

# *Beyond Imagination: Deleuze and the Real Virtual*

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## ABSTRACT

During three years, from 1963 to 1966, Deleuze published three texts dedicated, respectively, to Kant, Proust and Bergson. In the last two, the most important concept that emerges is undoubtedly that of virtual, whereas in the volume on the critical philosophy of Kant the author speaks instead of imagination. If the latter is connoted as the faculty that prolongs, multiplying them, the possibilities of reality and of the ego that overlooks it and if, on the other hand, the virtual is the being that goes beyond its own current determination and that makes its differences proliferate, it is legitimate to ask how much these two notions have in common. The paper is therefore devoted to the definition of these two concepts, to verify whether and to what extent they coincide. In fact, it would seem that for Deleuze, the virtual is what brings to ontological completion the work of the imagination, desubjectifying its character and thus allowing the crossing of the gnoseological field within which it was convened.

## KEYWORDS

Deleuze, Kant, Imagination, Bergson, Virtual

1.

The focus of this contribution are two early researches which Deleuze published between 1963 and 1966 and that he dedicated to Kant and Bergson. The most important concept addressed in the latter is the notion of *virtual*, whereas in the volume about the critical philosophy of Kant, Deleuze discusses the role of *imagination* in Kant's *Critiques*.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the paper is to verify whether imagination and virtual are two aspects of the same problem, namely, the relationship between thought and world. In particular, imagination is a concept that Kant summons to answer a gnoseological question, which concerns the human way of binding thought to the world. For his part, Bergson establishes a difference

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<sup>1</sup> On Kant-Deleuze relation, see Rawes 2008, Rametta 2008, pp. 341-376, and Lee & Willatt 2009.

of nature and not only of degree between thought and the ‘matter’ of the world. As in the case of imagination, the virtual is conceived as a mediator between these two dimensions. Secondly, it is worth noting that, as with Kant’s *Critiques*, the dimension of time plays a key role also in Bergson’s work.

The most significant outcome of these early researches is for Deleuze the concept of virtual, whose importance goes far beyond the Bergsonian exegesis from which it springs.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, the volume on *Proust and the Signs* published in 1964 serves as a hinge between the two mentioned books, and not only in chronological terms. Therefore, we shall first take up the cornerstones of the Kantian account of imagination by referring to Deleuze’s analysis, which goes from Kant to Bergson and finally leads him to the concept of virtual.

2.

In Deleuze’s text devoted to *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, the notion of imagination plays a significant role, and this is also demonstrated by the fact that, in the same year of the book’s publication, Deleuze also wrote an essay entitled “L’idée de genèse dans l’esthétique de Kant,” where the notion of imagination turns out to be central:

the schematism is an original and irreducible act of the imagination; only the imagination has the capacity to schematize [but] it would be wrong to scrutinize the mysteries of the schematism, as though they harbor the final word of the imagination in its essence or in its free spontaneity. The schematism is a secret, but not the deepest secret of the imagination. [...] Kant discovers the free accord of the imagination and the understanding as a ground of the soul, presupposed by the other two critiques (Deleuze 2000a, pp. 60, 62).

In this article, Deleuze starts with an analysis of schematism, which, together with synthesis, constitutes the activity of imagination. The philosopher also speaks of a “secret of imagination,”

<sup>2</sup>In his book entirely devoted to Deleuze’s Bergsonism, Lundy quotes several students of Deleuze who think that “the virtual is one of his most significant concepts [nay] the most pivotal concept in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical vocabulary” (Massumi 1992, p. 34) and that “Deleuze’s entire philosophy is concerned with the description of this virtual domain” (Smith 2012, p. 172. See also *ibid.*, pp. 189-221). For Lundy himself, “the virtual is one of his most significant concepts” (Lundy 2018, pp. 78-79). According to Eric Alliez, “Gilles Deleuze, throughout his career and on all levels of his philosophy, never ceased to develop an ontology of the virtual” (Alliez 1997, p. 19.8). Last but not least, we quote a sentence by Alain Badiou, who, although within a critical framework, recognizes that for Deleuze “the virtual is the very Being of beings” (Badiou 2000, p. 47).

which is likely to be found in its ability to overcome the aporias of the first two *Critiques*. In other words, in both texts dating up to 1963 and dedicated to Kant, the French philosopher identifies imagination as the faculty that, through accord and “free play” (Kant 1790, § 9, 217 pp. 48-49) with understanding, solves the problems opened by Kantian criticism.<sup>3</sup> It plays a fundamental role as the “ground of the soul,” that is, as the element which connects gnoseological, moral, and aesthetic instances. Indeed, aesthetic common sense does not present a simple accord between faculties (to know, to desire and to pleasure), but a harmony among them. This is achieved by means of imagination, which does not legislate, but frees the faculties in play (Deleuze 1984, pp. 49-50).<sup>4</sup>

According to Deleuze, in order to understand the role of imagination in the third *Critique* it is necessary to go back to Kant’s analysis of this concept within the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here it serves a fundamental but complex task within the transcendental schematism, one of Kant’s most strenuous theoretical concepts. Kant himself considers imagination as the notion which defines a correspondence between thought and sensible intuitions. In particular, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he identifies productive imagination as the faculty that mediates between the senses and the understanding through the production of transcendental schemes. Imagination indeed recomposes the break between thought and the world and thereby legitimates the use of the categories (which in themselves do not belong to things) for the understanding of entities. The scheme of imagination *conforms to* a concept, without being predetermined by it. The concept is not prescriptive with respect to the scheme of imagination, but provides for an accord, a conformity with the understanding without being independent of it but neither governed by it.

Why does the understanding (and not the imagination) legislate? Why does it legislate in the faculty of knowledge? [Because] the imagination embodies the mediation, brings about the synthesis which relates phenomena to the understanding as the only faculty which legislates in the interest of knowledge (Deleuze 1984, pp. 16-17).

In *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, Deleuze reminds us that with respect

<sup>3</sup> In his works Sandro Palazzo highlights that Deleuze’s reading is not so obvious, considering that in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, just a year earlier, the philosopher had instead challenged the foundational assumptions of the Kantian critical project. See Palazzo 2019, pp. 101-02, Palazzo 2008, and Palazzo 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Another significant line of inquiry, which we cannot develop here, concerns the theme of the sublime in Deleuze’s reading of Kant, which is also inextricably intertwined with the concept of imagination. On this, see Lesce 2021.

to the faculty of knowing, the imagination is not legislating; instead, it accords with the understanding to which it provides a synthetic and schematic re-presentation of phenomena. Its relation with the understanding is “free or indeterminate” already in the first Kantian critique (Ginsborg 1997, p. 73). In addition to that, transcendental schematism operates an “intellectual pre-synthesis” and provides a “general ‘composition code’ which contains the procedure by means of which the imagination can produce an image” (Barison 2021), that is: sensible data are not arranged by categories, but according to the prefiguration of those same sensible data *in time*. Time is in fact the common element between sensible things and pure concepts. The schema can be understood as a temporal determination produced by imagination; it is, in other words, the structure that makes headway in knowing the world, that is, the mediating formula that produces the mutual belonging of being and thought through the temporalization and internalization of external objects.

Let us summarize two characteristics of imagination – temporality and indeterminacy – pointed out by Deleuze in *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, which turn out to be crucial in relation to Deleuze’s later treatment of the virtual. First, we must highlight that, like the other faculties – understanding and reason – with which it is associated, imagination is a source of representations:

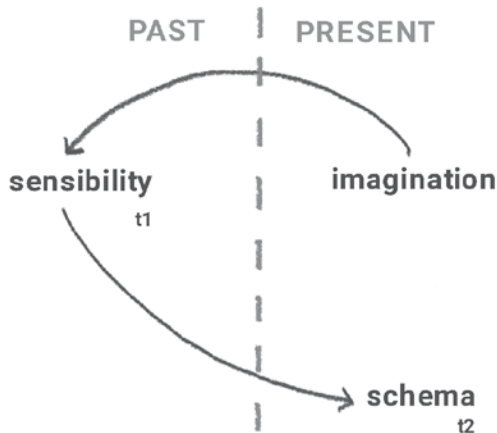
We must distinguish between, on one hand, intuitive sensibility as a faculty of reception, and, on the other, the active faculties as sources of real representations. Taken in its activity, synthesis refers back to imagination; in its unity, to understanding; and in its totality, to reason. There are thus three active faculties which participate in synthesis, but which are also sources of specific representations when any one of them is considered in relation to any other: imagination, understanding, reason. Our constitution is such that we have one receptive faculty and three active faculties (Deleuze 1984, pp. 8-9).

Faculties can be receptive or active. Sensibility is a receptive faculty, because with respect to it the knowing subject is passive and, precisely, only receptive to data coming from outside. The case is different for those faculties that are sources of representations since we do not get them directly from our experience of the world: representations are rather a reworking of it for the purpose of knowledge. Imagination, understanding, and reason *represent* the world, that is, they return a mediated image of it, and thereby make it comprehensible. Deleuze relates in detail what representing means to him: in his view, representation is first and foremost “*re-presentation*”.

The important thing in representation is the prefix: *re-presentation* implies an

active taking up of that which is presented; hence an activity and a unity distinct from the passivity and diversity which characterize sensibility as such. From this standpoint we no longer need to define knowledge as a synthesis of representations. It is the representation itself which is defined as knowledge, that is to say as the *synthesis of that which is presented* (Deleuze 1984, p. 8).

As for the faculty of imagination, reproductive imagination, which evokes an image without depending on the actual perception of the object, performs undoubtedly this activity of re-representation. But the so-called “productive imagination” also shares this character, since it synthesizes the data of experience by re-presenting them to the understanding in the novel form of the transcendental schema. Temporality is involved in the activity of schematism, moving from present to past – and back again. Imagination starts from the present of experience and transforms it into a schema that makes the experience itself past in relation to it. But the schema is also what allows the experience to re-present itself to the consciousness, and thus it brings the past back to the present time. Put another way, we may say that the mediating operation the imagination performs between the experience of present time and the schematized representation places the schema in a second time ( $t_2$ ), subsequent to the time of perception ( $t_1$ ), thereby making the empirical data ‘past.’



Imagination applies time to categories to make them correspond to the world they describe. Thus, it is clear that the common point

of world and thought is time. Imagination acts as a middle term between thought and the world precisely by means of temporality, that is, of its capacity to give reality to mental structures – the categories – which, out of the “order of time”, would otherwise stay detached from the reality they wish to interpret.

Another salient characteristic of imagination concerns its nature, which appears different from that of understanding. Indeed, it has been defined as a matrix, as well as a

pre-discursive and instinctual shadow zone [...]. Different instances, forces, tensions coexist in a sort of primordial condition [...]. Imagination and the pre-philosophical plane are, in this sense, places where events of freedom can occur, forces of transformation [which] belong to the dimension of the neutral, and of the multiple (Villani 2000, pp. 14, 21, our transl.).

These words prove that the faculty which links thought and the world operates before the occurrence of intellectual synthesis. Imagination represents the condition of such synthesis, although indeterminate and ungraspable by the understanding. Indeed, the latter legislates over it, shaping and rearranging the images which imagination provides the consciousness with. Its schematizing activity works in a condition of conceptual indeterminacy, for although it accords with the understanding, it is not immediately dependent on it. The transcendental schema the imagination produces account for a *surplus* of the concepts that flow from them; they constitute indeed the reservoir of images on which the understanding draws to enrich thought with content. To the principle that “thoughts without content are blank, intuitions without concepts are blind” (Kant 1781-87, A51/B75, pp. 193-94) one should therefore add a further specification: the transition from intuitions to thoughts involves the production of images as outcomes of the imagination. They represent the middle term between sensibility and understanding, are not blank, not blind, but they work within a dimension of productive conceptual indeterminacy. Illustrating this idea with an image, we could say that imagination is like a funnel: at its widest opening it collects the chaos and multiplicity of sensory data and from its narrowest exit hole drains off concepts determined by the understanding. Imagination is thus what makes the passage from sensibility to understanding possible, through a work of sifting and transit, of transposition and reconfiguration. For this reason, imagination contains more than the concepts that are its result. Recalling the aforementioned Kant’s example, “quadrupedal-being” is potentially more fruitful than the concept of “dog”, although its being vaguer and more indeterminate than it.

3.

We can now ask what is the virtual for Deleuze. To understand his interpretation, it is worth considering the positions of Proust and Bergson, protagonists of two volumes that Deleuze published immediately after his work on Kant. Both researches focus on time, and more specifically on the past to be understood not as “not-to-be-anymore”, but instead as an eternity that does not fade, and coexists with the present. Our usual conception of time escapes “the past’s being *as past*,” that is, the essence of time as such. We commonly think of what-has-been as something that constituted as such after it has been present, as an epiphenomenon that arises after the present or as the effect that arises after the cause has been exhausted.

But in this way the essence of time escapes us. For if the present was not past at the same time as present, if the same moment did not coexist with itself as present *and* past, it would never pass, a new present would never come to replace this one. The past as it is in itself coexists with, and does not succeed, the present it has been. [...] If there is a resemblance between Bergson’s conceptions and Proust’s, it is on this level – not on the level of duration, but of memory. That we do not proceed from an actual present to the past, that we do not recompose the past with various presents, but that we place ourselves, directly, in the past itself. That this past does not represent something that has been, but simply something that is and that coexists with itself as present. That the past does not have to preserve itself in anything but itself, because it is in itself, survives and preserves itself in itself – such are the famous theses of *Matter and Memory*. (Deleuze 2000b, p. 58).

The first part of the quotation is not easy to understand. What does it mean that the present as present has to be present-*and*-past, otherwise it would never pass? Different students (among others see Lundy 2018, p. 80, and Ansell-Pearson 2005, p. 1124) have tried an explanation of this passage, although they have not necessarily provided the readers with greater clearness. The philosopher is indeed setting here a problem that unhinges the common logic: he asks us to abandon the idea that time is a continuous flow that from future generates the present which on its turn produces the past, because in this way we get to the contradictory representation of a past that *is* insofar as it is-no-longer. Present becomes past only because in a certain time the actual present coexists with the one that is coming, otherwise we would face the paradox of a temporal void at the moment in which the future becomes present and thereby places itself in a box left empty by the present that has just passed into past. Since neither in our daily experience nor conceptually is verified the hypothesis of continuous temporal jumps and ‘present gaps’, we must then think of a moment in which two presents subsist, one

of which is, however, the past of the other. The consequences of this reasoning are incredible, and can be found first in Bergson and then, transposed into literature, in Proust's masterpiece. Essentially, we should assume a new image of time, that envisages the coexistence of present and past as two distinct, but not irreconcilable or contradictory moments. It is not true that present is the negation of past and vice versa, their relationship being of coexistence and not mutual exclusion.

Albeit only in three short excerpts (Proust 2012, vol. IV, ch. 3, dig. edn.), in the fourth volume of the *Recherche* Proust quotes Bergson acknowledging his outstanding outcomes about memory. In turn, throughout his work Deleuze often quotes a passage from Proust where a most effectively definition of virtual can be found. Let us read the passage, in its narrative context:

But let a noise or a scent, once heard or once smelt, be heard or smelt again in the present and at the same time in the past, *real without being actual, ideal without being abstract*, and immediately the permanent and habitually concealed essence of things is liberated and our true self [...] is awakened and reanimated as it receives the celestial nourishment that is brought to it. A minute freed from the order of time has re-created in us, to feel it, the man freed from the order of time (Proust 2012, dig. edn., our emphasis).

The passage is quoted from the last volume of the *Recherche*. Proust describes nothing less than the experience of being “freed from the order of time”, that is, of being immersed in a dimension in which past and present are no longer bound by the linear sequentiality that common sense ascribes to them. Instead, they coexist and belong together within an instant that brings time out of its joints. Deleuze often quotes the words we have emphasized, but, in its entirety, the whole passage expresses in literary form the philosopher's philosophical project regarding the notion of the virtual. These lines speak of liberating the essence of things; with the same aim to unveil the profound nature of the real, Deleuze transports the question to a philosophical level.

Summing up his philosophical project, which develops over many years and varied researches, we could say that virtual “is real without being actual, ideal without being abstract,” i.e., that it: 1) stands in opposition to the notion of possible; 2) does not merge with the actual as complementary or similar to it; 3) acts by differentiating and substitutes the concepts of fold and implication for that of negation; 4) represents the totality of the past.

1) For Deleuze, the virtual is distinguished from the possible in two respects:



From a certain point of view, in fact, the possible is the opposite of the real, it is opposed to the real; but, in quite a different opposition, the virtual is opposed to the actual. We must take this terminology seriously: The possible has no reality (although it may have an actuality); conversely, the virtual is not actual, but *as such possesses a reality* (Deleuze 1991, p. 96).

That ‘possible’ is not just another name for the virtual is also evident to Bergson, who devotes an article to the relationship between the possible and the real (written in 1930 and then gathered in Bergson 1934). Even more than in *Matter and Memory*, these pages make clear that possible “is only a retroactive extrapolation from an actual event” (Bogue 2007, p. 276)<sup>5</sup> even when it refers to events that might occur in the future. The possible is a portion of reality that is pushed back and determined retroactively: “the possible is only the real with the addition of an act of mind which throws its image back into the past, once it has been enacted” (Bergson 1934, dig. edn.)<sup>6</sup>, so it is an artificial shadow, a retro-projection of the real (Piatti 2021, p. 192). It is the possible that resembles the real and not vice versa. The possible is therefore a “sterile double” of the real (Deleuze 1991, p. 98). The virtual, on the other hand, is not “constituted *after* having been present” (Deleuze 1991, p. 58), and neither it resembles nor limits the real, but actualizes it by difference and divergence. Quite the opposite of what happens with the possible, in the framework of the virtual it is not the present that is projected backward; it is the past instead, that is brought up to the threshold where it becomes actual.

2) The process of actualization of the virtual implies that the latter is never totally and exclusively actual, or, more precisely, that the indeterminacy of virtuality includes a germ of actuality in which it actually unfolds. When this happens, that is, when we move from the virtual to the actual, however, we do not find ourselves before something that resembles the virtual, nor we face a fragment of it made present.

Whatever the reality in which the virtual object is incorporated, it does not become integrated: it remains planted or stuck there, and does not find in the real object the half which completes it, but rather testifies to the other virtual half which the real continues to lack (Deleuze 1994, p. 101).

Unlike the possible, in fact, virtuality retains its own ontological

<sup>5</sup> On the same issue, Diodato states: “The possible is stillness, inactivity, whereas the virtual is a node of tendencies or a dynamic-problematic complex,” Diodato 2012, p. 92. See also Longo 2015.

<sup>6</sup> A reading of this text can be found in Agamben 2022, pp. 69-70.

status in the face of the actual; it does not merely represent its complementary piece, the element that, interlocking with it, completes it giving rise to an overall whole. Virtuality is not the potentiality of an actuality, the cause of an effect, the past of a future (Leoni 2021, p. 152), the part of a whole. As a parceled being is rejected, so too is the idea of a superior, transcendent or otherwise all-encompassing whole, “Because if everything [*tout*] is not given, it remains that the virtual is the whole [*le tout*]” (Deleuze 2004, p. 30): this sentence seems to contradict what has just been stated, but in fact, it is perfectly consistent with Deleuze’s reasoning: a whole exists, but in the molecular form of “fragment, shred or remainder” (Deleuze 1994, p. 101). The virtual, then, is an unconscious wholeness, powerless with respect to action, an ontological dimension that is pure and ineffective, though not inactive.

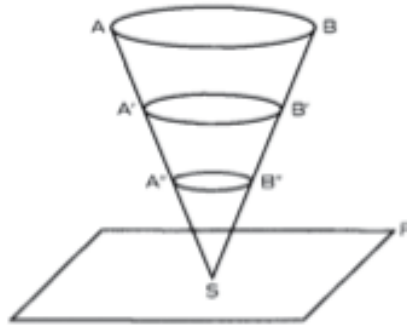
3) The virtual “contains no negation and dismisses all dialectical method” (Alliez 1998, p. 237). Compared to Plato’s dialectic of alterity or Hegel’s dialectic of contradiction,

The originality of Bergson’s conception resides in showing that internal difference does not go, and is not required to go as far as contradiction, alterity, and negativity, because these three notions are in fact less profound than itself, or they are viewpoints only from the outside (Deleuze 2004, p. 39).

By means of the virtual, the ontological question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” significantly changes. At stake now is the “mode” of things, and so the question turns into: “Why is this display of reality taking place, rather than others?”. The nature of virtuality presents folds because “what is folded is only virtual and currently exists only in an envelope, in something that envelops it” (Deleuze 1993, p. 22). The nature of virtuality presents folds that are actualized differentially and non-dialectically, and this means that negation is not necessary for something new to come into existence. Recalling a cornerstone of Bergson’s thought, Deleuze states that not even evolution proceeds by negation: it does not go from something actual to another, but from virtual to actual. As such, evolution, and with it, becoming, creation, and life are given as “production, creation of differences” (Deleuze 1991, p. 98): implication, fold, and unveiling are key lemmas of this new ontology, that sees dialectics as an unconvincing solution since it is not daring enough. Dialectics is indeed unable to keep up with a world which is always changing and in which entities are distinct, but not engaged in the annihilating competition of being-*versus*-nothingness.

4) Deleuze reminds us that according to Bergson the virtual

possesses its own temporality, which coincides with the past. Bergson also proposes an image, which Deleuze then reproduces, of his theory and which consists of an inverted cone resting on a plane.



The image allows us to clarify some important aspects related to the notion of virtual. First, the plane represents the present time of perception and matter, which clearly differs in kind and not only in degree from the other geometric figure, which represents instead the dimension of memory and remembrance, as well as the virtual. As Bergson explains (Bergson 1991, pp. 152-163), the cone represents the totality of the past, while the sections  $A'B'$ ,  $A''B''$  secant to the cone are not to be interpreted as specific memories: “Each section contains the entirety of the past, but at lesser or greater degrees of contraction” (Lundy 2018, p. 87). The level of contraction depends on the type of action required in  $S$  on the plane  $P$ : for example, if it is necessary to run away from an imminent danger, then the contraction of the virtual past will be greater than if one walks serenely in the same environment. In commenting on the passage, Deleuze points up that Bergson refers to the past as to a dimension that is ontologically autonomous from the present. Therefore, he warns,

one must avoid an overly psychological interpretation of the text [...] According to Bergson, we first put ourselves back into the past in general: He describes in this way the *leap into ontology*. We really leap into being, into being-in-itself, into the being in itself of the past. It is a case of leaving psychology altogether. It is a case of an immemorial or ontological Memory (Deleuze 1991, pp. 56-57).

We shall finally deal with the importance of this ‘ontological’ interpretation of the virtual given by Deleuze.

4.

Before trying a direct comparison between imagination and the virtual, a further specification is needed. Although the virtual is undoubtedly the focus of Deleuze's studies on Bergson, it cannot be overlooked that Bergson himself devoted some reflections to the notion of imagination, both in *L'Évolution créatrice* (2005) and in *La Pensée et le Mouvant* (1934). In these books, imagination is seen as the faculty, in itself neutral, of generating images which are unrelated to the actuality of the moment, that is, retrieved from the past or projected into the future.

When I say that the water on the fire will boil today as it did yesterday, and that this is an absolute necessity, I feel vaguely that my imagination is placing the stove of yesterday on that of today, kettle on kettle, water on water, duration on duration, and it seems then that the rest must coincide also (Bergson 2005, pp. 235-236).

Imagination is what allows to superimpose the image we produced from yesterday's experience onto today's; it regards two moments (yesterday and today) as simultaneous. According to the author, with it we therefore disregard the time that has passed from one to the other, that is, the life experiences the subject has accumulated in the meantime and which make impossible to see an identity in the movement of repetition, even in the elementary act of boiling a pot of water. Imagination thus opens the way to misinterpret differences of quality as differences of magnitude, that is, to understand the world in terms of quantities rather than as a set of qualities. This way of thinking leads to induction, recursivity and, more generally, to a quantitative conception of the subject's experience of the world.

In the essay *Introduction to Metaphysics* in *La Pensée et le Mouvant* (2007), Bergson speaks of the "effort of imagination" to refer to the action of abstraction that the imagination performs in order to

solidify [the] duration once it has passed by, divide it into pieces set side by side and count all the pieces; but that this operation is achieved on the fixed memory of the duration, on the immobile track the mobility of the duration leaves behind it, not on the duration itself (Bergson 2007, dig. edn.).

The idea of an "effort to imagine" is also present in the essay *Growth of Truth* (Bergson 2007), where imagination is summoned as what is capable of figuring the action to be performed in the future. Once again, this representation is seen as extrinsic, that is, as quantitative and conceptual, abstract and not intuitive. However important and characterizing the realm of the human, the faculty

of imagination exposes to the risk of extrapolating things from the flux in which they are embedded, and thus of entangling them in a schematic and scientific view of reality, which is untrue with respect to the becoming – that is instead a continuous flow.

These quick remarks allow us to further specify the aim of the present paper, which does not pretend to reconstruct the history of the ideas of imagination and virtual. We would rather propose a comparison between these concepts starting from the account provided by some authors who have dedicated to them some of their studies – namely, Kant for the imagination and Bergson for the notion of virtual. In this framework Deleuze acts as a bridge, since in some of his early researches he merged in an original way the conclusions to which the two philosophers had come. From the specific analysis of imagination provided by Bergson two remarks are worth highlighting. Beyond the concerns he expresses, the philosopher considers imagination as a dimension immediately connected to the questions of time and of images. With regard to time, Bergson seems to have assimilated Kant's lesson, which, as we have already seen, speaks of the imagination's capacity of 're-presenting' the sensible data. The theme of images is also very present in Bergson's treatment, since they are the specific product of this faculty, as well as the element that makes its exercise risky and problematic. On the basis of these elements, we try now a direct comparison between the faculty of imagination and the concept of virtual, to verify to what extent these two notions can overlap and whether the virtual is able to correct some of the drifts to which imagination would be exposed according to the reading that Bergson returns of it.

5.

Some interpreters have pointed out that Deleuze's reading of Bergson is influenced by Kant (Kerslake 2009, p. 85; Alliez 1998, p. 233). This should not be surprising if one considers, as we did from the outset, the chronological order of publication of the works Deleuze devoted to these authors. Aside from Kantian spirit that undoubtedly pervades Deleuze's analysis of Bergson, however, we are focusing more specifically on the hypothesis that imagination and virtuality could be included within the same conceptual framework. Having sketched the most significant features of these two notions, we can now briefly compare them more directly, looking for similarities and discordances that will allow us to further explore their nature.

As for the analogies, let us first highlight the fact that what is at stake in the case of imagination as well as with the virtual is the relationship between two ontologically distinct dimensions: with Kant we speak of sensibility and understanding, where Bergson, and then Deleuze, appeal to the dyad of matter and memory or perception and recollection. In both cases, what is at stake is the relation between thought and the world. This question is also explicitly mentioned in the first pages of *Matter and Memory*, when Bergson approaches the idealism-realism debate. Both Kant and Bergson do not stand for one or the other pole; they rather take the difficult path of mediation between seemingly irreconcilable spheres. Furthermore, despite their specificities, both authors identify time as the element that can bring the two extremes together while preserving their difference.

Temporality plays indeed a fundamental role in the definition of both concepts, as it enables the specific activity of each. On the one hand, imagination could not constitute itself as a matrix *medium* between sensibility and understanding unless it merges these two dimensions through the temporalization of the sensible data. Deleuze explains that it is not to the future that imagination looks when it re-presents the data of sensibility to the categories of the understanding: imagination functions by generating a past that is offered to consciousness for the purposes of action and reflection. Similarly, virtuality is not located at time zero of a temporal ecstasy; rather, the virtual is properly and explicitly past, a reservoir of memories on which one constantly draws in order to act in the present. Indeed, the thickness and solidity of the present precisely depend on what has been previously experienced.

A third level of connection and resonance between these two concepts is the relationship they share with the activity of producing images. Images are the product of the synthesizing and schematizing activity of imagination in Kant, and they play a fundamental role for the virtual too, especially in the original explanation of Bergson, who in the famous incipit of *Matter and Memory* declares that his inquiry starts from the certainty everyone is always dealing with images, regardless of what worldview is adopted: "Here I am in the presence of images" (Bergson 1991, p. 17). Like imagination, the virtual is also a producer of memories-images, whose degree of past contraction varies according to circumstances. Imagination and virtual operate by images rather than concepts, by figures of time rather than through lines of reasoning.

This last consideration opens the way to a further level of analogy between the two notions, which concerns their necessary indeterminacy. This is a factor that is anything but contingent and concerns the nature of imagination and the virtual. Precisely because both of them perform a seemingly impossible mediation between thought and the world, they cannot adhere to the chaotic disorder of matter/sensibility, but neither they operate through conceptualization. Hence the recourse to images is inevitable: they indeed render ‘at a glance’ the complexity of a pre-verbal and pre-reflective scenario, which is however not insignificant or less pregnant than its subsequent logical and conceptual reworking. Indeed, imagination, on the one hand, and virtual images, on the other, represent the atopic dimension, the dense and formless core from which determinations of reality can spring.

Comparing Deleuze’s interpretations of imagination and virtuality, however, also means highlighting a difference that separates and distinguishes these two concepts. As we have already noted, in his essay on *Bergsonism*, Deleuze explains that the virtual lies in an “extra-psychological range” (Deleuze 1991, p. 55). By this statement, the philosopher points out that the notion of virtual holds an inherently ontological meaning, for it operates a specific taxonomy of the real. Deleuze returns several times to this point precisely to specify that the reference to the time of remembering, to which the virtual is linked, should not suggest a subjective dimension of the virtual. What is at stake instead is a layer that “constitutes and accompanies experience and subjectivity” (Piatti 2021, p. 61) but does not belong exclusively to them. In this sense, imagination is what captures the processes of actualization, the *tool* that records the transitions from virtuality to actuality and makes them both available to the knowing subject.

The image of the funnel that we have recalled above differs from that of the inverted cone: to use Deleuze’s later lexicon, it could be said that the inverted cone forms an *assemblage* with the plane on which its tip rests and that therefore virtual and actual are intertwined through differentiation. The funnel instead represents the instrument, the machine aesthetically skeuomorphic with respect to the reality to which it applies, that allows us to understand how this same assemblage takes place. In other words, it seems that for Deleuze, virtual brings to ontological completion the work of imagination, desubjectifying its character and thus allowing the crossing of the gnoseological field within which it was first convened.

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