

Active Imagination

By MAXWELL L. ANDERSON



“He has an active imagination.” Such is the stinging rebuke for a child’s free associations or fears. Later in life, this phrase is invoked to suggest that a purported threat is illusory. In both cases the reflex is to shut down the most natural of our impulses—the predisposition to find our way in life not through research, instruction, or rote, but through play, instinct, and imagination.

As a child blessed with two years of life overseas, I found it effortless to catapult myself back in time. At Versailles, my sensible brown Thom McAns crunched what I believed to be the same gravel scattered by horse-drawn royal carriages centuries earlier. In French and Italian fortresses, I ran my hand across smooth, black cannons, fantasizing about their original recoil and report. At the Roman baths in Bath, England, I dipped a finger into what I believed to be ancient water. Perched on a boulder amid the wind-whipped desolation of Stonehenge, I wondered how the Druids presided over rituals and astrological observations centuries before.

Through travel, I was fortunate enough to connect rituals of daily life with the past—collecting coins handled by others two generations earlier, pretending to be a Beefeater at Buckingham Palace, or equipping myself with a plastic sword to become D’Artagnan in *The Three Musketeers*.

As I grew up in the transistorized 1960s, my fetishism for objects wasn’t limited to the past. A James Bond fan, I spent countless hours in would-be espionage, fashioning imaginary surveillance equipment out of discarded appliances and undertaking perilous missions at the grocery store. “Playing army” was a low-tech, non-commercial version of paintball, punctuated by cries of “I killed you first!” as my friends and I indulged in a Hobbesian brutality straight out of *Lord of the Flies*.

Today’s youth expiate sadistic demons with joysticks rather than plastic guns, and aren’t allowed to venture out without fretful supervision. Both videogames and anxious parents channel the imagination into prescribed routes, dull our faculties for fantasy, and breed a generation increasingly

deprived of self-reliance. As adolescence crests into adulthood, the slow trickle of a budding erogenous imagination, fueled in the past by dog-eared *Playboys* found in a closet, has been washed away by the open hydrant of the multi-billion dollar online porn industry. Erotic fantasies, which are rampant on Greek vases, Pompeian frescoes, Indian temples, and in Japanese painting, medieval lore, and countless other adumbrations throughout the history of art and literature, are part and parcel of what makes us human. Americans are reprimanded from childhood on for acknowledging that sexuality is at the core of our existence; and the repression of such acknowledgement leads to career-ending revelations of the libidinous antics of televangelists, businesspeople, and politicians.

Whether courtly, violent, or prurient, my fantasy life of 40 years ago was rooted in traditions stretching back centuries. In the West, until the Enlightenment, mankind operated in a complex miasma of instinct, learned beliefs, and intuition. The rising tide of scientifically based information since the 18th century has challenged the value of our imaginative powers at every turn, favoring empirical evidence over intuition and rendering our imaginations the province of children and those in society considered to be creative.

Calling someone creative today often is a code word for those operating outside the challenging realities of corporate executives, blue-collar workers, and every other wage earner who can indulge in impractical pursuits for at most two weeks a year. Society’s suspicion of imagination confers on it a shrinking role even in creative pursuits. Gaming, entertainment, architecture, and design are areas in which dreamers are rewarded, since—in the right hands—these enterprises might attract investors or patrons willing to subsidize an unformulaic end that could meet the tests of the marketplace.

Notwithstanding the overprotective cocooning of our young by society, the most fertile playground of the imagination remains childhood. And for those of us fortunate enough to earn a living by fostering creativity, life can be rewarding every hour of the day. For others, it’s to be hoped that encounters with acts of creativity from the past or present can sporadically tease out childlike empathy and imagination before an ivory carving, bronze vessel, altarpiece, or C-Print—a burst of “let’s imagine” that lifts our spirits from the daily woes and concerns that might otherwise engulf us.

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