# Truthfulness and Narcissism: Phenomenological Reflections on the Ambiguity of Imagination

Abstract:

Balancing a hermeneutic of trust with a hermeneutic of suspicion, this article develops a phenomenological description of imagination that highlights its alethic ambiguity. Imagination is an act of disclosure, without which the world of fiction and pure possibility cannot be constituted. Imagination is also an act of self-indulgence and narcissism, the source of much concealment and untruth. It is not the one or the other, but both at the same time, essentially ambiguous because of its phenomenological constitution. In this article, I will take some steps towards clarifying this essential ambiguity of the imagination by drawing on the insights of Husserl and Sartre. Beginning with Husserl’s parallel treatment of imagination and perception as intuitive, objectifying acts, I will argue, drawing on insights from Sartre, that there is an important discrepancy between them with respect to the role of desire. While the constitution of perceptual presence is inseparable from a desire for truth, the desire involved in the constitution of imaginary presence has an ambiguous character, both epistemic and magical. This duplicity of desire partly accounts for the ambiguity of imagination, which is all the more pronounced the more the imagination demands the full emotional involvement of the imagining subject.

Key words: imagination, ambiguity, narcissism, desire, phenomenology, Husserl, Sartre

## 1. Introduction

Husserl classifies imagination as an intuitive objectifying act, by which he means a basic form of intentionality in which an object constitutes itself for consciousness in its originality. Just as perception is the original mode in which a real and actual object manifests itself (in its bodily presence) and memory is the original mode in which a past object manifests itself, so imagination is the original mode of intentionality in which a fictional object manifests itself to consciousness. Commentators have highlighted the originality of this approach: this conception of imagination as an objectifying act or as “an act of disclosure” “radically breaks with classical modern accounts” of imagination (Jansen 2018, p. 683); it decisively leaves behind the “illusion of immanence” (Sartre 2004, p. 5; cf. Sartre 2012, p. 133). Husserl himself is fully aware of his originality in this respect. In the seminal lectures on phantasy and image-consciousness from 1904/05, he points to the lack of “the concept of objectifying apprehension” and the attendant confusion between the lived sensory content and the imaginary object as the main problems of earlier theories of the imagination (Husserl 1980, p. 7).

The intuitive, objectifying character of the imagination is crucial for its participation in our achievement of truth, or what we may call its alethic function. For Husserl, this dimension of the imagination is centered on its indispensable role in the constitution of pure possibilities, and thus in the enactment of eidetic intuition. He famously says, in this vein, that “fiction” is the vital element (*Lebenselement*) of phenomenology and the eidetic sciences in general (Husserl 1976, p. 148). T[[1]](#footnote-1)

For the alethic function of the imagination to be possible – or for its possibility to be intelligible –imagination must be given its right as an intuitive objectifying act with its own evidential force. However, if phenomenology is primarily concerned with the “how” of *disclosure*, it is no less obliged to study the manifold forms of *concealment, distortion, and confusion*. Thus, a phenomenology that emphasizes the contribution of imagination to our achievement of truth should be complemented by a phenomenology that draws attention to possibility of untruth in imagination; or so I will argue in this paper. With regard to imagination in particular, a hermeneutic of trust should go hand in hand with a hermeneutic of suspicion that brings out a certain ambiguity of imagination with regard to its alethic character.

Admittedly, I am going beyond the orthodox Husserl framework by saying this. For Husserl himself, an “untruth” that differs from a falsehood could only consist in the emptiness of purely signitive intentions that lack fulfillment, and this conception of “untruth” presupposes that a relation to fulfillment and truth belongs in principle to every emptiness (cf. Bernet 2012). Indeed, for Husserl, our entire conscious life is oriented toward the telos of truth or reason, at least in principle. As he famously writes in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, “intentionality as such … and evidence … are essentially correlative”; “[t]hanks to evidence, the life of consciousness has an all-pervasive teleological structure, a pointedness toward "reason" and even a pervasive tendency toward it” (Husserl 1974, 168-9). Now evidence is nothing but the experience of fulfillment, and imagination is an intuitive act that fulfills empty intentions, albeit differently from perception (Husserl 1984: 588, 651). It is thus no coincidence that Husserl never speaks of an “untruth” inherent in imagination.

Nevertheless, my attempt to go beyond Husserl is deeply informed by Husserlian analysis. The ambiguity of the imagination that, as will be discussed in this paper, is rooted in the role of desire in the imagination. It is precisely Husserl's transcendental phenomenology that teaches us to see how the achievement of truth is impossible without a fundamental truthfulness, an impulse toward truth. How does imagination relate to this impulse? Husserl seems to conceive of imagination as a kind of detour in the “pervasive tendency” of transcendental consciousness toward truth: a neutralization of the desire for truth, which is to be reappropriated, in a change of attitude, as the conditio sine qua non of eidetic cognition. But is this reappropriation implanted in imagination itself as its internal telos, or does imagination have another, and darker, origin that makes its appropriation more difficult than Husserl suggests? A promising way to approach this question is through the connection between imagination and desire. If the desire for truth is inhibited in imagination, is it not animated by a different, and more primitive, desire?

I will draw on the resources of Sartre's theory of the imagination to answer this question. Of the many thinkers who have explored the entanglement of desire and imagination, Sartre's methodological proximity to Husserlian phenomenology makes him ideal for our purpose. Sartre makes no secret of Husserl's fundamental importance to his project: The Imaginary is announced as an essay in phenomenological psychology. Indeed, an important part of this project, the theory of the "analogon," is intended to address a problem for which the Husserlian solution does not satisfy Sartre: the problem of how intuitive presence is achieved in the imagination (cf. Huang 2021; Flajoliet 2021). As we will see, this problem is central to our concern, as is the Sartrean theory of analogy that is meant to address it. Since this paper combines a Husserlian and a Sartrean perspective to uncover a phenomenon that is explicitly thematized by neither, it cannot be an interpretation and comparison of these two philosophers. Rather, I reconstruct their accounts and mobilize their resources for my purpose.

This paper is divided into five sections. After the introduction, section 2 outlines a broadly Husserlian account of the objectifying character of imagination and its parallelism with perception. Section 3 identifies a fault line in the parallelism of imagination and perception concerning the role of desire in the achievement of presence. Section 4 elaborates on the nature of desire in imagination from a Sartrean perspective. Combining the Husserlian and the Sartrean perspectives, section 5 finally argues for the inherent ambiguity of imagination.

## 2. Imagination as internal simulation

Husserl's conception of the imagination as an *intuitive, objectifying* *intentionality* is an appropriate starting point for a phenomenological analysis of the imagination. For Husserl, this starting point is gained through a critical engagement with Brentano. On the one hand, the *intuitiveness* of the imagination is affirmed in contrast to Brentano's conception of the imagination as “improper” representation (Bernet 2004, pp. 77-81). In contrast to this Brentanian analysis, which conceives of the imagination in analogy to signitive consciousness, Husserl understands the imagination as an intuitive and sensuous form of intentionality (Husserl 1984: 607). On the other hand, the very conception of *the objectifying act* is the result of Husserl's Brentano-critique in chapters 3-5 of the 5th *Logical Investigation*. In each case, the phenomenological affirmations against Brentano leave Husserl with a philosophical problem, the solution of which is an important task for a phenomenology of imagination. The first affirmation poses the problem of accounting for sensory intuitiveness in the absence of the object to be intuited. The second affirmation obliges him to give an account of how a non-positional (and apparently non-normative) objectifying act is possible. Addressing these two problems will allow us to present the basics of a Husserl-inspire analysis of imagination that is necessary for our purpose. I will discuss the second problem in this section, and the first in the next, although, as we will see, the answer to the two questions are interdependent.

Before outlining a Husserl-inspire response to the second problem, a few words on how it arises in a Husserlian framework.[[2]](#footnote-3) The “objectifying act” is a term of art in Husserlian phenomenology, intended to retrieve what is phenomenologically retrievable in Brentano’s notion of “presentation” (*Vorstellung*). Presentation, for Brentano, is the most fundamental of mental phenomena, which are either presentations or based on presentations (Brentano, 2009a, 65). As the most basic mental phenomenon, presentation is characterised by the simple possession of immanent objectivity, which does not affirm or deny anything about its object, and does not allow for the normative distinctions between right and wrong, success and failure (Brentano, 2009a, 68). Positionality and normativity belong to the higher-level mental phenomena of judgment and emotive act, which, as founded on presentations, contain “a second intentional relation” directed towards the presented object (Brentano, 2009b, 10). In chapters 3-4 of the 5th *Logical Investigation*, Husserl criticizes this Brentanian analysis (cf. Melle 2019, pp. 196-199). His phenomenological analyses convince him that the original manifestation of objectivity takes the form of a positional and normatively committed intentionality (cf. Huang 2023, 124-130). These attributes belong originally to perception, to which imagination is referred as its intentional modification.[[3]](#footnote-4) Both are objectifying acts, but perception is objectifying in a more original way. Attentive to the normative constraints of experience, perceptual consciousness explores the world and holds itself responsible for its explorations. Now – and this is the problem – if the objectifying act is originally positional and normative, how is the non-positional and (at least apparently) a-normative objectification that is the imagination possible?

We may better appreciate the point of this question if we consider what it takes for an act of imagination to be objectifying, that is, to relate to a specific object in a specific way. It is certainly true that when I merely imagine seeing centaurs fighting, my imagination is not subject to the confirmation or refutation of the future course of experience. In this sense, my imagination is non-positional and a-normative. But in order for my experience to be really *about* the centaurs, in order for it to be an experience *as of* these particular fictional entities, it must stand in certain non-accidental relations to other – actual and possible – experiences that are of a positional and normative nature, such as *perceptions* of horses and men, etc. For the as-structure essential to the objectifying character of intentionality seems to be inconceivable without a minimal sense of normativity – of the possibility of success and failure – built into it (Doyon 2016), and the most natural way for the imagination – which is in itself a-normative – to possess this minimal sense of normativity is for it to stand in certain non-accidental relations to other experiences that are essentially positional and normative.

Husserl secures this non-accidental relation by saying that every imagination intentionally “reproduces” a positing intentional experience (Hua XXIII: 310, 334). But “reproduction” is perhaps not a very happy terminological choice, for, in the way Husserl means it, “reproduction” does *not* mean the mere repetition of an earlier consciousness, “as if an echo, reflection, afterimage of the earlier internal consciousness, although weak, were coming back”.[[4]](#footnote-5) Rather, it describes the way imagination *intentionally* refers to positing acts as something implicated in its internal structure; the reproduced act does *not* inhere in the imagining act as a *really immanent* part.[[5]](#footnote-6) Following Thompson (2008), I suggest that the intentional relation Husserl expresses in terms of “reproduction” is more accurately captured by “simulation”. This term is more accurate in conveying the idea that the positing act implicated in an imagining act has no existence independent of the latter; rather, it exists only as simulated. “Simulation” also captures well the sense in which imagining involves a certain “pretending”, which comes to the fore when Husserl speaks of phantasy as having an “as-if” character: the imaginary object is given *as if* it werepresent in flesh, though we do not for a moment forget its absence (Hua XXIII: 505; cf. Lohmar 2020). Imagination is non-accidentally related to positional and normative experiences by being their internal simulation.

That (pure) imagination involves an internal simulation can be demonstrated by comparing it with typical picture-consciousness. Both (pure) imagination and typical picture-consciousness involve a peculiar intertwining of *the intuitive* and *the unreal*. When I imagine a fight of centaurs, an intuitive appearance seems to float before my eyes, but I do not for a moment take the appearance to present a real occurrence here and now. Similarly, when I look at the famous portrait of Descartes in the Richelieu wing of the Louvre, for example, Descartes’s slightly cynical gaze is “perceived” in its intuitiveness *and* *unreality*, for Descartes, despite the intuitiveness of the pictorial appearance, is not bodily present. The way in which this intertwining is constituted is, however, very different in the two cases. In the latter case, the experiential unreality of the pictorial appearance is due first of all to the lived conflict between two ways of apprehending the picture: its apprehension as a picture-thing, in this case an oak panel covered with oil paint, and its apprehension as the pictorial appearance through which Descartes is made present to me. Because of this conflict, and because the apprehension in terms of the picture-thing enjoys the full right of perception, the pictorial appearance is “de-realized” and experienced as unreal. The sense of unreal intuitiveness in (pure) imagination, however, cannot be constituted in the same way, for the simple reason that (pure) imagination is not based on perception in the same way. Imagination is *not* the contemplation of an inner image.[[6]](#footnote-8)

We can see this more easily if we allow the pictorial appearance of a typical picture-consciousness to become gradually thinner until, through some intermediate stages, we arrive at pure imagination.[[7]](#footnote-9) The intermediate stages might include the experience of seeing a caricature, of seeing faces in a bonfire, and of seeing landscapes on stained walls. As we move through these stages, we become less and less dependent on a given pictorial appearance, which, in lived conflict with the perceptual apprehension of the picture-thing, is experienced as unreal. The ‘seeing’ of this unreal appearance is increasingly a simulation of seeing, a pretending to see. Accordingly, the conflict that establishes its unreality becomes less and less a directly experienced conflict and more and more a pretended conflict. When we finally arrive at pure imagination, the intermediate dimension of pictorial appearance shrinks to zero, and the intuitive but unreal appearance of the imaginary object is entirely a matter of pretending to see, oran *intentional simulation* of seeing.

The simulative character of imagination can be further demonstrated by comparing it to remembering. Both imagining and remembering involve the implication of one act in another, the making present of something absent. To remember is to immerse oneself in the past, to search for and to activate the time that has passed. In remembering, consciousness posits the (past) existence of its object; it asserts its own truth and thus demands confirmation or denial by other memories and the memories of others. In contrast, in imagination, consciousness adopts a playful attitude, enjoying an “as-if” experience in a fictional realm, a quasi-world of floating appearance unconnected to the real world.[[8]](#footnote-10) In our language, imagination is, or essentially involves, a playful simulation of the normatively committed objectifying acts.

Given this conception of imagination as playful simulation, we can see why its non-positionality does not imply a complete absence of normativity (cf. Aldea 2020). A girl who plays at being a mother to her doll does not disregard the norms of motherhood; on the contrary, she tries to observe them with the utmost care and seriousness. But the care and seriousness are themselves played, and the girl takes pleasure in this careful adherence to the norms of motherhood because it is a normative identity that she is assuming freely, spontaneously, and playfully; the whole situation is her own creation rather than an imposition from the outside. Play is pervasively structured by norms, but norms reign *freely* in play. The same is true of imagination: as a playful simulation of intentional constitution, it is pervasively structured by the norms that apply to its object (in its true being), but it is not *subject to* these norms as in positional acts; instead, it assumes them spontaneously and playfully.

## 3. Epistemic desire and perceptual presence

We now turn to the first problem as mentioned at the beginning of section 2: the problem of accounting for the sensory intuitiveness of imagination. We can better appreciate the relevance of this problem if we recall Husserl’s account of the role of empty intention in the constitution of *perceptual* presence. Paradigmatic perception, or the perception of physical things, is characterized by a certain “contradiction” in its inner constitution: every perception “in fact and by its nature constantly pretends to accomplish more than it can accomplish” (Husserl 1966, p. 11). On the one hand, perception gives the object in its bodily presence; it is the original mode in which the thing is intuited as itself, unmediated by signs or images (Husserl 1976, p. 90). On the other hand, perception always shows its object from one perspective at a time; it is always partial, presenting a certainsideof its object in a certain aspect through a certain profile.

As an expression of this inherent “contradiction”, perceptual consciousness experiences a “pull” from the object, a “call”, so to speak, to tap into more of the reservoir of its unrevealed richness (Husserl 1966, p. 5). In other words, perceptual consciousness is pervaded by a sense of *lack* that *wants to be filled*. In noematic terms, objects of perception are “intertwined and permeated with an intentional empty horizon, that is, [that they are] surrounded by a halo of emptiness…that is not a nothingness, but an emptiness *to be fill-out*.” (Husserl 1966, p. 6; my emphasis) This “halo of emptiness” corresponds to an *empty intention* on the noetic side which is, therefore, not at all an inert emptiness. Empty intention *strives* for fulfilment and it does so in a twofold manner. Not only does it want intuitive fulness for what it emptily delineates in advance, but it also demands fulfilment due to its *lack of determinacy*. As “determinable indeterminacy”, it “strives onward” – even when its empty prefiguration is brought to intuitive fullness – “from one closer determination (*Näherbestimmung*) to another, again and again.” (Husserl 1966, p. 83)

This *dynamic* of empty and fulfilled intention, which, from a transcendental-phenomenological point of view, is essential for the constitution of perceptual presence, can be aptly described as “the accomplishment of a desire” (Bernet 2003, p. 156). It is, however, a very special desire. It is *not* the kind of desire that originates in a wish, *nor* a desire just to see or otherwise enjoy the sheer presence of the object, *nor* a desire to be in the right (Bernet 2003, pp. 156-157). The peculiar desire in question is a desire for truth (or a desire to know, an epistemic desire) that cannot be reduced to any of these other kinds of desire. Husserl himself is very sensitive to the varieties of desire and the corresponding varieties of fulfilment. Indeed, he goes so far as to *define* objectifying acts in terms of the peculiar dynamic of desire and fulfilment that is proper to them, i.e., that which has “a character of identification” (Husserl 1984, p. 585/p. 218). In other words, the desire inherent in objectifying acts is directed towards that which is *identical* in the interplay of presence and absence.

We can penetrate deeper into the essence of epistemic desire if we adopt a genetic perspective. As Husserl himself acknowledges, the discourse of fulfillment has its home in the affective sphere; to speak of the fulfillment of an epistemic desire, therefore, is to speak by way of metaphor (Husserl 1984, p. 583/p.217). In other words, epistemic desire and its unique mode of fulfillment are, linguistically speaking, not original. Now, there is every reason to believe that they are not original from a genetic-phenomenological perspective, as well. In other words, epistemic desire should be seen as emerging from the instinctive forms of passive desire through a process of maturation.[[9]](#footnote-11) As we have seen, the epistemic desire, as the desire for truth, is directed towards the identical in intuitions and empty intentions. It does not simply desire the presence of an object. To have such a peculiar desire presupposes a level of maturity where one has learned to tolerate absence, separation and loss to a certain extent. Before this level of maturity is reached,

“there is no true experience of presence and absence; there is only experience of gratification and deprivation... Separation is not tolerated; if what is lost is to be thought of at all, it is as something to be pulled back toward gratification. The only alternative is oblivion.” (Sokolowski 2017[1978], p. 26)

To gratify one’s desire with an object is not to have a genuine experience of presence, because one does not enjoy one’s object *as present*, which would imply an awareness of the possibility of its being somewhere else. Similarly, just to feel deprived is not yet to have a genuine experience of absence, or of an object *as absent*, which would in turn imply an awareness (or a kind of confidence) that the desirable object is momentarily out of sight but may come back. What is lacking in each case is a kind of detachment from the pleasure or pain associated with one's desire, or a certain indifference to “gratification or loss, confrontation or release” (ibid., p. 27).

Only such an indifference that breaks the affective spell of vital desires opens up the dimension in which an object can be appreciated *as absent but presentable*, or *as* *not being absent*. This dimension, this play of presence and absence, is the “spacing” in which the truthfulness of things is achieved in their encounter with consciousness. It is the dimension in which a certain *respect* is cultivated for the thing as it is in itself, apart from what it does for or against us. It is therefore essential for the genesis of epistemic desire, that is to say, for its emergence from the multiplicity of vital desires.

To sum up: a specific desire – or, more precisely, the dynamic interplay of this desire and its fulfilment – is essential to the achievement of perceptual presence, which is inconceivable without its own share of absence and concealment. This desire, which we have described as epistemic and which aims at the advent of truth, embodies the “contradiction” inherent in the constitution of the perception of things: it is at once a respect for the secrets of the thing as it is in itself, and a longing to tap into these secrets and to unfold more of what has hitherto remained closed. Most importantly, this respect and this longing go together: without the former, it would be indistinguishable from the vital desires with their impatience and intolerance; without the latter, it would no longer be a desire, and the thing in its transcendence would have no means of manifesting itself to consciousness. It is through such a desire, combining both respect and longing, that consciousness opens itself to the encounters with things in all their transcendence and indifference.

Given this account of the role of desire in perception, we can return to our original problem concerning the intuitiveness of imagination. If, as we suggest in section 2, imagination essentially involves the simulation of perception, then the achievement of imaginary presence must involve the simulation of epistemic desire and its fulfilment. But can a simulation of (the desire for) truth be conducive to truth? Will it not lead to a similitude of truth?

This is more than a rhetorical question. For it is seems very difficult to preserve in simulation that which distinguishes epistemic desire from (the genetically more primitive) vital desires, namely its indifference to gratification or loss, its detachment from pleasure and pain, and, finally, its respect for the thing and its independence. And this difficulty, we hasten to add, is rooted in the very nature of imagination as (essentially involving) the simulation of perception.

While the emergence of the epistemic desire, with its characteristic indifference, detachment and respect, is a sign of maturity, this maturity (or maturation) is largely the result of a long process of what might be called our sensory education – by the things themselves. It is, after all, the things that show us their indifference to our satisfaction or loss and their detachment from our pleasure and pain. It is the things that teach us to respect their independence and transcendence. Our maturation is more like the removal of obstacles (e.g., the affective spell cast by our vital needs), which then opens us up to the teachings of the things themselves. And when the appropriate degree of maturity is finally reached, our perceptual consciousness, animated by the desire for truth, does not simply aim at the presence of objects to be enjoyed, or at the correctness of our assertion as such, but at the things themselves in their transcendence (Husserl 2002, p. 113; cf. Bernet 2003, p. 158). Indeed, we cannot properly speak of the fulfilment of an epistemic desire[[10]](#footnote-12) – that is, an identification that brings about an increase in knowledge and insight – unless the identification that the desire aims at is coupled with the essential possibility of disappointment (Husserl 1984, pp. 574-576). Only if our desire to know can be frustrated by the things themselves are we entitled to (provisional) truth when our desire is (at least partially) fulfilled.

Now, imagination, while essentially a simulation of perception, is defined precisely by the absence – in principle! – of the things themselves, the very things to which our epistemic desire is directed. Given this absence, it is reasonable to doubt whether the constitution of sensory intuitiveness in imagination exactly parallels perception, as Husserl seems to suggest when he characterizes imagination as “a precise mirroring of the intentional process of perception” (Husserl 1966, p. 244).

Of course, Husserl is by no means to insensitive to the many and varied differences between imagination and perception. As we noted in section 2, perception is positing and imagination is not; perception aims at truth, while imagination lives in a more distanced and playful attitude (cf. Aldea 2020; Huang 2023). As a result, perception and imagination fulfills empty intentions in fundamentally different ways (Husserl 1984: 588; Husserl 1966, 78-83, 248). Moreover, they have different temporal structures and thus different modes of individuation (Husserl 1980, 550-553; cf. cf. Bernet 2004, pp. 137-141, Lohmar 2020).

These analyses reveal much about how the two forms of objectifying intentionality differ in their intuitive character. However, Husserl seems to underestimate the power of desire and neglect its fundamental role in imagination. This is both striking and unsurprising. Striking, given his sensitivity to the function of desire in the constitution of perceptual presence; unsurprising, given his (almost) exclusive focus on the desire that is already domesticated and rationalized. But this domestication and rationalization cannot be taken for granted. In particular, there is nothing to guarantee that in the internal simulation of the positing acts that is the imagination, the fulfillment of epistemic desire, as simulated, will automatically adhere to the objectifying track. Thus, we need an account of *how* the intuitiveness of imaginary appearance is achieved that takes full account of the unorderly power of desire. It is here that a Sartrean perspective will help us move our analysis forward.[[11]](#footnote-13)

## 4. Magical desire and imaginary appearance

The dynamics of desire and its fulfilment cannot have the same structure in imagination and perception because, to put it very simply, what ultimately fulfils the epistemic desire in perception is by definition inaccessible to the imagination. Simulating what is in principle inaccessible tends, we suspect, to lead to a radical transformation of the epistemic desire. To see what this transformation looks like, we can start with a crucial common factor between the two: bodily involvement. In the case of perception, the fulfilment of epistemic desire is not an event passively undergone. Rather, it is made possible by our *sensorimotor understanding* (or *bodily skills*) and steered by our *bodily agency* (cf. Noë 2012). The dynamic of fulfilment goes hand in hand with “the orchestrating movements of the lived body”, which functions as “the organ of perception” (Husserl 1966, p. 13). The system of lived-body movements is experienced as “a subjectively free system”, which is permeated by the awareness of our bodily agency, by “the consciousness of the free ‘I can’”, and this system is related to the system of perceptual profiles in the motivational relations of “if-then”, which express our sensorimotor understanding (ibid., p. 14).

In the imagination, on the other hand, the simulation of perception essentially involves – and it is a major contribution of Sartre’s theory of the imagination to have recognized this – the mobilisation of the same sensorimotor understanding and bodily agency that go into the constitution of perceptual presence (cf. Preester 2012). To take a very simple example from Sartre: when I imagine seeing the shape “8”, I cannot help but catch my eyes tracing the contour of “8” or at least making the beginning of such a movement. In more complicated scenarios such as imagining the Pantheon in Paris, our embodied anticipation that if one “were to move, then those changes would occur that normally occur when [one] moves” contributes essentially to our sense of having the Pantheon before our “mind’s eye” (O’Regan et al. 2005: 378; cf. Sartre 2004, p. 77).

Although bodily skills and agency are involved in both imagination and perception, the way they function in the two forms of intentionality differs fundamentally. In perception, the freely initiated lived-body movements function as what Husserl calls “kinesthetic motivation” (Husserl 1966, p. 13). They are part of the motivational conditions that form the “if” side of the “if-then” relation; we can think of them as posing questions on our part that demand answers from the things themselves (the “then” side). Now, in imagination, where the responses from the things are absent not occasionally but in principle, bodily postures must take on a different – and more prominent – function. Sartre’s fundamental idea is that the lived-body movements – in cooperation with lived feelings[[12]](#footnote-14) – somehow manage to provide the lacking fulness (Sartre 2004: p. 77).

It should be noted at once that the functional difference of the lived-body movements is part of a larger structural difference. It is certainly not the case that, with the whole “if-then” structure of perceptual intentionality remaining unchanged, the bodily movements now take on the roles on both the “if” side and the “then” side. That would make no sense. Instead, lived-body movements and feelings can only stand in as providers of ersatz-fullness, if the whole “if-then” structure is fundamentally altered in the imaginary simulation. The original structure, as we have seen, is animated by a desire for truth that finds its satisfaction only in the things themselves, that is, in what proves to be the same in presence and absence. Such a critical and vigilant desire will not be duped by the ersatz-fullness provided by the lived-body movements and feelings. For this to happen, the epistemic desire must already have been inhibited by the onset of the imaginary attitude and transformed into an impatient desire for presence (cf. Huang 2021: pp. 14-17).

Here we should recall our earlier discussion of the peculiarity of the epistemic desire and how it emerges from the developmentally more primitive vital desires. It is an intellectual achievement to aim, not at the presence to be enjoyed, but at the identical unity across the play of presence and absence. In the absence of the things that call on consciousness to open itself, it is no surprise that consciousness tends to lapse into a primitive desire for presence. As Sartre puts it, “there is always,” in an act of imagination, “something of the imperious and the infantile, a refusal to take account of distance and difficulties” (Sartre 2004, p. 125).

Sartre characterizes this desire for presence as a magical desire, and as a desire for possession (ibid.).[[13]](#footnote-15) To see why, consider his description of a performance by a mimic (Sartre 2004, pp. 25-29). At first, the audience has no idea who exactly is being imitated; he reads the imitator’s gestures and expressions as signs for an indeterminate X, not unlike the way in which one deciphers a hieroglyph. Now a series of signs point in the same direction and he has a judgment: she is imitating the French actor Maurice Chevalier. From that moment on, instead of seeing the actress’s behavior as a sign to be deciphered, he begins to see Chevalier intuitively *realized* in the body of the woman artist on stage. What happens in this change from a sign-consciousness to an act of imagination? A change of attitude. A moment ago, the real gestures and expressions were taken as *signs* referring to an indeterminate X; now, together with my emotional reactions, they are used to *incarnate* the absent person in the here and now, and they do so by offering themselves to be possessed by him. “The relation of the object to the matter of the imitation is”, writes Sartre, “a relation of possession” (Sartre 2004, p. 29). The new attitude is thus characterized by “a formal will”, in complicity with the actress, to see her as possessed and to experience the incarnation of the absent (ibid.).

We can further explore this “formal will” by considering another example: the emergence of a mental image from a vague affective atmosphere when we miss someone. We start from “an affective consciousness in the absence of the object they aim at” (Sartre 2004, p. 70). This affective consciousness is intentional, though its intentionality is indeterminate. It has its distinctly affective way of aiming at its object, but it does not know its object by representation. Though it is not impossible to stop at this stage, there is an instability inherent in this pure affective consciousness without representation. It is very natural for it to turn into an imaginary act, in which case we seek to *possess* in an intuitive and determinate manner what the affective intentionality blindly intends. This act of imagination develops the inner tendency of the affective intentionality to clarify itself by representing its object. This tendency, this “blind effort to *possess* on the representative plane what is already given to me on the affective plane”, is an inchoate desire in search of its unknown object (ibid., p. 71; my emphasis). This desire, however, is not an actual search that translates into actions, but an almost infantile attempt to conjure up a virtual object that will satisfy my indeterminate longing. Thus, as long as an indeterminate feeling allows its implicit desire to unfold, we slide into an imaginary attitude (ibid.). And this attitude can be characterized as the desire to *possess* intuitively what is blindly but affectively intended.

However, this desire to possess is at the same time a desire to be possessed, for it is only by offering up my lived-body movements and lived feelings to the incarnation of the absent that such (imaginary) possession can be realized. To place myself in the imaginary attitude is to desire to possess the absent by offering myself to be possessed by it. Just as the magicians in a ritual dance prepare themselves to be possessed by spirits or gods through their bodily movements and collective sentiments, so the person in the imaginary attitude uses his kinesthetic and affective analogon to incarnate and to possess the irreal. Hence the magical character of the imagination. The desire for presence in the imagination is a kind of magical desire.

## 5. The ambiguity of imagination

With this Sartrean account of the magical character of desire in the imagination, we substantiate our earlier claim that the imaginary simulation of perception involves a transformation of its constitutive epistemic desire, a lapse into a more primitive state. The magical desire for presence that characterizes the imaginary attitude can also be described as “infantile”, for its “refusal to take account of distance and difficulties” resembles the mindset of “the very young child”, who, “from his bed, acts on the world by orders and prayers” (Sartre 2004, p. 125).

We are now in a position to see how imagination is an intuitive, objectifying act in a more ambiguous way than perception, that is, how the unerring effectuation of the disclosive tendency is essentially more difficult in imagination than in perception. As said in section 2, the acknowledgement of the *intuitive* and *objectifying* character of imagination constitutes two major Husserlian innovations vis-à-vis Brentano. For Husserl, unlike for Brentano, the objectifying act is *not* simply the possession of an inner appearance. Rather, it is the first establishment of our contact with an object in its transcendence and independence. This is why the original form of the objectifying act is perception rather than imagination. Imagination can only be objectifying insofar as it involves an internal simulation of positing acts (perception being the most basic of them). Now, for a perception to be properly objectifying is for it to aim at what remains identical in the play of presence and absence. For an internal simulation of perception to be objectifying, however, a further task must be accomplished: it must spontaneously generate the *intuitive presence* of its object. In other words, imagining consciousness must not only take care of the manifestation of transcendence on the basis of given profiles and appearances, but also provide for these appearances in the first place. It has to be an intentional achievement of (imaginary) *presence* – driven by a “magical” desire for presence – before it can be an intentional achievement of *transcendent identity* across presence and absence.

Thus, we can distinguish two steps in a fully objectifying act of imagination: the first step, in which an imaginary presence is evoked, can be joined by a second step, in which an imaginary object is intended (and then fulfilled) as the identical across presence and absence.[[14]](#footnote-16) Only the second step is objectifying in the proper sense and it is this act that runs parallel to active perception considered as an objectifying act. In imagination, however, this objectifying operation is founded on a first step in which imaginary appearances are conjured up in a quasi-magical operation, whereas in perception, appearances or profiles are *given* in a more straightforward sense. We do not always make the effort to take the second step when we imagine; all too often, we are satisfied with the enjoyment of simple (imaginary) presence. This is why the unerring effectuation of the objectifying tendency is more *difficult*, more of an intellectual achievement, in imagination than in perception.

The second step not only takes more intellectual effort: it goes against the direction of the first step. The generation of imaginary presence is fueled by a magical desire that refuses to take account of distance and difficulties; intrinsic to the first step is a certain propensity to self-indulgence and narcissism. The achievement of identity across presence and absence, on the other hand, is motivated by an epistemic desire that requires precisely the toleration of absence, separation and loss. Taking the second step involves then a self-imposed discipline, a kind of purification of the propensity to narcissism that is inseparable from the first step. This propensity is not an adventitious danger for imagination, but an intrinsic liability, for it is rooted in the way imaginary presence is achieved. Thus, imagination as an objectifying act is intrinsically tempted by the opposite tendency to narcissism.

Imagination, then, is marked by an internal conflict, but it is not a conflict of theories that we are talking about here, of one theory claiming that it is objectifying-disclosive and another theory claiming the opposite. Rather, we are talking about imagination as it is lived by consciousness from a first-person perspective, and *this* is marked by a conflict of tendencies, between an objectifying tendency and a narcissistic tendency. Imagination as an objectifying act is inherently ambiguous.

Since the ambiguity of imagination consists in the tension between its two steps, or in the difficulty of overcoming the narcissistic tendency of the first step, it varies in degree according to the weight of this step in the whole act. Moreover, since the narcissistic tendency has much to do with the desire of possession, the ambiguity of imagination also varies according to the nature of the object or event being imagined and its relation to the affective life of the imagining subject. Thus, the kind of imagination used in mathematical thinking is certainly much less prone to the narcissistic tendency than the kind of imagination invoked by a poet or a novelist. The reason for this is, first, that in the eidetic attitude of mathematical thinking, the first step of imagination, as we define it, plays only a preparatory role. In such eidetic intuitions, as Husser puts it, “the objects of the founding acts do not enter into the intention of the founded one” (Hua XIX, 690/292). Thus the first step of imagination, as that which produces the sensory quasi-presence of individual objects, is not at all the center of gravity of the eidetic imagination. The proper focus of mathematical thinking is on the relational properties of idealized objects, which have little to do with our natural affective life. Thus the desire for their presence, which is part of the first step of a mathematical imagination, is almost entirely disciplined by the second step, which is directed at the object in itself (or in truth); it has little life of its own, little intrinsic motivation.

It is very different with literary imagination, or for that matter, with most imagination in everyday life. Here, the imaginary object or event often appeals to us because of its very appearance, and we are often motivated to evoke an imaginary appearance due to this very appeal. And when this happens undisciplined by a second objectifying intention, we indulge in the narcissistic tendency, which lies behind what Milan Kundera describes as *kitsch* in *L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être*:

“Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.” (Kundera 1984, p. 315)

The first tear is an expression of pre-reflective emotion; the emotion may not be particularly deep or original, but that does not make it kitsch. The second tear makes kitsch kitsch because it is sustained by a narcissistic imagination: we imagine ourselves watching this scene of innocence and tranquility “together with all mankind”, an imagination that turns a real scene into a symbol of world harmony and at the same time sublimates reality. This is what Kundera calls *kitsch*: a self-indulgent fantasy that pretends to justify reality.

In literary imagination, the realization of the objectifying-disclosive tendency is thus more challenging. It requires overcoming narcissism, which becomes all the more difficult when the reader is called upon to give over “his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values” (Sartre 1988, p. 58) in order to animate the literary object, to give it “substance” and “flesh” (ibid., p. 53). This gift of one’s whole person (i.e., the first step of imagination) is only then “an exercise in generosity” (ibid., p. 58), when it is put at the service of “obtain[ing] a certain transcendent effect” (ibid., p. 57), i.e., the constitution of an imaginary world, with its quasi-transcendence and -independence (i.e., the second step of imagination). Only then can the narcissistic tendency of the imagination be resisted and its disclosive potential released, its potential “to scrutinize man's concrete life” and “to hold life-world under a permanent light”, as Kundera (1986, p. 16) so nicely puts it.

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1. Imagination is also closely related to empathy, both in the sense of our access to other embodied persons and in the sense of our access to literary objects and fictional worlds. Empathy in the first sense is beyond the scope of this paper, but we will touch on the second sense of empathy in the final section. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Such a question is not explicitly posed by Husserl himself. What follows is therefore more a reconstruction than a close commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Hua III/1, §111. This is, of course, to cut a long story short. The conception of intentional modification embodies a critique of the earlier position as presented in the *Logical Investigations*. For accounts of the evolution of his analysis of imagination, see Jansen (2005), Huang (2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Hua XXIII: 310; cf. Hua XXIII, 208. Parenthetically, Sartre misunderstands Husserl’s account of imagination precisely in the way the term “reproduction” might suggest (2012, 136) – which illustrates the need for a new terminology. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See XXIII, pp. 265-267 and Hua XX/1: pp. 125-128 for concise expositions of this account by Husserl himself. For interpretations, see Bernet (2004, pp. 93-117) and Jansen (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. On Husserl’s (early) analysis of image-consciousness and its structural difference from pure imagination, see Hua XXIII, 15-42, 54-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
7. Our analysis here is inspired by Sartre’s discussion of “The image familty” (cf. 2010, 17-53). It should be emphasized that studying the transition from picture-consciousness to pure imagination does not deny their structural difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
8. Husserl emphasizes the playful character of the attitude of imagination (*Phantasieeinstellung*) in some of the later manuscripts on imagination (Hua XXIII, 513, 577). Cf. Huang (2023,132-139). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
9. Husserl develops this topic in his phenomenological explorations of instinctive intentionality (cf. Bower 2014; Laasik 2018). Given that his focus diverges from the present investigation into imagination, his analysis will not be elaborated upon here. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
10. On such a “proper” – i.e., more precise and more restricted – notion of fulfillment, understood as “confirmation” (*Bewahrheitung*), see Husserl 1966, pp. 78-80, 249-250. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
11. In fact, it is Sartre himself who has first argued that Husserl’s account of the intuitive character of imagination is unconvincing in The Imagination; More specifically, he faults Husserl’s conception of the hyle imagination (2012, 136, 139-140; cf. Huang 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
12. According to Sartre, lived-body movements provide fulness – i.e., act as analogon – for relational and spatial determinations, such as spatial form, shapes, directions, etc., while lived feelings stand in for the intrinsic, qualitative, and “expressive nature” of the imaginary (Sartre 2004: pp. 78, 81). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
13. On the idea of magic in Sartre’s thinking, see O’Shiel (2019) and Majolino (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
14. Husserl also distinguishes two steps in the imagination that functions in a cognitive context, e.g., in eidetic cognition or the cognition of possibilities. Since pure imagination is non-positing, the constitutive activity of consciousness in a purely imaginary attitude is an as-if constitution that produces only as-if meaning-formations (first step). To get from there to pure possibilities and essences, a change of attitude is required (second step). One must establish a composite attitude: the nesting of a pure imagination in an act of knowing, or the invocation of pure imagination by a positing act (Hua XXIII, pp. 529-530, 558-559). My discussion can be seen as an extension of the Husserlian analysis. I argue that the constitution of as-if meaning-formations that are ready to be epistemically appropriated is already a more complicated and difficult task than Husserl recognized. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)