The Imaginal as Spectacle: An Aristotelian Interpretation of Contemporary Politics

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ABSTRACT Our contemporary politics faces the paradoxical problem that while we are inundated with images on our screens, we nevertheless seem to lack creative political imagination to conceive of solutions to our global problems. One account for this paradox is Chiara Bottici's suggestion that the constant stream of virtual images produced qualitatively alters them to such an extent that they become ends in themselves: thus, spectacularizing our politics. My claim, against Bottici's, is that it is not the case that the increase in images created causes a qualitative change; rather, the increase in images created results from an already occurred qualitative change that images are created for their own sake instead of as a response to the particular situation's determining conditions. The concept of the imaginal, insofar as it is unhinged from these local conditions, is itself the precondition for the very problem of political spectacularization that we face. To support my claim, I utilize Aristotle's concepts of imagination, desire, and practical truth to show that without truth conditions determined by the particular, the political imaginal ends up operating under the motive of image for its own sake—which is, at bottom, desire for its own sake—thus feeding into the creation of more images devoid of concrete solutions.

KEYWORDS Aristotle, Contemporary Politics, Imaginal, Imagination, Spectacle

I. Introduction

In today's political climate, we encounter ourselves within the paradoxical problem of simultaneously being inundated with images on our screens while nevertheless consistently lacking creative imagination in our politics for envisioning concrete solutions to our global problems. Our politicians and their actions are guided by the way their public images are affected, often ignoring pressing issues because it falls outside the scope of governing or popular opinions. Other times, politicians and corporate leaders perform singular gestures to align themselves to a popular cause; for

example, they may tweet or share images in support of a current social movement on social media platforms. These representational and performative activities, while fostering symbols of solidarity, do not concretely address the particular issues at stake because no further action nor planning, beyond the sharing of images and representational stances, occurs. It is not simply our political and corporate leaders performing these image-oriented actions, but the public at large also tends toward partaking in merely representational politics. We point out the problems and align ourselves with the causes by sharing a few articles, images, or tweets we agree with, but we often do not come together to address, imagine, and layout practical plans for solving our political problems. What results from this paradox of producing excessive images but lacking creative imagination is a political theater made to ogle at, but not to amend; politics becomes a mode of entertainment, an enormous spectacle.[1]

Chiara Bottici, in her paper "Imaginal Politics," clarifies this paradox by linking the creation and reception of images to her concept of the political imaginal.[2] The imaginal is a concept that serves as a bridge for the opposition between the imagination, understood as an individual faculty, and that of the imaginary, understood as a social context. Politics, understood quite broadly as the social relations and symbolic orders having to do with the public, is imaginal because it is a product of both individual imaginations and our collective social imaginary; it is made up of images produced by us, but it is also that network of images that influence us. The political imaginal therefore operates via a complex balance between our active creation and our passive reception of images. Bottici proposes that the paradox we see today arises because of the way in which the increased and constant reproduction of virtual images on our screens profoundly alters the images we receive in both quantitative and qualitative manners to such an extent that our capacity to actively imagine has been thwarted by the hypertrophy of our passive imagination. Effectively, this means that we take in and accept more images than we create of our own. What results from this virtualization of our politics and the hypertrophy of the passive over the active imagination, is the stated problem of a spectacularized political imaginal.

In this paper, I utilize Aristotle's understanding of imagination to critically respond to Bottici's account of imaginal politics and its relation to the spectacle. In particular, against Bottici's account, I take it that the notion of an imaginal politics, insofar as it is how we today conceive of our modern political situation, is actually the precondition for the very problem of spectacularization diagnosed. As I will show, this is because our modern understanding of imagination, and consequently the imaginal, has been divorced from local particulars (be they things, people, or situations) thereby engendering within us a desire to create and enjoy images for their own sake. The desire of image for its own sake, in turn, sustains the spectacle character of the political imaginal. To clarify my claims, in section two I will first elaborate Bottici's account of the imaginal and her understanding of Aristotlean imagination to

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[1] The notion of a political spectacle was famously elaborated by Guy Debord (La societé du spectacle, 1967) and encompasses not only the capitalist consumption of entertainment but is "a social relation among people, mediated by images." ("Thesis 4" in *Society of the Spectacle*, 1970). Under the spectacle, reality is reduced to a ceaseless supply of commodifiable images that serve as a means for social control, for example, by political personalities, information propaganda, and generally mass media. According to Debord, to which I concur with and will, via Aristotle, account for the mechanics of in this paper, "the spectacle aims at nothing other than itself" ("Thesis 14"). Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Black & Red, Detroit, 1983)
[2] Chiara Bottici, "Imaginal Politics," *Thesis Eleven* 106, no. 1 (August 2011): 56–72.

show how her account misses the importance of truth conditions embedded in the particular situation; conditions which Aristotle takes to be essential for correct political action. In the following section, I explain how an imaginal unhinged from its local particular situations leads to a mutation in the relationship between imagination and desire such that this relationship becomes the condition, parasitic upon itself, for sustaining the political spectacle. Effectively, in this paper, I provide a more originary explanation, via Aristotle, for two related qualities of the spectacle: the increase in the quantity of reproduced images, and how the spectacle is self-sustaining—or, as Debord puts it, how the spectacle aims at "nothing other than itself." [3] Given the scope of this paper, I will only briefly highlight some problems that arise from this separation—and consequent spectacularization—as well as attempt, in the final section, to offer broad suggestions for a potential 'regrounding' of the imaginal in the particular.

II. Imagination, the Imaginal, and the Particular

To convey the importance of imagination in general, Bottici highlights that the term's origin in Ancient Greek, *phantasia*, was generally linked with the creation of images. Aristotle argued that *phantasia* gives us a basis for action because it is a necessary component of all desire. From *De Anima* 429, Bottici highlights a few key features of *phantasia.* In particular, Aristotle says that *phantasia* is "a motion effected by actual perception" and that its name comes from 'light' (phaos) because one needs light to see; thus highlighting the way perception and imagination are intimately entwined.[4] From this, Bottici takes it that, *phantasia* is "an important ingredient for the formation of a unitary image of objects out of an otherwise unrelated set of data."[5] Imagination is an important ingredient for the formation of an image, however, for Aristotle this image does not arise out of an "unrelated set of data," as Bottici suggests. For Aristotle, the imagination is driven to form certain images based upon the already related data available. That is, the data that the imagination receives first makes possible the formation of an image because the data harbors the conditions for correct and incorrect images. For Aristotle, it is not simply that I collect unrelated data pertaining to color and texture in order to, out of sheer creativity, form the image of a table and so take it *as* a table; it is rather that there exists before me *this* particular table here, and it is this table which creates the possibility, and the restrictions of correctness, for me to create an image of it so as to understand it *as* a table. The interpretation of the data can only happen because there exists a very particular set of conditions pertinent to the entity in question restricting my ability to imagine it otherwise. Importantly, Aristotle takes it that imagination can be wrong. Since only creatures with perception have imagination, and since imagination is "of those things which perception

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[3] Debord, "Thesis 14" in *Society of the Spectacle*, 1970

[4] Aristotle, *De Anima,* translated by Christopher Shields (Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 58.
See: 428b30-429a3

[5] Bottici, p. 57.

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is" imagination is contingent upon the success or failure of perception to perceive correctly.[6] We can perceive the given incorrectly and thus imagine incorrectly.[7]

Moreover, because Aristotle, as Bottici, takes imagination to apply more broadly to political situations (and not solely to physical objects), he places important emphasis on the need for leaders to develop practical reasoning in order to see the good for a situation. Imagination in political action relies on an intimate relationship between perception, imagination, and desire. Bottici highlights that Aristotle, "recognized that no action is possible without *phantasia* because *phantasia* is at the basis of appetite, which is a form of movement."[8] Appetite, or desire, is the link between imagination and movement. Importantly, for Aristotle, desire is always desire for the sake of something, and this something is based upon what we can perceive. That is, imagination and its desires are anchored in the way the world shows up and gives us conditions for what we can possibly desire. When Aristotle says that "desire and imagination are both correct and not correct" he is underscoring that imagination's objects of desire, what its images are of, have constraints imposed by conditions for correctness. Aristotle also says that desire "is always for the sake of something, since desire is for something, and this is the starting point of practical reason, while its final stage is the beginning of action."[9] The "this" that is the starting point of practical reason is that for the sake of which desire is at all; namely, the object of desire. Practical reason is guided, and so shaped, by its end. The "final stage" that motivates action is the actual having of the object of desire. Hence, desire comes about by the image formed of actually having this object, which is already given as a possibility because of the situation that provides the conditions for its formation. *Phantasia*, therefore, *is* a kind of movement, but it is not the case that we first imagine up some object we wish at will and then figure out how to pursue it practically; rather, the object of desire is already preconditioned by the defects or excesses in the particular situation which perception is able to detect and which imagination is able to envision a remedy for, enabling desire and so moving us to action. Thus, what imagination makes an image of, the object of desire, and what moves us to act, are both tied up with, and are conditioned by, the specific situation.

Bottici sees the connection between political action and imagination and so extends this connection by noting the way the social sphere is often understood today in terms of a social imaginary that informs individuals' identities, outlooks, and beliefs.[10] She introduces the concept of the imaginal in order to rethink and go beyond the seeming opposition between conceptions of imagination as an individual factuality and those of the imaginary which pertain to social contexts. This concept best captures the connection and interrelation between the individual autonomous capacity to form images

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[6] Aristotle, *De Anima,* 428a12, 428a15-25

[7] Using my previous example, I can perceive wrongly and form an image of a bench when the given particular entity is actually a table; hence, my imagination's image is incorrect. Aristotle uses the example that when we perceive the color white, this is always true—he thinks there is a very small chance of getting perception of qualities wrong—but when we believe that this thing, say the table, is what is white then we have formed a false image. We may not be mistaken "that there is white" but we are mistaken if we take the entity as being the white itself, seeing white no longer as an attribute of the entity but as the entity itself. See Aristotle, 428b18-23.

[8] Bottici, p. 57.

[9] Aristotle, *De Anima,* 433a15-20.

[10] A common way we speak about the social imaginary today is through the notion of "social constructs."

and way in which the social imaginary informs and creates individuals. Thus, Bottici takes it that "the political is imaginal because it depends on the possibility to imagine commonalities."[11] That is, because she takes imagination to bring into relation unrelated data, she also takes it that what an otherwise unrelated body of individuals have in common must be created, in some sense, out of the activity of the imagination. Given that imagination for Aristotle relies on the conditions of correctness inherent in the particular conditions, if we follow Aristotle in his thinking, it is not simply the case that we imagine up commonalities from out of the blue. These commonalities arise from the not unrelated set of data that there are specific individuals with similar interests in relation to basic needs that concern their survival, as well as more refined needs of human connection, gathered together locally. It is this local particular situation—the 'there' of people sharing space and time—which provides the conditions of correct and incorrect images. We do not need to imagine commonalities; our basic commonalities are already a fact of the matter that pertain to the very needs of what it is to be a human being even prior to the formation of a polis.[12] In fact, Aristotle sees the political state as something that arises naturally. In the *Politics*, he argues that once various human villages unite, "the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life."[13] For Aristotle, we are already held in common by our natural way of existing with one another. It is for this reason that he famously states that "man is by nature a political animal" where the political, as Bottici notes, is all that has to do with the public. But crucially for Aristotle, the public entails a relation between human beings *already* held in common by their spaciotemporal conditions and shared needs; politics, therefore, is not purely imaginal (at least, not initially) but is grounded in the particular local conditions of a public.[14,15] In this way, the state of sharing the local space together, of having commonalities at all, is not a derivative product of the imaginal—which governs social relations in their normative and ideal forms—but its basic condition of possibility.

For Aristotle, it is this commonly held particular situation of the public that must be heeded by political imagination. However, just as perception can be wrong—and thus too imagination—what we imagine as right object of desire to address the situation can also be wrong. Aristotle says that "the object of desire always initiates motions; but this is either the good or the apparent good—not every good, but the good concerned with what can be done, since what can be done is contingent and can be otherwise."[16] The object of desire moves us to act but we don't always have the image of the correct, good, object of desire. Thus, how we act, driven by some desirable object(s), can always be otherwise because we can perceive the situation wrong and desire objects that are not the good, but only apparently so. The situation's determining conditions don't always provide a single necessary answer, an evident good object of desire, in the way that the contemplative intellect does. This is why Aristotle makes a distinction between practical truths and theoretical truths; where the latter are necessary and

[11] Bottici, p. 64.

[12] I mean to suggest here that for Aristotle, whom I concur with, these basic conditions are what allow a polis to form at all, and hence the public sphere wherein social relations are termed 'political.'

[13] Aristotle, *Politics,* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle,* edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984). 1252b28-32.

[14] Ibid., 1253a2-4.

[15] Bottici, p. 64.

[16] Aristotle, *De Anima,* 433a27-30.

universally valid, while the former are contingent upon the situation they arise from.[17] Theoretical truth is without need of mediation from the specific and can only be true or false—there is no deliberation about necessary things.[18] On the other hand, practical truth is based in the specific situation. In "Aristotle's Conception of Practical Truth," Olfert shows that,

"practical truths are those truths about the unqualified human good which are variable and sensitive to a particular agent and her particular situation. What makes practical truths true is a rich and complex picture of what it means for a specific person to realize her highest good at a specific time and in a specific context. Thus, practical truths are, in a sense, personalized truths about someone's happiness, about what happiness is relative to her, about what we have already called the specification of her happiness."[19]

In contrast to theoretical truths which have a necessary answer, practical truths require careful and diligent heeding of the situation in its particularity. For our objects of desire to be right, objects which inform and motivate our actions, they have to correspond to the way the situation reveals itself. Using Heidegger's translation of *aletheia*—truth as a revealing or unconcealment—practical truth can be conceived of in terms of the way the situation reveals itself in its particularity. This revealing, this truth, of the situation is not a fixed universal object in the way it is for theoretical truths but is rather a dynamic and configurable scene that reveals itself out of its own accord.[20] However dynamic and configurable the situation is, Aristotle still takes it that there is a *right* desire which responds to the conditions disclosed by the situation. The right desire to be had will respond to the unconcealed situation, the truth, in such a way that it draws out from this malleable situation the good for it, and not any choice whatsoever, which is always also in its purview. We can always err in how we respond, or don't respond to a situation, and the situation can even show up in a way that its good is obfuscated by "apparent goods." We can entirely pass over what is being shown in the situation because of the way the world shows up to us through the lens of a dominant imaginal. Instead of perceiving the particular person in front of me with his or her needs, I perceive instead whatever image the imaginal has prescribed onto them. Their particularity and their situation's practical truth conditions are obscured. The imaginal without recourse to its determining conditions is, what I call, an 'unhinged' imaginal. Both

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[17] Thus, when I say, following Aristotle, that the situation has "conditions of correctness," correctness here should not be interpreted as universally valid across all situations. What is the correct thing to do in one situation might not be right for another. I am not making a claim about what is the morally right thing to do (morality often being associated with universal claims to the good), but instead what is ethically, that is *practically,* the right thing to do for a particular situation.

[18] Properties of triangles are an example of theoretical truths. We don't ask whether a triangle ought to be one way or another. It is simply the case that a triangle has three sides, and its angles add up to 180 degrees. Moreover, it is irrelevant to theoretical truth whether I draw *this* triangle here or point to *that* triangle there. The specific triangle has no bearing on the theoretical necessary truths pertaining to triangles.
See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle,* edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984). 1140a30-1140b5

[19] C. M. M. Olfert, "Aristotle's Conception of Practical Truth." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52, no. 2 (2014): 205-231. p. 223-224.

[20] Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth" (1943).

sides of the imaginal, the individual imagination and the political imaginary, thus becomes prone to psychosis; that is, insofar as we understand psychosis to mean a detachment from the truth conditions of reality. The spectacularization of politics is a sign of such a psychosis.[21]

III. Diagnosis of Spectacularized Politics

One motivation for developing a theory of the imaginal is to clarify the contemporary political landscape, which Bottici sees as a "paradox of an eclipse of imagination that goes hand in hand with its hypertrophy." [22] We are constantly inundated with images on our screens, showcasing a spectacularization of politics, and yet there is little room within the geopolitical, neoliberal, landscape to imagine new ways of existing. Virtual images, she suggests, have deeply affected our politics and, potentially, even the imaginal relationship between the individual and the social context.

We can understand the political spectacle as a mode of practicing politics that dramatizes actions for the sake of viewer engagement. This mode has always been a part of state ceremonies; Bottici highlights, for example, the performative role of elections dedicated to the transfer of power. These repeated elections maintain a model image of the society by "providing it with visible continuity."[23] Today however, Bottici sees, following Debord, that the political spectacle pervades *all* forms of social relations as a result of an exponential increase in the quantity of images. This image-mediated mode governing all social relations is spectacularized imaginal politics (understanding, again, politics broadly as all public social relations). The increase in images then overshadows the content of the images such that the images themselves become the sole focus of our collective attention. The political battles we see on screen, as Bottici puts it, are not real battles but performances meant to capture viewership, effectively for monetary gain and social control. On the other hand, the *real* battle is "between the political options that are admitted [into the spectacle] and those that are left out...between those who get a role in the spectacle and those who are left out."[24] The decisive battle in contemporary politics is for a role of performance—to be an actor in the world show—in order to get a say in the direction of our society's drama. Effectively, we cast ourselves as types, auditioning to the spectators through our identities, ideas, and opinions, to be taken seriously and become a voice of influence. This battle for more representation creates not only a spectacle of formal political battles, but also of our daily lives. It is not coincidence, I think, that social media is a birthing ground of "influencers"; our social relations are seeped within the spectacle. Social relations become spectacle is the imaginal become spectacle, because

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[21] To give a broad elucidation of the consequences of this unhinged political imaginal, individuals are often taken for their image within the imaginal to such an extent that they are denied the basic conditions requisite for a human body s livelihood in a shared social space: health, food, housing, labor distribution, concern for each other s pains, care, help, and so forth. The dominant interpretations in play can become so pervasive that they cover over our shared basic conditions that first made an imaginal realm even possible. Consequently, we often cannot perceive the situation clearly. For example, the inability to see racial or gender inequality due to ideals about individual merit; or the way in which the imaginal understanding of steak as 'dinner'—or in ancient times as a kind of holy sacrifice— covers over the reality of the creature's life killed for our consumption.

[22] Bottici, p. 56.

[23] Ibid., p. 67.

[24] Ibid.

the imaginal is the imaginative arena of all our social relations and its effects on individuals' imaginative autonomy.[25]

A marker of spectacularized politics is, as Bottici notes, the creation and consumption of images for their own sake. The increase in the number of virtual images reproduced by the media, she says, has resulted in "qualitative leap" wherein "images have become an end in themselves."[26] My claim, instead, reverses Bottici's suggestion: it is not the case that the increase in images creates a qualitative change— it is not that mass reproduction brings about the problem of making images for their own sake—rather, I take it that the increase of images results from the qualitative change that images are created for their own sake instead of as a response to the particular situation, and this problem of image for its own sake, that marks spectacularized politics, is simply a result of the imaginal divorced from the particular. To solidify this claim, I will now turn to clarifying two points: how the creation of images for their own sake is a result of the imaginal divorced from the particular, and how this results in more images consistently created. Both of these points are explained by how desire's role in imagination is altered when imagination is no longer heeding the particular.

i. Imagination for Its Own Sake

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[25] There is much more to say about the onset of the political spectacle in terms of neoliberal modes of governing which Bottici goes to great lengths to spell out in her book, *Imaginal Politics* (2014). For the sake of concision, I have been focusing my response to her views spelled out in her paper under the same title. To briefly highlight a main idea in her study, the theatricalization of political activity within a nation, conceals the loss of true political action, of those traditional forms of democratic politics wherein the people have a say to the ends of the state. This mere *appearance* of democratic practices covers over the loss of true democratic rule, according to Bottici's analysis, and this happens alongside the advent of a neoliberal world governance that escapes democratic accountability. Governance, as opposed to centralized government, refers to that network of purportedly non-political modes of world organizing; it is associated with the rise of globalization and the kind of authoritative rules overseeing the interaction, often economic, between different nation-states. The diminution of local state power is enhanced by the way global neoliberal governance becomes a distance-less and time-less network of social relations; there is a "compression of space and time" in globalization that threatens nation-state powers and democratic rule. This spaciotemporal compression happens via the exportation of labor and material abroad and is intensified by virtual banking systems as well as online modes of commerce and communication; all of which collapse distances and make social relations almost instantaneous. Effectively, relations within the local state are diminished by the claims of other states abroad; "By stretching the social chains of interdependence, the symmetry between decision makers and the addresses of such decisions—a symmetry upon which democracy itself ultimately rests—breaks down at a number of important points. The territorial anchorage of the state, its correspondence to precise territorial and functional boundaries, was at the same time the limit and the force of the modern state." The diminution of these spaciotemporal constraints (constraints that I take to be essential to the truth conditions of local situations) to a technology mediated neoliberal governance diminishes the claims, and thus the power, of the demos over their local territory. It also generally diminishes the power of spaciotemporal constraints as such. This affects the very basis upon which we hold relations with each other and with our understanding of the world (for example, the distinction in experience between going to the grocery store and having it delivered to you; or talking to someone in person vs talking online or through cellular communications). To be clear, when I refer to the loss or detachment from the 'particular' or 'particular situation' I am concerned with both of these losses, but I am emphasizing the latter because spaciotemporal constraints are the condition for which a demos can have power over their specific concerns (often intertwined with their specific location). See Chiara Bottici, *Imaginal Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 108-109.

[26] Bottici, "Imaginal Politics" (2011), 67.

When the imaginal is unhinged from the particular, imagination becomes capable of getting lost in itself. As explained, for Aristotle images are supposed to be of objects we desire, and these objects are determined by the truth conditions revealed in the particular situation—its specific context, people, objects, issues, etc. When, however, the imaginal covers over these particulars and is no longer conditioned by them imagination becomes unhinged, unrestricting its scope of what it can desire. Fantastic creativity, illusions, and psychosis all reside in this terrain. Since the desirable objects are no longer "tied down" by the 'here and now'—using Benjamin's term—of the particular situation, imagination can only take recourse to 'making up' images; now, its objects of desire can only arise from what it itself can create. These creations, however, remain mere images. The object of desire, the motivating principle for action, is now *not* obtained from the factors of the local situation but are created from out of unrestricted images that are subject to mutations. These created image-objects have no truth conditions and so have no way of applying to the local situation properly *nor even improperly* because they completely overlook the situation. This means that if these images are taken up by us in our understanding of the world, particular situations will not call to us, and we won't heed their conditions. Once the imagination, or the broader political imaginal, is concerned only with its image-objects, it makes the creation of more images its end due to the relationship between images and desire. Our imagination makes images of what we desire in order to get us to act towards obtaining such desirable objects, but when what we desire are image-objects, objects created from nothing but unconditioned images, we are at bottom desiring images that, in turn, invoke more desire and move us to act towards obtaining more images in an unending recursion. Recursion is a mode of building, and it does make entire structures (all computer simulations utilize this basic abstract looping). The political imaginal, I take it, is such a structure built off unrestricted image making.

In the imaginal, we are in a situation where we are creating ceaseless images propelled by desire. Since what we desire are objects that are in their essence only images, and since images invoke a state of desiring, when we desire images, we effectively desire that state of desiring something but never obtaining it. Desiring the state of desire is falling prey to desire for its own sake; this is the propeller underlying the ceaseless creation of images that builds up and sustains the spectacularized imaginal. Desire for its own sake can propel ceaseless image creation because this is the state of being in constant lack. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates shows that one does not desire what one has but only ever what one lacks. He says that "there is no desire if there is no lack."[27] Similarly, Anne Carson in her book, *Eros the Bittersweet,* gives a lucid account of the paradox of desire, often citing the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus.* She states, "The Greek word *eros* denotes 'want,' 'lack,' 'desire' for that which is missing. The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting."[28] For the state of desire to remain desiring, one cannot actually obtain the desired object. Desire for its own sake has no end—neither in the sense of concrete object that can be realized nor in the sense of actually ceasing. It is in the thrall of "the chase" when it keeps itself in lack. Whereas images that obtain their object from the conditions of the particular situation actually

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[27] Plato, *Symposium*, translated by M. C. Howatson, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 200b-d.
[28] Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, (Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 10

have the capacity to be realized, ending the desire and with it the thrill of, and thrall in, desire. Desire for its own sake is the mechanism behind the spectacle that Debord and Bottici agree aims only to sustain itself, and this mechanism is what, in turn, causes the creation of more images.

ii. Virtual Consequences

We can see this phenomenon of desire for its own sake already in consumer capitalism and the entertainment industry, but it becomes much more evident in the way we create and consume virtual images. These images are unendingly produced and quickly replaced for a new image in mere seconds of scrolling. That this creation and consumption happens at such a rate makes the phenomenon more noticeable, but, as I have been claiming, the phenomenon of desire for its own sake has already been taking place prior to the advent of the virtual. The divorce of the political imaginal from the particular situations already sets going the problem of desire for its own sake. We get more images once this divorce happens because the penchant for desire fuels image making and so drives up the quantity of images seen. No single image is satisfactory because none are actually capable of addressing nor answering the problems of the particular situations. The black square image that circulated on Instagram in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter 2020 protests is a testament to image creations that are only symbolic in action, that do not address actual problems, and that keeps people in lack—in this case both of palpable solutions and of helpful real-time protest related communication. These images are, indeed, political but they are spectacle, purely performative gestures that, when tied up with the trending hashtags, end up blocking the advances of ground-level support in need of real-time online communication. The sharing of black images was effectively driven by an image-obsession—both with respect to the poster's self-image and the spectator's desire to display their stance in the prevalent discourse (essentially to pose before others)—that fuels a need for more images and furthers the lack of practical actions taken to address the actual issues.

Moreover, Bottici, following Benjamin, takes it that virtual images are further removed from the '*hic et nunc,*' "here and now," than artworks had become upon the rise of photography. For Benjamin the "here and now" has to do with the sense for an art work's particularity within a historical context (tradition) of a particular place (the 'here') and particular time (the 'now').[29] The work's "here and now" gave it its authenticity. Its loss is taken as a consequence of the work's increased reproducibility through photography which make copies that have no link to the environs from out of which the original stood and had revealed. Bottici concurs and argues that this qualitative difference in today's virtual images and physical works—that they have lost touch with the 'here and now'—is an intrinsic change caused by the increased reproducibility of images. In contrast, under my view, the reproducibility of images is a consequence of the loss of the 'here and now' and this loss occurs when the imaginal, and not the particular situation, becomes the basis from out of which we understand the world. In other words, the loss of the here and now is not new to artworks; rather this loss is only the realized product of an already detached political imaginal from all "heres" and "nows" of local particulars. It is only within a political

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[29] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illumination,* edited by Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books, 1968), p. 220.

world where we do not heed the particular situation and its conditions of correctness, that the images we see follow along this trajectory already in place. The virtual is, therefore the latest version of this detachment.

I do, however, agree with Bottici that virtual images are further removed from the "here and now" than works of art. Virtual images do not create the confrontation with the 'here and now,' or what I have been referring to as the 'particular situation,' that the artwork did. This confrontation assisted in disrupting the claim the imaginal had over us. The here and now of the artwork was such that in standing before the work, we were confronted with its particularity and the way its earthly material gave rise to the image and the 'world,' as Heidegger puts it.[30] We were confronted with the way the image rests upon, hinged on, the constraints of the particular entity and its immediate surrounding situation; and consequently, confronted with ourselves, undistracted, as witnesses that stand there within that "here and now" of the work. Thus, the artwork as whole, as both an entity and an image, served as a tool of resistance against the dominance of the imaginal realm within which we predominantly spend our social lives. The artwork brought about a double awareness of the particularity of the work as a thing and the awareness to the realm of images, the imaginal, that was seen as reliant on the thing's particularity.

Virtual images are further removed in that they have no particularity, no 'here and now,' whatsoever.[31] Bottici states that in a virtual image there is "no authenticity to be preserved, and no original to orient us" and because of this, "the pathologies of the imaginal of our time are linked to the fact that there is no easy way to determine the content of reality of images."[32] While we can present blockchain as a counter example to a way in which images can indeed be verified as authentic and original,[33] we can nevertheless pull a stronger implication out of Bottici's analysis of the distinction between artworks and virtual images: the lack of a 'here and now' in virtual images is not necessarily

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[30] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1977).

[31] There is no *loss* of the "here and now" in virtual images as there is with works of art; there is only ever lack of it.

[32] Bottici, "Imaginal Politics" (2011), 68.

[33] The claim that there are no original and authentic virtual images can be challenged by the advent of Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) which, by means of blockchain technology, are unique virtual images. Crypto currencies and digital art works made into NFTs cannot be copied and they can be verified as originals. I take it that these forms of original images are potentially subversive of the reproducibility taken as essential for the spectacle (especially as it pertains to capital). Notwithstanding, in my view, NFTs further entrench the dominance of the imaginal realm unhinged from the particular due to the way in which they absolutely lack the 'here and now' of the local situation; they are not rooted 'on the earth and under the sky,' to put it in another way. They have no link to the 'there' of our shared concrete existence with each other and other things, quite literally, around us. Instead, these original virtual images are exactly that: originating virtually out of the imaginal itself. Without being able to further examine the exact role of these non-fungible images within this paper, I will say briefly that NFTs are a sign of the way in which the imaginal is recursively built up by its motor of desire for its own sake. It can further be argued that recent "meme coins," like DOGE for example, in their way of undermining the entire Crypto project, effectively show us that NFTs are, however 'original,' solely based and locked in images. The belief in the reality of reproduced capital is the same belief in the reality of Crypto; namely, the belief in the imaginal; except, only in the case of Crypto, reproduction and falsifiability does not seem to be essential for its role in the spectacularized imaginal. NFTs, I speculate, showcase the way in which reproducibility is actually not essential for the lack of a 'here and now,' however much it may have been a key historical turning point for the loss of it in the physical work of art if we are following Benjamin. I do not have a stance on this speculation as of now.

due to their lack of *uniqueness*, but to their lack of connection to the particular situation of the viewer. Images that depict, say, a hospital under a corresponding article on COVID-19 and claim reality will remain dubious to skeptics simply because they have no immediate experience of such scenes in their particular situations. Virtual images are also phenomenally removed from one's immediate situation in that they simply do not fit into it (virtual images are, quite literally, floating before us on ever-changing screens); and, what's more, engaging with them actually removes us from our particular situation, not make it manifest; they completely absorb us.[34] The double awareness of the imaginal and its reliance on the particular that we had with the physical work is not present in the experience invoked by virtual images.

Finally, there are two key dangers I see with the problem of creating images for their own sake in a virtual spectacularized politics: one, as has been stated, is that we keep ourselves in a state of desiring and therefore never arrive at tangible solutions for particular problems. The second danger is that we lose a shared basis of correctness necessary for identifying what counts as being true or false. With the virtual, the problem of not having a basis of correctness for the imaginal becomes a greater threat to our politics. Bottici realizes that the lack of the 'here and now' in images has major consequences with regards to what is taken as true or false because these images can be easily falsified.[35] With the virtual and its hyper malleability, we are in a much greater danger with regards to coming into agreement as to what is true and what is false, what is a right action and what is a wrong one, than we were prior to the virtual. This is because the virtual gives us an illusive sense of particularity through its ability to be perceived, effectively "performing" particularity. In truth, virtual images are a manifestation of an unhinged imaginal which we can see occurring before us in 'real time' and which can act as a kind of proof for claims about the world that are ultimately not rooted in any real particulars' own conditions of correctness. We are therefore much more likely to choose at will, for ourselves, what counts as true; hence, our current plight of "fake news" and entrenched echo chambers.

IV. Regrounding the Imaginal

An important question to address now, and to which I cannot answer in full detail here but will give some directive suggestions is the following: how can we recover the particularity of the imaginal if the spectacularized, desire-driven, imaginal blocks our ability to even reckon with the particular?[36] Because, as I have been arguing, the unhinged political imaginal has been built off of itself, through its desire-driven, recursive, mode of making itself its own end, it as a whole does not have a 'here and now' particularity to it. At our level of global interdependence and reliance on the political imaginal that we have today, it is unclear if we even ought to fully 'reground' ourselves into local communities where we can become aware of each other, as the full beings that we each are, in a much more intimate and manageable situation. While I take it that we must still foster local community, I also take it that, given our global problems and especially our climate catastrophe, instead of a complete return to local

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[34] Anyone on a public transit, for example, can quickly see how everyone is glued to their screens; absorbed in images and unaware of their particular surroundings, nor even of their very absorption.

[35] Bottici, p. 67.

[36] I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer to bringing up this important question.

communities, we, as a global public, need modes of existing within this unhinged imaginal that place extensive awareness upon the perilous potential to become lost in unconditioned images. These modes have to incorporate, to some degree, warnings and reminders of the desire driven intoxication we fall prey to in images. Such an awareness, at the very least, brings to consciousness the lack of truth conditions in images and so helps place limitations on the hold of the imaginal over our lives. Consequently, we can work to 'despectacularize' the imaginal.

Certain kinds of warning signs or reminders within the imaginal could, I take it, develop our vigilance in the imaginal. These might include virtual images that address the viewer directly and aim not at reengaging her but getting her to question her absorption in images. Nevertheless, the worry here is evident: the creation of more images might simply maintain the spectacularized imaginal.[37] How exactly to implement an awareness seems to be a question of pedagogy, which I cannot dwell on here. At the very least, I take it, warning signs—be they images or words or some other form of warning—could reposition the individual to heed the imaginal at a distance and thereby make possible a relation to her own particularity and her standing *there,* in her situation. This very seeing of the imaginal and the problem of its truth conditionlessness might even help develop one's faculties that govern practical reason, especially perception of the situation—both of one's own and of the political situation.

V. Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that Bottici's concept of the imaginal, understood as our political symbolic network of relations, insofar as it is divorced from the particular is the basis for the possibility of the virtual world and, consequently, of political spectacle. I take it that in focusing on the imaginal as the basis for understanding our political world in lieu of what makes it possible in the first place—namely, the particular conditions that place restrictions on the imagination—we become further entrenched in the political spectacle. By utilizing Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between images and desire, I clarified how an unhinged imaginal, and so political spectacle, obtains its impetus and sustains itself. Namely, I explained how it is that creating images of unconditioned objects leads to a recursive creation of images fueled by a state of desiring for its own sake. The objects of desire, which imagination forms images of, are no longer hinged to the particular conditions of correctness, but are now image-objects. This makes possible the contemporary problem of unending virtual images and the lack of concrete actions taken to remedy our current problems. Lastly, as an outcome of my analysis, I have argued that the spectacle is not simply the result of an increase in images reproduced but is the consequence of the more originary separation of the imaginal from its determining conditions in local particulars; a separation that occurs from a reorientation in our collective perception of looking at the world from out of images and not from out of the particulars.

Ultimately, I take it that in order for imagination to actually be useful for motivating us to action, and not enabling of the spectacle, we need to change the object of desire away from the image itself—

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[37] My feeling is that *memes* are a virtual attempt to undermine the spectacle but, given that they keep us engaged, they actually end up maintaining it. There are some that may do the job, but many of them are not critical of the imaginal *as such* but are only critical of the various norms *within* it.

despectacularizing the imaginal—and shift it towards futures based upon particular conditions. This disruption of the spectacle can be accomplished by reframing the way the imaginal is understood not as something over and above the particular conditions but as dependent on it. For this to happen, we must first become aware, through vigilance and disruptive signs, of our absorption in the unhinged political imaginal. By reorienting ourselves toward the particular that the imaginal rests upon, our imagination can be better guided by practical reason to properly discern from out of the conditions of the situation practical truth, that which can and ought to be desired for the achievement of a good state.

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