Digitalize and Disappear

Anachronisms on Dematerialization and Education

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The essay, reconsidering the philosophy of education as a discipline at the crossroads between philosophy and pedagogy, assumes a critical-theoretical approach, developing the "anachrony" as a critical tool. Then the essay focuses on the digitalization processes, examining the transformations of space and time in social life and educational work. New forms of scarcity seem to arise from the de-materialization and de-bodyness of educational settings. The anthropological emptying of the "here", the accelerated overdetermination of the "exterior", the "present-remote" of school-life, open a new set of educational problems caused by the compression of spaces through time.

Keywords: Philosophy of Education, Critical Theory, Digitalization, Education, Space-Time.

Digitalizzare e sparire. Anacronismi su dematerializzazione e formazione
Il saggio, riconsidera la filosofia dell'educazione come disciplina cerniera tra filosofia e pedagogia. In seguito, assumendo la prospettiva della teoria critica ed impiegando lo strumento critico dell'anacronismo, mette a tema i processi di digitalizzazione della vita sociale e della formazione esaminando le trasformazioni dello spazio-tempo nel lavoro educativo. Nuove forme di penuria sembrano prendere forma dalla dematerializzazione e decorporeizzazione delle relazioni educative e didattiche. Lo svuotamento antropologico del "qui", la sovradeterminazione accelerata dell'esteriore, la vita scolastica coniugabile in "presente remoto", aprono un fronte proble-

matico inedito come effetto della compressione dello spazio attraverso il tempo.

Parole-chiave: filosofia dell'educazione, teoria critica, digitalizzazione, formazione, spazio-tempo.

> *The contemporaneity of the Essay*
> *is the contemporaneity of the anachronism*
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> TW Adorno, *The Essay as Form*

The philosophy of education

We do not intend here to arrive at the delineation of a clear and distinct disciplinary boundary, capable of establishing the *proprium* of a field of study called the philosophy of education. The notion of "philosophy of education" is always philosophically situated, and it goes without saying that there is not only one given philosophy. It is difficult to think of *a* philosophy of education. A phenomenological-existentialist philosopher of education (and pedagogist[1]) will have a different conception of this sphere of thought than a colleague with a neo-Thomist or Problematicist approach. And likewise those who derive their inspiration from Dewey will undertake such a line of research from yet another perspective. In some of the cases mentioned we will find overlapping concerns, and in others unbridgeable distances.

Our modest proposal rather leads us to note, as Exhibit A, the existence recognized and accredited, with particular emphasis in the Anglo-Saxon world and in European educational research, of a so-called research network, and of journals explicitly dedicated to it.

Now, if the existence of such an object – in this case the philosophy of education – does not reveal its essence, it is also true that, regardless of the tradition of thought to which individual scholars refer, this theoretical and speculative presence in the field of pedagogical knowledge reveals a common implication, usually tacit but which seems to be shared: the presence of an inevitable and differently interpreted relationship between philosophy and

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[1] Given his habitat in the field of pedagogical knowledge, via the object complement, the philosopher of education is at the same time a pedagogist, just as the philosopher of law is at the same time a jurist.

pedagogy, between philosophy and education, between presuppositions of a philosophical order of different origin and pedagogical discourse in its own distinctive arborescence. Without this link of implication involving the restoration of the hegemonic forms (of the philosophical over the pedagogical) that have characterized a large stretch of the history of Western thought[2], or new subsumptions of the theoretical-practical axis of pedagogy within the conceptual ordinates of a broader philosophical horizon, however differently postulated.

The philosophy of education is understood by us, specifically using a tributary approach to the tradition of critical thought, as an examination of the philosophical presuppositions of the pedagogical discourse, and of the already socially pre-formed educational practice, understood in their root meanings. It is also conceived as a critical review of the fundamentals of current pedagogical discourse. Assumptions and fundamentals that, without the permanent work of retro-illumination, would risk remaining in the shadows, and of determining long-range effects and consequences, along the entire span of the pedagogical-educational "mechanism", without being revised in the light of day, reconsidered, or even *thought tout court*. This omission would have significant costs. Entire anthropological and ethical concepts, for example, would operate undisturbed in the most meandering hiding places of educational practice without any critical scrutiny, ending up being assumed without adequate awareness, or, worse, being understood as "natural" and lacking alternatives. Entire socio-economic-political concepts would act equally undisturbed, without the slightest problematization, depositing themselves, without any critical filter, into words and things concerning schooling, learning, education. And in the same way, entire epistemological frameworks, gnoseological options, methodological and didactic choices, if not critically examined, would hegemonize the pedagogical-educational discursive order, as if they were mere facts of nature, rather than historically determined products (for which the order of things could have been different – and can be), and mere contingency formulas. The philosophy of edu-

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[2] The writer however, does not believe it has ever been a real hegemony understood in the sense of an intentionally coercive sovereign domination of one instance over another, but rather of a relationship, that between philosophy and pedagogy, which is necessary and not forced, historically evident and not potential, inscribed in the very things of the two knowledges. The first philosophers founded schools, and then academies and high schools (*lyceum*).

cation therefore proposes, in the conception of it we present here, to break every form of undisputed hetero-normalization of the pedagogical and its semantic field, always exposed – historically – to expropriation, capture, colonization, by the "extra-pedagogical reality", the contents of which vary according to the historical epochs and the power that conditions each.[3] Not to ennoble oneself as a discipline-sentinel, or as an unlikely defensive bulwark that no one has summoned, but rather as an independent critical factor that monitors the conditions of possibility of the pedagogist, in whose service one finds oneself, without claiming in any way to determine them. This critical function accompanied by a task of conceptual construction, of a general nature, relating to educational action, in the sense of the permanent rethinking of the governing categories of pedagogical discourse, starting with them and looking beyond them. This is not for the purpose of distilling the eternal from the transient, nor to build an axiomatic lacking presupposition.

A Critical Perspective for the Philosophy of Education

When we speak here of a "critical perspective", we mainly refer to a very specific tradition of thought, namely "the critical theory of society" in the terms in which it was able to take shape and consolidate itself among the first generation of "The Frankfurt School"[4]. The introductory delineation, which we carried out elsewhere[5], of a "critical theory of education and society" was located in the wake of this tradition, which in turn it critically examined *so as to not completely betray it*.

The prospect of a "critical philosophy of education" alludes to a very precise *modus operandi* which follows some lines of thought summarized below in a non-exhaustive way, merely as a guidepost: a) it does not hypostasize its objects of study (school, education, etc.), isolating them from "extra-pedagogical" factors that determine a large, or in any case a significant part of their form and contents. Problems related to learning, so to speak, are never

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[3] Herbart had already seen this clearly, inviting Pedagogy, already in 1806, (please see *General Pedagogy deduced from the purpose of education*), to reflect more "on its own ideas" by cultivating more of "its own independent thinking". In this way it would not run the risk of being treated as foreign power treat a remote country of conquest.

[4] For a systematic discussion, see Schmidt, Rusconi (1972).

[5] Please refer to Conte (2016), in particular pages 39-92.

solely problems related to learning that can be solved with an updated teaching methods or with rhetoric about innovative technology; b) it traces every moment or fragment of educational praxis broadly speaking back to the hegemonic rationality that informs it as a factor that is neither marginal nor totally determining, in order to arrive at a critical and not naïve, nor guilty by omission, understanding of the constituent elements of that praxis that is already in existence, preordained and functioning; c) it opposes any philosophy of education that merely justifies that which exists, and for which "it is so and it cannot be otherwise" or is presumptively non-evaluative of the current order of socio-political and pedagogical discourse; d) it therefore sustains a pedagogy of self-mastering consciousness and self-awareness, rather than a pedagogy of renouncing adaptation that capitulates to the power of the existing, producing a "self-preservation without a subject" (Adorno, 2010, p. 41).

Notes on the Notion of "Anachronism"

The notion of anachronism is understood by us to be a critical tool. We do not emphasize the negative side of the term, its common sense, which refers to a condition of inadequacy and disharmony with regard to the present time: to be out of one's time, to have become antiquated, dated, in disuse, and for which the only alternative would consist in an undifferentiated synchronism. On the contrary, we see in anachronism a critical potential and a productive posture. The intentional lack of synchronization with one's own time alludes to a non-adhesion, to a non-correspondence to it, to a point of resistance. To value in one's own time a counter-time capable of rendering visible all of the fractures, the blind spots, the contradictions, the abstractions of the system's administrative chronology. Being ahead of one's time (*prochronism*) or behind the times (*parachronism*) of the disembodied real, do not constitute missing negative or insufficient forms of life. They are so only in the judgment of those who think to accord every movement of the real, and therefore also of the educational real, to a single, pre-established time. Different non-linear temporal trajectories, capable of establishing different points of orientation and reorientation, can co-exist, creating discontinuous events (Foucault, 2004). If the spirit, writes Adorno, "does what is socially right only when it does not dissolve in undifferentiated identity with society, the time of anachronism has come" (Adorno, 2010, p. 51). The "au-

tonomous movement of the object can be followed only by those who do not participate completely" (Adorno, 2018, p. 15).

Digitalization of education, a new anthropology of scarcity

The state of emergency due to the pandemic shock has unexpectedly accelerated a process already underway: the digitalization of education. Moreover, the digitalization of interpersonal relationships, as well as the de-materialization and disembodiment of individualized-socialized living, were already in the process of expansion and progressive normalization on a global scale. The culture of the so-called postmodern had already "gathered up all the orientations that had presumed to resolve Being in Language", dissolving and resolving reality "in a network of communicative networks" (Finelli, 2018, p. 174). Therefore, the "symbolic-communicative" has increasingly ended up mediating and covering every material reality (*ibidem*). Everyday experience appears to be ever increasingly constructed on the horizontal communicative-linguistic dimension. To the emptying of the verticality-interiority correspond the "overdetermination of the exterior" (*ivi*, p. 175) and the "superficialization of the experiential" (*ivi*, p. 176). The emptying of the concrete carried out by the abstract, understood in absolutist terms as an economic-financial abstraction, and the totalizing investment in the superficial, constitute powerful vectors of indeterminacy and of absence in oneself and in relation to others with which to account, even (and not only) in thinking of the young.

The dematerialization of education, induced by its digitalization, is part of this broader de-signifying framework[6]. If it has become possible to do almost everything without being there, education included, we hold that this condition cannot be assumed by seconding "the logic of technological inevitability" and simply taking note of the technological conforming of learning and

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[6] Therefore, the very "meaning" or "having meaning" for oneself and for others, ends up no longer constituting something relevant. The questions "what does this mean for me?", "What sense does this have for me and for others?" lose relevance as they are dysfunctional with respect to mere proceeding. The relevant questions seem to be the following: "How do I solve this problem?", "How do I successfully and efficiently intervene in this situation?". The meaning-sense concerns the "verticality-interiority", the "how efficient" instead, concerns the external horizontality. Emptying the first dimension by emphasizing the second has many consequences on the formation of a conscience capable of judgment.

of existence, declaring it in itself progressive. Every technological advance is two-faced, as for example Gehlen (1987, pp. 120-130) had already intuited as an anthropologist, and perhaps as had already Michelstaedter (1982, pp. 158-159) as philologist and thinker *sui generis*. Gain and loss go hand in hand in the same instant. And it is usually the gains, often and undoubtedly formidable, that obscure the losses, the new scarcities. If everything, or almost everything, can take place now, in the time of the synchronization of activities mediated by ubiquitous technological devices, this now produces the emptying of the here. So the others somehow appear, but without being there. The screen is only the simulacrum of a place. The others are there even though they are not there. If space is the place of bodies, the prevalence of time (of a synchronic connection without material contacts) produces the disembodiment of education and of learning. The lesson text separates itself from bodies and from places, and dematerializes. The pre-text is given by the fact that space needs time in order to be crossed so as to reach places. Space has become an obstacle, and this is a paradox in the time of easy travel. "The capitalist landscape is made up not only of subways, railways and highways, but of individuals who, while being transported from one job to another, continue to work with their laptops on their lap, or to answer their last email with their smartphone" (Tomba, Vertova, 2014, pp. 7-8). The Marxian intuition of "capital's destruction of space through time" (Marx, 1974, p. 161) returns to interrogate us. Education and training (which today we qualify as "neoliberal") must speed themselves up, in the sense that the times must be ever shortened that are needed to reach the designated places, places which are no longer necessary in their materiality, and ever more rapid and ubiquitous must be the times of their fungibility and acquisition. Nothing seems quicker, more efficient, within reach, "hands on" in the proper sense of the expression, than a "remote" education, which does not imply any time whatsoever to cross the space necessary to reach the venerable institutions, and can be used at other times, and in any other place at one's discretion. It takes only a moment to reach the non-place. Education thus becomes indifferent to time and space. Time of life, of work, of travel, are no longer clear and distinct. The absorbing porosity of the single time of productive synchronicity seems to subsume every particular time. And so there is the chance and the "hands on" opportunity to work in non-working time. To be able to carry out several things simultaneously, or with minimal time lag, incrementally increasing the productivity of the day, its mere performance. Will fixed

places of learning become less and less necessary in the time of permanent synchronic/asynchronic digital connection? And the students, the teachers, where will they be?

Scarcity of oneself and of others

The anthropological emptying of the concrete by the technologically mediated symbolic-communicative abstract leads us to consider the subjective side of scarcity. Lack, scarcity, also concern the self and the other. Being absent from oneself and from others, even in the continuous communication of oneself with others, and vice-versa, determines a new form of impoverishment. Which no longer concerns only the material side of subsistence, which still scandalously concerns non-marginal segments of the population, but calls into question the awareness of oneself and of the other-than-self. If the present, the *now* of events *does not take place*. *If the others don't take place*, if daily operations are traceable to non-places of occurrence, the self loses the verticality of its consistency, its own specific *weight*. "The digital order" writes Han, "causes a progressive disappearance of the body of the world" (Han, 2017, p. 57), which no longer seems to offer resistance and therefore neither fatigue nor opposition. *Everything is at your fingertips*. Yet the world of smart smarts, carries a secret penalty. Everything that claims to be easy, every facilitation, should be looked at with a critical eye, such as free social media. The disappearance of the negative behind the spectacular positivity of instantaneous and ubiquitous hyper-communication mutilates the formation of an essential element: learning to "look the negative in the eye, lingering close to it" strengthens the spirit, enlivens it, makes it present to self. The loss of gravitas renders indistinguishable work and play, character building and free time. The uncritical consensus regarding surfaces of high and fast performativity, inexorably gains ground on the sense, of the self, of others, of the world. Character traits such as firmness, determination and stability, conditions of thinking and doubting, give way to the voids of inconstancy, incoherence, uncertainty, fertile and facile ground for any and every manipulation and regressive construction of consent. The "remote present" within this floating scenario, establishes an ambiguous trajectory of temporality. If the past can also be close, the present when it becomes remote as experienced by distant human beings, loses consistency and becomes the flow of a

scarcity, which puts on stage abundance, contacts, friends, *followers*, digital resources of any kind. A scarcity not perceived as such. The remote present is a distant present that, while it happens isolates, while it includes excludes, while it draws near distances. It certainly works like time linked to performances, to exchanges of information, to the rapid handling of administrative issues. But that which only works, and fortunately works as in the case of emergencies, is not sufficient in itself to establish the verticality of sense and meaning when the practices that are supposed to be educational come into play. The remote present is a demotivating and impoverishing time for education and learning. The most prudent and pedagogically well-intentioned solicitations, even if they play well in the short term, can hardly manage over time to stem discouragement and disinterest. The so-called "distant education", consequently, should be understood to be only for emergencies and as a last resort, for the sole purpose of protecting public health when this is necessary for incontrovertible epidemiological reasons.[7] And the same holds true for all other forms of hyper-mediated teaching.

In the last novel by Guido Morselli, *Dissapatio H.G.*, the protagonist, after deciding to take his own life by drowning himself in a pond at the bottom of a cave, in the end changes his mind and returns to the surface. Retracing his steps, he gradually realizes that humanity itself has evaporated, has disappeared. Everything has remained intact; objects seem to have become close and unreachable at the same time. He sees, in his return journey, a bus crushed against a wall: "There were no occupants in there, not even the driver, when the bus broke down. Before, it was automobile accidents that took life: but now it was the taking of life (its withdrawal, its vanishing) that caused the automobile accident" (Morselli, 1977, p. 13). The "dissipation" of humanity, not intended in a moral sense, refers here to a physical dispersion, to an incomprehensible "exodus", to which the "excepted" tries to find an answer by scrolling through the pages. The resignation of humanity, perhaps "angelicized *en masse*", or perhaps a sort of death-reward through a collective tourist emigration...these are hypotheses that become obsessive thoughts. Is assisting the disappearance of humanity a curse or a privilege? Where did they go? Why did they go?

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[7] More generally, education technologies should always be considered a means, and never as an end. And, understood in their non-neutrality, as "preliminary didactic decisions", which, by incorporating precise intended uses, predetermine, and preformat teaching practices before the judgment of the teacher.

The situation-limit imagined by Morselli is the extreme and literary figuration of a human condition that has emptied itself, inexplicably. A complete and total social desertification. The machines remain functioning: "The electronic systems continue to function, or at least they are able to function, whether or not there are operators and users" (*ivi*, p.73). The situation that concerns us, on the contrary, and by contrast, digitally duplicates social reality without apparently touching its materiality, but subtracting relevance and centrality to being together in physical places from the production of meaning. In the novel, the "excepted" protagonist has *all* the space, and *all* the time at his sudden disposal: the curse of a privilege. The anthropological emptying delivers the concrete and the abstract to its progressive consumption and return to the state of nature: "The Market of Markets will change in the countryside" (*ivi*, p.154). The others literally aren't there anymore. In our case, already saying "our" is revealing, the others are all there, and simultaneously, in the *now* without *here* of ubiquitous communication. Their disappearance is only on the level of space and of places, in turn intact and where they should be, but no longer a necessary condition of life, work, school, relationships. The abstract empties the concrete of meaning. The potential omnipresence generates a new form of absence and disappearance towards oneself and others, well-masked by the portable screens.

Carefully avoiding the traps of romantic renunciation, thought that seeks to think education does not yield to the temptation of placing itself at the service of the renunciatory and anti-pedagogical "there is nothing to be done". On the contrary. Faced with the ideology that "resounds from the mechanism of a praxis that cannot be escaped", educational praxis included, what is non-ideological "is the thought that does not allow itself to be traced back to operational terms and instead simply tries to help the thing itself to find those words that the dominant language would otherwise choke in the mouth." (Adorno, 2018, p.15).

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