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## ARTICLE

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# Critical imagination

**Marina Garcés**

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

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**Abstract**

When facts become predictions or even catastrophic prophecies, they can only be complied with or denied. Critical imagination is then locked into a twofold experience of the absence of limits, in other words an absence of limits leading to the Apocalypse or an absence of limits in the production of images in the global factory of innovation and creativity. The critical tradition was, right from the outset, to establish that the condition for true autonomy (of reason, decision, and learning) is being able to participate in setting one's own limits. This article is based on the hypothesis that, today, critical thinking needs to be constructed in alliance with ecology of the imagination. Criticism is the art of limits, of inquiry, and of cautious discernment regarding human productions and their conditions of possibility. Imagination is the living relationship with them, situated in a "between" that links – beyond the principle of non-contradiction – being and not-being in their various forms: what we know and do not know, what we see and do not see, and the different dimensions of time. Accordingly, I shall argue throughout this article that imagination is a power of strangeness that returns to us the possibility of relating with a common, but not unique, world and temporality.

**Keywords**

imagination; collapse; critical; limit; strangeness

## Imaginación crítica

### Resumen

*Cuando los hechos se convierten en predicciones o incluso en profecías catastróficas, solo pueden ser acatados o negados. La imaginación crítica queda entonces bloqueada en una doble experiencia de la ausencia de límites: la ausencia de límites que conduce al Apocalipsis o la ausencia de límites de la producción de imágenes en la fábrica global de la innovación y la creatividad. La tradición crítica acertó desde un principio al establecer que la condición para la verdadera autonomía (de la razón, de la decisión o del aprendizaje) es poder participar en la elaboración de los propios límites. Este artículo parte de la hipótesis de que el pensamiento crítico necesita elaborarse hoy en alianza con una ecología de la imaginación. La crítica es el arte de los límites, del examen y del discernimiento cauteloso acerca de las producciones humanas y de sus condiciones de posibilidad. La imaginación es la relación viva con ellos. Se sitúa en un «entre» que enlaza, más allá del principio de no contradicción, el ser y el no ser bajo sus distintas formas: lo que sabemos y lo que no sabemos, lo que vemos y lo que no vemos, así como las distintas dimensiones del tiempo. Por eso, como argumentaremos a lo largo del artículo, la imaginación es una potencia de la extrañeza que nos devuelve la posibilidad de relacionarnos con un mundo y una temporalidad comunes, pero no únicas.*

### Palabras clave

*imaginación; colapso; crítica; límite; extrañeza*

## Introduction

We have a problem: facts can be confused with predictions. Describing the present state of affairs seems to include the foretelling of imminent catastrophe. The present world brings with it an apocalyptic shadow from which it can only be released by resorting to fantasy. We have gone from the naturalistic fallacy, which confused being with what must be, to the catastrophist fallacy, which confuses what is with the impossibility of its continuing to be. When facts take on the condition of prediction and even prophecies, history regains a neo-religious condition which can be explained by a dichotomy: damnation or salvation.

How can we separate the reality of ecological, social, and psychic devastation from its incorporation into a story that has become law? How can we critically distinguish between the irreversibility of facts and the irreversibility of history? Facts are not neutral. They do not speak for themselves. Not even the neopositivism of data can convince us that they do. Yet it is once again necessary to speak of facts. Of them, and from them.

Although it may seem paradoxical, the ability to speak of facts requires a lot of imagination. Imagination is the faculty of limits: a sensitive mental process that actively relates us with the limits of what we see, know, and think. Hence, we can say that imagination is a critical faculty. Criticism is the art of limits, of inquiry, and of cautious discernment regarding human productions and their conditions of possibility. Imagination is the living relationship with them. The disturbing virtue

of imagination is that it links, without uniting, that which thought separates: the perceivable and the intelligible, inner and outer, present and absent, what is and what is not, the possible and the impossible... and the various dimensions of time.

In the West, at least, our relationship with imagination has been ambivalent. Feared and scorned because of its aspiration to an eternal and diaphanous truth, it has simultaneously been exalted by the aesthetic sensibility and, nowadays, by cognitive productivism and its apology for creativity. Neither the subordination of the imagination to higher criteria of truth nor its reduction to a factory of images allows us to enter into a relationship with its critical dimension and particular way of working on the meaning and value of facts. I, therefore, propose a shift that would enable us to rediscover, for our present, the powers of a critical imagination.

## 1. The madwoman of the house

The observation that imagination is the madwoman of the house is attributed to Saint Teresa of Avila. It is not exactly her own expression, although tradition has lent it to her. What is certain, however, is that for the author of *Las Moradas o el castillo interior* ('The Interior Castle, or the Mansions', 1577) and creator of a vast network of foundations or houses run by barefoot women, the imagination has a special relationship with the house. She refers to it using charming, amiable images,

such as small, inconvenient moths fluttering at night, or small lizards slipping, silent and agile, through cracks. In the sixteenth century, when Saint Teresa was reading and writing about her visions, the Aragonese scientist Michael Servetus claimed that imaginings were prompted by “animal spirits” that moved between the heart and the brain, igniting both the blood and the recesses of thought. For those who would impose order in the house, imaginings, lizards, and animal spirits can only end up being a plague of ghosts.

Saint Teresa was hounded by the Inquisition and the Castilian powers of the time because she read and founded institutions - in other words because, for her, imaginative activity and intervention in the social reality belonged together, and because she welcomed into her house the disorder of the spirit that comes with imagination, simultaneously maintaining the criterion from which to take a stance and defend it within the order of the society of her time. Imagination may be the madwoman of the house, but Saint Teresa was not mad. On the contrary, it was precisely because she could keep the doors and windows of the house open to different elements that she was able to govern herself and to understand her limits and the potential of her actions, without the guidance or tutelage of others.

“Sometimes what is spirit is called disorder”. The playwright and philosopher Juan Mayorga gives these words to Saint Teresa, and the Inquisitor replies, “You are a lover of paradoxes, as people of twisted speech tend to be. Your writings are full of them and coded images. ‘I die because I do not die’. ‘Inner castle’. You people love hiding behind this mysterious way of talking they call allegory.”<sup>1</sup> With the words of the inquisitor on stage emerges one of the essential aspects of imagination and its critical power: its relationship with paradox. Imagination resists classification and submission to the principle of non-contradiction. Far from arbitrariness, its virtue is, as I have said, its linking of that which thought separates. Or, as the philosopher Juan Arnau puts it in his *Historia de la imaginación* (‘History of the Imagination’) it dynamically sustains the essential tension of duality.<sup>2</sup> Why? Because imagination itself is dual in nature: material and immaterial, individual and collective, subjective and objective.

Professor John Sallis of Boston College addresses this matter in his book *Logic of Imagination*. From a contemporary perspective, he traces the history of imagination and the reasons why it has been in unresolved conflict with the logical stance of philosophy, in other words its orientation *vis-à-vis* a logos based on the principle of non-contradiction: “Imagination is identified as posing the conflict, as the instrument of contradiction.” He then adds, more forcefully, “Imagination cannot but consort with contradiction, and its infraction of the law is anything but merely incidental. Rather, its very constitution is such to situate it on the verge of contradiction” (Sallis 2012, 96-99).

Sallis situates the thresholds of this logical identification of philosophy between a pre-logical Plato in the *Dialogues of Plato*, where being and non-being retain their conflicting relations, and Kant’s transcendental logic which, without denying the syllogistic principles for analytical reason, must once again take a step towards sensibility. There, even in their pure or *a priori* determination, the conditions for the possibility of turning the object into an experience must displace the fundamental character of the principle of non-contradiction. This is no whim or deficit. The reason lies in time. When concepts are rooted in time, what is and what is not are recombined in an array of possible relations that only a paradoxical logic can detect. Sallis calls this “ex-orbitant logics”. It is neither arbitrary nor is it defined by its ability to breach any possible limit, as fantasy would do. It situates what is possible beyond the formal contradiction and embraces the monstrous as a form of what is real. “Imagination has a proclivity for the monstrous (...) indeed monstrosity is the primary form that contradiction assumes in nature (...) the very being is both natural and unnatural.”

Owing to this ability of the imagination to situate antagonism in the bosom of what is real and of temporality, the Uruguayan philosopher and lecturer at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), María Noel Lapoujade, states: “Imagination bursts onto the surface of philosophical reflection with a core role at the time when philosophy becomes critical” (Lapoujade 1988, 23-24). In other words, this occurs when reason discovers and accepts its fragility and the constant need to criticize itself and its achievements, or when it agrees to explicitly engage with its own limits. What it then discovers is that madness is, precisely, not placing limits on reason and its pretensions, which are ultimately turned into fantasies of power made reality. This is the history of modernity, of its ambitions and its tensions. And this is why it is possible to state that, in modern times, critical imagination has been the driver of resistance to the derangement of reason: an art of limits that has not been labouring in the hidden workshops of culture and that, today, asks to be brought to light.

## 2. Collapse of the imagination

When facts become predictions or even prophecies, they tend to be attacked or denied. Accelerated or slowed. Critical imagination is blocked. Many theoretical trends and practical positions are presently derived from the following narrow range of choices: *denialism* (climate, health, etcetera), which denies existing problems and the sciences that diagnose them; *accelerationism*, which opts for a leap forward in which the contradictions of present reality will resolve themselves; and *solutionism*, which limits perspective on the world to technical problems

1. Extracts from the play by Juan Mayorga *La lengua en pedazos* (Ediciones La Uña Rota 2021).

2. This is the central thesis in Juan Arnau in *Historia de la imaginación*.

that have swift, effective solutions. In all three cases, we find a collapse of the imagination.

Imagination collapses whenever any limit with which it is related comes to be understood as an ending: an ending in the form of catastrophe, or an ending in the form of a solution or salvation. A yes or a no, an all or a nothing that introduces the exclusive dichotomy and a principle of non-contradiction transformed into the fate of anything that happens to humanity. From the most specific problem through to an overview of the state of the world, we are always damning or saving ourselves. Under this law, no other sense of experience is possible.

How can we distinguish between collapse as a fact or group of facts related to the present of production with its effects on ecosystems and social relations, and collapse as an all-pervading logic that annuls the very possibility of imagination? The critical task, in this case of thinking that can separate and discern between notions and their areas of application, is one that must urgently seek to make this distinction.

The key lies precisely in the relationship with time: collapse as an event or set of historical events that affect our relationship with present-day resources and modes of production and consumption, is taking place *in time*. It is a present of the world that links to the past, its ideas, its victors and its victims, and its broken promises. It specifically indicates possible futures which, because we can imagine them, we can also change or at least intervene in them.

By contrast, collapse as a logic imposed on the meaning of every possible event occurs not in time but *against time*. This is what I defined as a posthumous condition in my essay *Nueva ilustración radical* ('New Radical Enlightenment', Anagrama, 2017). The posthumous condition is an experience of the limit in which what is placed outside its own limits is time itself. This, of course, is not about abstract time or the time of physics. What is threatened is the time of the liveable - in other words, the time that is opened up when we can participate or intervene in the transformation of, and dispute over, our conditions of life. The posthumous condition is a new commandeering of the narrative of the future, dragging it from the historicity of the present and submitting it to the imminent threat of an ending that serves as permanent blackmail on any action or decision. The ethical and political nexus of the action is thus broken.

In *Nueva ilustración radical*, I quoted Svetlana Alexievich when she reflects on testimonies about the Chernobyl accident: it is the nuclear accident, as a paradigm of the accident that cancels time and breaks the linkages of temporality. For Alexievich, Chernobyl is not a catastrophe in time, but rather the catastrophe of time. Or, as we could also say, a catastrophe against time. "When we speak of the past and of the future, we introduce into these words our conception of time but, more than anything else, Chernobyl is a catastrophe of time" (Aleksiévich 2015, 44-56). The imaginary of the accident still refers to that of divine punishment or of the irruption of fatality. We have seen this with the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been difficult to keep analysis of the facts and their causes on the level of historical events, decisions, and material

conditions, and all kinds of biblical and conspiratorial tales have quickly emerged, telling us that the ill-treated Earth has decided to serve us a well-deserved punishment in the form of a virus. Faced with difficulty, it is easier for the human mind to take the leap into apocalyptic fantasy, even as punishment, even as disaster. At least that releases us from the burden of finding answers and putting them into practice.

But imagination does not collapse only in the face of the complexity of major global disasters and the impotence of not knowing how to respond to them. It also collapses, day after day, with the violence that we as human beings inflict upon ourselves and our surroundings. In this regard, thinkers in Latin America have adopted what I consider a very interesting approach to possible readings of a broken, profoundly damaged present but which in no way appears to be the end of the world for everyone. For example, the social researcher Daniel Inclán of UNAM has focused his recent inquiries into violence on the idea of a war against history. He writes, "As part of the mandate, violence fulfills a function that dehistoricizes communicative processes, whether by their endless reiteration or by their lethality, which rules out the existence of linkages and operations to situate them in a collective temporality" (Inclán 2015, 13-27).

Dehistoricizing also means depoliticizing experience. Making impossible any collective temporality, it situates us in the threatening immediacy of a permanent exceptionality that ensures that violence and arbitrariness are the only ways of governing the crisis, be it an economic, health, or climate crisis, or the various kinds of political dissent that also burst like bubbles across the world. Permanent exceptionality is the political form of the catastrophe of time and, in it, the only condition of the subject is to be more or less a victim, more or less affected, depending on the temporalities that erupt and become individualized. The collapse of the imagination is the shattering of time into presents and futures of fast, privatized consumption.

### 3. The art of limits

The collapsed imagination is thus led back to two experiences of the limitless. First, as we have seen, it is subjected to a recurring relationship with the totality of time and of the world. This is the imposition of the Apocalypse as a framework that shatters any relationship with the specific and its value. We are always in the all-or-nothing of our damnation or our salvation whence imagination is replaced by utopian or dystopian fantasy that can only project images of the afterwards: any afterwards. Whether dark or bright, the characteristic of this fantasy is that it always situates us in a world without us, either because humanity has become extinct or because the survivors are longer human but rather, thanks to technological hybridization, posthuman.

But this is not the only activity to which contemporary imagination has been reduced. The other experience of the limitless is the imperative of creativity, innovation, and disruption that presently mobilizes the

agenda of cognitive capitalism. Besides the production of information and knowledge that sets the tone for the computerized societies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, what the global brain must now generate is the constant stimulus of simulacra of novelty. It has been assumed that not only are we on the brink of collapse, but that, on this brink, we are in a scenario of constant disruption. This is the equivalent of the politics of permanent exception. If the arbitrariness of decision-making makes it possible to govern the crisis and establish some kind of power in the disorder, disruptive innovation renders uncertainty exciting and profitable. Without direction or ideas, the only criterion is not to stop what we are experiencing as everything being about to end. This looks like a paradox but is not one. They are two sides of the same coin. The collapse of the world and of imagination is experienced by producing without limits, without the ability to imagine how to get out of this relationship.

This productivism of imagination without criteria or ideas is not a plan for the upper echelons of scientific and technological innovation alone. It is a way of existing in the world that is conveyed through the set of structures of culture and, especially, of education. As I showed in *Escuela de aprendices* ('School of Learners', Galaxia Gutenberg, 2020), the message of uncertainty with regard to the future is combined with the orientation of education towards a broadening of skills and extractivism of attention. Although this programme can be delivered through the public system in societies such as those of Europe, it is neither democratic nor emancipatory. It turns the Enlightenment idea of "thinking for oneself" into the application of formal skills which, rather than developing consciousness in relation to a world, fosters a type of intelligence that works in a framework of opportunities. The approach is about competence and competition, and it is based on the idea of intelligence as potential. The old hierarchy of those who knew more or knew less, those who could study and those who could not, is replaced by an opportunistic game of flexible skills that must demonstrate, every step of the way, their potential for adaptation to a changing environment in which the present is disconnected from its future.

When the educational system accepts that its mission is to educate for a future about which we know nothing, it becomes a producer of a new kind of servitude: adaptive servitude. Capitalism is no longer mechanical, and neither is obedience. The most virtuous people, in terms of recognition and legitimacy, are not those who best obey mechanical orders, but rather those who devote themselves with most creativity to the task of responding to the changing catchphrases of social and political reality, whether this pertains to the job market, fashions, health guidelines, or bureaucratic procedures. If the rebel, in whatever form, once faced the docile student-citizen, then rebellion, now faced with the adaptive servant, becomes residuality. A person who has been unable to adjust to the dictates of constant adaptation is residue.

Imagination, thus converted into a constant production of responses to changing situations, has neither limits nor autonomy. Its limit is its failure (an inability to keep going) and its autonomy a simulacrum

behind which hides the exploitation of an individualist and commodified idea of freedom.

The critical tradition was correct in the very beginning, when it established that the condition for true autonomy (of reason, decision-making, and learning) is the ability to participate in the construction of one's own limits. Indeed, this question dates back a long way. Ancient Greece devoted much of its philosophical, political, and even literary and dramaturgical efforts to attempting to plan a culture of limits as an expression of the highest degrees of autonomy and wisdom. Naturally, it was not a plan for everyone, but rather one that carried its aristocratic connotations beyond social structures. When today's dictate of the limitless places experience under the shadow of its imminent end, the question forcefully returns: where are the limits? The desire for there to be someone who will impose them is growing stronger, and so are the political responses ranging from populism to eco-fascism. There is also a resurgence of dominant social positions based on force, among them new expressions of sexism, racism, and obscene classism.

But the question of where the limits lie has other answers, too. From the point of view of power and servitude, limits are anything that can be expressed in terms of prohibitions, while from the perspective of autonomy, limits "leave us free and responsible for our decisions or, in other words, only obliged by ethics and our ability to anticipate these catastrophes" (Servigne 2020). The quotation is taken from Pablo Servigne's book *Colapsología* ('Collapsology') and it refers to the situation in which we find ourselves once we have crossed boundaries such as those of global warming, exponential extinction of species, damage to oceans or to the ozone layer, and the various pollution indices. These are data, these are facts, as I stated at the beginning of this article - but to speak of them is to refer to a set of actions and decisions that have caused them to emerge as dangerous. Bringing out our own limits and their threats for a liveable life requires us to face ourselves as responsible subjects and thus capable of ethically deciding the conditions and criteria of our self-limitation. In a similar vein, the Greek environmentalist Giorgos Kallis, in his essay *Limits*, calls for a culture of limits as the highest expression of freedom. When "a rhetoric of limitlessness goes hand in hand with the imposition of strict limits on those with less power" (Kallis 2021, 107), questioning what we want is "what autonomy and democracy are all about" (Kallis 2021, 82).

#### 4. Imagining the strange

The ability to question what we want: this is where criticism and imagination meet as inseparable dimensions of an art of limits. Referring to imagination as an "art" is not to aestheticize it as a reduction of imagination to creativity, but rather to understand it as an activity linked to a set of different kinds of knowledge and practices. There is no imagination apart from imaginative activity, and imaginative activity is a

dynamic of linking and relating times, images, and senses that create contexts and new possibilities.

Imagination is not, therefore, an individual, spontaneous, and empty faculty, but a way of manufacturing our relationship with the limits of what we see, know, remember, and project about the world in which we live. Whether this occurs in art, science, politics, or everyday decisions, it does not render of any of these terrains the monopoly of, or a place that is strictly pertinent to, imagination. Its activity moves in the “in-between” of temporalities, disciplines, subjects, and the dimensions of social and cultural life. It is not, then, an independent faculty but, rather and interdependent activity, so its condition is an ecosystem that can be changed and damaged or enriched and cultivated.

The critical stance that defined the core of the radical Enlightenment of the early eighteenth century very clearly situated the need to put this critical attention into practice with regard to the interdependent, and therefore fragile and partial, nature of the human mind. Far from the ingenuity with which Enlightenment’s trust in knowledge and progress has been portrayed from a position closer to dogmatic scientism than to a truly enlightened one, the critical tradition asserts the precarious nature of human reason. It is not necessary to read everything Kant wrote in order to realize this. It suffices to recall a few sentences from the entry headed “Criticism” in the *Encyclopédie Française* to grasp the sense of radical criticism. The writers say that the task of the critic is none other than to convince the human spirit of its weakness and to accompany it in the task of ensuring that it is not led astray by overconfidence or excessive ambition. The human production of knowledge (scientific, but also cultural, political, moral, and aesthetic) can be dangerous if there is too much dogmatism, or sterile if there is too much activity. Criticism, then, must work towards self-limitation, guided not by quantity but by quality and meaning. The activity of criticism is to generate, but not impose, criteria of self-limitation. Its result is not, then, an all-knowing sovereign judgement, but rather the inscription of human experience in the fragility and partiality of any appraisal, but not in its arbitrariness.

If we are to become critics of ourselves, does this mean that we must live in fear of the ever-looming shadow of human excess? This seems to be the emotional state of our times: an atrocious fear of ourselves that is leading either to pathological impotence or to anthropological submission that places our destiny, as we have seen, in the hands of irreversible, transcendent laws, which may be divine, natural, or man-made. This is where intervention by the imagination becomes indispensable for exercising criticism that does not become a policing job or an apology for fear.

What appears at the limits of what we are capable of seeing, knowing, or recognizing? What happens when we accept the limit but not condemnation to it? What then appears is *the strange*, and we are faced

with the need to learn to relate to it. What do we call the strange? John Sallis appealed to the imagination’s preference for the monstrous or, in other words, that which specifically brings up to date the limit between the natural and the non-natural, and even the anti-natural, or for anything that shows us that which is almost at the limit of not being able to be. If we extend this notion, we could say that the strange is everything we do not know or recognize but with which we can establish some kind of relationship.

We cannot relate to absolute ignorance, as this would trap us in Platonic paradoxes regarding memory and ignorance. Neither can we relate to the absolute other, although there are philosophical positions that defend the ethical importance of radical otherness. The strange is that which is and is not known, that which is and is not recognized. We could say, then, that the critical imagination is the power of the strange.

The principle of noncontradiction, therefore, remains in suspension, though not to destroy logical thinking but rather to enable the relationship with what the mind can neither possess nor dominate. For the strange, there are no closed, stable, or eternal categories. Strangeness is a dynamic concept that brings us into the movement of the relationship. Anyone is strange as long as he or she hasn’t arrived or become integrated in a new place (unless something or somebody is preventing it and fixing his or her position forever), and any knowledge or practice can be strange to us as long as we don’t sufficiently enter into the different aspects of learning about it (unless something or somebody is blocking our access to them).

Being able to imagine doesn’t, then, mean limitless fabrication but being able to situate ourselves without fear at the limits of the known and the recognized, both by ourselves and the systems that can legitimately do so. Imagination opens the door to worlds and temporalities other than our own. Critical imagination is not, therefore, a way of escaping what there is, but rather an ethical and political requirement to broaden the limits of definitions to the strangeness that constitutes them. This means that, in order to imagine critically, we need to be able to make ourselves strangers among strangers without having to ask permission to be, and without being condemned to not being.

## 5. Politics of the imagination

When facts become prophecies, imagination collapses, because they cannot surprise us - only threaten and frighten us. These are facts captured by a single message of damnation or salvation: the principle of noncontradiction now becomes humanity’s final destination. I began by asking how to refer to facts without complying with their mandate or their threat. Now we have a hint of an answer: learning to find their strangeness by means of critical imagination.

Imagination, as we have seen, is not a spontaneous force of an individual faculty of fabulation, but an art of relating to the limits of what we know and do not know, of what we recognize and do not recognize, of what there is and what there is not. This is, therefore, a practice that is learned and shared. In her book *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Gayatri Spivak writes that the imagination must be trained to prepare knowledge and reorganize desires. This idea of preparation, preparing oneself to know and to desire, is interesting. Is this not the very thing that is interrupted when imagination collapses?

There are many aspects in this task of preparation, and they form what an ecology of the imagination would be concerned with opening up and developing, in both the domain of philosophy and in that of practices. With regard to my line of argument here, there would be three inseparable dimensions in this ecology of shared worlds and temporalities.

First, to make an experience of the strange is to make room for *an other* that situates us, too, in the condition of strangers. Otherness has been too assimilated to the idea of another identity. Both multiculturalism and the culture of the target typical of the market society, which nowadays spreads into every aspect of social life, have shown us that we can be others and juxtaposed, in a catalogue of differences that are not affected, transformed, or imagined by each other. Hence, the leap to the “culture wars” is very easy. If there is no “between” in which to meet as strangers, the boundary becomes a frontier or a battlefield. Spivak defends the imagination as “the instrument of the othering”; for me, this implies both hospitality towards the other and being a stranger to oneself and in one’s world. A common world is the one we can see as if it were not our own.

This brings us to the second aspect. Becoming strange in one’s own world means learning to do this, which also applies to time. There is no single time, and no one lives in a time that is uniquely their own. The historicity of experience is precisely this coexistence and overlap between temporalities, both biographical and collective. We live in the time of others. Intergenerational conflicts have crossed through societies since ancient times, but now they are experienced as ruptures that are pathologized and internalized as private problems. This is the fragmentation and privatization of shared times that have dislodged the future as a horizon for debating a shared project. In the posthumous condition, it makes no sense, perhaps, to recover past meanings of the future, thus falling into the trap of retrotopias. But we need to learn to imagine in time and to stop living against it, which is what we are doing now.

All this leads to the third dimension of an ecology of the imagination. Learning is essentially learning not to know. Our attention is saturated with all the knowledge of what we can no longer imagine. Critical imagination, as we have seen, is situated at the limit and transforms it into a threshold where what we know and do not know about any aspect of reality meet in dynamic tension. They do not clash or threaten each other. They inquire and question each other. The threatening question of the posthumous condition – how long will the world be the way we

know it? – becomes other questions. To what extent is the world the way we think we know it to be? Why must it be like that and not different from that? These are not rhetorical or naïve questions, but rather the essential starting point of a critical and imaginative commitment to emancipation in times of the scheduled Apocalypse.

Modernity has experienced the dream of emancipation of the subject: for some, the individual subject, and for others, the collective subject in its various forms. Now, perhaps, emancipation means freeing facts from the single sense. This means leaning, once again, to read. When workers, women, and the poor came together to learn to read and write, they not only wanted to be literate but also to be able to reinterpret the reality that condemned them to lives of slavery, and to do so by gaining access to sources of knowledge and rewriting reality with their own words: with their desires, their love letters, their plays, and their pamphlets. Today we are literate, but we cannot read between the lines or beyond a literality that falls upon us with all the weight of insulting obviousness. There is no room for strangeness. This can be seen in the arts, in culture, and in the media. They are less informative than they are literal. Training the critical imagination is learning once again to read beyond literality. It means to say and to make visible what there is without complying with any ruling.

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## CV

**Marina Garcés**

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya  
 mgarcesma@uoc.edu

Barcelona, 1973. She is a philosopher and after 15 years as associate professor of philosophy at the University of Zaragoza, she is currently a professor at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, where she directs the Master Degree in Philosophy for Contemporary Challenges and the MUS-SOL research group.

She is the author of the books *En las prisiones de lo posible* (Bellaterra, 2002), *Un mundo común* (Bellaterra, 2013), *Filosofía inacabada* (Galaxia Gutenberg, 2015), *Fuera de clase: textos de filosofía de guerrilla* (Galaxia Gutenberg, 2016), *The commitment* (CCCB, 2013) and, recently, *Humanidades en transición* (Raig Verd, 2017) and *Nueva ilustración radical* (Anagrama, 2017), awarded with the City of Barcelona prize in the category of Essay, Social Sciences and Humanities in 2017. Her latest book, *Escuela de aprendices* (Galaxia Gutenberg 2020) develops a look at education, learning and imagination.

Thought is the declaration of a commitment to life as a common problem. Her main work is divided between teaching, writing, her children and the dedication to practical, critical and collective thinking that she promoted for years, together with other colleagues, in Espai en Blanc.

