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*Don't fight the darkness,
turn on a light:*
**A post-critical reading
of Vlieghe & Zamojski
ontology of teaching**

W tym artykule recenzyjnym staram się przemyśleć propozycję ontologicznej perspektywy w rozpatrywaniu nauczania, którą składają Joris Vlieghe i Piotr Zamojski w swojej książce *Towards an Ontology of Teaching...* Zaczynam od próby zrekapitulowania najważniejszego – z mojej perspektywy – edukacyjnego założenia tej propozycji. W odniesieniu do tezy o istnieniu równości immanetnej dla nauczania, równości, która tworzy się w odniesieniu do rzeczy, formułuję swoje wątpliwości dotyczące tego projektu. Na ile bowiem zawieszenie społecznych stosunków nierówności może się dokonać w sytuacji tak wysoce spreparowanej jaką jest nauczanie? Na ile zatem przygotowanie rzeczy, aby stała się materią wspólnego studiowania nie jest powiązane z konieczną rekontekstualizacją i redukcją świata? Chcąc pokazać istotę swoich wątpliwości, zwracam się do przykładu Leonarda Bernsteina oferowanego w książce.

Słowa kluczowe: ontologia nauczania, równość, redukcja świata, kontekstualizacja, rzecz

Joris' Vlieghe's and Piotr Zamojski's *Towards an Ontology of Teaching. Thing-Centred Pedagogy, Affirmation and Love for the World*¹ is published in the wake of the provoca-

¹ J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching. Thing-Centred Pedagogy, Affirmation and Love for the World*, Springer, Cham 2019.

tive post-critical turn in educational theory². This awkwardly titled though superbly engaging and powerful book focuses on one particular dimension of education: teaching. The book develops a rich theoretical discussion of the kind of education that does not begin with critical analysis of some state of affairs, but arises out of an affirmation of the world grounded in the love of subject matter. This culminates in fascinating portraits of teaching and the teacher through extended analyses of selected teaching episodes and reflections from Leonard Bernstein.

In contrast to common sense approaches within theory and philosophy of education which set out to expose the various hegemonies at work in educational structures and practices, Vlieghe and Zamojski seek to develop an affirmative approach. Despite sundry banal declarations of the transformative power of education in political and social discourse, philosophy and theory of education could be said to be following the dark path, where the darker the analysis, the greater the acclaim. Critical analysis of the long shadows cast by any number of injustices seems to be the only form of serious thinking in education. To counter the darkness, this book might have begun with the wisdom of Vedic philosophy as quoted by filmmaker David Lynch: "Don't fight the darkness. Don't even worry about the darkness. Turn on the light and the darkness goes. Turn up that light of pure consciousness: Negativity goes"³. And yet, paradoxically perhaps, the book spends a good deal of time addressing the very conditions in which the darkness descends.

While this book takes as its starting point the tendency of much of the contemporary philosophy of education to base argument upon critique, Vlieghe and Zamojski do not deny the place of critique, but seek to draw attention elsewhere: to the place of education, or more specifically, of teaching. Teaching, they argue, is a positive enterprise, an endeavour that always posits something. So widespread is the critical move within educational theory that we seldom recognise the affirmative structure that is at the foundations of educational practice. The fact that we care at all about how the next generation meets the world testifies to a fundamental educational condition: that we must affirm a common world to the next generation.

This brings me to a couple of important educational presuppositions that are central to this text: namely inter-generationality, and the existence of a common world. Following Hannah Arendt's argument in 'The Crisis in Education'⁴, Vlieghe and Zamojski consider education to essentially be "a meeting between two generations [an older and younger]"⁵. In educational terms, this meeting takes place in

² N. Hodgson, J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*, Punctum Press, Earth, Milky Way 2017.

³ D. Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness and Creativity*, Penguin, New York 2007, p. 98.

⁴ H. Arendt, *The Crisis in Education*, [in:] tejże, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, The Viking Press, New York 1961.

⁵ J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching...* dz. cyt., p. 23.

teaching, where the older generation shows *the* (not just a) world to the younger. This showing entails a kind of standing for the world; this acknowledges the world as it is, in all its light and darkness, but draws attention to the light. This standing for the world is not neutral or dispassionate, but affirms what it stands for: “the teacher needs to testify a genuine and unconditional love for our world”⁶. The authors acknowledge that this is a conservative move, but a conservatism that “stems from a profound love for the world, which opens the possibility of the world’s rejuvenation”⁷. Only through a moment of conservation are the conditions established for the next generation to engage in a regeneration that is neither simple acceptance (reproduction) nor rejection (transformation). This regeneration is possible once the next generation have the common world before them. Vlieghe and Zamojski believe that such standing for, and love of, the world is the basic educational gesture. But this standing for is not the whole story, it must yield to the coming of the new generation; how the younger generation take up the common world is an entirely open question. Vlieghe and Zamojski present this primary affirmation of teaching as an ontological condition: of the very being of teaching, and of education. For teaching to be what it is, it must be structured by a primary affirmation of something. This is because teaching is always some kind of revelation of the world, or in Badiouian terms, an *event* of being.

With this basic argument set out in the opening chapters, the book fleshes out what this love of the world and the ontology of teaching really mean by providing a penetrating discussion of certain ideas from Badiou and Agamben: namely how the renewal of our world does not need to be based on critique and overcoming the negated status quo. ‘Fidelity to the Event’ (Badiou) allows for a “non-dialectical breach”⁸ in which something genuinely new can come in that is not predicated on a primary negation. Since Badiou and Agamben are not educational theorists per se, Vlieghe and Zamojski show how these arguments support the claims around the ontology of teaching: where teaching must be faithful to the world and create spaces in which it can be encountered.

These encounters presuppose another dimension of the event of teaching that is taken up in chapter 4, namely that in such encounters we are all equals: that the profession of love “suspends the usual order of things and that gives them [students] free, kairotic time – time to think, to exercise, to study, and to rejuvenate the world... this possibility is predicated upon a particular kind of equality”⁹. This persuasive account of equality is inspired by Jacques Rancière. Consistent with the general argument of the book, the issue of equality is not approached ‘dialec-

⁶ Tamže, p. 25.

⁷ Tamže, p. 27.

⁸ Tamže, p. 35.

⁹ Tamže, p. 45.

tically': as something that we hope to achieve through some analysis and correction of present inequalities. Rather, real education can only operate on the basis of equality: "there is no possibility to conceptualise education, nor to educate without equality"¹⁰. In particular, by being gathered around the *thing* (the subject matter) educational equality is established because such an encounter with things entails a kind of suspension of identity, the de-identification associated with entering school¹¹, where economic, social, political, religious etc. aspects of identity are suspended. And yet the argument also builds on Rancière's¹² argument that equality is not something to be established, but to be practiced, or verified. In encountering *the thing* (a notion here indebted to Heidegger), educational equality is materialised such that "everybody in the room is rendered equal"¹³. This is so because of the nature of the thing: that no one, not even the teacher, is master of it. All the teacher does is present the thing to the students so that it may become something worth studying, a presenting which assumes a fundamental equality.

I find this idea of the equalizing power of education is deeply appealing at a time where educational equality is often conceived in narrowly politicised terms. Vlieghe and Zamojski seem to suggest that the much-maligned authority of the teacher is supplanted by the legitimate authority of being itself. However, their attempt to offer a thing-centred pedagogy, by giving authority to the thing, brings with it certain questionable assumptions: that in showing the common world, the teacher is able to allow the unadorned thingness of the thing to show itself. Despite the concerted efforts to show that this does not rely on transcendence, the argument seems to restate the idea that through the revelation of the world itself (i.e. Herbart's *Aesthetic Revelation of the World*¹⁴) the interpretive acts (and biases) of the teacher can be effaced. Doesn't this underestimate the ways in which educational subject-matter is always a result of some kind of framing, or production; that the world is recontextualised, transformed or reduced in some way as it becomes educational subject matter?¹⁵ While I would wish to emphasise that education involves the drawing of attention to the world, this emphasis should not lose sight of the fundamentally interpretive position that the teacher assumes. This account

¹⁰ Tamže.

¹¹ Masschelein J., Simons M., *In Defence of the School. A Public Issue*, E-ducation Culture & Society Pub., Leuven 2013.

¹² Rancière J., *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 1991.

¹³ J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching...* dz. cyt., p. 54.

¹⁴ J. F. Herbart, *The Science of Education and the Aesthetic Revelation of the World*, D. C. Heath & Co., Boston, 1908.

¹⁵ See Z. Deng, *Powerful knowledge, transformations and Didaktik/curriculum thinking*, "British Educational Research Journal", 2021, 47 (6), pp. 1652-1674; D. Lewin, *Toward a theory of pedagogical reduction: Selection, simplification, and generalization in an age of critical education*, "Educational Theory", 2019, 68 (4-5), pp. 495-512.

of the ontology of teaching seems too ready to overlook the interpretive dimension that is essential in what, in the end, teachers must be responsible for: that they stand for the educational value of seeing things in a particular way. To illustrate this tension within the argument I turn to the discussion of Bernstein as an educational figure which forms the extended example in the book.

What should teachers focus on? What is the essence of being a teacher? Is teaching basically mastery of the arts of teaching and learning (didactics)? Or does teaching focus on something else: the subject matter? The answer in this book is clear: "the teacher needs to testify to a genuine and unconditional *love for our world*"¹⁶. What better way to illustrate this love than the conductor, composer and educator, Leonard Bernstein? Bernstein's guide to the Orchestra takes for granted that music, in the Western tradition and style is worth learning about. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Bernstein decides for the audience that this is worthy of attention. Now I happen to agree that this is worthy of attention. But I also accept that this perspective on music is not the only, nor necessarily the best perspective. It is obviously the case that this (Bernstein's) orchestra belongs to a particular tradition with its own history and context. Thus, I can't help feeling that what we see with the example of Bernstein is not an "unconditional gift for all"¹⁷ but a gift for those who are to be educated into the traditions of 'Western' orchestral music. As already suggested, I have no objections at all to this as an educational aim. I too have been inducted into these musical traditions and am grateful for it. However, it occurs to me that in encountering this, I do not encounter that (for instance South Indian Classical Music). This is not an appeal to relativism. I do not claim that there are no grounds for affirming one over another, even if I acknowledge the limits of my own perspective and historical understanding and therefore of my capacity to decide which is to be affirmed. Still, Bernstein seems to have decided; or at least the presentation of Bernstein who, through love of music, is thought to make 'music' itself present, risks a false universalism. My point is that in turning to X, we are implicitly turning from Y. I am not sure that dialectics can be so easily avoided.

In chapter 8 Vlieghe and Zamojski offer a detailed discussion of Bernstein's appeal to the aesthetic sensibility of his audience: an example of bad orchestration in which Bernstein illustrates what good and bad orchestration looks like. Many viewers will happily go along with Bernstein. But what if you happen not to agree that Bernstein's illustration of bad orchestration is bad? Bernstein seems to assume the self-evidence of his claims. But what if that is not the case? The authors anticipate this objection¹⁸, arguing that it is predicated on relativism, the assumption behind the objection being that any interpretation of orchestration is as good as any other.

¹⁶ J. Vlieghe, P. Zamojski, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching...* dz. cyt., p. 25.

¹⁷ Tamże, p. 58.

¹⁸ Tamże, p. 125f.

But this does not seem right because relativism does not necessarily follow: the child may have a different view of orchestration without at all believing that any orchestration is as good as any other. Of course, children are inducted into what good orchestration looks like in a given context. Some of these conventions are probably easier to grasp than others (trombones are generally louder than flutes) but so much else is the product of culture. Vlieghe and Zamojski quote Bernstein as saying "You see how terrible that is? Awful, isn't it? You can't hear the tune, the rhythms are too loud, and it all sounds clumsy and thick, and not at all Spanish"¹⁹. It is hard to imagine such a statement occurring outside of the given contextual milieu.

Maybe the educational point of Bernstein that we should emphasise is that he affirms something, while we can remain somewhat agnostic, or at least open, on the specificities of the *thingness* of that affirmation. But this would shift the emphasis away from the thing to the relation. In chapter 9 Vlieghe and Zamojski discuss the pedagogies involved in Bernstein's presentation of music. Here we see that presentation of music is not simply a matter of linear accumulation of knowledge from the simple to the complex. In order to encounter the thing, Bernstein deftly engages the student through the pedagogical devices described in the book as the entry point, caesura, and invitation to study. These persuasive connections flesh out many details of the foregoing theoretical analysis. While the presentation of Bernstein provides an example of teaching which "takes away fear, acting upon the assumption of equality"²⁰ this seems to bring us into the presence of music only in a restricted, or constructed sense. It is *Bernstein's* music. Even though I am not persuaded that Bernstein's educational gestures result in the authority of the thing in any pure sense, it seems that the student is able to witness the passionate relation to an interpretation before him. This testimony (to an interpretation) might persuade the student of the value of the interpretation, and therefore may offer a route back to the thing, by way of the relation. But this seems to undermine a central basis of the argument that we all inhabit a common world.

Vlieghe and Zamojski's choice of Bernstein is, of course, perfectly orchestrated, and allows for a developed engagement with subject matter and pedagogy. But other choices might have been made. Consider, for instance, the educational relations in the film *This is England*. Set in an English working-class community of the early 1980's, the story centres on skinhead subculture and the influence of certain white supremacists on potential recruits. One reading of the film is that the white supremacists attempt to influence the next generation with their love of Englishness (though whether it is truly Englishness that they love is another question). This example of a less savoury form of love of subject suggests to me that the ontological account of teaching may not be complete.

¹⁹ Tamže, p. 117.

²⁰ Tamže, p. 143.

In scrupulously avoiding the cynicism and despair of a radically critical pedagogy Vlieghe and Zamojski attempt to maintain the autonomy of the educational sphere (distinct from the influence of politics). This raises one of the most interesting tensions within the book: the mediation between the grammatisation of the subject matter, and the 'thingness' of subject matter itself²¹ – where the flux of everyday life is named and defined so as to become matter fit for a curriculum (what I earlier referred to as recontextualization, transformation or reduction) – seems to entail something like political deliberation: decisions about what is going to be represented and why. In the end, I am not sure that the encoding of 'the continuous' (e.g. music) into 'the discrete' (e.g. notes and intervals that belong to a tradition) – that is, the transformation of thing into pedagogical object – can take place without history, culture and therefore politics.

This lucid and engaging book is a passionate, articulate, thoughtful, and original contribution to educational theory. There is a vast amount here for students and teachers to consider and I whole-heartedly affirm and commend the text to any reader interested in what teaching means and what it means to be a teacher.

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²¹ See: tamže, p. 138ff.