

Einbildungskraft, Phantasie and hikikomori. Reflections on the Extremes of Imagination

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ABSTRACT

In the first paragraph of the paper, I aim to show the semantic richness and at the same time the ambiguity of the notion of imagination. I therefore try to show how the notion of imagination tends to be distinguished from that of fantasy. In the second section, I briefly reconstruct the characteristics of *Einbildungskraft* in Kantian reflection and compare them with the notions of *Bildungskraft* and *Phantasie* in the work of Jean Paul Richter. While for Kant, fantasy is mostly disconnected from sensible reality and thus proves to be an unreliable faculty from agnoseological point of view, for Jean Paul Richter it represents the most fertile and creative cognitive faculty. This romantic conception of the *Phantasie* is taken up in aesthetic terms by the Schlegel brothers, who recognise in it the essential endowment of genius. The last paragraph of the paper focuses on the social and existential phenomenon of *hikikomori*. Japanese youths confined in their rooms and addicted to virtual reality seem to be the perfect example of imaginative decadence, yet I try to show how precisely the virtual and digital fields can provide an opportunity for imaginative and creative practice.

KEYWORDS

Imagination, Fantasy, *Einbildungskraft*, Romantik, hikikomori.

1. *Einbildungskraft and Phantasie. Some Differences Between Kant's and Jean Paul Richter's Reflection*

In this contribution I aim to discuss three main interrelated topics: Firstly, I intend to briefly analyse the terminological and conceptual ambiguity of the notions of imagination and fantasy in some particularly significant contexts of Western aesthetic thought. Secondly I plan to analyse the distinction between *Einbildungskraft* (imagination) and *Phantasie* (fantasy) in the context of German *Romantik*, with particular reference to Jean Paul Richter, August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel. Thirdly, I mean to analyse the dysfunctional drifts, but also the creative potential, of “phantasy”

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and “imagination” in the contemporary Japanese context, proposing an argument about the social phenomenon called *bikikomori* (ひきこもり or 引きこもり).

Despite the vast critical literature, there seems to persist a certain semantic and conceptual ambiguity surrounding the notion of “imagination”. In the classic study by Murray Wright Bundy *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought*, and then in Jean Starobinski’s *L’œil vivant. 3La relation critique*, it is shown how Plato distinguishes εικασία (imagination), which has as its object the reflections of corporeal things, from φαντασία, which refers to an image that has no original corporeal referent (Bundy 1927, pp. 12 ff.; Starobinski 1970, pp. 173-195). Imitative art (μιμητική) can be imaginative (εικαστική), i.e. relating to the image of reality (εικόν), or fantastic (φανταστική), i.e. relating to a purely mental image.

In *De anima*, Aristotle distinguishes imagination (φαντασία) firstly from αἴσθησις (perception, sensation), faculty of perceiving through the senses, secondly from δόξα (opinion), subjective point of view. Imagination is not sensation because an image can be conceived even in the absence of direct bodily experience, for example during sleep. Imagination is not opinion because, unlike the latter, one does not have to believe it. Moreover, imagination, unlike opinion, is also present in animals. For Aristotle, therefore, imagination is an intermediate function, a movement (κίνησις) ο appetite (ὄρεξις), which from perception (αἴσθησις) moves towards thought (*De an.* III, 428 b 26).

The Stoics distinguish between fantasy as a “true impression” (φαντασία καταληκτική) i.e. derived from a real external source, and fantasy that has no relation to a real external source (φαντασία ακατάληπτος). The equivalent of this second type of fantasy is the fantastic (το φανταστικόν) relating to the unreality of visions and dreams.

If we follow the development of the notion of “fantasy” chronologically, the Greek term φαντασία is closely related to the Latin term *visio*. This concept is used in the Roman world in rhetoric: Quintilian, for example, speaks of *visiones* as representations that the good speaker brings out in the minds of his listeners (Quintilianus 1970, p. 335). Linked to this word is also, as Julius Lepschy shows, the rhetorical Greek notion of ενάργεια ο “vivid representation” (Lepschy 1987, pp. 21-22). In the Roman context, therefore, the boundaries between fantasy and imagination are not clear-cut, as both experiences are assimilated to a mental vision stimulated by the skill of the rhetorician in the listener.

Moving from the Latin field of rhetoric to that of medieval “psychology”, the latter sphere postulated the presence, in the back of the human head, of the faculty of *imaginatio* or *phantasia*, which forms mental images that are then processed by the so called *vis cogitativa*. A semantic ambivalence and a translation problem developed in this period for the terms *imaginatio* and *phantasia*. These notions are in fact synonymous for Thomas Aquinas: “*phantasia, sive imaginatio, quae idem sunt*” (Lepschy 1987, p. 24; Muratori 1745, p. VII).

Between the Late Middle Ages and the Baroque period, the notions of *phantasia* and *imaginatio* sometimes merge and sometimes differ, designating the former a more passive and reproductive faculty, the latter a more active or productive faculty or vice versa (Franzini, Mazzocut-Mis 2000, pp. 235-247). It should also be noted that during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the term *phantasia* did not only correspond to the Greek term φαντασία, but also to the term φάντασμα, indicating the connection of this faculty with error, illusion and deceptive appearance (Bundy 1930, pp. 535-545; Formigari *et al.*, 1999). This negative meaning of *phantasia* was, however, accompanied by the positive one of greater combinatorial freedom. Similarly, the term *imaginatio* has on the one hand the negative meaning of mechanical reproduction and material copy, and on the other the positive meaning of solidity and fidelity to the original. Beyond these schematisations, the two terms “fantasy” and “imagination” continued to rival and ambiguously intertwine throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.

From the early 19th century, this semantic and conceptual ambivalence seems to come to disambiguation. A brief summary of the meanings of *Einbildungskraft* in Kant’s works might be useful in order to understand the complexity of this notion in the late 18th century and then in the context of German Romanticism. In the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kant states that when a representation comes to the human mind by the only possible route, namely that of sensibility and its intuitions of space and time, the faculty of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), which represents an intermediate faculty between the senses and the intellect – i.e. between sensitive data and categories – comes into action. How is it possible, for example, to apply the category of causality to phenomena A and B, stating that A is the cause of B, if the category is a pure concept that, as such, cannot be found in phenomena? Hence the need to think of an intermediate faculty that, on the one hand, has the spontaneity of the intellect, but, on the other, has as its objects intuitive representations of sentience. This intermediate faculty possesses three

different meanings and functions: reproductive imagination (the faculty of preserving and inwardly recalling sensible perceptions in images) (Kant 2000³, pp. 282 ff.), productive imagination (the faculty of freely and actively combining sensible perceptions to create novel images), pure or transcendental imagination (the faculty at the basis of all a priori knowledge that enables sensibility and intellect to be linked by means of schemata that synhypothesise the multiplicity of the sensible and make it intelligible).

In the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, the imagination is revealed as “free and creative”, i.e. it establishes a “free play” with the cognitive faculties of reason and intellect. If, following the vision of an object (natural or artistic), the imagination spontaneously accords with the intellect, then the object that elicits such accord – and thus gives rise to aesthetic pleasure – is judged beautiful. In the artistic sphere, the productive imagination, being able to give rise to novel images, is considered by Kant to be a faculty proper to genius, which alone has the capacity to mould into sensible forms those “aesthetic ideas” that are “representations of the imagination” (Kant 2007, p. 173).

Whereas *Phantasie* is limited for Kant to the production of forms and figures in the activity of dreaming and reverie, *Einbildungskraft* is the faculty of producing images intrinsically and necessarily linked to every stage of knowledge. Every kind of language, from mathematical to verbal, must resort to productive imagination. Even the simplest of judgments (e.g. “this rose is red” or “A=A”), cannot avoid resorting to mental images.

In *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (1804), Jean Paul Richter contrasts *Einbildungskraft* with *Bildungskraft* oder *Phantasie*: “Imagination is the prose of creation or fantasy (*Einbildungskraft ist die Prose der Bildungskraft oder Phantasie*)”. “Imagination” says Richter:

Ist nichts als seine potenzierte hellfarbigere Erinnerung, welche auch die Thiere haben, weil sie träumen und weil sie fürchten. Ihre Bilder sind nur zugeflogne Abblätterungen von der wirklichen Welt; Fieber, Nervenschwäche, Getränke können diese Bilder so verdicken und beleiben, daß sie aus der innern Welt in die äußere treten und darin zu Leibern erstarren. (Jean Paul [Richter] 1804, pp. 31-32)¹.

Einbildungskraft therefore has for Jean Paul Richter – as for Plato – a “prosaic” character as a distortion of reality: fantasy and creativity are instead something higher. There seems to be, in this

¹ Imagination is nothing but enhanced and more vividly coloured memory, which animals also have because they have dreams and fears. Its images are only leaves that come from the real world; fever, weakness of nerves, drinking can condense and materialise these images to such an extent that they pass from the inner world to the outer world, and there they stiffen into bodies. (My transl.).

romantic context, a kind of reversal of the Kantian position, according to which the unconscious and arbitrary dimension of the phantasy makes this faculty misleading and unreliable. “The power of imagination”, claims Kant, “in so far as it also produces images involuntarily, is called *fantasy*” (Kant 2006, p. 60). Compared to imagination, therefore, fantasy is completely disconnected from discursive thinking based on the laws of logic, and is instead close to childish, magical or “mad” thinking. The unconscious and arbitrary dimension of the fantasy, its fundamental independence from objects and stimuli of external reality, as well as the propensity of this faculty to the senseless and illogical, constitute for Kant unreliable and ambiguous elements that oppose the rational sphere. On the contrary, Jean Paul Richter’s reflection sees in the breaking of any link between fantasy and objectivity a fruitfully creative element.

This positive evaluation of *Phantasie* at the expense of Kantian *Einbildungskraft* can also be found, as we shall see, in some of August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel’s reflections. However, before attempting to restore a theoretical framing of the notions of fantasy and imagination in these authors, the ductility and semantic fluidity of these terms depending on the translations should be emphasised once again. The French translation (1862) of Jean Paul’s passage renders “*Einbildungskraft*” as “*imagination reproductrice*” and “*Bildungskraft oder Phantasie*” as “*imagination productrice ou fantasie*”. When “*Phantasie*” is then used alone, it is instead rendered with “*imagination*”. (Jean Paul [Richter] 1862, p. 145).

Even in the English translation (of 1973) “*Einbildungskraft*” is rendered with “reproductive imagination”, and “*Bildungskraft oder Phantasie*” with “creativity or imagination”. Indeed, the translator warns: “I have avoided using the translation ‘fancy’ for *Phantasie*, since the connotations of ‘fancy’ in English are negative”. (Haie 1973, p. 18; Lepschy 1987, p. 26).

2. *Imagination, Fantasy and Unconscious in Schlegel Brothers*

Kant and Jean Paul Richter’s reflections reveal the difficulty of unambiguously specifying the relationship between the fantastic and the imaginary even in the modern context. As I have mentioned, Schlegel brothers also propose alternative reflections to the Kantian doctrine of imagination. It is in particular Fichte’s attempt to rework Kant’s transcendental philosophy by basing it on a process of subjective self-production of phenomenal reality that represents the critical connection and transition between Kant and the Roman-

tics. Fichte's insistence on the "creative imagination" (*schaffende Einbildungskraft*) as the fundamental faculty of thought, and on "sentiment" (*Gefühl*) as the element that limits the ego's action, offered therefore both August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel the theoretical tools for a revision of Kantian theories. (Seliger *et al.*, 2017; Schrader 1997, pp. 10 ff.).

Friedrich Schlegel replaced the primacy of reason with the free-floating *Phantasie*, and the assumption of pure, self-conscious being with that of the becoming, unconscious *Universum* (See Kobayashi 2018). "*Poiesis*", says August Wilhelm Schlegel in continuity with his brother, means "*schaffende Wirksamkeit der Fantasie*" (Ewton 2012, p. 35): This "creative efficacy of the fantasy" must be the necessary and constitutive element of every work of art. To better understand the meaning of this definition of *Phantasie*, it must first be emphasised that for both Schlegel brothers, art is the product of genius, and that the work of genius is both conscious and unconscious. The link between fantasy and the unconscious dimension is thus – once again from an anti-Kantian perspective – exalted by Schlegel brothers. For them, the fact that there is a conscious, rational component to the work of genius is quite obvious, while the unconscious dimension of fantasy is a more problematic element (Kollert 2010; Gentry, Pollok 2019). It is worthwhile, from this point of view, to quote in full a passage from August Wilhelm Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über schöne Literatur und Kunst* (1801-1802):

Vielmehr so untrennbar wir in einem ächten Kunstwerke das, was man das poetische, und was man das künstliche nennen kann, sind, so untrennbar ist auch der wahre Geschmack vom wahren Genie. Dieses ist eben die innigste Vereinigung der bewußtlosen und der selbstbewußten Thätigkeit im menschlichen Geiste, des Instinktes und der Absicht, der Freyheit und der Nothwedigkeit. Deswegen, weil in ihm die ursprüngliche Entzweyung sich aufhebt, worin der Mensch als ein endliches Wesen sich endlos befangen sieht, erscheint es uns auch als etwas übermenschliches, als eine göttliche Kraft, und seine Mittheilungen als wahre Offenbarungen. Darum ist auch zum Genie große Eminenz der auf Erkenntniß gerichteten Geisteskräfte, Einbildungskraft und Verstand, die Kant als seine Bestandtheile angiebt nicht hinreichend, sondern es umfaßt den ganzen innern Menschen, und kann in nichts geringerem bestehen, als in der Energie und innigsten Eintracht dessen was sowohl in der Sinnlichkeit als in der Geistigkeit des Menschen das selbstständige und überschränkte Vermögen ist, also der Phantasie (die man in diesem Sinne noch von der Einbildungskraft unterscheiden kann, und der Vernunft. (Schlegel 1884, I, pp. 82-83; Ewton 2012, pp. 46-47; Schöll 2015, pp. 88-115)².

² Rather, as inseparable as we are in a genuine work of art from what one can call the poetic and what one can call the artificial, so inseparable is true taste from true genius. This is precisely the most intimate union of the unconscious and the self-conscious activity in the human spirit, of instinct and intention, of freedom and necessity. For this reason, because in it the original divisiveness is dissolved, in which man as a finite being sees himself endlessly imprisoned, it also appears to us as something superhuman, as a divine power, and its communications as true revelations. For this reason, great eminence of the

What emerges from this passage is first and foremost that intellectual faculties, however high and lofty, are not sufficient for the definition of genius. Authentic artistic genius is rather the fruit of a dynamic and polar co-presence of unconscious and conscious activity, of instinct and intention, of spontaneity and reflection. Secondly, August Wilhelm Schlegel clearly separates imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) from fantasy (*Phantasie*). Regarding *Phantasie*, he proposes perhaps the most important definition of the term in this passage:

Es läßt sich nur daraus erklären, daß wir einsehen, Fantasie sey die Grundkraft des menschlichen Geistes. Der ursprünglichste Akt der Fantasie ist derjenige, wodurch unsere eigene Existenz und die ganze Außenwelt für uns Realität gewinnt. Daß diese eine Produkt unserer eignen Thätigkeit sey, kann jedoch nur durch Speculation dargethan werden, nie ins Bewußtseyn fallen. Das entgegengesetzte Extrem ist die künstlerische Wirksamkeit der Fantasie, die selbstbewußt ist und mit Absicht geleitet wird. Diese ist in Ansehung ihrer Produkte rein Ideel, d. h. sie macht für sie keine Ansprüche auf Wirklichkeit, und bedarf deren nicht. (Schlegel 1884, I, p. 329)³.

If, according to Fichte's idealism, every reality we know is a representation of consciousness, according to August Wilhelm Schlegel the entire external world acquires reality and can for the human being only through the faculty of fantasy. But fantasy, for Schlegel, is also the mental faculty that produces myth and art in general. Therefore, *Phantasie* can be said to be both the source of objective reality and its artistic re-creation. During his lectures on philosophy of history in Wien, Friedrich Schlegel claims: "In aller Kunst und Poesie, vornehmlich aber in der romantischen, macht die Phantasie als eine unabhängige Seelenkraft, die sich nach eignen Gesetzen regiert, ihre Ansprüche geltend". (Schlegel 1971, VI, pp. 185-186)⁴.

Although Friedrich Schlegel does not explicitly refer to imagination here, the traditional distinction between the unbridled character of the *Phantasie* and the conditioned character of *Ein-*

mental powers directed towards knowledge, imagination and understanding, which Kant names as its constituent parts, is not sufficient for genius; rather, it encompasses the entire inner human being and can consist in nothing less than the energy and most intimate harmony of that which is the independent and limited faculty both in the sensuality and in the spirituality of the human being, that is, the fantasy (which in this sense can still be distinguished from the imagination) and the reason. (My transl.).

³ It can only be explained by the fact that we realise that fantasy is the basic power of the human spirit. The most original act of fantasy is that by which our own existence and the whole external world acquire reality for us. That this is a product of our own activity can, however, only be demonstrated by speculation, and never become conscious. The opposite extreme is the artistic efficacy of the fantasy, which is self-conscious and guided by intention. This is purely ideal with regard to its products, i.e. it makes no claims to reality for itself and does not need it. (My transl.).

⁴ In all art and poetry, but especially in Romantic art, the fantasy asserts its claims as an independent soul force that governs itself according to its own laws. (My transl.).

bildungskraft is immediately apparent. While imagination borrows and reworks objects from nature, fantasy is free, independent and only follows its own laws.

Fantasy, as mentioned above, is also necessary for artistic production: when it weakens, art declines, and when it disappears, there is simply no more art either. Speaking of poetic imagery, August Wilhelm Schlegel states:

Nur auf eine solche Verschwendung von Bildern, welcher kein wahrer Schwung der Phantasie zum Grunde liegt, die also ein Bloß erborgter überladener Schmuck ist, paßt die Benennung des Schwulstes, oder des Bombastes, wenn die Fantasie sich aus den heitern Regionen schöner Anschaulichkeit in des Verworene und Sinnlose verliert. (Schlegel 1884, I, p. 292)⁵.

In this passage, Schlegel first of all highlights the far from extrinsic and ornamental character of fantasy. What he says here about fantasy is thus similar to what Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, says about the role of art: art cannot be belittled and regarded simply as “an amusing Sideshow” (*ein lustiges Nebenbei*), or as a “jingling of fool’s bells” (*Schellengeklingel*), but rather as an essential element for life and for knowledge (Nietzsche 1999, p. 14).

The direct correspondence between the decadence of fantasy and the decadence of art postulated by Schlegel brothers allows for a conclusive reflection on the contemporary social experience *hikikomori*.

3. *Hikikomori and Imagination. Between Dystopia and Utopia*

The Japanese psychological-existential condition referred to as *hikikomori* seems to characterise itself as a radical impoverishment of *Einbildungskraft* and *Phantasie*. Indeed, the condition of the *hikikomori* apparently seems to express, on the one hand, the radical impossibility of creative reworking of sensible objects (*Einbildungskraft*) and, on the other, the radical impossibility of freely producing new realities (*Phantasie*). Instead, I will try to show how – despite their differences – both imagination and phantasy can represent constituent elements of the *hikikomori* experience.

The term *hikikomori*, as is well known, literally means “one

⁵ Only to such a waste of images, which is not based on a true impetus of the fantasy, which is therefore a mere borrowed overloaded ornament, does the name ‘gayest’ or ‘bombast’ fit, when the fantasy loses itself from the cheerful regions of beautiful display into the depraved and senseless. (My transl.).

who pulls back”, “to remain aloof”, “isolated”, “withdrawn into the background” (*hiki*, stems from *hiku*, meaning “to pull back” and *komori*, stems from *komoru*, meaning “to seclude oneself” or “to stay inside”). This word was at first used to define Japanese people, usually male of a young age, who out of discomfort, a sense of inadequacy or presumed existential failure decide to withdraw into their rooms, without going out anymore, thus breaking off all relations with the outside world. The *hikikomori* could be said to lead an existence that disrupts and reverses the rhythms of the outside world. He/she may reverse, for example, the alternation of sleeping and waking, as well as mealtimes, going so far as to make disorder a rule (Treppiedi 2020, p. 199).

The *hikikomori*'s room is thus populated by a galaxy of objects towards which he/she develops a basically obsessive attitude, focusing on manga, television, and especially video and computer games (Ghilardi 2010). The support of a permanent Internet connection completely replaces face-to-face relations with others. Clinical, psychiatric, psychological and sociological studies on *hikikomori* are numerous and are also proliferating in relation to similar phenomena linked to the distress of young people in the age of pandemics and distance learning. In respect of our investigation, however, the question to be pursued concerns the relationship between isolation, internet addiction, fantasy and imagination. Several studies identify, among the symptoms of *hikikomori*, depressive forms that also involve the loss of creativity, curiosity and passion for life: does *hikikomori* allude to an almost total annihilation of the ability to produce images, and to the need to continuously consume pre-packaged digital images? Does the image-bulimia that occurs with the *hikikomori* have a uniquely pathological character, linked to severe psychiatric illnesses, or can it also be an expression of new declinations of imagination and fantasy? To answer the question, it is certainly useful to clarify what is meant, in this context, by “image bulimia”. By this expression we mean to describe the continuous “hunger” for images of the *hikikomori*, attributing to it a possible “nutritive” and positive character. The *hikikomori*'s overexposure to the proliferation of virtual images leads to a worldview in which the distinction between appearance and reality tends to disappear. It is precisely the lack of adherence to a solid reality principle, a consequence of image bulimia, that can allow the *hikikomori* to create new realities (and thus resort to fantasy), or to combine virtual images through the imaginative faculty. By feeding on images, the *hikikomori* can develop, more or less consciously, a worldview in which reality and illusion become one, in which any

objective reality is rejected. Immersed in this hyper-reality or virtual-reality, the *hikikomori* experience an apparent and de-realised dimension, which on the one hand can atrophy, with its excess of information, the possibility of processing or creating images, favouring a passive and uncritical consumption of them, but on the other hand can become the condition of possibility for new attributions of meaning and new creative combinations of significations.

Our hypothesis is thus that the *hikikomori* phenomenon can certainly prefigure a dystopian near-future horizon of mass anaesthesia and weaken of productive capacities, but it can also prefigure, at least in some cases, a fertile anomaly of imagination and creative surplus.

Studies of a limited diagnostic and medical-clinical nature do not really capture the complex nature of the *hikikomori*-“anomaly”, which stands on the threshold between health and disease, denying an absolute dualism between these two elements. Questioning the *hikikomori*-cliché means understanding this phenomenon not only as a monad enslaved by his/her gestures and obsessive rituals. As we mentioned in connection with the notion of “image-bulimia”, the fluidity of the threshold between health and illness that characterises the *hikikomori* condition also concerns the relationship between imagination and reality. The Sino-Japanese world in which this peculiar lifestyle was born and developed is not based on the ontological difference between the real world and the apparent world. The Platonic distinction between the idea, the sensible world and artistic imitation is lacking, as is the Kantian dualism between phenomenon and noumenon, of which imagination is an intermediate faculty. The very ontological status of digital images dissolves the distinction between reality and appearance: the digital creation is not a cast or trace of the real, it is not a *reproduction* of reality, but a *production* of images disengaged from any referent in the world (Gurisatti 2019, pp. 18-19; Gurisatti 2012, pp. 220-222). The *hikikomori* then, on the strength of a peculiar *Phantasie*, can produce images out of thin air that are both unreal and hyper-real. Such images, as studies show, are first and foremost mental images, concerning a reworking of one’s self, one’s body, one’s relationship with otherness (Ricci 2008; Ricci 2014). Internet use, the use of video games, social-network presence and the consumption of television series allows for the creation of an introverted and sometimes distorted imaginary ecosystem, but one that can at the same time be rich, vast and profound. The individual in retreat thus finds refuge but also an outlet in the dimension of his/her own imagination. The virtual world, acting as a mediator between reality and imagination,

keeps the *hikikomori*'s symbolising capacities active not only by preventing the psychotic break, but also by allowing, in some rare cases, mental images to be transformed into digital images through the practice of programming (Lancini 2019).

The enigmatic imaginative excess of the *hikikomori*, irreducible to the pathological element, manifests itself when the extreme dryness of life and the aberrant rigidity of habit are sometimes counterbalanced by a complex and varied inner world. Far from a merely passive and obsessive consumption of images, the *hikikomori* can create fantastic mental scenarios through novel forms of productive imagination and fantasy.

As mentioned above, the ability to produce mental images or to combine unseen images can be followed by the ability to create digital images through the practice of programming. The *hikikomori*, with his/her rarefied practical life and his/her inability to experience the concreteness of the everyday can surprisingly turn out to be a creator of virtual worlds. That is, he/she can become a re-processor, a remixer, a metamorphic assembler of synthetic data and of digital fragments: if the romantic genius creates fantastic images through the "free play" of imagination and intellect, the *hikikomori* can create new virtual images through "logarithmic free-play". This "logarithmic free-play" consists of the manipulation of digital data that allows unlimited enhancement of creativity and imagination, which the *hikikomori* can operate without ever leaving their room or resorting to sensitive materials.

As we have tried to argue, the *hikikomori* condition is not merely a social phenomenon to be addressed with the tools of psychology, nor merely a serious psychiatric disorder to be tackled with the tools of medicine. The psychological-social element and the clinical-medical element obviously should in no way be underestimated, however, a further articulation of the *hikikomori*-phenomenon should be considered, which concerns the cognitive element involving *Einbildungskraft* and *Phantasie*. From this point of view, the *hikikomori* condition does not represent something "other" and radically distant from the cognitive processes of imagination and fantasy philosophically developed in Europe. The fact that the number of *hikikomori* is statistically increasing in Europe shows firstly that this condition has no "ethnic" connotation specifically linked to Japan. Secondly, it seems possible to recognise certain elements of continuity and parallels between apparently epistemologically different experiences such as the cognitive-theoretical experience of imagination and the social-existential experience of *hikikomori*. Indeed, we have seen how the cognitive phenomenon of *Einbildungung-*

skraft can represent – although not always and not necessarily – a component and an internal articulation that fruitfully complicates the *bikikomori* world. Here, the thinking of Kant, Jean Paul Richter and the Schlegel brothers is not something alien to the *bikikomori* experience, but can perhaps be a useful theoretical contribution to understanding its complexity. The hope argued in this paper is therefore to stimulate the integration of a theoretical approach, using philosophical reflection, with the psychological-clinical approach, in order to better understand the *bikikomori*-phenomenon.

If (in some rare cases) the *bikikomori* can thus generate new integral realities, what, one might ask, differentiates them from a normal computer programmers? It is the state of exception that characterises the existence of the *bikikomori*, which in some ways recalls the romantic proximity between genius and madness, that (sometimes) makes possible the expression of peculiar forms of fantasy and imagination. The rejection of a normalised existence, the unwillingness to adapt to the typical dynamics of modern existence, the uncompromising search for solitude, and a heightened existential sensitivity undoubtedly have a dramatic and pathological character, but they can also be necessary conditions for the creation of a personal narrative that is precluded to those who live in an ordinary context. There are therefore exceptional circumstances in which the extremes of imagination represented by the figure of the romantic genius and that of the *bikikomori* seem to touch. This is clearly not a matter of romanticising an often very serious and severe pathological disorder, but rather of highlighting how *bikikomori* are often very bright, intelligent and creative individuals, as indeed a vast literature shows (Klanten 2022; Tajan 2021; Michiko 2021; Mugyo 2019; Tamaki 2013; Kuhn 2012.). If we shift the focus of the study on the *bikikomori*-phenomenon from the clinical to the aesthetic-philosophical sphere, new and unprecedented declinations of the notions of imagination and fantasy may perhaps emerge.

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