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The power of imagination in *the Red Shoes*

Abstract: In the 1948 movie *The Red Shoes*, the power of imagination and artistic vocation are metaphorically represented as a pair of red dancing shoes. Just as in Andersen's fable, the shoes are enchanted: they can open up new horizons and possibilities of existence and artistic expression to the one that wears them. But their inexhaustible power can also possess her, demand complete devotion, or even dance her to death. A hermeneutic reading of the three key scenes from the movie inspires a reflection on the dialectics of the power of imagination and its productive as well as destructive potential.

Keywords: Imagination, Power, The Red Shoes, Vocation, Violence, Hermeneutics.

Introduction

Imagination is one of the most powerful human faculties. What do we mean when we say that imagination is powerful? Is the imagining subject powerful by virtue of exercising their imagination? Is it the imagination itself that has the power over the imagining subject? When we think of the representations of the dialectical power of imagination, *The Red Shoes*, Michael Powell's and Emeric Pressburger's 1948 masterpiece movie inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's fable, comes to mind. There, the power of imagination is catching, ambiguous, ephemeral, and very concrete. Sometimes it approaches us, wearing red shoes, and invites us to the dance. How do we respond to this invitation?

Femme/homme immaginant(e)

We can talk about the power of imagination in terms of the objective genitive (*genitivus obiectivus*), which is “the genitive that determines the person or the object that are being the subject/object of activity” (Wierciński 2019, p.34). The genitive indicates “the bearer of the feature expressed by the defined noun” (i.e., power). In this sense, the power of imagination is the potentiality of seeing beyond what presents itself directly to the senses, imagining that things can be different¹. It concerns imagination’s capability to generate or prevent change.

The power of imagination can also be expressed with the subjective genitive (*genitivus subiectivus*), that is, as the power that constitutively belongs to the imagination as such (Grondin, 1987). The power of imagination is not something that exists outside of itself, irrespective of the imagining subject (Wierciński 2019). It is the kind of power that extends to an imagining of the one who imagines. The one who imagines belongs to and co-creates that which can be imagined. Reflecting on the power of imagination uncovers that it is a faculty (*facultas imaginandi*). A faculty is a capacity, a potentiality, a capability. To be capable, following Paul Ricoeur, means that one can do things that pertain to being a human being (Ricoeur, 2008). Imagination, from the hermeneutic perspective, is not a competence that is learned or acquired, but it is a capability of being a human being. It is a way of being in the world, a longing for belonging to the world. In this sense, a human being is a *femme/homme immaginant(e)*. But what does it mean when we say that we are imagining beings? What do we do when we imagine? Or, what is happening to us when we imagine?

Against the long tradition which sees imagination as a merely representational faculty (see Aristotle, 1993, Plato, 1975, Nussbaum, 2001, Sheppard, 2014, Kearney 2020),² in modern philosophy, Kant invites us to envision a productive model of imagination:

¹ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger concludes that potentiality stands higher than reality. (Heidegger, 2008).

² Richard Kearney draws attention to a long dismissal of imagination in the history of philosophy: “Named alternatively *eikasia* and *phantasia* by Plato and the Greek thinkers, imagination is roundly condemned as a pernicious strategy of simulation: one that tempts mortals to take themselves for omniscient gods, whereas in fact they are merely playing with reflections in a mirror.” (Kearney, 2019 p.23)

The power of imagination (*facultas imaginandi*), as a faculty of intuition without the presence of the object, is either *productive*, that is, a faculty of the original presentation [*Darstellung*] of the object (*exhibitio originaria*), which thus precedes experience; or *reproductive*, a faculty of the derivative presentation of the object (*exhibitio derivativa*), which brings back to mind an empirical intuition that it had previously. (Kant, 2007, 7:167)

For Kant, the *productive* imagination creates something that precedes the experience, whereas the *reproductive* imagination is derivative of experience. Reproductive imagination allows us to see with the mind's eye the images or impressions guarded in our memory. Productive imagination creates new and unprecedented impressions. To imagine is either to *re-vision* or to *en-vision*. The latter, productive aspect of imagination, is crucial for Hannah Arendt in her reading of Kant:

What Kant calls the faculty of imagination, to make present to the mind what is absent from sense perception, has less to do with memory than with another faculty, one that has been known since the beginnings of philosophy. Parmenides called it nous (that faculty "through which you look steadfastly at things which are present though they are absent") and by this he meant that Being is never present, does not present itself to the senses. What is not present in the perception of things is the it-is; and the it-is, absent from the senses, is nevertheless present to the mind (...) To put this differently: by looking at appearances (given to intuition in Kant) one becomes aware of, gets a glimpse of, something that does not appear. This something is Being as such (Arendt, 2014).

Referring to Parmenides, Arendt stresses that what can be seen with our senses can lead us to see something beyond them, to see the appearances with "the eyes of the soul." Such seeing, which discloses something that *is*, even if it is not present in perception, is called imagination. When we imagine, we get a glimpse of that which never presents itself to the senses, that is, Being.

With Arendt, to imagine pertains to Being just as being pertains to Being. But how can she claim it, since what we imagine clearly does not exist in the same way as what we perceive exists? What Arendt hints at is that the Being of the imagined is the Being in the mode of presence and in the mode of absence (Heidegger, 1977). Against the accounts that encourage us to see imagination as the surreal, referring to Parmenides, Arendt says that the

imagined is as real as the Being itself. To imagine, in the productive sense, is not to bring something out of nothing but to bring something, the it-is, into the open, into the possibility that can become actuality. To imagine is to participate in the mystery of Being, to get a glimpse of it, and to see that things can be different (*to what the things might seem*). With Gadamer, we can also say that we welcome that something is different and that someone might be right (Gadamer, 1975). Imaginative creativity is the capacity to bring forth the possibility of being different. And such bringing-forth is already a creation. The act of imaginative transcendence of reality ‘makes present’ that which is absent. Imagination is an act of creation. When we imagine, we ‘make present’ images, sounds, or emotions that were not present before the act of imagining, and yet “they gain a certain degree of presence” (Ward, 2006, p. 440). Imagining makes another world internally present, which “expands our own being in the world, externally” (Ward, 2006, p. 440). This transcendence is perhaps most apparent in the act of reading, where, through signifiers, we enter the imaginative world of the story. But surely such imagination is not limited to the literary narrative art/arc (Blundell, 2010)? Paul Valéry draws particular attention to the transcendental aspect of imagination in dance, which he calls *une poésie générale de l’action des êtres vivants* – general poetry of the action of living beings (Valéry, 1957, p.13)³. Imagination that is at work in dance allows the dancer to search, through their transgressive and transformative movements, for the limits of instantaneous powers of Being. The dancer’s body has, thus, similar power to that of the poet’s mind. This power distances the dancer (sometimes excessively) from the ground, from reason, from known concepts, and from the logic of common sense⁴.

The dialectical power of imagination is vividly displayed in the movie *The Red Shoes*, which tells the story of a ballet company staging a ballet piece, *The Red Shoes*, based on Andersen’s tale *The Red Shoes* (*De røde sko*). We are invited to enter a magical world of a tale within a tale within a tale (which reminds of a play within a play in *Hamlet*), where the imagined and the real are indistinguishable.⁵ The original Andersen’s tale is about Karen, a girl who dreams of impressing everyone at a ball with her beautiful shoes

³ My translation.

⁴ Imagination pertains to all aspects of creation, whether we consider mental or physical world of possibilities, actions, or transformations.

⁵ In this regard, Diana Diamond relates this structure to Freud’s theory of the dream within the dream: “it is clear that *The Red Shoes*, the fairy tale nested in the ballet nested in the film, embodies the affirmation of Vicky’s painful and seemingly irresolvable conflicts,

and dance. She puts the red shoes on and dances exquisitely the whole night through, to the amazement and awe of everyone present. However, after the ball, she realizes that she cannot remove the shoes. They force her to dance to exhaustion until her feet are chopped off tragically (Andersen, 1997). The movie's Karen is Victoria Page (Moira Shearer), a ballerina noticed by the legendary Impresario Boris Lermontov (Anton Walbrook) after the two have an exchange about Vicky's vocation to dance.⁶ At first disinterested in her skills, Lermontov is so intrigued by the conversation with Vicky that he devotes her more and more attention, finally giving her a lead role in *The Red Shoes* ballet. On the day of the premiere, Vicky begins to dance, but it is only after she puts on the actual red shoes that she amazes the audience. We are treated to a fourteen-minute ballet sequence unparalleled in the movie-making history to date. When Vicky falls in love with the ballet's composer, Julian Craster (Marius Goring), she needs to choose between a life alongside her beloved and a life devoted to dance. In the end, the red shoes make the decision for her.

Three scenes from the movie appear crucial for the contemplation on the power of imagination: the legendary ballet sequence, the exchange with Lermontov at the cocktail party, and the ending scene where Vicky is confronted by Lermontov and Craster in her changing room.

The party: *why do you want to dance?*

To understand the complexity of the power of Vicky's imagination, it is indispensable to consider the topic of vocation as disclosed in the cocktail party scene, where we also encounter Boris Lermontov. In the first sections of the movie, we do not see Lermontov. We are invited to imagine the legendary ballet director, which reinforces his powerful introduction. His name is repeated among the audience, written on the posters. The director himself sits behind a curtain, from which only his hand emerges to give a *yes* or a *no* to the invitations by the higher-class audience. The Caesar of the Ballet gives a verdict on their social life or death. One fortunate Countess is granted life, having offered substantial funding to the ballet. At the Countess's cocktail party, we see the Impresario for the first time. Walbrook's calm and confident

alternately denied and affirmed in the different layers of the narrative that ultimately determine her fate." (Diamond, 2016, p. 113).

⁶ As Linda Ruth Williams points out, "Lermontov is molded on the early-twentieth-century mogul of the Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev, given to firing dancers who lack his single-minded dedication." (Williams, 2017, p. 10).

aura of authority leaves no doubt that this man is not to be played around with. As soon as he realizes that he was tricked into attending the cocktail party to see a ballet performance by the Countess's niece, he refuses to watch the show and recedes to the bar. Unable to show her dancing skills to the ballet director, the red-haired, glamorous niece – Vicky, approaches him at the bar and pretentiously tries to get his attention. Out of this provocative meeting, a conversation is born.

Even though Victoria is desperate in Lermontov's eyes, even though she is slightly pushy, he asks: "Why do you want to dance"? He opens up a dialectic of question and answer, Whereby "the question and the answer belong together" (Wierciński, 2019, p. 26)⁷. It might be Lermontov's benevolence to overcome the previous negativities and open himself up to the creative and ambiguous dialogue. This creative ambiguity gives Victoria a chance to show Lermontov her true colors. Being asked the pro-vocative question (provocative meaning a question about vocation)⁸: "why do you want to dance?" (Powell & Pressburger, 2010), she answers with an equally provocative answer: "why do you want to live?" Victoria responds in the most profound sense of provocation. Her reply is, indeed, much more provocative than Lermontov's question. By asking him, "why do you want to live," she changes the dynamics of the dialogue. She transforms a question about dancing into a question about living. A question about vocation becomes an existential question. Lermontov's answer to Victoria's question, "Well, I don't know exactly why, but, er, I must," and her final response: "That is my answer, too," remind of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*:

Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if this answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple "I must," then build your life in accordance with this necessity; your whole life, even into its humblest and most indifferent hour, must become a sign and witness to this impulse (Rilke, 2010, p. 6).

⁷ A Wierciński explicates: "A dialogue operates on the model of question and answer. We are always interpreting the content of a dialogue as an answer to a question, which in turn raises new questions requiring new answers."

⁸ Lermontov's question to Victoria could be merely provocative, in the sense of trying to get rid of her, or pro-vocative, in the sense of asking her about her vocation.

The “strong and simple: I must” shows the dialectical power of imagination. It reveals that the disclosure of truth is also a closure. Understanding this, Rilke indicates to the young poet that to disclose to himself what his vocation is, is to put himself under the power that makes him do what he *cannot not do*. The power of imagination, disclosed in vocation, does not make us do what we do not want to do. Instead, it is the capacity to hear a call (from Latin *vocatio*) to which we need to respond (in the sense of *re-spondeo*, which is related to responsibility understood in the existential sense, i.e., as a necessity to give an answer). Thus, a search for vocation and a search for identity are inseparable:

Recognizing the poetic vocation is not so much a matter of analyzing one’s self, but rather, having an insight into what is mysterious in poetry when it persists in its challenge for a human being to stick firmly to realizing his/her life’s work; and also recognizing that the true poetic vocation is inseparable from the poet’s examination of his/her own call to be a human being. In that sense, the two dimensions of this vocation cannot be separated from one another. Reflection on the personal aspects of the vocation is an essential part of the struggle for one’s own identity (Wierciński, 2019, p. 447).

The power of imagination related to vocation is the power of recognizing what we cannot live without and who we cannot give up on becoming. For Vicky, there *is* no life without dance. If she is not a dancer, she *is* not. The artist recognizes herself in art. She understands herself in and through art. She forms and transforms herself through art.

The experience of art is radically transformative. It calls us to become a new self – “you must change your life” (Rilke, 1947). Gadamer would say that the picture we are looking at captivates us – keeps us captive. Perhaps at this point, the power of imagination turns into coercion/violence? In the cases of Vicky and Lermontov, we sense that their “must” does not refer to violence or lack of freedom but stems from their deepest insight about who they ought to be. The only way they can ‘actualize’ their freedom is by doing what they *cannot not do*. The Kantian understanding of imagination and vocation in *The Power of Judgement* reminds that imagination is “a power to assert our independence in the face of influences of nature, to diminish the

value of what is great according to these, and so to place what is absolutely great only in its (the subject's) own vocation." (Kant, 2002, 5:269)⁹.

The ballet: the imaginary is the real

Victoria follows the call of her vocation and gets a lead role in the Ballet Lermontov's newest production, *The Red Shoes*. As the ballet is about to commence, we browse through the libretto with the audience present at the theatre. Astonishingly, Victoria plays "The Girl" and not Karen, the original Andersen character. Is Victoria's character just any girl? Or anyone? Or, is it for *The Girl* to determine who she is to become?

Backstage, before the show, everyone is worried about something. The red shoes are lost, the scenography leaves much to be desired. The chaos, effort, and nuisances of backstage life show that art is happening in life. The everyday is the milieu of the revelation that only some have the capacity to witness. Amidst this turmoil, Lermontov comforts the tense Vicky, reminding her that during the performance, music is all that matters. If she lets herself be guided by music, everything will be alright. The seemingly ordinary advice discloses that "listening" is what guides us through the dance and through life. We are called to listen to how life revibrates within us and how it moves us. However, "only he who already understands can listen [*zuhören*]" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 174). *Whoever has ears, let him hear* (Mt 11: 15).

The ballet begins before the curtain goes up. Against the red fabric of the curtain enters a solitary persona. The Shoemaker holds a pair of red shoes in his hands. In a fascinating sequence, he presents the shoes and invites the audience to the dance. We are tempted to give in to the red shoes' power. "Wouldn't you love to wear the shoes?" – the Shoemaker seems to be asking. The curtain goes up and uncovers that it is not only the red shoes that are on display. There are blue, green, and yellow shoes of distinct shapes and sizes fitted for different dancers and shoe lovers alike. Perhaps we could try a pair on. But the red shoes are meant for only one ballerina: Vicky. They are calling her; she cannot resist them. She sees her imagined self, dancing with the red shoes on. Her projection is nothing like the Vicky we see onstage: the imagined Vicky has her hair down, her skirt is short, and her ballet shoes are red. Looking at the imagined version of herself, Vicky sees whom she yearns to be. The power of her imagination enables her to see what is not physically there, yet it is just as real for her.

⁹ For an extensive hermeneutic analysis of *The Power of Judgement*, see Marino, & Terzi (2021), Makkreel (1990).

The being of Vicky's imagined self is the being in the mode of presence and in the mode of absence. The power of Vicky's imagination enables her to see what is there the way that (only) she can see it. She *en-visions* (*vor-stelen*) something that is not *visioned* (*vor-gestellt*) in the physical sense but what she can nonetheless *see* with the same degree of presence. When Vicky sees her reflection at the Shoemaker, it is both her immediate and imagined reflection. She sees through the appearances of herself and toward the transcendental – toward what she could become. Even before she puts the red shoes on, she experiences the power of seeing herself the way she *envisions* herself.

Vicky's imaginary reflection transmits lightness, confidence, and mastery. She is alluring, mesmerizing. The power that the "real" Vicky cannot resist sucks her in as she gets closer and closer to the red shoes. They are tailor-made for her. They magically jump on her feet by themselves. Vicky commences an unusually difficult and fast solo, one that she could not accomplish without the red shoes. Her imaginary microcosm is weird, strange, scary, mysterious, fascinating, hypnotizing. The enchanted ballet transforms into a journey to Vicky's unconscious, where we witness the condensed, displaced, and dramatized conflicts and passions that she faces in her artistic journey offstage. Two figures reappear in various settings: that of Lermontov and that of Craster.

Following Vicky through different sequences, we rejoice with her as she dances her way into the ball. Having arrived, she shines: the crowd is amazed, they compete for her attention and attempt to dance with her. She cannot. The shoes pull her in an unknown direction. Vicky's lack of control over the red shoes reveals that we do not have full command of our imagination. The images come into us and take us into possession to express ourselves in creative art. Those powers can bring about something that can construct us, but also something that can destruct (destroy) us. The alluring power of the possibilities might bring us to destruction and almost self-annihilation. Czesław Miłosz calls a poet a secretary of an invisible force, someone who makes themselves available to the force, not by intentional decision, but rather by being who they are. They are tormented by the ideas and express them as they come (Miłosz, 2001)¹⁰. It is a matter of their radical existential responsibility that the spirits that go through them (the good or the evil spirits) will

¹⁰ "I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing/That is dictated to me and a few others./Secretaries, mutually unknown, we walk the earth/Without much comprehension. Beginning a phrase in the middle/Or ending it with a comma. And how it all looks when completed/Is not up to us to inquire, we won't read it anyway."

fall on the productive ground. Vicky makes herself available to the force of the red shoes, with all the beauty and the terror that they bring about. As long as she has them on, she dances along to their rhythm.

The rhythm is unforgiving. Vicky's solitary dance among the cemetery columns announces the unavoidable. She attempts to return home, but the shoes pull her back on the stage—her “real” home— where she belongs and does not belong (see Heidegger, 1977, Wierciński, 2010)¹¹. In the last scene of the ballet, Vicky's dress is worn-out, wrecked. She is exhausted, she cannot dance anymore, yet dance she must. She approaches the church and asks the priest to free her from the burden. She wants to have her shoes taken off. Perhaps, being unable to deal with the radicality of the exigencies of the life of a dancer, she feels that she is collapsing under the pressure of the artistic vocation. The only help she envisions in this situation is the gift of being relieved from her personal confrontation with the demands of life. She puts her whole hope into a supernatural power that can absolve her from the requirements of personal/artistic vocation. Realizing the inescapability of an existential answer to vocation overburdens Vicky to such an extent that she pleads for mercy. But mercy is not granted. She cannot be dispensed from an answer to her vocation. After a fiery duet with Grimsha, Vicky collapses at the altar. She finally has her shoes taken off, but without them, she dies. The shoes caused Vicky's ultimate exhaustion, but ultimately, they were what kept her alive. The tragic possibility of the artistic vocation is disclosed: the power of the artist's imagination can give them life and take their life. The prophetic scene, which announces what happens to Vicky offstage, shows the con-fluence of the imaginary and the real. The imaginary *is* the real.

The dressing room: the de-cisive act

In the following scenes, the inescapability of making the decision about the vocation is condensed (*ver-dichten*) in a powerful, dramatic exchange between the two most important people in Victoria's life: her director and her fiancée. Each of them asks her the decisive question: what do you want? The previous dialogue (Why do you want to dance? Why do you want to live?) seems particularly tragic now, as Vicky needs to choose between *to*

¹¹ In the *Letter on Humanism* Heidegger calls homelessness “the symptom of the oblivion of Being”. Homecoming means rediscovering our essence in our primordial relationship to Being. (Heidegger, 1977, p. 220)

*dance and to live*¹². She is confronted, on the one hand, with the decisiveness of her fiancée, who, despite the enormous promise of his future career and artistic life, declines it in order to be with Vicky. On the other hand, Lermontov, who is entirely devoted to art, expects nothing less from her. Both men leave Vicky exposed, undressed, as she has to perform the decisive act. Engaging Lermontov and Craster, she discovers that her love for art is as genuine as her love for the lover. Being thorn in-between those two loves, she finds herself unable to make the decision. Her significant hesitation (we are again reminded of *Hamlet*) shows how serious she is in giving the response, how responsible she feels for her vocation and for her relationship¹³. Hers is not a hysterical but a deeply existential indecisiveness. She struggles, trying to envision the combination of the two ways of being. The very powerful confrontation, which is also a powerful con-fusion, brings Vicky into despair. Her ultimate decision is as final as it is tragic. If there is one decisive thing she does, led by the shoes, it is the running into despair.

Was there another scenario for Vicky? In the dressing room, when the three main heroes confront each other, they need to give a radical response to their lives. The response is the matter of finding the right measure – not a statistical measure that can be applied to everybody, but a measure that is a challenge that everyone has to take upon themselves to determine. “Man is the measure of all things” (Plato, 1906, p. 14) – it is upon each one of us to find the right measure for our lives. In the final scene, three life horizons meet. Craster’s and Lermontov’s horizons are opposed. Vicky finds herself in the middle of this opposition. Not being able to find the right measure for herself, she ends her life out of total despair. The power of her imagination gave her life and took her life. Perhaps, if she was not put under the enormous pressure of instantaneous choice, she could envision an alternative future for her, where the horizons fuse in imaginative and creative ways. Or, she would never encounter the way to reconcile the two callings in her life and would need to make the tragic choice sooner or later?

The power of imagination, which brings about an enormous and unlimited potentiality, entails an enormous responsibility. The radical responsibility also entails the radical freedom to decide for ourselves (see

¹² Feminist critiques of the movie notices the patriarchal and narcissistic tendency to force women to choose between career and family life, making us believe that it is unimaginable to reconcile the two. (see Diamond, 2016).

¹³ In this regard we can also recall Freud’s interpretation of *Hamlet* (see Freud 1997). Diamond notices that *The Red Shoes* is “a tale perhaps inspired by the thwarted desires of its author, the homosexual son of a shoemaker and a frustrated dancer” (Diamond 2016, p.105).

Ricoeur, 1992). Discovering the power of imagination calls a human being to discern, that is, to make decisions. The most challenging decisions regard the discernment of our vocation (Heidegger, 1966). Our task is to address and readdress the question of vocation without any premature answers that lead to unilateral solutions. Indecisiveness in human life with relationship to the vocation does not necessarily mean a weak determination toward living life to the fullest. The power of imagination, in the end, is the power of seeing the vastness of the potential ways of being. With Gadamer, the horizon always moves with us. Just as in dance, every next step brings about new possibilities, which can lead us in new directions (Gadamer, 1975). Appreciating the beauty of the horizon that opens up with each new step requires radical openness to what happens. Whoever has feet, let them dance!

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