditions and methods of acting engage with internal and external impulses, perceptions, and observations, drawing on imaginative constructs and empirically grounded experience. Even actors who do not playact within psycho-realistic or naturalistic conceptions need the capacity to respond to and communicate with scene partners and the ensemble on stage. For all of them, it is crucial to cultivate actors' competencies in perceiving, imagining, and expressing through their bodies. Thus, actor training is primarily a training of creativity, receptivity, and expressivity. To explore the role of the different aspects of imagination, I will compare two well-known acting techniques: Method Acting and the Michael Chekhov Technique. Both utilize active imagining to influence physical and emotional expression, making it useful for role interpretation and character work. Neither of them sees acting as a form of deception or pretense. Despite the differences in their respective approaches to acting both techniques make the actor work with the paradox of genuinely doing and feeling something within the fictional circumstances of the play. For example, an actor is able to distinguish between merely pretending to think about something on stage and really thinking on stage—and we, as spectators, can perceive the difference: the one who is just pretending is less engaging than the one who is inwardly engaged in the task of thinking.¹⁶ This distinction is one of the secrets to achieving presence on stage.

Method Acting developed within the famous Actors Studio in New York and Hollywood, makes use of three different aspects of memory techniques: the "affective memory" together with

¹⁵ Strasberg, "The Actor and Himself," 621.

¹⁶ Diderot's famous dialogue on *The Paradox of Acting* (1830) is dedicated to the question, if an actor should better use an inner or an outer technique.

“sense memory” and “emotional memory.” At the center of the method is the aim of enabling the actors to experience real emotions on stage. Their emotions must be controlled and made repeatable through conscious preparation without losing their unconscious spontaneity.¹⁷ It is crucial to find ways to remember and then relive biographical situations. Strasberg differentiates: *Affective memory* is the reliving of an experience; *sense memory* is the memory of a situation through accompanying sensory impressions—sounds or odors, temperature, pain etc.; *emotional memory* is the memory of complex feelings.¹⁸ Memorizing requires the imagination of the absent. Imagination and memory have a common trait: the presence of the absent, as Ricoeur posits: “To be sure, we have stated repeatedly that imagination and memory have as a common trait the presence of the absent and as a differential trait, on the one hand, the bracketing of any positing of reality and the vision of something unreal and, on the other, the positing of an earlier reality.”¹⁹ An actor must be trained to precisely evoke personal experiences from their own life in highly detailed form. For instance, an actress might draw on her mother’s funeral to portray the reaction to the death of her fiancé, or to express the shock when she realizes Hamlet’s mad, erratic behavior towards her. The feeling of abandonment and lack of response is taken from a personal memory that is recalled as precisely as possible. One can imagine the strain this technique places on an actor’s personal life. It has been posited by some actors that they experienced their performance as a sort of betrayal when they were compelled to resurrect the feelings and memories of their mother’s death on a nightly basis in order to utilize them in their performances, and perhaps even to receive applause.

Michael Chekhov (1891–1955), the famous actor and nephew of Anton Chekhov, takes a different approach; while he also agrees with Strasberg’s conviction, that an actor’s strongest expression comes from the invisible inner work, he does not focus on personal experience. Instead, he emphasizes the creative power of imagination that shapes external expression. He does not see the actor primarily as a director’s instrument but highlights their autonomous creative potential. He trusts in the power of imagination allowing the actor to explore where it leads. The imagination he stimulates and utilizes should not be modeled on external realities; it is meant to transcend personal life experience.

To stimulate the imagination, a series of exercises and physical movements are employed. The core of the Chekhov Technique is psycho-physical: imaginative activity is always connected to physical movement and vice versa. The purpose is to reach a state of creativity that allows for greater receptivity to mental, physical and emotional impulses. The use of creative imagination requires “active collaboration.” Despite the apparent autonomy and spontaneity of the image-generation process, the actor is responsible for meticulously crafting and refining these images to align with the demands of their role.²⁰ Consequently, they must exercise their imagination in a manner analogous to their physical training. The actor develops their role according to the imperative: imagine—and trust in the material through which the imagination is expressed—namely, the body. When actors explore their character and prepare for performance, they make use of the connection between physical movement and imaginative processes. Imagination here is not employed as a picture, trait, or copy of remembered reality. After all, who has truly murdered their own children, like Medea? Truth on stage is not achieved by reproducing empirical facts. It is

¹⁷ Ricoeur developed the notions of the voluntary and the involuntary, cf. *Freedom and Nature*.

¹⁸ Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion*, 123–174.

¹⁹ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 44.

²⁰ Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 23–26.

not a matter of reproductive imagination, but of productive imagination—a creative force that goes beyond memory and personal experience. Here, we can consider Paul Ricoeur's view of productive imagination as a means to revise and transform our habitual concepts of reality.

A theory of productive imagination implies revision of our concepts of reality and of truth, since a concept of truth as adequation belongs to the subject/object relationship, whereas the relation to reality in terms of pre-objective belonging (it) has more to do with a concept of truth as manifestation.²¹

Michael Chekhov was convinced that actors can attain a deeper level of insight and truth through their creative practices. He referred to the "higher self" as part of the actor's personality. Art, in this sense, is understood as a higher mode of consciousness and a pathway to truth.²² Ricoeur's concept of "fiction as augmented reality" expresses a similar conviction: that fiction—once freed from the constraints of empirical reality—can reveal a deeper form of truth than observation or representation alone could ever provide. If we consider the double nature of theatre—to be and not to be at the same time—we cannot simply or naively apply our everyday concepts of reality to the stage. This presents a particular challenge for documentary theatre, as well as for current debates surrounding political correctness in the context of contemporary theatre practices.

Reproductive and productive Imagination

To better understand the distinction between memory-based imagination and what Paul Ricoeur calls "poetic imagination" we must examine more closely the distinction between the reproductive and productive functions of the imagination. We find both concepts described in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and then in more detail in the *Critique of Judgement*. We know that Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) theory of knowledge and his reflections on aesthetics fundamentally transformed the philosophical view of imagination as a kind of mental copy of external things. He formulates a theory of the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) that does not reduce it to a mere mental image of the external world or to perceptions like Spinoza and Hume.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant introduces the central role of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) as mediating faculty. The well-known section on schematism presents understanding as a process, that is necessarily connected to the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*). We require the faculty of imagination in order to recognize and to remember. How can concepts fit to intuitions? The faculty of imagination helps to produce "schemata", which provide rules to connect the intuitions to the concepts. Kant offers the example of a simple train of thought: if you wish to think the time from one noon to the other noon, or just the distance from one number to another, we must not lose the earlier item in our thinking; one must link both stages in a mental sequence.

²¹ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 285. The term "pre-objective" refers to the phase of experience before it is categorized within objective, scientific or analytical frameworks. Ricoeur explores how individuals perceive and interpret their world before transforming these perceptions into a systematic or objective understanding. "Pre-objective" describes the immediate, often emotional and intuitive way in which we experience the world before we rationalize or categorize it.

²² There are influences from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, cf. Hentschel, *Imagination und Theater*, 86-92 and 97-102.

This connection is carried out by the imagination.²³ In another example, Kant describes how the diversity of the given is synthesized by imagination. Here, Kant makes the crucial move in identifying imagination as an active, dynamic faculty of the mind.²⁴ It is always at work whenever we perceive, think, and recognize. The mind is not a static apparatus that depicts something external inwardly, but is an incessantly continuing activity, synthesizing the manifold of the given. This is the reproductive function, as Kant pointed it out in the first *Critique*. The reproductive imagination is directed toward prior reality.

The productive imagination, by contrast, is not necessarily tied to any object reference, as Ricoeur points out. It cannot be assigned a definite temporal marker, as is the case with memories of a specific event. To understand the concept of productive imagination in its full scope, we must turn to Kant's aesthetics. Here, in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) a new dimension of imagination emerges. Kant explores the relation between sensibility and understanding that is highly relevant to our context. In contrast to the first *Critique*, productive imagination is no longer described in the context of cognitive schemata. Based on its capacity of synthesis, imagination gives rise to a state of "free play"—as Kant describes it—within the faculties of cognition. In the realm of aesthetic experience, imagination is not subordinated to the understanding. It holds the power to bring together seemingly incompatible elements, thereby generating new and unexpected combinations. Productive imagination is able to unify disparate elements without conceptual determination, giving rise to a sense of purposiveness without purpose (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*). This marks a shift from the epistemic to the aesthetic function of imagination.

This is precisely where Ricoeur situates his own theory of productive imagination. He identifies two levels at which imagination operates: on the one hand, the epistemological level, which is essential for the dynamic linking and mediation of cognitive activity; on the other, a "poetic" or "creative" function that transcends mere cognition of what already exists. The imagination's productive power plays a role in fiction, art, and literature—but also in ideology and utopia, and in the symbolic orders of politics, society, and religion. Building on Kant's idea of imagination's productive capacity, Ricoeur goes a step further. In his discussions of modern poetry and abstract painting, he develops a concept of imagination that is liberated from reference to empirical reality. At this point, Ricoeur introduces the notion of a "second-order ontology," locating the productive power of imagination within the framework of autonomous aesthetics. While first-order ontology refers to entities in the empirical world (things as they are), second-order ontology refers to the worlds disclosed by imagination. Fiction, metaphor, and art do not

²³ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 120. "Es ist also in uns ein tätiges Vermögen der Synthesis dieses Mannigfaltigen, welches wir Einbildungskraft nennen (...). Die Einbildungskraft soll nämlich das Mannigfaltige der Anschauung in ein Bild bringen; vorher muss sie also die Eindrücke in ihre Tätigkeit aufnehmen, d.i. apprehendieren. Es ist aber klar, dass selbst diese Apprehension des Mannigfaltigen allein noch kein Bild und keinen Zusammenhang der Eindrücke hervorbringen würde, (...) wäre da nicht (...) ein reproduktives Vermögen der Einbildungskraft (...)." "There is thus an active faculty of the synthesis of this manifold in us, which we call imagination, (...) For the imagination to bring the manifold of intuition into an image; it must previously have taken the impressions up into its activity, i.e. have apprehended them. It is, however, clear that even this apprehension of the manifold alone would bring forth no image and no connection of the impressions, (...) were there not (...) a reproductive faculty of the imagination, (...)." (A120-A121 my translation)

simply mirror reality; they propose alternative modes of being. In this way, imagination does not imitate reality but opens up new possibilities. Ricoeur thus assigns art a philosophical function: it becomes a way of questioning and reshaping our understanding of the world. As he writes: "The paradox of fiction (another word for imagination I.H.) is that the more remote it is from the usual way of dealing with reality, the greater its capacity for opening, for disclosing, for extending reality."²⁵ This is a strong argument for the artistic freedom of creation and for the role of imagination and the significance of art in shaping our understanding of what is real and reality.

... the more imagination deviates from what is called reality in ordinary vision and in ordinary language, the closer it comes to the core of reality that is no longer the world of manipulable objects. In terms of painting, the paradox is that when painting is no longer figurative, it displays its most mimetic function.²⁶

Here, Ricoeur is aiming at a deeper understanding of reality—an allusion to the pre-objective conditions of human existence. The "shock of fiction" serves to expand our concepts of reality, beyond what is framed and constrained by scientific or everyday language.

Nevertheless, the productive function of imagination cannot be entirely separated from the reproductive one. Creativity is not possible without the reproductive imagination. It relates to perception.²⁷ Creativity unfolds against the background of perception, memory, and conceptual structures. Reproductive imagination is always already involved. Productive imagination does not operate in isolation; rather, it relies on the resources of reproductive imagination.²⁸ What we invent or imagine is always connected, however subtly, to our previous experiences and stored cognitive frameworks. The objects we remember and visualize in imagination can become part of new, freely associative relationships through the productive faculty. Concepts and categorizations remain involved in the process without being able to fully control or limit it. If they did, there would be no discoveries, no experiments, no utopias—and certainly no art or literature. But also, no memory and remembrance.

It is worth briefly turning to Ricoeur's later work, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (*Memory, History, Forgetting*), which may serve to further sharpen the conceptual distinction between memory and imagination. Here, he explicitly warns against conflating imagination with memory, and imagining with remembering, though they are closely tied together. In Part I.1, titled "Mémoire et imagination," he underscores a nuanced understanding of the interplay between imagination and memory. While both involve the representation of what is absent, imagination

²⁵ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 276.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

²⁷ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 120. Later Kant describes the concept of transcendental imagination, in Kant (B-edition §24): Transcendental imagination is "a faculty of synthesis in general," meaning that it constitutes the unity of experience. Without it, perceptions would remain mere chaos. Transcendental imagination is a fundamental faculty that synthesizes the manifold of intuition under the conditions of the understanding. It mediates between sensibility and the pure concepts of the understanding (categories), making objective knowledge possible. In this sense, it operates not merely empirically, but a priori, as a condition for the possibility of experience.

²⁸ Although reproductive imagination is associated with perception, we should bear in mind that, according to Ricoeur's broader theory, productive imagination is more closely linked to language and the symbolic dimension than to perception.

suspends the assertion of reality, allowing for the creation of the unreal, whereas memory affirms the reality of the past event.²⁹ This conceptual differentiation is pivotal in Ricoeur's exploration of the epistemological and phenomenological dimensions of memory and imagination. Here, Ricoeur is clearly referring to what we know from the *Lectures* as productive imagination—without naming it as such—delivered nearly twenty-five years earlier in Chicago. There, he differentiates between reproductive and productive functions of imagination. From this point of view, we can state: the reproductive imagination, grounded in the reactivation of past perceptions, can thus be more closely aligned with memory—while the productive imagination is capable of generating novel configurations beyond the real, and hence aligns with fiction, aesthetics, and creative world-making.³⁰

Intertwining experience and action – reproductive and productive Imagination

To return to the work of the actor and the two acting techniques mentioned, developed by Strasberg and Chekhov: it is obvious that we cannot simply evaluate them in terms of their creativity. It is, of course, the case that Strasberg's memory-based working method also produces extremely creative new theatre presentations and role interpretations. After all, it is the most widely used acting technique. We therefore need to look more closely at the relationship between reproductive and productive imagination within these techniques.

To create a character, the actor reproduces for example a particular way of walking, drinking, speaking and laughing. Usually, they try out many possibilities in the rehearsal room before the character and the scene are finalized. They can draw on personal experience as well as observations from everyday life. Sometimes an actor will be inspired by the gait of an animal, perhaps a cat or by the movements of a homeless person. There is much reproductive imagination at work here.

But if we think about the complex life of a character, namely Hamlet, when he learns of Ophelia's death—what feelings, memories and fragments of thought move within him, not only in his mind—but also in his body? Perhaps tensions and vibrations arise. Which part of the body is most affected? These questions serve to avoid clichés in the process of creating the dramatic character. Michael Chekhov stimulates the actor to experiment with these aspects, even with colors, temperatures, or personal atmospheres and so on—to find ways of expression that are not taken from reality. If we think a little further into modern dance techniques, we can imagine how they

²⁹ "Nous avons toujours dit que la présence de l'absent est le trait commun à l'imagination et à la mémoire, tandis que leur trait distinctif réside, d'une part, dans la suspension de toute affirmation de réalité et la représentation d'un irréel, et d'autre part, dans l'affirmation d'un réel prioritaire" (*La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 53f).

³⁰ We must consider Ricoeur's notion of "attestation," developed in *Oneself as Another*, as a form of assured self-relation distinct from Cartesian certainty. Rather than signifying epistemic certainty, attestation denotes a confident, though fallible, affirmation of one's capacity to act, speak, and take responsibility. It is an ethical commitment to the reliability of memory and testimony—an interpretative trust that underwrites the productive use of imagination. Even where error remains possible, attestation enables imagination to remain answerable to the truths embedded in lived and remembered experience, thus crucial for understanding how imagination can bear a relation to truth in both historical narrative and artistic creation.

can find new forms of expression that have never been seen before, that do not even exist elsewhere. It is all about productive imagination.

To provide a concrete example and to give a sense of how the method is applied in practice to yield a powerful or meaningful theatrical effect we have to consider: It is always difficult to describe an actor's concrete process of role work.³¹ The Chekhov Technique in particular resists precise description because of its psycho-physical foundation and its highly individual application. Chekhov offers a wide range of tools. With regard to the example of preparing the role of Ophelia, the following tools for shaping a character can be mentioned: utilizing the "Imaginary Body," to create a unique body quality; the "Psychological Gesture," which serves to explore the character's inner intentions; and the employment of the so-called "Six Directions," which here will provide a more accessible entry point into the technique for non-specialist readers.³² The British director and actress Sinéad Rushe explains:

Try moving back and up with a quality of floating: you may begin to feel a little fragile, dreamy, and perhaps slightly unhinged. We might use this to play the singing Ophelia in *Hamlet* (Act IV.v), where she has lost her mind, and blend it with sudden shifts into the forward and down direction with a staccato quality for her addresses, or commands, to Claudius and Queen Gertrude—"pray you, mark," "let's have no more of this", "say you this." In this way, the "fog" of her madness is cut through with arhythmical moments of sharp and accusatory lucidity, and we might begin to access something of Ophelia's tragic and turbulent distress.³³

The corporeal movements are accompanied by concomitant sensations that give rise to feelings and emotions and stimulate the emergence of images. It is evident that an actor's discoveries in preparing a role are not drawn solely from the "higher" worlds of imagination.³⁴ Because every actor is physically and mentally bound to life, aspects of personal experience and memories, as well as elements of cultural and collective history, will inevitably enter the process. Thus, when working on a role, we encounter combinations of both imaginative modes: reproductive and productive imagination. What can be analytically distinguished in theory cannot be separated in practice; reproductive and productive imagination are intertwined and interwoven. We must therefore consider the relationship between these two dimensions. Can productive imagination be active at all without reproductive imagination, which remains rooted in what has been experienced and perceived?

Although the distinction between the two modes of imagination can be clarified, we should not overestimate it, since a new referent in productive imagination is not created out of

³¹ Kemp, *Embodied Acting*; Fischer-Lichte, "Aesthetic knowledge and aesthetic experience."

³² See Rushe, *Michael Chekhov's Acting Technique*, 205 ff (Imaginary Body), 269ff (Psychological Gesture).

³³ Rushe, *Michael Chekhov's Acting Technique*, 155.

³⁴ Michael Chekhov repeatedly emphasised the primacy of the spiritual or imaginative realm over material reality, a stance that stood in clear opposition to the dominant materialist ideology of the Soviet period. His insistence on intuition, the higher self, and the transformative power of imagination was viewed with suspicion by Soviet cultural authorities and contributed to his emigration. Hentschel, *Imagination und Theater*, 33–39, 86–93.

nothing. We must consider that productive imagination always contains elements of reproductive imagination. As George H. Taylor explains:

To be effective, the productive imagination must transform existing categories; it cannot exist totally outside and separate from them. This suggests that any transformative fiction—any utopia, any scientific model, any poem—must have elements of reproductive imagination, must draw from existing reality sufficiently so that its productive distance is not too great.³⁵

The objects of perception are informed by conceptuality and by language; the objects are not simply material facts. “The intertwining of experience and meaning allows an opening for imagination to function.” Taylor states, that this intertwining “is but a subtext in the *Lectures on Imagination*, and reference will be drawn to Ricoeur’s greater exposition elsewhere on the symbolic mediation of action.”³⁶ It is not only the categories associated with the reproductive power of the imagination, but also the perceptions that come from reality—not just language, but the world itself. Even if the subject of action and even the ontological question about the material dimension arise in the *Lectures*, Ricoeur does not pay them further attention. The subject of theatre demands even greater consideration of action and of the material dimension than language-based or motionless artworks. The corporeality of performance, the actors’ bodies always in motion prompt us to ask about the grounding of productive imagination. Ricoeur primarily refers to static objects, such as words, and in the *Lectures on Imagination*, he discusses images and paintings. He deals with abstract painting to explain that productive imagination in fiction has no reference in the outer world, but creates its own reference, a kind of second ontology. Therefore, he can conclude that productive imagination when set to work could change and transform reality. Change and transformation is a well-known purpose in the annals of theatre history up to contemporary developments of diverse performance forms and formats. Theatre reforms have been implemented for the purpose of effecting transformation and change in several areas. These aims may be political, as Brecht suggested; or cultural, as Artaud argued; or poetic, as exemplified by Maeterlinck (1862–1942), to name but a few historical examples.³⁷

There are few words, Ricoeur dedicates to the subject of theatre in the form of tragedy in his *Lectures*. He calls painting mimetic, but under the conditions of its medium, since the tragic poet creates the medium of mimesis by controlling the plot. In painting there is a plot of colors and lines, and tragedy is more condensed than life, containing only the essential structures of life. Here again Ricoeur overlooks the living moment of life representation—he has here only the tragedian in mind, the written tragedy, not the performance.³⁸ When he compares Jakobsen’s term of the metalinguistic function in speaking with poetry, he even states, that “The element of contact is not very important for our purpose and is the kind of expression—hello, goodbye—we speak only to preserve the communication for itself.”³⁹ Beyond Jacobson’s more technical use of the term, upon

³⁵ Taylor, “Ricoeur’s Philosophy of Imagination,” 97–8.

³⁶ Taylor, “The Depth Dimension,” 6.

³⁷ In this historical trajectory, we also find the work and theories of Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, Ariane Mnouchkine, and the different theatre laboratories of the twentieth century. Michael Chekhov, too, envisioned a “theatre of the future” – one that was not based on literary drama.

³⁸ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 255.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

which Ricoeur is commenting, contact is what unfolds on multiple levels during a theatre performance, not only among the actors on stage, but also between actors and audience. The intertwining of reproductive and productive imagination occurs not only in the work of the actor, as we have seen, but also in the reception of dramatic performances.⁴⁰ If the distance between experience and new concepts were too great, no audience member would be able to understand or make sense of what is presented on stage.

Imagination and Action – Imagination is embodied.

This essay seeks to explore the significance of Ricoeur's concept of imagination for the field of theatre. Conversely, engaging with such a complex, transitive, and ontologically challenging medium as theatre can give rise to the formulation of some questions about Ricoeur's theory itself. Theatre, in its multiple dimensions, raises the question of the importance of human action and the human body for any theory of the imagination. In performance, imagination is enacted and made bodily through the actor's work; it becomes action, set in motion in space and time. Thus, the psycho-physical dimension opens new perspectives on the interplay between language, image, thought, feeling, and the corporeal dynamics.⁴¹

Furthermore, understanding the relation between experience, on the one hand, and what Ricoeur calls the "augmentation" or extension of reality through productive imagination, on the other, remains a significant challenge. Although Ricoeur conceives imagination as kind of work—an act of dynamic mediation—he pays little attention to the bodily processes involved in time-based art forms such as dance and theatre. In the practical work of role creation and interpretation, actors engage in interwoven processes of understanding and knowledge; conceptual thinking and experience connected to language are transformed into bodily performed actions.⁴² The connection between imagination and physical, corporeal activity in the actor's work, as can be observed especially in Michael Chekhov's psycho-physical exercises show the importance of body expression and movement for understanding how imagination works and how it can be conceptualized. Michael Chekhov insisted that the goal of an action should not be pursued through thinking and speaking alone. The whole person, he argued, must be transformed into a gesture, involving the entire body: The execution of gestures such as "open," "close," "give," "take," "lift" among others also has metaphorical character and demonstrates the significance of "conceptual metaphors" explained by the Neurolinguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: Many abstract concepts are understood through reference to concrete, physical experiences.⁴³ That is exactly what an actor undertakes, when he discovers new meanings and images while exploring and shaping a role with the help of these body-mind interdependencies.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur's reflection on the process of "refiguration" regarding the role of the reader could be further considered in Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 53ff.

⁴¹ Saulius Geniusas discusses the topic of productive imagination in connection with embodiment in the last chapter of his *Phenomenology of Productive Imagination*, 257–288.

⁴² Fischer-Lichte, "Aesthetic knowledge and aesthetic experience."

⁴³ Accordingly, there are cross-domain correspondences whereby source domains (concrete experiences) map onto target domains (abstract concepts). Lakoff/ Johnson: *Metaphors We Live By*. See Hentschel, *Imagination und Theater*, 157–182.

Given the various forms of transformation enacted in theatrical performances, we might speak of a form of “iconic augmentation of reality” drawing on Ricoeur’s formulation for the effect of fiction—an idea that merits more extensive discussion in future research. Just as metaphor transfigures meaning, theatre transfigures reality through embodied performance—even the human body becomes subject to this metamorphosis through acting processes, as can be observed in the Chekhov Technique, for example, with the “imaginary body.”⁴⁴

Ricoeur’s theory of imagination must therefore be read within the tension between his commitments to both analytic philosophy and phenomenology—privileging language, meaning, and intentionality.⁴⁵ Yet alongside this emphasis on meaning, Ricoeur was deeply concerned with action and praxis. His other writings from the same period—particularly *Time and Narrative* and the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*—engage more directly with the material and temporal dimensions of reality. As George H. Taylor notes, these other texts function as a kind of subtext for Ricoeur’s thinking on imagination, even when not explicitly referenced.⁴⁶ Human action is a subject that is almost absent from the *Lectures on Imagination*, as the sparse index entries reveal. Yet, action is the very means through which imagination is brought to life. Human existence is structured through meaning and symbolic mediation, but it always exceeds them. Theatre is not merely a visualization of meaning; it is meaning lived, performed, and enacted in flesh and blood. Theatre performances remind us of our own vitality—and allow us to experience it. Each performance creates an event, a lived experience shared by actors and spectators, occurring anew with every encounter.

Conclusion

Even if only a few aspects of the relevance of Paul Ricoeur’s work on imagination to theatre acting practices and role-playing techniques have been delighted here, it has nevertheless become clear that the distinction—as well as the intertwining—between reproductive and productive imagination offers a vast field for further research. Theatre, by its very nature, demands an interdisciplinary approach, and Ricoeur’s philosophy is uniquely suited to crossing disciplinary boundaries. His thought provides a foundation for articulating and differentiating what is at stake in the craft of acting. The distinction he draws—following Kant—between reproductive and productive imagination proves especially significant in the process of creating a role. Strasberg’s method, grounded in personal memory, draws primarily on reproductive imagination to recall and reinhabit past experiences, while Chekhov’s approach foregrounds productive imagination, inviting actors to generate new inner and outer states through bodily movement and imaginative

⁴⁴ Chekhov, *Master Classes in the Michael Chekhov Technique*, DVD, The Michael Chekhov Association Inc. MICHA (eds.), London et al.: Routledge.

⁴⁵ Saulius Geniusas states critically on Ricoeur’s phenomenology of painting: “However, we can now say: the phenomenological emphasis on the transformative nature of pre-predicative imagination stands opposed to the hermeneutic emphasis on the primacy of language.” Geniusas, *Phenomenology of Productive Imagination*, 249. Ricoeur’s discussion of the pre-objective in the *Lectures on Imagination* is quite short, but it is called the source of the productive imagination.

⁴⁶ Taylor, “The Depth Dimension,” 11-14. The symbolic structure of human life bears upon its ontological and anthropological rooting, upon what it means to be.

exploration. Despite these differing emphases, the practical interplay of both modes of imagination must be acknowledged.

The conceptual focus developed here may hold significance beyond conventional role-based theatre. In particular, collective and devising practices—in which creation is distributed, material emerges, and authorship is shared—suggest further terrains in which productive imagination might prove analytically salient. The distinction between reproductive and productive imagination is thus proposed not merely as a classificatory device, but as a heuristic capable of illuminating divergent techniques of acting and rehearsal processes. It is hoped that this intervention will encourage renewed attention to the imaginative foundations of performance and stimulate further research at the intersection of Ricoeurian thought and theatre practice.

Furthermore, Ricoeur's attention to the paradoxical nature of imagination and fiction helps us grasp theatre's unique capacity to transcend fixed concepts and perspectives. It is no coincidence that imagination plays such a central role in Ricoeur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* and underpins his later reflections in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. It is productive imagination, as Ricoeur explains, that opens new horizons, enables utopian thinking, and a meaningful connection to the past. Imagination, as Ricoeur shows, is not merely a faculty of fancy but a constitutive force in shaping reality. Theatre, as a lived and embodied art form, exemplifies this truth: it is where imagination becomes action—and action becomes understanding and an extension of reality.

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