Real Fantasies: Reinserting the Imaginary in the Scene of Social Encounter

This article is about a failure to imagine the 'imaginary' in sociology, or to think it through with enough critical awareness as a form of social interaction. When C. Wright Mills (1959/1967) outlined his promise for the 'sociological imagination', he offered, in effect, not a manifesto for the imagination itself, but for the need to imagine the world *sociologically.* Even though Mills emphasises a capacity to shift between macro- and micro-perspectives – from 'impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self' (p. 7) – the built in assumption was that the intimate and individual modes of apprehension were also traps, forms of bewilderment, that had to be transcended. What people need (or what 'men' need, as Mills failed to imagine that women could also comprehend their lives) 'is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves' (p. 5). They yearn 'for facts, they search for their meanings, they want "a big picture" in which they can believe and within which they can come to understand themselves' (p. 17). To imagine sociology means to situate oneself within this bigger factual picture.

A similar index of the way in which the imaginary fails to establish itself as an object of social enquiry could be read out of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), where the 'imagined' needs so to be insisted on against the grain of historical and political scholarship. The nation, he argued, 'is an imagined political community'; it is '*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most

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of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (p. 6). Anderson defends his choice of 'imagined' here against Hugh Seton-Watson, the members of whose community merely '*consider* themselves to form a community' (my emphasis), and Ernst Gellner, for whom 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist' (p. 6). The fine line the 'imaginary' has to tread is as something less neutrally reflective, more emotive, than 'consider', but not thereby a 'fabrication' or a 'falsity' to be dispensed with. Though nationhood may be an intangible entity in some sense, Anderson's book does furnish it with a material basis, as a living 'image', around which are organised commitments in the minds of specific individuals, which circulate more tangibly in letters, essays, maps, artefacts and histories. However, in the example with which Anderson opens, the tombs of Unknown Soldiers 'saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings' (p. 10), one sees how hard it is to prevent the mental and emotional side of the equation from becoming unreal and unknowable, 'ghostly'.

Anderson's book came out at a time that saw a widespread attempt to materialise imagination as a necessary object of study, particularly in feminist history and cultural studies (Burgin, *et al.* 1986; Walkerdine, 1990; Alexander, 1995; Dawson, 1994). Many of these publications shared a sense of the 'imaginary' (and 'fantasy', with which it is often used interchangeably) as a complex chain, or set of mediations, which includes 'inner' events (daydreams, erotic fantasies, memories, dreams, the images and ideals inspired by reading fiction, news or history), and an 'outer' field in which such representations circulate. Walkerdine (1990), for instance, suggested that 'femininity and masculinity are fictions linked to fantasies deeply embedded in the

social world which can take on the status of fact when inscribed in the powerful practices, like schooling through which we are regulated' (p. xiii). For Graham Dawson (1994) 'Masculinities are lived out in the flesh, but fashioned in the imagination' (p. 1). Note how both these statements attempt to subvert the distinction through which 'imaginary' is relegated to the interior, private or unreal side of the social equation – fictions and fantasies are 'embedded in the social world'. Yet at the same time such authors emphasise that they are struggling against the grain to make present for social reflection something which the latter is always rendering invisible. The editors of *Formations of Fantasy* begin by acknowledging the 'fundamental objection in common sense to considering fantasy in the context of the social and political' (Burgin, *et al.*, 1986, p. 1); Sally Alexander warned historians not to 'jettison fantasy', a loss which 'has implications beyond the reach of feminist history' (1995, p. 229). Thirty years later, fantasy and the imaginary remain a contentious, only sporadically visible object within mainstream social science – something that still repeatedly has to be argued for, re-found, re-demonstrated. Social anthropologist Henrietta L. Moore recognises that 'what anthropological theories ignore… is the role of fantasy', and makes the case that the discipline 'needs to take the imaginary seriously if it is to provide an account of the relationship of individuals to cultural orders' (2007, pp. 11, 14); Sasha Roseneil's work advocates for Avery Gordon's theorisation of 'socio-cultural ghosts' which offers a 'generative way of thinking about how the social-historical lives in memories, imaginations and cultural texts… in the fleeting, the ephemeral, the almost invisible' (2009, p. 417); Jacqueline Rose (1996) contends 'there is no way of understanding political identities and desires without letting fantasy into the frame' (p. 4), even though fantasy is commonly regarded as 'supremely asocial' (p. 2); David Marriott (2018) – who I'll return to later

– argues that in Fanon's social therapy, 'it is the reality of the phantasm, or the way reality is maintained as a phantasm, that needs to be accounted for' (p. 51).

The relations between psychoanalysis and sociology remain marked by this double rift between the imaginary and the social, whereby the imaginary is branded as both fictional *and* private (or 'inner') in such a way as to divorce it logically from the study of social life. And to some extent, trends within psychosocial studies in the last decade have grown accustomed to working with this rift, either (via Lacan) by subordinating the imaginary to the symbolic, and promoting in particular the analysis of social discourse over the mental life of individuals;[i] or (via post-Kleinian approaches) which maintain a concept of 'phantasy' as something deeply unconscious and distinct from the more cognitivist languages of representation common in sociology.[ii] There is a recent growing literature that mobilises Winnicotttian concepts to understand the political, though the focus has often been less on dimensions of the 'imaginary' and more on mapping Winnicottian terms directly onto political reality – for instance, Honig's (2017) combination of Winnicott with Arendt to interpret 'public things' as transitional objects; or Swartz's (2019) conceptualisation of protest movements in terms of 'ruthlessness'.[iii]

The questions this article will broach have to do, firstly, with how we *imagine* human interaction, and what contributions psychoanalysis can make to sociology in restoring emotive imaginary factors to its considerations of interaction processes. Psychoanalysis is well placed to contribute here, given its very particular attention, over the course of a century, to the observation of people's fantasies and their entanglement with identity formation, moral ideology, cultural production and social

enactment. But behind that project lies another question, of how to sustain an adequate disciplinary space – or cross-disciplinary space – within which such contributions can themselves be successfully imagined (without merely reproducing the divide between the 'real' and the 'unreal', the inner and the outer). Such a 'psychosocial' space would include 'fantasy', 'fiction' and the 'imaginary' as a social fact, which not only accrues like a penumbra 'around', or at a distance from social events, or as a 'distortion' of social reality, but which is itself part of that reality, manifesting at both psychological and broader cultural levels. To maintain this perception necessitates ongoing interaction between sociology, cultural and media studies, psychology, psychoanalysis and anthropology. Here I'm arguing that the 'imaginary' can itself provide a useful platform on which to build such interactions.

This article can only provide an improvisatory sketch of how such a middle or common ground – one based around the imaginary as an object of enquiry – could be delineated. It cannot give an adequate account of the many different strands of psychoanalytic theorisation operating in sociological and psychosocial literature, and will be necessarily schematic in its pursuit of a few general problems in relation to the 'imaginary'. But I want to begin by drawing attention to the way in which many different psychoanalytic and sociological conceptions of imagination are saturated by models couched in terms of dramaturgy – internal or external theatres, scenarios, the drama of mental life, the drama of social situations, and so on. The 'inner' psychological space to which the clinical literature in psychoanalysis most often refers – a space of conscious and unconscious memories, fantasies, and emotionally-charged images of people and events – is often described as a kind of theatre, going back to some of Freud's earliest intimations about psychical life, including his

description of dream-life as taking place on a different stage, or 'scene of action' [*Schauplatz*] from waking life, or the presentation of Anna O's 'private theatre' in Breuer and Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*. Sometimes such metaphors indicate a realm of *illusion*, but more often they simply recognise that our minds consciously and unconsciously play host to imagined scenarios (in recall, in anticipation, or as reverie).

For Paula Heimann (1942) 'the memory-traces of psychical experience, past and present, are… moving and living dramas, like never-ending scenes on a stage' (p. 11). Donald Meltzer (1978) called phantasy 'a theatre for the generating of meaning' which imbues the external world with 'emotional significance' (p. 384). These are authors working in a Kleinian tradition, but the traction of dramaturgical metaphors goes much wider than this. Joseph Sandler (1962), a contemporary Freudian, compared the representational world to a stage set within a theatre: 'The characters on the stage represent the child's various objects, as well as the child himself...' (p. 134). According to French psychoanalyst Joyce McDougall (1985), everyone 'harbours in our inner universe a number of "characters", parts of ourselves that frequently operate in complete contradiction to one another, causing conflict and mental pain to our conscious selves. For we are relatively unacquainted with these hidden players and roles' (p. 4). Moreover, there is a whole sub-domain of psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic theorisation about 'scripts'. To quote Eric Berne (1975), a script 'is an attempt to repeat in derivative form a whole transference drama, often split up into acts, exactly like the theatrical scripts which are intuitive artistic derivatives of these personal dramas of childhood' (p. 116); by 'fantasies' Robert Stoller (1985) intended 'meanings, scripts, interpretations, myths, memories, beliefs, melodramas, and built

like a playwright's plot, with exquisite care, no matter how casual and spontaneous the product appears' (p. 49). The terms drama or scenario are usefully broad, allowing for the fact that people may imagine things in narrative or visual form, or may play host to a conversation of voices or characters. The form of the aesthetic metaphors may differ, but what is shared is the notion that people continually model scenes, gestures, conversations or roles internally.

This is equally true of certain traditions in sociology, particularly those focused on the micro-sociology of social engagement. Berne's description bears a close resemblance to Erving Goffman's view in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) that 'ordinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together... Scripts even in the hands of unpractised players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing' (p. 72).[iv] In the Preface he famously stated: 'The perspective employed in this report is that of the theatrical performance; the principles derived are dramaturgical ones' (p. xi), and in the same work he approvingly quotes the influential sociologist Robert E. Park: 'everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role… It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves' (p. 19). Other versions of this dramaturgical discourse (including the widespread reference to actors, scenes, role-taking and performance) can be found in work on social ritual and social performance, in Victor Turner's cultural anthropology, in strands of social psychology (Rom Harré described expressive action as a resolution of 'dramatic' situations), and in Arlie Russell Hochschild's (1983/2003) work on the sociology of emotions – 'everyday life clearly requires us to do deep acting' (p. 47). Above all it continues as a significant thread within the tradition of social interactionism – Susie Scott's (2015) study of

approaches to social identity throughout refers to identity as performative, which she distinguishes from Judith Butler's theorisation because for Scott there is always an 'actor' behind the scenes. Such actors 'co-operate to stage versions of reality' (p. 21) and 'performances are tailored to the audience's expectations and normative codes of conduct' (p. 85).

Such comparisons help to undermine the assumption that psychoanalysis deals only with the internal, sociology with the external. In using dramatic metaphors, psychoanalysis implicates deeply 'internal' aspects of emotional life and the psyche in the strategies and rituals of public scenes, and illustrates the traffic between them. Correspondingly, it is clear the sociologists who study social interaction and human encounter are often forced to flesh out some aspect of what happens 'internally', in the subjective space of individual minds, because their descriptions involve complex articulations of how each protagonist mentally imagines or anticipates an encounter.

What also becomes apparent is the reductively 'cognitive' nature of the way such internal imagining is often conceived by the sociologists who have tended not to base their accounts on observations that reveal the complexity of internal life or psychological behaviour (or have drawn from the psychology literature in a very selective fashion). Where they do construct mental process, this often serves as a way of extending a model of social interaction into notionally personal mental space. What gets constructed 'inside' typically focuses on rational or conceptual factors, and on strategic choice. Identity is 'actively accomplished worked at and "done" by individuals in the course of interaction, and this is a self-conscious, reflexive process' (Scott, 2015, p. 20). If outside we have a specific situational performance, inside is an

epitome of this with room for making decisions about how best to play it. What has tended to drop out are elements central to psychoanalytic interpretation, including unconscious factors, emotions, or specifically psychological dynamics (see Craib, 1998; and Groarke, 2014, for a critique of the cognitive bias of sociology from a psychoanalytically-informed perspective). Though this is not to say that sociological interaction is necessarily conceived as a smooth and transparent process. For ~~both Meade and~~ Goffman the ability to pressure someone into a response is part of normal practice, and ~~Goffman himself was~~he was fundamentally interested in deception – the social agent 'may wish to ensure sufficient harmony so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonise or insult them' (1959, p. 3).

Where sociology and psychoanalysis depart from each other in their characterisations of dramaturgy can best be pin-pointed by turning to a couple of examples of sociologists who supply more complex theorisations of internal representational processes drawing on Freudian models: Gidden's (1984) theory of society, which includes an account of 'the psychological foundations of the interweaving of conscious and unconscious' (p. 41), and Hochschild's (1983/2003) work on emotional labour, which asserts that 'a social theory of emotion must have both a social and a psychological side' (pp. 228-229). Gidden's Freud is a 'cognitivist' Freud, mediated by the work of Sullivan, Horney and Erikson, who 'argued that Freud's preoccupation with repression and the unconscious led him to underplay the more cognitive, rational components of the agent' (1984, p. 52). He finds little use for Freud's second topography of the psyche, divided between id, ego and superego, reframing this with a different kind of stratification in terms of 'basic security system, practical and

discursive consciousness' (p. 41). On the way, accounts of desire, and the passionate demands of the id, drop out of the model, which begins to resemble a cybernetic system geared towards maintaining stability, and for which the prime affect is anxiety. 'Ordinary day-to-day social life… involves an ontological security founded on an autonomy of bodily control within predictable routines and encounters' (p. 64), where anxiety signals a disruption in the expected routine. Turning this into a developmental account, Giddens argues that anxiety is 'canalized or controlled' during the earliest experiences of the infant when the 'basic security system' is shaped. This formation depends substantially upon predictable and caring routines established by parental figures; but in development towards adulthood ontological security is increasingly 'maintained in a more fundamental way by the very predictability of routine' itself, which is tested and disrupted in 'critical situations' (p. 50). The conception of depth-psychological process developed here is remarkably akin to the 'surface' world whose routines and patterns of trust it is designed to underpin. What is especially striking from a psychoanalytic perspective is the way in which emotional and psychological life are almost fully conflated with what Freud termed the 'reality principle'. It's as if Freud's two principles of mental functioning – pleasure and reality – had been reduced to one.[v] This remains the case even in later iterations such as *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) which emphasises unconscious emotional commitments alongside cognitive frames – emotion here still essentially coincides, functionally, with the cognitive, supplying a 'defensive carapace' necessary to 'get on with the affairs of day-to-day life' (p. 40). It is never a disrupter or deflector of cognitive frameworks themselves; or it is not acknowledged how far the 'cognitive' might depart from the 'rational'.

Hochschild's (1983/2003) classic study of the management of emotion similarly brings together elements of Goffman with Freud. Perhaps even more so than in Giddens, Freud's psychology of the emotions (here coupled with Darwin) is reduced to a form of 'elicitation-expression' which she terms the 'organismic model'. Sexuality and desire are again displaced by anxiety which 'signalled the presence of a danger from within or outside the individual', while joy, sadness, jealousy are equally senders of signals about our way of apprehending the inner and outer environment (pp. 230-31). Hochschild ties this signalling process to cognition, 'broadly interpreted' (p. 230). Even so, her account of emotion – which deals both with the management of love and hate in an 'intricate private emotional system' and with those same elements taken into the marketplace where they 'become stretched into standard social forms' (p. 13) – begins by distinguishing 'surface acting' from 'deep acting' (p. 35), which she illustrates with examples from Stanislavski. It is in some ways here, in her borrowings from method acting, that the psychological model gets more complex: 'Not simply the body or immediately accessible feeling, but the entire world of fantasy, of subconscious and semi-conscious memory, is conceived as a precious resource' (p. 40).

However, as with Giddens, there is still a doubling of inner and outer worlds. Though the book provides a substantial critique of the 'estrangement' of emotion in the workplace, it at the same time casts more personal self-experience as inherently a form of 'emotion management', which Hochschild also refers to as 'cognitive emotion work' and 'trained imagination' (p. 257; p. 38). We use deep acting 'in the course of trying to feel what we sense we ought to feel or want to feel' (p. 41). Thus alienation enters experience primarily not through this need to perform controlling

operations *on* emotion, but because of who commands that process: institutional mechanisms come to 'control how we "personally" control feeling' (p. 229). Rather than supplementing social theory with psychological theory, the sociological imagination, itself predicated on increased control and rationalisation, has here tunnelled its way into 'depth' space and produced, methodologically, a kind of assumed dissociation between the self and its emotions, in the very act of bringing the emotions into sociology.

One key element missing here, in comparison with psychoanalytic models of internal dramaturgy, is the idea that emotions (and emotional memory) – Heimann's 'moving and living dramas' – might have a dynamic logic of their own, one even capable of driving aspects of cognition in 'non-rational' ways. In Hochschild the self-reflexive operation of the 'internal' scene differs little from how the sociologist herself might analyse a sociological vignette of a micro-encounter. But the more psychoanalytically-informed dramaturgies assume that models of interaction accumulate, from childhood onwards, as an imaginative repertoire for a different kind of work performed by the emotions themselves, in tandem with unconscious defence mechanisms. Disturbing feelings (erotic, aggressive, guilty, envious, hateful) are processed into more manageable states, guided by aims such as gratification and the avoidance of unpleasure. Thus imagined scenes, from the earliest beating fantasy onwards, also function as a way of dealing with internal emotional pressures, ones not fully derivative of external interactions, and therefore capable of making an independent contribution to them. This allows for the possibility of drama that moves in the other direction – projected onto the outside – as in Meltzer's formulation, quoted earlier, in which internal theatre imbues the external world with emotional

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significance (1978, p. 384), or McDougall's observation that 'psychic plays may be performed in the theatre of our own minds or … may take place in the external world, sometimes using other people's minds and bodies, or even social institutions, as their stage' (1985, p. 4).

Such projection might be conceived, weakly, as a kind of individual 'colouring' of events, laid over the reality of the interaction process (each person may have their own differing response to the social 'reality'); but it can also be theorised more strongly as an impulse to constitute the scene of interaction itself in a particular way, through selective forms of emphasis, amplification, or disavowal, or by mobilising forms of narrative to interpret an encounter, so as to reinforce a fantasized pattern (paranoid, idealising, omnipotent, reparative, etc). Dawson (1994) notes how 'a complex process of selection, ordering and highlighting gives prominence to some events over others and interprets their significance, thereby making sense of an objective world'. In this way events can become bound to fantasies, 'becoming the site of imaginary scenarios with desired and feared outcomes, narrated "as if" they had "really" happened in just this way' (p. 22). In that case, the scenario within which Hochschild's or Scott's actors bring their strategic gaze to bear may already be unconsciously determined by emotional tendencies, and dramatization would provide a filter through which the individual experiences reality, rather than a quasi-realistic space for rehearsing responses.

What psychoanalysis is adding in to the psychosocial mix, here, is not the *psychological* element per se, but theorisations (underpinned by decades of clinical observation) of the way in which specific kinds of emotional and psychical dynamics

play out across this imaginal/dramatic field, which don't just accompany interaction, but prove capable of structuring it according to unconscious principles of desire and defence (such as projection, negation, identification, repression, and so on). Indeed, whatever position the ego adopts in a given situation (critical, accepting, guilty, fearful, loving) is potentially already organised as part of such a more extensive, complex and partly unconscious drama in which those others encountered may be invested with projected aspects of the emotional life of the perceiver.

A further consideration, besides acknowledging the active components of emotion in imagination, involves dislodging the 'fantasied' place of the ego as internal expert (observing and reflecting on scenes) and recognising that this representational space may be more seriously moulded by affective and irrational forces than supposed. Something a little bit like this was conceded by Hochschild when she acknowledged that 'in the theatre, the illusion that the actor creates is recognised beforehand as an illusion by actor and audience alike. But in real life we more often participate in the illusion. We take it into ourselves, where it struggles against the sense we ordinarily make of things. In life, illusions are subtle, changeable, and hard to define with certainty, and they matter far more to our sanity' (1983, pp. 46-47). This then begs the question: why is it assumed that the internal theatre necessarily provides a cognitive space for realism, and for rational decisions? The problem is not just that Giddens and Hochschild restrict their accounts to the rational forms of cognition which they see as most relevant for understanding the processing of social interactions. It is that they can't help but imagine mental space as a space in which we understand things better. For Giddens, 'Understanding is not merely a method of making sense of what others do, nor does it require an empathic grasp of their consciousness in some mysterious or

obscure fashion. *It is the very ontological condition of human life in society as such*'
(quoted in Craib, 1998, p. 67), an assertion which takes Mills' bid for a sociology that
can supply something society currently lacks – 'lucid summations of what is going
on' – and turns it into an always already present condition of social existence.

Something of the affective, passionate, and active investment in inner representation,
which Giddens marginalises in his account of understanding, is captured in the many
psychoanalytic notions of 'fantasy' which permeate the psychosocial literature, drawn
from theorists as diverse as Sigmund and Anna Freud, Carl Jung, Melanie Klein,
Erich Fromm, Susan Isaacs, Jacques Lacan, Frantz Fanon, Wilfred Bion, Corenelius
Castoriadis, Julia Kristeva, Juliet Mitchell, Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler and Frank
Wilderson. These supply a much more complex and differentiated account of all the
ways in which we might develop scenarios – from unconscious levels of *phantasy* and
'primal scenes', through dreams, conscious fantasies and daydream, memories and
fictions, to the internalisation and externalisation of culturally-circulated images,
narratives, and movie-scenes, which challenges the sense that the imaginary is in any
way 'simple', or singular, or happens just 'inside'. Fantasy, for writers in this
psychoanalytically-informed tradition, functions as a composite meta-frame for social
interaction which crucially cuts across notions of internal and external. And there is
no dearth of means by which to materialise it.

A good example of the sheer diversity of media through which to actualise a study of
the 'imaginary' is provided by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952/1986),
through his investigation of the 'drama… enacted every day in the colonized
countries' (p. 145). Fanon analyses racial representations in several films and popular

novels, as well as exploring the psychological and political discourses of race. He attends to the imagery of race circulated in children's picture magazines, schoolbooks and comics, and invokes evidence from catch-phrases, counting-songs, advertisements and food product labels (p. 116, p. 148, p. 49). He illustrates points about unconscious aggression with analyses of dreams drawn from clinical case studies (pp. 101-102), while also referencing psychodramas in group therapy (p. 145). He records the impact of inserting the word 'Negro' during associational tests, and cites statistics from a study by Gershon Legman that every American six-year old in 1938 had assimilated '18,000 scenes of ferocious tortures and bloody violence' (p. 146); he suggests comparing the difference in identification between black spectators watching *Tarzan* in the Antilles and in Paris (p. 152); he recommends reading 'the compositions written in French by Antillean children between the ages of ten and fourteen' (p. 162); and notes the archetypes emerging from 'waking-dream therapy' (p. 166). The book is a small laboratory of psychosocial methods designed to illustrate (in Fanon's words) 'a series of propositions that slowly and subtly – with the help of books, newspapers, schools, and their texts, advertisements, films, radio – work their way into one's mind and shape one's view of the world of the group to which one belongs' (p. 152).

The point I want to make here is that the 'imaginary' or 'fantasy' elements dealt with in the psychosocial literature do not keep being rendered invisible because of their extreme distance from social reality (with 'fantasy' conceived as a recreational space, marginal even to inner life, itself marginal to the practicalities of social action). The problem is not that the imaginary is barely present to sociology because it is too personal, too psychological, to be a social fact. Rather, it is a reservoir for perceptions

structurally excluded from the 'ontology of understanding'; perceptions and experiences which are both part of the 'bigger picture' and forced to maintain a symptomatic non-life within it. As Fanon himself recognised: the 'juxtaposition of the white and the black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex' (1952/1986, p. 14). In such a racialised field, the white gaze is one that obliterates the reality of the black subject, rather than rendering it present – 'Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality' (p. 116).

In the final part of the article I want to emphasise the difference between an imagined, coherent representational scene, and the more complex agonism actually inherent in the model of dramaturgy both sociologists and psychoanalysts invoke, in which what is at stake is precisely what will count as real, and what will be evacuated as unreal; what will solidify as a social institution, and what will remain barely speakable; what will be subjectively owned and what will be projected. The sociological uses of 'theatre' – whether dealing with the inside or the outside – in particular tend to stress both the coherence of representations and assume that these integrate (or are ideally capable of integrating) with social reality. That is, they assume that 'social reality' is itself capable of integration. Reality is thus notionally made wholly present, if not to the actors themselves, at least to the third party of the sociologist who witnesses or interprets the scene, at however macro- or micro- a level.

What frequently gets left out, particularly when sociologists abstract from socio-historical situations in order to represent the general structure of interaction processes in a given society, are those aspects of broader social phenomena which are the most emotionally, psychologically and socially charged, and for which the scene of the

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micro-encounter can function as a form of reinforcement. Of relevance here are features of race and colonialism, patriarchy, gender formation, ethnic conflict, criminality, white supremacy and (back to Benedict Anderson) nationhood. Admittedly, this seems to take us far beyond micro-encounters into the realms of social discourse, 'ideology' formation and cultural and geographic 'imaginaries'. But such factors need to be slotted into the operations of micro-encounters precisely where Giddens talks of ontological support and patterns of trust, and Hochschild of social norms and feeling regulation. In Giddens' work, it is not just that *inner* space is arranged as a set of rational devices for securing social routines; individual agency is itself inserted into a generally rational schematisation of how human interaction functions. The 'mechanics of personality' are embedded in a 'day-to-day' reality which he imagines proceeds 'routinely and for the most part without fuss' (1984, p. 5). Critical interruptions of everyday routines, it seems, are incidental, and necessitate adaptations internal to the agents concerned. Likewise, for Hochschild, when things slip up through 'the consequences of too much "illusion"', the assumption is that this will be in affairs of the heart: 'a love is killed, a suitor rejected, another hospital bed filled' (p. 48). Neither model fully acknowledges the extent to which the public stage – available to the sociological imagination as a cognised scene – might itself be riven by conflicts, *mis*trust, disavowals, idealisations and other crises of representation, which make it impossible to establish ontological security, or social regulation, as something collectively and coherently produced. But without access to the security of that settled and cognised scene, what guarantees the shift (in Millsian terms) from the psychology of individual illusion to the sociological imagination of reality? Psychosocial dramaturgy, one might suggest, is antagonistic, messy and polyvocal, involving collusions and exclusions. It is as much about what is *not* cognised.

~~Such more catastrophic and critical concepts of~~This more critical version of the social field typically inaugurates work ~~which~~ that deploys strong concepts of fantasy, fiction, and the imaginary to construct arguments about social realities that are otherwise impossible to represent. Thus Walkerdine sought to expose the 'scientifically constituted' arena of modern education in which 'the fiction is perpetrated that equality can be produced' (1990, p. 118), while at the same time denying the operation of power, sexuality, and the divisive constitution of gender. Slavoj Žižek (1997) describes fantasy as having a 'radically intersubjective' character which helps to conceal fundamental antagonisms at the heart of capitalism, obfuscating 'the violence of its actual genealogy' (p. 10). For Achille Mbembe, the discourse developed out of the colonial relationship between Europe and its other worlds was 'fundamentally imaginary', its modes of enquiry and curiosity 'inseparable from the work of fantasy' that was also a form of violence (2017, pp. 12, 17).

I want to conclude by developing this point about the imaginary as the socially, rather than empirically, unrepresentable, by looking at two psychoanalytically-informed critiques of the kind of ontological mapping of psychosocial reality envisaged by Giddens. The first is from psychoanalyst and sociologist Steven Groarke's *Managed Lives* (2014) which, up to a certain point, endorses Giddens' project as having made 'a decisive contribution to the understanding of basic security in contemporary society, combining a traditional sociological emphasis on social order with a more existentially oriented account of personal experience' (p. 151). Rooting his own analysis of 'managed lives' in Donald Winnicott's work, Groarke locates this in the

context of new objects of concern emerging out of the Second World War, including

the 'absent mother' and the 'deprived child'. Against this background, 'the link

between security and social provision opens up new possibilities for the rationality of

government' (p. 26), with the mother identified as 'the privileged anchorage point for

administrative intervention' (p. 27). At the same time, Groarke critiques Giddens,

along lines already suggested, as being too cognitively biased, and too prone to use

psychoanalysis selectively to underwrite a unitary construction of identity (p. 170).

Giddens privileges 'real-life events and conscious mechanisms of self-regulation over

endopsychic entities or intrapsychic structures and functions' (p. 152), coming to the

conclusion that 'the objective reality of social facts is consistent with the lived

accomplishments of knowledgeable agents' (p. 159). This, then, is one example of the

logic through which emotion, fantasy and the imaginary are squeezed out of the

picture.

Groarke additionally takes Giddens' ontology of security *as trust*, and elaborates its

extra-cognitive dimensions more fully. 'Giddens appears to accept the idea that trust

is a condition of reliable cognition rather than a cognitive phenomenon as such.' The

implication is 'not only that feeling comes before knowing, but also that a trusting

orientation towards the world is distinguishable from the recognizable coherence of

the world' (p. 171). We are 'inwardly secure as we *hope to be*' (p. 172, my emphasis).

Drawing on Winnicott's account of childhood development, security is more than

repetition, dependability, anticipation and, eventually, rational expectation –

something Giddens himself came to concede (1991, p. 38). But Groarke gives body to

this pre-reflexive grounding of truth and hope in a way that Giddens doesn't, by

involving Winnicott's theorisation of spontaneity and illusion, facilitated by maternal

care. Winnicott describes a situation 'in which the mother makes experience available (or not) to the infant through a type of intuitive management that is in tune with the infant's life. This suggests that it is a loving world, which the infant finds lovable' (p. 15). Groarke is essentially revising Giddens' model, founded on routines as a bulwark against anxiety, as something more ultimately sustained by loving care which, in the right form, allows (in Winnicottian terms) for the illusion necessary to gain access to reality. 'Genuine contact with reality presupposes an ongoing imaginary subjective identification with the world' (p. 12), one in which human life 'is understood as the impulse to dwell in its own nature, a pre-reflexive relation of immanence' (p. 16). The essential difference here is that subjective identification with the world, in Groake's terms, can't wholly be assimilated to a neutrally cognised social scene. Security, rather, 'is an expression of the *vital* normativity of the self' (my emphasis, p. 172), where the 'vital' indicates the excluded creative and subjective dimensions of Giddens' or Hochschild's still somewhat more reflexive or cybernetic evocations of depth psychology.

Here, however, comes the second critique – which is how does this model of 'vital normativity', of 'dwellling' which 'grounds the life from which it emanates' (Groarke, 2014, p. 16), fare when confronted with Fanon's man of colour forced to 'run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence' (1952/86, p. 60) – not by insufficient maternal care, but by learning 'the truth sometimes from smiles, sometimes from rumour or insult' (p. 150). What happens to both the 'ontology of understanding' and that of 'subjective illusion' when faced with a subject structurally 'immiserated or affected by its own impossibility or nothingness' (Marriott, 2018). Where, for Groarke, illusion is not symptomatic (as it is in Freud) but is in some ways

constitutive of subjectivity and of reality (as something 'dwelled' in), for Fanon

something necessary for subjectivity becomes illusory when 'I am being dissected

under white eyes' (Fanon, 1952/1986, p. 116). In the colonial drama – and even that

of the post-colony – 'everything is reduced to a permanent confrontation at the level

of phantasy' (Fanon, 1961/2004, p. 19). Or, as Frank Wilderson concludes,

'ontology', 'once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside – does not

permit us to understand the being of the black.' (2010, p 57).

The implication is that there are extraneous dimensions of the imaginary which

intervene in the drama of subjective presence and absence that Groarke tied to

qualities of maternal care. There are cultural and historical legacies which, when

encountered in maturity, can retrospectively (atemporally, even) rob infancy of its

ontological support. To develop this point, I want to draw on two images from David

Marriott's *Haunted Life* which articulate something about the complex social

functions of the imaginary, as something that can materialise empirically, yet also

remain displaced from frameworks of social recognition and subjective dwelling

alike.

The first concerns a description of CCTV footage tracking a boy through the civic

spaces of Southeast London who appears, to Marriott, to be 'at play in himself',

repossessing the public space 'until it becomes the space of the imaginary' (p. xi). The

footage is that of Damilola Taylor who fifteen minutes later, on 27 November 2000,

would be found dying of a stab wound to his leg. But Marriott is concerned here less

with the fact of his death – both missing *and* inexorably 'present' in the broadcast

footage – and more with the way that on the tape 'his death has no aura': 'like a pure

abstraction of the public sphere or an event without history, the CCTV image designates an excess of mimesis over that of narrative meaning' (p. xiii). Though Damilola, in his last hour, may have devised 'his own imaginary', as spectators we are exposed to 'the depressing emptiness of a nullity without horizon, received but never perceived by the nonmeaningful reproducibility of CCTV' (p. xv). So far, so proximate to Groarke's presentation of the schism between subjective illusion and its absence, the possibility of a world underpinned by 'vital normativity of the self', and one that is deprived of 'being' and 'dwelling', merely reproducible. But what ultimately concerns Marriott – introducing Fanon into a proto-Benjaminian account of the technological gaze – is the raced nature of the alternatives, which displaces the pre-ontological grounding of the subject once more from psychoanalytical into sociological space, or at least some complex psychosocial juncture between the two. What cannot be represented in the CCTV footage is, firstly, the imaginative life animating its subject, but, secondly, 'the discursive frameworks, political and commercial interests, that ensure that some social "targets" are rendered more visible by surveillance than others in the geopolitical space of urban cities. It is around that invisibility – of racial hegemony and capital – and the excessive visibility of the socially undesirable, that the political and commercial legitimacy of CCTV coheres' (p. xiv).

To return one more time to the dramaturgy of sociology, Marriott is arguing here for the ways in which scenes of representation, of any kind, are haunted by violent histories and social dynamics they never reveal. In this case, the colonial regimes which still inform the contemporary protocols of urban surveillance, the logic of what gets captured in the image in the first place, and why? The violence of that history, it

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seems, is never finally socially witnessed and recognised, but is destined to repeat itself in some limbo of the imaginary: 'the occult presence of racial slavery, nowhere but nevertheless everywhere' (p. xxi). The footage runs continuously but 'It is as if whites and blacks were watching different screens' (p. xxi), perpetuating a history 'that no one remembers, but to whom everyone is subjected.' (p. 5).

Returning also to the dramaturgies of psychoanalysis, Marriott is also arguing for the unacknowledged ways in which such logics of representation, such stark divisions in psychosocial ontology, forcibly impose themselves on the mind, the soma, and on language. If, in the example of Damilola, the problem might be ascribed to the technologies of managed lives, in the following chapters of the book Marriott makes clear that what plays *inside* the mind, in the unconscious even, is the same footage of race, violently inserted where the subject should be: 'how strange it is to see a thing like this, the unconscious revealed like a vast movie screen bearing the phantoms and fears of freedoms past' (p. 1). In *Whither Fanon* (2018) he will elaborate further on the 'violent occupation of the psyche' (p. 53) in relation to sociogeny and colonial psychiatry. In *Haunted Life*, Marriott echoes the motifs of his prefatory essay in a chapter on visual culture and phantasms in John Edgar Wideman's 2003 memoir *The Island: Martinique*. Here Marriott calls upon the reader to imagine the cultural spectator, 'as a kind of Photomat, haemorrhaging images – think of all those Spirit photographs in which the medium's body pours forth white ectoplasmic images. Then think of the medium's body as black: a body altered, disfigured by the white gunk oozing from mouth and eyes; the spew of spirit' (2007, p. 13).

There are a number of points one can elicit from this image, rendered purposefully grotesque. Firstly, most simply, the reference to the Spirit photograph captures that problem with which I began: how to materialise the 'imaginary', how to render it visible for social science. It taps into all those attempts to render the ghostly and the haunted – and psychical – aspects of the social, while pointing out how visual media (from the description of waking dreams, to photographs and advertisements) give examples of how such imagined material can become historically concrete and circulate socially and internally. A second thing it captures is the ways in which fantasy galvanises emotive and passionate investments – as we move from the neutral, near-automatic presence of 'spectator' as 'Photomat', to the violent and visceral register of disgust: blood flow, disfigurement and gunk. But the function of the experiment turns on a crucial third element, which is a rupture, or crisis, in representation – in the representation of the subject, and subjectivity as a site of co-ordinated representations. It is this element, and not just the flow of images through and around the subject's head, which is the truly 'occult' component here, and which introduces the note of shock and the improbable. The whole thing is an essential corrective to Mills' conjuration of the 'quality of mind' necessary to achieve the 'bigger picture' with which this article opened. And here I think Dawson (1994) misses something important when he characterises 'cultural imaginaries' as 'those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions' (p. 48), evoking the imaginary as a useful – 'available' – extension to more overt objects of social investigation. What this misses out is the force of exclusion, the radical fault-lines, which run through the subjective experience of individuals, and social groups, segregating and inverting their relations to what is

apparently the same world. It is this violent paradox that Fanon captured in his thesis 'black skin, white masks', and which Marriott restates here in the image of black bodies, white ectoplasm of the imaginal world.

Not to see the radical disymmetry of phenomena here, for different subjects, turns 'seeing' itself into a form of obliteration; 'our very freedom to see is experienced as just another form of blind domination or domination by blindness', beneath which lies a 'more fundamental dialectic between the gaze we imagine and the gaze we are dispossessed by' (Marriott, 2018, p. 13) which is unwittingly 'interiorized by white and black subjects'. Interiorized, one might add, as a social fact, as a fact of social interaction. But unwittingly so, because of the failure of social analysis to take sufficient account of the imaginary, to think its own unthought and excluded dimensions, of which race has been a point of focus here as one possible example. I am arguing here for the imaginary as a necessary third component in the dialogue between psychoanalysis and sociology, not quite reducible to either camp, within which elements that are historically, or psychologically, or socially displaced, can be encountered and potentially recognised. The imaginary, in this sense, is not a coherent and cognisable scene, but a dimension within which one can begin to access the multitude of ways in which coherence and cognizance, and trust, fails. And this is necessary before one can ground an account of the social scene, or social interaction, in the forms defined, for example, by Giddens and Hochschild, or indeed by Winnicott. What the imaginary is able to constellate is precisely the instability, the antagonism, and the denial operating at the points through which both the personal world and that of particular groups are sutured to the social scene. It is a field through which critical questions can either be opened up or glossed over (discounted as *merely*

imaginary). Critical psychosocial studies is possibly that arm of social research which takes fantasy for real, which includes it in the 'big picture', where it disturbs and dislocates some of the routine assumptions about rational and social relations. For Marriott as for Fanon, 'The more we observe such real fantasy, the better we shall be able to understand how its symbolic representations come to be implanted as parts of the habits of a culture where racial paranoia and psychosis come to be counted as common sense' (Marriott, 2018, pp. 51).

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the 'imaginary' as an entity that is often excluded from the sociological imagination, and argues that the imagination of human encounters – including fantasies about this – are essential for understanding the dynamics of interaction processes. Despite the emergence, since the 1980s, of a literature aiming to constitute fantasy and the imaginary as an object of social study, the sociological portrait of human interaction has remained dominated by cognitive models, even where these draw on psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic evocations of internal processes as a theatre, or dramaturgy, are placed alongside dramaturgical models of mental life from sociology, in order to pin-point the differences in their characterisation of the function of imagination, and especially its emotional investments. I argue for a view of imagination and fantasy as crucial social facts. Drawing in particular on psychoanalytically-informed examples from Frantz Fanon, David Marriott and others, I also argue that the reason why the imaginary keeps being rendered invisible to sociology is not because it cannot be empirically objectified. Rather it is because the antagonisms and disavowals which surround many interaction processes, along with the strong emotions this provokes, fail to fit with sociology's assumptions about rational intent.

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[i] See Derek Hook's contention that 'discourse analytic approaches… are not adequate to the task of apprehending racism in its ostensibly "extra-discursive" bodily and libidinal dimensions' (2012, pp. 46-47).

[ii] According to Nikolay Mintchev, Kleinians have been slower than Lacanians to engage in the complexities and historical transformations in ethnic forms of exclusion 'because the categories they work with describe deep unconscious processes that seemingly operate independently of language/culture' (2018, p 235).

[iii] See Bowker (2017) for a contribution that is directed specifically to 'fantasy'.

[iv] Interestingly, he chose to illustrate this through the example of psychodrama: patients 'act out parts with some effectiveness... Their own past is available to them in a form which allows them to stage a recapitulation of it' (p. 72).

[v] See also Groarke's criticism (2014, p. 180) that for Giddens 'practical consciousness is more properly a type of what Freud called the preconscious… rather than the unconcious.