**Imaginal Interventions:
An Interview with Chiara Bottici**
Rob Ritzen

Introduction

At times, it feels that reality is only trying to catch up with fiction. 'What will happen when America has a dictator?' it reads on the cover of my edition of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*. Published in 1935 the book describes the election of Buzz Windrip as President of the United States by provoking fear and promising drastic economic and social reforms while promoting a return to patriotism and traditional values. Once in the White House, Windrip takes complete control of the government and institutes an American version of fascism (Lewis 1935). Who never had the intuition that fiction and reality are actually more intertwined than we want to admit? It is very difficult, however, to clarify the complex ways in which the political domain and the nexus of images, stories and narratives are indeed interrelated.

Chiara Bottici's work is precisely an attempt to build up a philosophical framework for thinking about the role of images and narratives in politics. Her book *A Philosophy of Political Myth* develops a philosophy that makes it possible to view political myth as more significant than being merely true or false. Her point of departure takes Blumenberg's view of myth as not presenting a given once and for all, but as

being a process of continual reworking (Bottici 2007). According to him a narrative must always answer a need for significance in a specific period and context in order to function as a myth (Blumenberg 1979). Bottici recognizes this and argues that myths indeed should be seen as re-appropriations and as the maintenance of images, symbols, stories and narratives that give significance to people's lives and worlds. As such, people play an active role in the working of myth and are not merely persuaded by them. This also means that there is no clear distinction between truth and unreality.

The discussion between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, truth and untruth has revived again these days. In America and England *post-truth* was elected as word of the year in 2016 and the Society for the German Language nominated a similar word, *Postfaktisch'* (Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache 2016). The entry in the Oxford Dictionaries describes *post-truth* as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). It seems common sense that people's opinions, choices and actions are shaped not merely by objective fact but also depend on feelings and mores that give significance to their life and the world they live in. It seems undeniable, however, that these are also conditioned by a prescriptive view of how one would wish human beings to be.
In political thought, for example, the view that we needed more rationality in politics has been dominant in the twentieth century, especially since the 1990s, after 'the end of ideology'. The works of John Rawls (e.g. 1993) and Jürgen Habermas (e.g. 1992) – the successor of Horkheimer and Adorno in the Frankfurt School's critical theory – are of primary importance in this current of political thought. They presuppose the possibility of rational choices once the structures and processes of decision-making were to be made fair. The underlying belief of their views, however, is that conflicts can be solved through an improvement of civilization and social organization, and settled through peaceful deliberation by way of amicable compromise. Even though their theories are suggested as models for everyday politics however, they could only really be put into effect in a world that, as yet, does not exist.

It is precisely through a recognition of the particular and changing character of politics today that Bottici proposes a new direction in critical theory in her latest book *Imaginal Politics: Images beyond Imagination and the Imaginary* (2014). To anyone who uses Facebook, Twitter or just follows the news these days, it seems harder than ever to figure out what is real and what is not. Mediatization has changed politics in a drastic way, becoming inseparable from images whose omni-presence works on our imagination. Images have to be continually worked on and maintained to secure their reality through sedimentation in everyday thoughts, language, and acts. Yet we also all have the capacity to do the imagining ourselves, to produce images of both existing and non-existent objects, Bottici argues (2014). In *Imaginal Politics* Bottici analyses the relationship between politics and our imaginative capacities as well as the transformation this connection is undergoing today. According to her 'we live in a society of spectacles that rests on the commodification of the imaginal, within which we are all socialized' (Bottici 2014, 192). The book is about what she refers to as the imaginal. This concept enables her to maneuver through the philosophical impasse between imagination seen as an individual faculty and the imaginary understood as our social context. In her view, the imaginal makes space for that which precedes the division between real and unreal as well as that between the individual and the social.

Various authors of the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno, have pointed to the political disposition of imagination by emphasizing the role that society as a whole exercises in the creation of compliant subjects (e.g. Adorno & Horkheimer 1969). These works emphasize the supposed heterogeneity of imagination, but even in the work of Marcuse, where imagination seems to unfold the possibility of freedom, it represents that which does not yet exist and as such remains linked with utopia (e.g. 1980, 1991). Bottici however departs from the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, for whom imagination was the condition for the possibility of reality (Castoriadis 1975). In his view, the imaginary is a field of the undetermined creation of figures, which create the possibility of there being objects. What Bottici calls the imaginal is such a space where figures of the possible emerge. The social functioning of the imaginary, however, is confined by its own symbolic resources, history, and nature. Thus, it is not a space of free imagination but rather the act of imagining a different

distribution of the edifice of the social. As such the imaginary is a social practice – a common struggle.

Out of the tension that arises from this struggle between the already instituted social imaginary and the instituting power of collective self-making emerges the real, according to Castoriadis (1975). Rather than a staging of political ideas, work on the social imaginary seems to be an ongoing process of production. To come back to images, one might see it as a post-production factory, a practice of continuously erasing, adding, re-appropriating and re-associating. In this way, the imaginal is seen by Bottici as a field of possibilities wherein these images of the social are animate. Once "out there" images also start to live their own life. Here Bottici follows Mitchell's view of pictures, understood as complex assemblages of virtual, material, and symbolic elements. Rather than questioning the intentions and views of the maker of the picture, he argues that we should ask what pictures actually 'want from us' (Mitchell 2005). Images thus have an undecided nature, they 'can be either alienating or liberating according to the different contexts' (Bottici 2014, 70). The question of their reality, then, is contingent upon the way we act upon them.

We seem to have forgotten that the political field can actually be changed in unexpected ways and that the rational choice is not always the political choice. For Bottici 'this political world that is full of images seems to lack imagination' (Bottici 2014, 108). In such a constellation, there appears to be no space for imagination, understood as the radical capacity to envisage things differently and to construct alternative political projects. Those who argue that 'another world is possible' are characterized as unrealistic, if not fanatical, and in this way are excluded from the spectrum of viable political options.

If we are to understand politics as whatever pertains to the life we have in common, politics is imaginal because we need an image of the public to make it exist, according to Bottici. Indeed, the relevance of the struggle for people's imagination seems to increase in comparison to the traditional view of politics as a struggle for the distribution of power and the use of legitimate coercion. The link between

politics, and what Bottici has named the imaginal, has been tightened in the technical transformations of contemporary capitalism. Recognizing that the imaginal is elemental to the political enables us to better understand contemporary politics and its manifestations through images, simply because persuasion of- and through people's imagination is recognized as part of politics. It is because of the disqualification of the imaginal as a valid domain of struggle by liberal political theory, and the focus on the center as a "reasonable utopia" by the Left, that the terrain has been left open for experimentation by neofascism. Developing counter-practices of imaginal interventions would be a way to repopulate the imaginal again as a political struggle for a life in common. We cannot ignore it anymore: images no longer simply mediate our doing politics, but now risk doing politics in our stead.

Rob Ritzen: It struck me that while your book *Imaginal Politics: Images beyond imagination and the imaginary* is about a world of spectacle and speed, your method of research seems to be out of step with that very world you describe. Can you tell us about your way of working?

Chiara Bottici: I am definitely out of step with the world we live in. Philology, Ancient Greek, Latin, Psychoanalysis: they are all dead languages. Yet, precisely for that reason, they can give you a perspective on current life. My method has always been in-between critical theory and history of philosophy. I think that the two of them, critical theory and history of philosophy, are actually two sides of the same coin; whenever we tell a story about the past, we always tell it from the standpoint of the present, but if we want to understand the present, we have to understand how we actually got here, which other roads we missed on the way, and thus, also, possibly whether we can get off this path. That's the reason why I am obsessed with genealogies. The philosophical move both in *Imaginal Politics* and in *A Philosophy of Political Myth* consists of asking: what do we say when we say this or that? And most importantly: how did we come to such a situation where one can say this and that? Why can we say, for instance, "this is the fruit of your imagination" in order to say that something is unreal, if it is true that in Ancient Greek one could say something similar in order to convey exactly the opposite, that

is, that something is real? What do we mean when we say, "this is purely imaginary"? Both theories of imagination and theories of the imaginary, despite their burgeoning, are currently stuck in a philosophical impasse. In order to move forward, we first need to grasp how we got there, what were the material interests that produced such a genealogy, and thus, also identify the potential resources for moving beyond them.

RR: Can you further explain what you mean by genealogy? Is it a history, a reconstruction of the past?

CB: The genealogical method that I use is not meant to provide a history with a capital H. I am not interested in reconstructing a linear path, and thus freeze a concept into a particular history. My aim is to do exactly the opposite, which is to show the contingency of conceptual formation. This can be done in different ways. One may, for example, try to jump outside the current concept of imagination and start using it to mean something else – let us say, "apple." This can be more or less successful depending on one's position on hegemony and power. Some writers actually have the capacity to do this. Another way of intervening is to build up a creative re-appropriation of a word through a genealogical investigation of its roots. I think this gives you more of a grasp of the constellation at stake, because you build on the contingency of its genealogy. For instance: there are passages of *De Caelo* where Aristotle used the term *phantasia* to mean true vision: how can it be that the corresponding term 'fantasy' now means exactly the opposite? By showing the contingency of conceptual constellations, we are in a better position to transform them. In this sense, the genealogical method is not meant to reconstruct continuity but to emphasize breaks, and thus open alternative roads.

RR: You pointed out that there seems to be an impasse in philosophy created by the alternative between the concepts of imagination and the imaginary. Could you explain the difference between these concepts and the tension that arises from them?

CB: It is more than a tension; I would say it is a dilemma. The concept of imagination, as it has been developed in our Western tradition, is imbued with what some people call the philosophy of the subject. That is to say, it is imbued with the idea that we are individuals, subjects endowed with a series of faculties; among the latter, on the one hand, we have reason, which is a faculty to produce abstract laws and concepts; and on the other, we have imagination, understood as the faculty to perform 'all sorts of capricious and illegal marriages,' to use Francis Bacon's expression. The concept of the imaginary has been introduced in philosophy precisely as an attempt to go beyond this understanding. Yet, this attempt to go beyond the individualistic philosophy of the subject has at times turned into an equally problematic metaphysics of context. In short, whereas imagination is the individual faculty that we possess, the imaginary is the social context that possesses us. This is a dilemma, rather than a tension or even a contradiction, in the sense that both horns of the dilemma can be true: that is, it can well be the case that we imagine both individually and collectively.

RR: How does your concept of the imaginal overcome this dilemma?

CB: The imaginal is a space that can be both individual and social. Developing the concept of the imaginal means moving away from the idea that, on the one hand, you have individuals, understood as containers with their faculties, and, on the other, you have contexts, which, in turn, contain individuals. I want to move beyond both these views by including what they each have to say while at the same time taking into account the space in-between. This space in-between is the place images inhabit, independently of who produces them -- socially or individually. The imaginal is a move towards this space which is neither totally individual nor totally social, but which is both individual and social. It is also a space that can be both real and unreal. The idea is to point to a kind of suspension of our presuppositions, so that we can approach this space without a priori assumptions about status of reality of images as well as about their social or individual nature.

RR: What do you mean when you say that the imaginal is made of images in the sense of pictorial representations?

CB: First of all, I mean that they are (re)presentations, that is, representations that are also presences in themselves. When we say re-presentation we usually mean that an image re-presents an external reality that is outside of the image itself. By speaking about (re)-presentations, I am trying to distance myself from that view. Even in psychoanalysis, there is often a tendency to think of images as signs of another, deeper reality for which the representation stands -- for instance, dreams that stand for deeper unconscious conflicts. Now, the invitation of the imaginal is precisely to suspend this search for something "deeper" and "beyond" images themselves and take images as presences in themselves. This is in general my definition of images. But, for the purpose of my argument in the book *Imaginal Politics*, I decided to focus particularly on pictorial (re)presentations. In that context, I emphasized the visual side of images, although I acknowledged that there are other types of images, such as acoustic, olfactory, and tactile images. And I did so, because in that context I wanted to emphasize the primacy of sight in contemporary politics, with the consequent transformation of the visual that accompanies it in our late capitalist conditions. This is why, even though I maintain a broad definition of images, as both representations and presences in themselves, when it comes to politics, we should pay special attention to the primacy it accords to the pictorial and to the visual side of our capacity to imagine.

RR: What is then the relation between images and language in your view?

CB: It is very significant that you raise this question. We can hardly speak about images without bringing language in. After the so-called linguistic turn, and under the influence of people like Heidegger in Germany and structuralists in France, there has been an emphasis on the primacy of language for philosophical research. The crucial idea is that we inhabit a world that is made of and through language. Even in psychoanalysis, which is a movement that began with the study of dreams and images that cannot be reduced to simple linguistic descriptions, we have witnessed the growing influence of the linguistic turn. To combat such a trend, I have tried to point to a dimension of images that comes before language. In this sense, I refer to Jungian psychoanalysts who argue that the image is primordial, in the

same way in which the unconscious is: what is the unconscious, if not, and foremost, a stream of images?

RR: Is this interest in psychoanalysis and its political usages something that you derived from the Frankfurt School?

CB: Yes, but *Imaginal Politics* was also a way to position myself in the field. My first job was in Frankfurt, which for me was first and foremost the city of "the school": books by authors such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse have been crucial interlocutors of my formative years. After the Habermasian turn in critical theory, there has been an emphasis on discursive rationality, that is to say, on the a priori structures of language that mediate doing politics, which is not my primary focus of analysis. In *Imaginal Politics*, I try to look at what is before language and at the role that this "before" plays in politics. To give you an example: take the dispute around the Mohammed cartoons, the image of the prophet, with a bomb in his turban. This cartoon appeared first in a Danish newspaper, therefore in a language notoriously impossible to learn. If instead of a cartoon, this had been an essay or an article, nobody would have cared about it. The whole polemic (and the deaths it provoked) was triggered by the power of images to travel outside of language and outside of language boundaries. This is what I mean by the primacy of the image.

RR: Do you think then that images have nothing to do with language?

CB: I think there are images that can be reduced to linguistic descriptions and there are even images that you can visualize only through languages, such as the example of a polygon with infinite sides. Yet, I think we went too far with language. There are people who think that images are *just* language. But they do so because they transpose onto them linguistic structures; they say this is a metonym, this is a metaphor, thereby projecting onto images literary categories invented to understand words. Instead, I am trying to point to what is always not-yet-linguistic in images. If you look at children's evolution, it is pretty clear that they communicate through images well before communicating with words. It is striking how quickly

we forget that. Even in psychoanalysis, with all its emphasis on infantile years, there is an almost exclusive focus on the post-oedipal, post-language phase, with very little work being done on the pre-oedipal. In a way, developing the philosophy of the imaginal means going back to the pre-oedipal stage and asking: what happened before we actually learned linguistic rules? What was the power of images then – and thus, what is left of that power in our adult lives?

RR: Let us go back to politics then. The view that politics has always mirrored theological concepts and motives is very widespread in political theory today. Instead, you claim that politics has always been imaginal; could you explain this shift?

CB: *A Philosophy of Political Myth* was already an attempt to criticize the increasing influence of political theology. There is the tendency today to consider political theology as the only alternative to a purely rational approach to politics. Those who say that rationalism is not enough and that, therefore, we need some form of political theology commit the mistake of excluding precisely all that is between the two. In the work on myth, I propose considering mythical narratives as one of those things in-between. Sure, we need stories, but not all stories need to be religious stories; not all stories need to depict the world in terms of good and evil, nor do they need to embody questions of life and death -- the general strike, for example, Sorel's idea that in order to mobilize working-class people you need a big myth such as the general strike. The myth of the general strike tells the story: "if you don't strike, it is going to be a catastrophe for the working class." This narrative is a myth, but it is a secular one. The example of the general strike also tells us something about the way in which myth works. A common opinion is that this myth failed. Yet, in New York City, during the Occupy movement, a lot of activists, beginning with many New School students, were occupying the main university building and protesting with posters that called for a general strike, using exactly the same terms and narratives. The slogan they were using was 'we are all in the same boat and the boat is sinking'; this is just a variant of the narrative Sorel was referring to. This is to say that I am really critical of a political theology revival and of the false alternative between rationalism and political theology that it presupposes: it seems to me that this alternative hides more than it illuminates, and what

it hides is precisely a most interesting space for our political choices. By depicting all that is not rationality as part of this big melting pot of "political theology," we end up in a night where all cows look equally grey, so you cannot distinguish between things. In this way, the general strike becomes as much of a political theology as does the Messianism of ISIS and the caliphate. What do we have to gain by assimilating all these different things? There are narratives that are more deleterious than others, some which already smell of death from the very beginning.

RR: How do you bring together the notions that there is always already a world we enter and therefore a context that shapes us and the possibility of creativity of those who inhabit it?

CB: This is a crucial question. How can we be both shaped by the social imaginary we live in and yet be free? The answer is both phenomenological and ontological. Phenomenologically speaking, I argue that precisely in this capacity to produce images that come before the language we learn through socialization, we experience our freedom. One may then ask where is this creativity ultimately coming from? And then we need to provide a more ontological answer, which, in the book, draws inspiration from Hannah Arendt's statement that natality is the basis of our capacity for action (and remember here that for her, "action" means bringing about the new). Natality constantly brings new bodies, new lives into being, and thus grounds the possibility to initiate something completely new. But maybe we have to take a step back to explain why this banal fact is so important. Do you know why philosophers like political theology so much? It is because they are obsessed with death. There is a tendency in the West to look at death as the defining moment of our existence, and therefore as the moment that is politically most salient. In the Hobbesian paradigm, for instance, we are told that we have to subject ourselves to a sovereign power otherwise we will end up killing each other. Within this perspective, even phenomena such as nationalism become good because the persistence of a nation beyond our death gives us the illusion of immortality. Way too many philosophers, from Hobbes to Heidegger, have been looking at human beings as fundamentally beings-toward-death. In this way, they tend to forget, but also make

us oblivious of, the fact that we can die only because we are born. You can understand why this happens; psychologically speaking, it is almost impossible to remember one's own birth. Most of the time, we remember it only in the form of trauma. Yet, we can actually constantly witness the phenomenon of other people's birth. This brings me to another point: death is also a truly individual business, because even if you commit collective suicide, you are still going to die alone, in a very bodily sense of the term. Birth, on the contrary, is always something you cannot choose, and most importantly, it is something that you cannot give yourself: it has to occur in the company of somebody else. This is perhaps the ultimate reason why philosophers like to focus on death much more than on birth: because we control our own individual death much more than we could ever control our own individual birth. But it is also the reason why, following Arendt, I argue that birth should be at the center of our political thinking.

RR: There seems to be tension between the constituted power, understood as the sovereign power to inflict death, and constituent power, understood as the power of life to start something new. How do you resolve this?

CB: From the point of view of the imaginal, this is the difference between what Castoriadis calls the instituting and the instituted dimension of our capacity to imagine. In fact, as I mentioned before, the reason why I embarked on the enterprise of writing the book *Imaginal Politics* was that I had been obsessed for a long time with the question: "where is the new coming from?" If we are always born in a context that institutes us, where is the space for the new? Where is, if you want, the truly constituent power coming from? I wanted to understand whether there is a possibility of escape. In order to have the possibility of escaping, you need to be able to find a moment when the mechanisms of domination break down and the new breaks in. The imaginal is precisely this dimension where such a break can happen. This can be described by pointing towards phenomena such as art movements and vanguards – even though vanguards no longer exist because avant-gardism became a dominant ideology. But, more in general, we can phenomenologically point to moments of ruptures generated by the unconscious. Yet, as I mentioned before, in order to understand how this can potentially take place, we have to go

back, ontologically, to birth. There are constantly new births on Earth, new human beings who arrive in unexpected ways; they have their own individuality, their own voice, their own faces, their own bodies, and they are different each time. Maybe we will get to a point where this will get completely lost and we will have only clones. But we are not yet there, so there is still space for hope.

RR: Could you relate this to the mode of image production today? What are the consequences and possibilities opened to us when the image becomes as pervasive as it is today?

CB: In the book, I focus on the capitalist transformation within the current post-Fordist mode of production. Within the latter, imagination is not only a moment in the consumption of commodities (what Marx called commodity-fetishism), but rather a crucial moment of the production process itself. We all have to be creative: participative management, multiple jobs, renewable skills are just a few examples. In the 1960s, people could still say "all power to the imagination" and think it would be liberating. But what is to be done now that imagination has taken all the power and capitalism has subsumed this imperative of creativity within itself? This really is what makes the question of where the new is coming from particularly crucial. In the book, I point towards what I call homeopathic strategy that is a strategy of creative re-appropriation that takes pieces of the spectacle and uses it against the spectacle itself. In another context, for a short piece I wrote for the New School *Public Seminar*, I even spoke of an aesthetic of recycling based on such a homeopathic recipe (Bottici, 2016).

RR: Does this mean there is no more original or no more outside of the spectacle as a possible strategy for critique? Is this the basis of the homeopathic strategy you describe in your *Imaginal Politics*?

CB: Yes. In homeopathy, you take a small amount of the substance that causes the sickness, and you use it against the sickness itself. This also means that you have to take the same poisonous substances in order to cure what is poisoning you: but in a very small amount and, in particular, through a form adapted to the patient at

stake each time. So every homeopathic remedy has to be adapted to the particular person under treatment. It is not that if we each have a sore throat, then we all get the same substance to cure it. If you have a sore throat, it means something particular to your body specifically, so we have to find the remedy that is most adapted to you.

RR: Recent social movements, for example, apart from their use of image re-appropriation, also use the physical occupation of a spatial entity; be it in New York, Tahir Square, or Istanbul. The strategy of recycling seems to be played out at the level of images, whereas the homeopathic strategy seems to bring a bodily aspect with it. Is there a role for something as elementary as having a body in imaginal politics?

CB: Yes. Our body is also an image: how do you distinguish between my own body and that of the woman sitting over there, at the reception of the hotel, if not through an image, or perhaps a set of images? Vice versa: I also think that images in their turn are also bodies. To speak about images as something opposed to, or even separate from, bodies, means assuming a form of metaphysical dualism that opposes the mental and the material, the bodily and the spiritual. But when it comes to ontology, I am a Spinozist: for me, there is one unique substance that expresses itself through an infinity of modes. So I think of the Occupy movement or the Arab revolts or the more recent No Border movements as both imaginal and bodily: what are the activists doing, if not occupying a space with their bodily presence and thus also triggering a new image of society?

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Biographies

Chiara Bottici
Chiara Bottici is a philosopher and writer. She is Associate Professor of Philosophy at New School for Social Research. She is the author of *Imaginal Politics: Images beyond Imagination and The Imaginary* (Columbia University Press, 2014), *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and *Men and States* (Palgrave, 2009). With Benoit Challand, she also co-authored *Imagining Europe: Myth, Memory, Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and *The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations* (Routledge, 2010). She also co-edited the collection of essays *The Politics of Imagination* (Routledge, 2011, with Benoit Challand) and *The Anarchist Turn* (Pluto 2013, with Simon Critchley and Jacob Blumenfeld). Her short stories have appeared in *Il Caffe illustrato*, while her novel *Per tre miti, forse quattro* was published by Manni Editore in 2016.

Rob Ritzen
Rob Ritzen is a curator and philosopher. He is co-initiator of [That Might Be Right](#), an organization for collaboration and alternatives to the present. He curated: *Between the Sheets: Intimate Experiments, Loving Assembly, Affecting Commons* (2017) a series of assemblies where cultural practitioners presented their work, thoughts and interests in an supportive scenography; *We Tell Stories - An Anthology* (2012) a series of exhibitions which explored the notion of storytelling in artistic practices and the potential to overcome the separation between doer/thinker/spectator; *When Squares [Re]Frame Meaning* (2011) an exhibition on the public square as a place for the production of meaning, inspired by the Arab Spring and the occupation of Tahrir Square.